

Timescape 311

Chapter 311: The Performance Starts

After the Eight Sect Coalition used their taboo treasure to destroy the Young Arbiter Sect and their dam, the Everlasting Immortal Profundity River had rushed from the Supreme Arbiter Salvation Mountains across the lands to the Eight Sect Coalition. That river nourished countless small nations, and ensured that the mortal population flourished.

As a result, the coalition guarded the river closely, constantly sending inspection patrols up and down it to keep it safe. But today, something unexpected happened.

And the part where it happened wasn't very far from the Eight Sect Coalition.

In fact, it counted as an area controlled directly by the Eight Sect Coalition. For some reason there, the water went from being very clear to being pitch black. From a distance, the river upstream still seemed to have strong immortal energy, but as the water flowed into this area, it released an incredibly strong stench, and was clearly full of mutagen.

The mutagen in it was very strong. In fact, this was reminiscent of what happened to the Everlasting Immortal Profundity River when it emerged from Emperor-Receiving Prefecture's forbidden ground. Black mist rose up from the water, so dense that it was corporeal. It turned into a mutagen fog that billowed onto the shores, corroding what it touched, turning plants a blackish purple color. Living things struggled to survive in it!

Most terrifying of all was that the mutagen fog seemed to be devouring spirit energy. The spirit energy in the area was rapidly diminishing. The river was now turning into a source of mutagen. Every single drop of water overflowed with stupefying levels of mutagen. In the blink of an eye, it became fatal to living things. It took only a moment for the fog to affect the dome of heaven itself. Black clouds filled the sky, making it look deeply sinister. Nearly invisible pulses began to spread out from the river water. Wherever they passed, they changed the life level of what they touched. Life collapsed as it was corrupted dramatically.

There was more. The river water also became incredibly poisonous. As that poison spread, the river became completely polluted and corrosive. Innumerable spirit fish died, and those that didn't die started mutating. They became vicious beasts that howled ferociously. Smaller streams connected to the river were also affected, and things there also started mutating.

Finally, hosts of resentful souls rose up from the water, too many to count, making the river haunted and evil. These resentful souls were not like ordinary souls. Instead of emanating a frigid, sinister energy, they radiated scorching heat, which caused the water to bubble and boil.

If some almighty being were present, they would be able to see the source of this event. It was an altar that had been set up at the bottom of the river. It was protected by a concealing magic that couldn't easily be penetrated. There was a small, black bottle on the altar, from which flowed a black liquid that merged into the river water.

And thus, this tributary of the Everlasting Immortal Profundity River suddenly became superlatively deadly as it flowed into the Eight Sect Coalition.

Because it happened so close to the coalition, almost as soon as the water became terrifying and full of mutagen, it was flowing into the megacity. Though the coalition had long since put in measures

to deal with such situations, the effect seemed to specifically target those defenses, making them almost completely ineffective. Spell formations collapsed, dams crumbled, magical barriers fell to pieces. Freezing power was released that was intended to stop the flow of water, but the incredibly hot souls melted the ice, stopping the effect. In an instant, the Eight Sect Coalition was shaken deeply. Bells rang out, and disciples rushed onto the streets. Everyone was absolutely shocked as they looked in the direction of the Everlasting Immortal Profundity River.

They knew full well that they couldn't let the mutagen-polluted waters flood the city. If they did, it would be a grievous blow to the coalition.

The coalition was one of the six great powers in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture, and had profound reserve powers. Though the frontline defenses were failing, there were many other steps that could be taken in such a situation that ordinary disciples didn't know about. Only the patriarchs and sect leaders had that knowledge.

It didn't take long before those leaders appeared, whereupon a massive earthen embankment rose up beyond the city wall to block the progress of the water. Streams of incisive sword energy slashed into the water, killing the evil entities in it. Massive amounts of medicinal pills streamed forth to negate the poison and mutagen.

Patriarchs took direct action, blocking the dangerous fog. The entire city trembled as an enormous channel appeared around the city, diverting the incoming water into the Forbidden Sea.

Because of these steps, the disastrous effects were largely mitigated. The quick reaction and amazing defenses went to show that the Eight Sect Coalition did belong among the six great powers. However, the mutagen and the poison still had some effects, and therefore, ordinary disciples were already hard at work dispelling it.

Besides, the incoming river water was only part of the problem. More important than that was the origin of the pollution. The top experts from the various sects, including the patriarchs, rushed out to find the source of the problem. As the disciples hastened to deal with the situation, circumstances were obviously urgent, but everyone moved with efficiency and in orderly fashion.

Xu Qing was in the Transportation Division, having just received his dharmaship when his transmission jade slip vibrated as instructions came in from the sect.

Zhang San's face fell as he saw information and orders coming in for him as well. The two of them exchanged a glance, and both could see how concerned the other was. Without a word, they flew off to their various assignments.

Something strange is going on! Xu Qing thought, looking up at the red clouds that were barely visible through the black fog. The mixture of red and black created something that looked almost violet. When he saw that violet color, he thought back to how unsettled he had felt earlier. That sensation still remained within him.

It was obvious to anyone that the situation with the river water... was likely just the beginning of a larger problem. The river water had to be dealt with, both in terms of the mutagen and the poison. And obviously, the patriarch-level figures were the ones who had to find the source of the problem. But taking in the Eight Sect Coalition as a whole, the problem wasn't that severe, and wouldn't take long to solve. The real question was what was coming next.

Xu Qing knew that if he could see what was really going on, there was no way that the high-level leaders in the coalition hadn't already come to the same conclusion. He sped up as he headed toward the Seven Blood Eyes main headquarters. As he raced through the city, he saw countless mortals looking around in shock, as well as numerous disciples with anxious expressions on their faces. Although everyone was busy with their respective responsibilities, all of them were worried.

The sects activated their taboo treasures to ward off any potential invaders, causing beams of scintillating light to shine out. However, as the light of those taboo treasures shone out, the red glow from the Soaring Cloud Sword Sect surged more brightly than the others. The red light shook heaven and earth, and attracted the attention of countless eyes. Almost instantly, everyone was looking at it. Though none of the disciples truly knew what was happening, all of them had speculations.

Meanwhile, Patriarch Soaring Cloud, who was one of three patriarchs who had rushed out to deal with the source of the river problem, looked back at the sect, and his face fell. The reason for that was... the taboo treasure was not being controlled by him!

The bright light emanating from the Soaring Cloud Sword Sect's taboo treasure was as red as blood, and as it rose into the dome of heaven, it took the shape of an enormous, blood-colored tree! As the massive tree spread up, its trunk filled with countless vicious faces all howling in grief. The tree had too many leaves to count, and all of them emanated an unstoppable sword energy that caused the sky to tremble. The sword energy then became a massive vortex that sent sword projections whipping left and right. The vortex was so huge that it covered the entire Eight Sect Coalition.

Xu Qing was closing in on the Seven Blood Eyes headquarters when he looked up and saw what was happening. His expression flickered as he felt a terrifying pressure weighing down. It was almost like the dome of heaven itself had turned into a blood-colored sea of swords.

Next, a figure appeared atop the massive tree. He wore a golden robe that was dark at the bottom and slowly became light as it went up. On his head was a blue crown inset with violet gems, and beneath his feet was an ancient bronze sword decorated with swirling clouds. His face was pale but incredibly handsome, except that his right eye socket was empty, and his left eye radiated ferocity and even evil. The moment he appeared, everyone who saw him felt shaken to the core.

He was none other than... Master Shengyun!

He stood on the ancient bronze sword as it floated above the blood tree, looking down at everything below and smiling. It was a smile that contained sorrow, but at the same time, intense madness.

"This," he said softly, "is my Blood-Soaked Performance."

As the words left his mouth, the massive blood tree suddenly erupted, sending a massive red sea out into the sky and then down... toward the Seven Blood Eyes headquarters! It moved with such incredible speed that, a moment later, it had spread out to cover all of the Seven Blood Eyes headquarters!

And then, another massive tree sprouted up from within the headquarters. The mountain shook. Heaven and earth trembled. And Master Shengyun slowly extended his arms to either side and looked up at the broken face of the god in the sky.

"Torchlight, please watch carefully!"

As the Eight Sect Coalition trembled, including the capital city of the Soaring Cloud Sword Sect, two black-cloaked figures could be seen on the top of a building there. Both wore masks resembling the broken face of the god. One of them stood, the other sat.

The sitting one fiddled with an ancient wooden box as he looked at Master Shengyun. Though this person was on the ground and Master Shengyun was in the air, the sitting young man seemed like he was looking at a bug.

Smiling, he said, "Night Dove, is that the person putting on the performance?"

"No, Lord, it's not him," Night Dove replied respectfully. His eyes, which glittered with numerous streams of starlight, turned in the direction of Seven Blood Eyes. "Lord, please enjoy the show while I go give a little gift to Seven Blood Eyes. After today, everyone in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture will once again recognize Torchlight. And you, Lord. Up to now, they've only thought of Torchlight as a fledgling organization. But with you here, Lord, Torchlight is different."

"Go ahead," said the young man, smiling. As he toyed with the wooden box, he turned to look... at Seven Blood Eyes. "Lil' bro is going to start crying again."

Chapter 312: Dramatic Upheavals!!

The sudden, shocking development caused faces to fall throughout the various sects that made up the coalition.

Patriarch Soaring Cloud immediately turned and left the river behind as he rushed back to the city. He looked at Master Shengyun hovering in the sky, arms outstretched as he looked up at the broken face of the god. Expression very unsightly, the patriarch then looked down at the blood tree growing up from within Seven Blood Eyes. There were only three people who could control the Soaring Cloud Sword Sect's taboo treasure. He was one of them. Another was the sect leader. And third was his own son, who had already been appointed to serve as the next sect leader.

That was Master Shengyun's father!

"Chu Tianqun!" growled Patriarch Soaring Cloud as he looked in the direction of his sect's headquarters. [1]

"Father." A middle-aged man stepped out from the Soaring Cloud Sword Sect headquarters. Floating up into the sky to stand next to Master Shengyun, he looked in the direction of Patriarch Soaring Cloud and bowed respectfully. This was the very same person whose fleshly body had been destroyed by Master Seventh back in Seven Blood Eyes in South Phoenix. [2]

"Why are you doing this?" Patriarch Soaring Cloud asked.

"You really don't know, father?" Chu Tianqun smiled mysteriously, his eyes full of venom as he looked at Patriarch Soaring Cloud. "My son did nothing wrong to deserve being born a conjoined twin. They were supposed to be ordinary twins. You

did something, oh exalted father, to ensure that one would devour the other. You made them venomous bugs in a jar.

“You were planning to possess my son all along, weren’t you? You wanted him to be your next reincarnation. The life lamp seemed like it was good fortune for him, but the truth was that it contained some of your divine resonance. You could have killed him with a mere thought. I was actually delighted to see that life lamp taken away from him. But if I didn’t pretend to be furious, you wouldn’t have been happy. So I played along.

“I thought that, given how things ended up, you would abandon your thoughts of taking my son. Instead, you did just what you would expect of an old patriarch. You traded my son to the president. Since you couldn’t possess him, you gave him over to be used as a clone.

“How could I not be furious at the coalition after that? How could I not hate a father like you down to my marrow? What other choice did I have but to rebel?”

“Truth be told, I should thank Seven Blood Eyes. But they did injure my son, so at the same time, I hate them with a passion. Therefore, though I had originally planned to put on my Blood-Soaked Performance in the Soaring Cloud Sword Sect, in the end, I agreed to my son’s request and decided to do it in Seven Blood Eyes.”

“You won’t get away with this,” Patriarch Soaring Cloud said, glaring at his son. And then he noticed something unusual happening to his son’s face, and his expression turned more unsightly.

As Chu Tianqun smiled, his face wriggled, and a mask appeared. It depicted the broken face of the god, sinister and awe-inspiring, pulsing with boundless fluctuations. Those fluctuations weren’t Chu Tianqun’s own energy, but rather a divine ability in the mask itself, which created a defensive barrier around him. With such defenses, he wasn’t exactly a match for his father, but he would be able to hold his own safely for the time it takes an incense stick to burn.

“Someone’s coming to get me,” Chu Tianqun said. “I just need an incense stick’s worth of time.”

Meanwhile, in Seven Blood Eyes, the blood tree emanated a shocking aura in all directions, causing wild colors to flash in heaven and earth, and sending winds screaming everywhere. The mountain headquarters trembled, causing massive rock slides, and shaking the entire area. The sect-destroying power of the taboo treasure erupted, making it seem like the mountain would end up completely destroyed. What was more, blood-colored shadows erupted from the trees, vicious expressions on their faces as they swarmed down.

From a distance, Seven Blood Eyes looked like a blur. Countless disciples were going crazy with anxiety.

However... there was no way that Seven Blood Eyes would join this coalition without being ready to defend themselves. That was especially true considering that Master Seventh and Sir Bloodsmelter were both known for their rigorous schemes and deep foresight.

As soon as the blood tree appeared, Sir Bloodsmelter appeared, becoming a stream of blood-colored threads that shot greedily toward the tree. Master Seventh was right behind him, ready to work together to keep the tree in check.

At the same time, in the Seazombie ancestral land, the Seven Blood Eyes taboo treasure appeared. Seven eyes opened, and the massive mirror turned in the direction of Seven Blood Eyes. As soon as the mirror locked onto the tree, the tree trembled violently. Terrifying fluctuations rolled out, and then an eye could be seen on the tree. Then a second eye and a third. Those eyes were manifestations of the Seven Blood Eyes taboo treasure.

The moment the eyes appeared, a unique power erupted. A power... of stealing!

Unexpectedly... Seven Blood Eyes was using this opportunity to steal the Soaring Cloud Sword Sect's taboo treasure! It was a development no one could ever have predicted.

Participation in what was happening required a certain level of cultivation base. As a result, in all of Seven Blood Eyes, only Master Seventh, Sir Bloodsmelter, and the taboo treasure could react to crush the tree.

Meanwhile, all disciples were stunned at what was happening. However, the peaklords had already issued orders about what to do, and thus, action was immediately taken to deal with the blood shades that were invading the sect. Though Seven Blood Eyes seemed like it was in chaos, the reality was... the sect was reacting in a very orderly fashion.

It was easy to imagine what would happen if Seven Blood Eyes actually took control of the Soaring Cloud Sword Sect's taboo item. If that happened, and Seven Blood Eyes controlled two taboo treasures, they would instantly become vastly more powerful.

The patriarchs and matriarchs of the other sects were paying very close attention to what was happening. Yet they seemed just as confident and relaxed as Master Shengyun and his father, Chu Tianqun. They didn't seem worried at all, presumably because they already understood exactly what was happening.

Master Shengyun and Chu Tianqun were betraying the sect and putting on a Blood-Soaked Performance. That was why the river water had been polluted, to attract the attention of the coalition leadership and force them to activate their taboo treasures. As such, it was a given that people from Torchlight were watching. After all, Torchlight was the only organization that had rules relating to a Blood-Soaked Performance. And that meant that the Torchlight members who were watching the performance had to be in the coalition somewhere.

Given that, and considering that the coalition was one of the six great powers, with Void Returning experts in it, there was no reason to lack confidence that they could defeat Torchlight, which had already been scattered and listed as wanted in the past.

As for Seven Blood Eyes, though the sect seemed to be in turmoil, things weren't as bad as they seemed.

It was the same with the Everlasting Immortal Profundity River. The source of the pollution had already been removed, and the river was already starting to turn pure again. The deadly fog was dissipating.

Events so far were still within the Eight Sect Coalition's power to control.

Meanwhile, Xu Qing sped on his way to the Seven Blood Eyes headquarters. He saw the huge blood tree, he saw the mountain headquarters trembling, and he saw the disciples fighting against the blood shades. He also spotted Sir Bloodsmelter and Master Seventh dealing with the huge tree.

Things didn't seem too bad. Yet for some reason Xu Qing still felt profoundly uneasy. What was more, the black fog and red sky had mixed, making violet light spread everywhere.

Xu Qing took a deep breath and took out an entropic teleportation talisman. Pushing down his unease, he flew into the mountain headquarters and joined the disciples fighting the blood shades. With his life flames burning, his battle prowess was sufficient to crush them with ease. Because the tree was being suppressed, there was only so much the blood shades could do. At first they had been ferocious, but with disciples surrounding them, they were collapsing. The only thing they had on their side was numbers.

As Xu Qing sped through the headquarters, he spotted the peaklords and elders fighting in midair. When he saw that, the anxiety in his heart eased a bit. However, that was when...

An indistinct figure flew through the sky into Seven Blood Eyes.

It was Night Dove, clad in a voluminous robe, a thousand threads swirling in his eyes. Fixing his eyes on the peaklords, he strode forward. As he passed Xu Qing, he looked over and exhaled softly. Then he blurred into motion as he shot toward the fighting.

Down below, Xu Qing had no time to react. In fact, he didn't even see anything. He just heard a rumbling sound in his head.

At that moment... his Violet-Heaven Supreme-Limitless Crown appeared and its defenses snapped into place. However, they were like wet paper, and collapsed immediately. The Violet-Heaven Supreme-Limitless Crown exploded.

Xu Qing's vision grew dark, and he felt a sense of deadly crisis erupt within him.

The next thing he heard was something like a child screaming. The lifeswapping ghost doll appeared in front of him, and it only lasted for a moment before crumbling as it lost a life.

That indicated that, a moment ago, Xu Qing should have just died!

Things weren't over yet. There was a second life within the lifeswapping ghost doll. However, that single breath from Night Dove was so terrifying that the second life only lasted for a moment before it was also destroyed!

All of that happened in the shortest of moments. Then, it seemed like the doll's third life might also be lost. The two lives it had lost before were lifelines for Xu Qing. Now, despite his shock, he instinctively crushed the entropic teleportation talisman.

In the blink of an eye, he began to ripple and distort. However, that was when another scream rang out as the lifeswapping ghost doll's third life expired!

That was when Xu Qing vanished, leaving behind only the fluctuations of a teleportation and the shattered remnants of the lifswapping ghost doll.

“Oh?” a soft voice said. “Three extra lives? And an entropic teleportation talisman...?”

Off in the distance, Night Dove wasn't paying attention. After all, he had just casually exhaled a moment ago, little more. Right now, he was fully focused on the battlefield. Looking around, he focused on the spot where the peaklords were helping crush the blood shades.

Master Seventh and Sir Bloodsmelter had both noticed what just happened with Xu Qing. Other patriarchs also noticed, and their expressions flickered.

“Void Returning expert!!”

It didn't matter how shocked everyone was, or what they did. They couldn't stop Night Dove from approaching the peaks of Seven Blood Eyes. He stopped right in front of Master Sixth! His move against Xu Qing had been beating the grass to startle the snake. He had wanted to hide his true reason for coming to the field of battle. That was why he had only exhaled softly.

Now, his eyes flickered with killing intent as the full power of his Void Returning cultivation base erupted. Not even Sir Bloodsmelter or Master Seventh could do anything to stop him now....

He reached out his index finger toward Master Sixth's forehead.

“The forehead is the bridge between heaven and earth. Slaughter the past, the future, the present. Lock down all teleportations, life-saving items, and divine wardings. EXTERMINATE!”

A stream of blood-colored light shot into Master Sixth's forehead. A tremor passed through him, and his eyes turned blank, even confused. Then they turned dim, and he fell. A Nascent Soul cultivator... had fallen!

Piercing cries of disbelief, pain, and heartbreak erupted from Master Seventh and Sir Bloodsmelter.

Winds screamed. The sky turned dark.

Grief overwhelmed Seven Blood Eyes!

Chapter 313: A Beam of Light!

Master Sixth had been a pitiable person. He started out like Master Seventh, as a shining star in Seven Blood Eyes. Normally speaking, he should have progressed beyond the Nascent Soul level.

But at a key point in his life, he lost his true love. She was his daoist partner and also his Junior Sister, but she died in an accident. What was more, she perished saving his life. Master Sixth, who had been a very romantic and idealistic person, was quickly overwhelmed with sorrow and regret. In fact, he nearly went insane with grief and indignation.

However, he clawed his way out of that mental state, and eventually placed all of his hopes and dreams in the child of his dead wife. His own son. His son was a hard worker and an assiduous cultivator. He was naturally talented, and his growth and progress drove Master Sixth's grief away.

But fate can be cruel. One day when his son went out for training, he never came back. His life slip shattered, indicating that he had perished. It was a worse blow to Master Sixth than when his daoist

partner perished. It created an unrelenting pressure that forced him out to sea looking for his son. However, even after all the years that passed he found no clues. Eventually, Master Sixth sank into sorrow, and spent his days drinking. Sometimes, he would weep to the moon, his heart overwhelmed with pain. The people in Seven Blood Eyes who knew him wished they could do something, but in the end, could only sigh in regret.

That was why, after Xu Qing found the clue leading to the killer, Master Sixth had gone absolutely crazy. It didn't matter that Sir Bloodsmelter had declared war on the Seazombies, Master Sixth *had* to take action.

It was also why Master Sixth had treated Xu Qing differently.

After that event, Master Sixth had worked hard to further the interests of Seven Blood Eyes. When Seven Blood Eyes reached a higher level and joined the coalition, it moved to Emperor-Receiving Prefecture.

Master Sixth already felt his pain easing, and had thus focused all his energy on Seven Blood Eyes. He had also quietly kept an eye on Xu Qing, and was waiting for an opportunity to pay him back for the great favor he had bestowed. To this day, he was still ready and waiting for that moment to arrive. Unfortunately... it all went up in smoke.

Master Sixth had perished.

His death was a massive shock to all of Seven Blood Eyes.

During the war two years before with the Seazombies, though Seven Blood Eyes had suffered casualties, not a single Nascent Soul peaklord had fallen. In fact during the last two hundred years in which Sir Bloodsmelter led the sect, and especially after Master Seventh started working with him, the sect had been on a constant rise to prominence. They had never experienced the death of a Nascent Soul expert.

The last time a Nascent Soul expert died was two hundred years before, and it led to the first vicious war with the Seazombies.

During that war, the Seazombies nearly managed to invade Seven Blood Eyes itself. The first generation patriarch had been wounded, and half of the peaklords died. Sir Bloodsmelter had been out of the sect traveling for so many years that many people had forgotten about him. Upon his return, he unleashed a cultivation base power that few people could have expected to see. It was the great circle of the Spirit Trove level. During that critical time, he saved Seven Blood Eyes. From that moment on, he became the nominal leader of the sect.

After that, Seven Blood Eyes made a lot of progress. Nascent Soul experts popped up like *bamboo after a spring rain*. Of course, to most cultivators, reaching that level was an incredibly difficult process, so there weren't a huge number. The current First Peaklord and Fourth Peaklord were original members of the peaklords, while the others were new. Master Seventh and Master Sixth had joined the sect together, and had once been rivals among chosen.

When Master Seventh watched as Master Sixth's corpse fell from the sky, collapsing into pieces, becoming a blood rain that fell onto the sect below, his eyes turned uncharacteristically bloodshot. He was no god that could turn a blind eye to such things. Neither was Sir Bloodsmelter. They had viewed the Soaring Cloud Sword Sect as a potential calamity, and also had an idea of where the president stood on the matter. They had predicted that a dangerous threat to the sect could arise.

They had even considered that traitors could rise up. They had even factored in the possibility that such traitors might be related to Torchlight.

Master Seventh had thought of all that. He had devised many contingencies, even plans if the Soaring Cloud Sword Sect activated their taboo treasure. As a result, they had followed through with those plans, and even taken advantage of the situation to try to steal the other sect's taboo treasure and add it to their own reserve power.

But... they had not considered that Torchlight would actually be far stronger than they had anticipated.

Master Seventh and Sir Bloodsmelter weren't to blame. The great powers in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture had mostly forgotten about Torchlight. Little did anyone know that, because of the arrival of one specific person, Torchlight had changed.

When that shadowy figure struck down Master Sixth, the battle prowess on display was that of Void Returning. That was something that not one single intelligence report from any of the great powers had mentioned.

It indicated that this entire event had been planned out in detail. It had been set up specifically to kill Master Sixth. Steps had been taken to assure that Master Sixth's defenses and lifesaving items would be negated so that he could be killed.

That shadowy figure hadn't truly been trying to kill Xu Qing. He wasn't the target of the mission. When you killed a chicken, you didn't need to use a giant saber. It didn't matter if Xu Qing fled or not. The whole point had been to kill Master Sixth, and that mission had been accomplished. Everything else was secondary.

Master Seventh trembled as he looked at the shadowy figure. His eyes were so bloodshot everything around him looked red, and the whole world reeled. The reason for his reaction was that there was nothing he could do. He had to stay with the patriarch to keep the Soaring Cloud Sword Sect's taboo treasure in check. If he abandoned the plan, it would fail, and the taboo treasure would inflict serious damage on Seven Blood Eyes.

Sir Bloodsmelter's eyes were also filled with grief, and he shouted in rage as he suppressed the taboo treasure. The other peaklords also trembled, but could only watch in disbelief as Master Sixth's corpse transformed into a blood rain. The Gold Core elders and the disciples from the various peaks were silent. That was especially true of the highnesses from the Sixth Peak, who trembled and howled inwardly. Unfortunately, no one could do anything.

The patriarchs and matriarchs of the other sects looked on with very serious expressions. Some of them performed incantation gestures, causing the coalition's grand spell formation to lock down the area. Up in the air, the president's face looked incomparably grim as he looked first at Seven Blood Eyes, and then the Soaring Cloud Sword Sect.

Eventually, his gaze came to rest on the eaves of one particular building.

The air there rippled and distorted as Sir Bloodsmelter and the other coalition patriarchs and matriarchs also looked in that direction, causing immense pressure to weigh down there. Their intense killing intent was all focused on the same area. The air suddenly cracked and split, and then collapsed.

Revealed on the eaves of the roof was a person in a black cloak, with a mask that resembled the broken face of the god. He lay back with his hands behind his head, looking up at Master Shengyun and Chu Tianqun.

A moment later, the air next to him rippled as Night Dove appeared.

“Lord,” Night Dove said respectfully, “I gave the gift to Seven Blood Eyes.” It didn’t matter that the coalition patriarchs and matriarchs had locked down that area with their killing intent. Night Dove’s voice didn’t quaver at all. It was as if he didn’t even notice what was happening. All he cared about was his lord and master.

“This performance was middling at best,” the young man said, sounding a bit bored.

“Yes, Lord. Shall I take back the mask?”

“There’s no need. The performance wasn’t amazing, but it was at least a bit entertaining.” The young man sat up, looked in the direction of Seven Blood Eyes, and smiled. Then he stood. “I’m done watching. Let’s go.”

With that, he hopped off the roof and onto the street below.

As the gazes of the patriarchs and matriarchs focused on the area, the air shattered, and the ground crumbled and sank down. Killing intent proliferated, making it so cold that snowflakes started falling. The pressure weighing down grew greater and greater, making the air so thick it seemed like it would be impossible to walk through.

However, the young man in the mask just strolled forward. It didn’t matter to him that powerful experts had locked down the area. Just like the coalition president up above, he was in the second stage of Void Returning, so such things didn’t affect him. They were so meaningless that, wherever he wanted to go, he would go. No one could stop him.

Night Dove followed quietly.

In that moment in which *the swords were drawn and the arrows were nocked*, the young man in the mask happened to walk past a vendor stand selling candied fruit. The mortals had long since scattered, leaving the Soaring Cloud Sword Sect’s city mostly emptied. However, they had left many things behind. The young man looked at the candied fruit, and then his eyes seemed to flicker with reminiscence. He picked up a skewer. “Lil’ bro likes these.” [1]

Everyone watched with very serious expressions.

This event had already escalated to the very highest of levels.

At this point, Seven Blood Eyes had finally managed to fully suppress the Soaring Cloud Sword Sect’s taboo treasure. When that happened, Master Seventh and Sir Bloodsmelter instantly shot out of Seven Blood Eyes.

The president of the Eight Sect Coalition had cold eyes as he said, “Torchlight, are you trying to declare outright war on the Eight Sect Coalition?”

The young man heard him and looked up. His eyes were visible through the broken god face mask. He smiled.

“Night Dove.”

“Yes, sir!” Night Dove took out a simple wooden box that was currently closed. Being very gentle, he opened the lid.

Then... a beam of light shot out from the box! It had no specific color or shape, and in fact, it couldn't be seen. It could only be felt. But as soon as it appeared, something changed in the dome of heaven. An intense rumbling sound echoed out. The Forbidden Sea screamed, and the sun and moon went dark!

Everyone in Seven Blood Eyes, from mortals, to disciples, to the leaders, all reacted with shock.

That was because, that light...

Was the same light that came when the eyes of the broken god face opened!!

Chapter 314: Moonlight Meeting

No magical treasure in the world, not even a taboo treasure, could possibly measure up to the light unleashed by the broken face of the god. After all, it was the gaze of a god. No matter what almighty cultivation base someone had, even if they had divine abilities and daoist magics that could transform heaven and earth, none of them... could possibly compare to the broken face of the god in the dome of heaven. It came down to a pressure by a greater level of life, and it hung over the heads of the countless species on Revered Ancient, like a death sentence.⁰

As the wooden box opened, and the shapeless, colorless light emerged, the dome of heaven transformed. The clouds seethed, becoming a sea of fury. The lands below blurred in unprecedented fashion, to the point where nothing could be seen clearly. At the same time, something like chanting could be heard, a sound that could shake the soul, filling heaven and earth, destabilizing the bodies of all beings. It was impossible to say if the chanting was what made the world blur, or if the world twisted and distorted because of the light. Either way, the Eight Sect Coalition was surrounded by the effect; everything blurred and everything distorted.²

Then, a strong mutagen like that from a forbidden region suddenly swept forth. It came from the ground, from the river, from even the dust. Every brick and tile, every food item, everything that existed suddenly erupted with streams of dark fog. The clouds above churned as they turned pitch black. Crimson lightning crackled within them, and then drops of blood began to fall as rain.¹

This was just as if the eyes of the god above had opened and were gazing at the Eight Sect Coalition!⁰

It was unimaginable.⁰

It defied contemplation!⁰

It was completely terrifying!!⁰

Just like the little city Xu Qing had been in back in South Phoenix, the Eight Sect Coalition's megacity could do nothing as the blood rain fell. The power of a god was majestic, and could change the life course of any and all living beings. They had absolutely no say in the matter. The entire Eight Sect Coalition was rapidly turning into a forbidden region!⁰

All of the sects and groups in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture were shocked to the core when they realized what was happening. The fluctuations emanating from that area were astonishing.0

Within the coalition, it didn't matter if someone was a mortal or a patriarch. They couldn't flee. In that moment, everything had transformed into despair!0

Buildings in the coalition crumbled into ruins. Life force was polluted, and mutation blotches blossomed on the skin of countless people. It didn't matter how high someone's cultivation base was, or what they normally did to keep the mutagen within them under control. Right now, that mutagen was raging wildly. It happened to the mortals, and the cultivators couldn't escape. Not even heaven and earth were spared. The fate of everyone and everything was now being affected.0

The megacity turned pitch black, and howls of grief rose up far and wide. It was so shrill and despairing that anyone who heard would feel chills running down their spine, and both their gazes and their souls inside their body went dim.0

Some disciples who had high levels of mutagen but kept them under control... suddenly lost control, and either exploded into clouds of gore or turned into blackish violet corpses. Mutations also occurred. Numerous cultivators' skin cracked, blood oozing out as they transformed into vicious beasts. At the same time, grues popped out of nowhere.0

The mere opening of that wooden box threw the entire Eight Sect Coalition into utter chaos. It was like a hell on earth.2

Sir Bloodsmelter and Master Seventh both reacted with intense shock, and it was the same with the other patriarchs and matriarchs of the coalition. None of them could possibly have imagined this ever happening; it wildly surpassed anything they could have predicted.0

Normally speaking, the patriarchs and matriarchs were incredibly powerful, but right now, they also had seemingly unending mutagen pouring into them, causing them to bleed profusely. They wanted to do something, but when under the gaze of a god, they lost control of their own functions. Mutagen went wild within them, and if they wanted to control it, they had to focus complete attention inward.0

Only the coalition president seemed able to deal with the situation. However, he was also trembling, mutagen going wild within him as he looked down at the ground below. His eyes contained a terror that had not been visible there for many years.0

“The gaze of the god above? Who... who are you??”0

As the blood rain fell down onto the eight shocked sects, the young man in the mask looked up. Drops of the rain fell onto his mask, flowed downward, and then dropped to the ground. His eyes contained reminiscence, and even a bit of regret as he walked through the blood rain.0

If one looked closely, it would be possible to see that despite the pouring blood rain and the shocking mutagen, the candied fruit he held didn't have a speck of contamination. He was protecting it carefully.0

As he walked, Night Dove followed, eyes burning with fanaticism and worship. Carrying the box reverently, he hurried along.0

The two of them walked the street, and the young man's gaze dropped to the patriarchs and matriarchs. It eventually stopped on Sir Bloodsmelter and Master Seventh.0

“It was reasonable for you people to kill Bai Li. It was also reasonable for me to take the head of his killer, and also watch the performance.”⁵

It was the first time he said anything to anyone in the Eight Sect Coalition. And having said that one thing, he flew up into the sky with Night Dove.⁰

He waved his hand, causing Master Shengyun and Chu Tianqun to tremble. Eyes full of reverence, they approached the young man and followed him.⁰

No one in the Eight Sect Coalition could do anything other than look on. None could interfere. From beginning to end, the young man seemed completely calm and casual. Just like when he had walked on the street, he would go wherever he wanted, and no one could stop him.⁰

Just before going over the horizon, the young man spoke again, his voice soft. Yet it echoed into the ears of the glaring president.⁰

“You just call him a god. We call him a living god.” [1]

2

The young man disappeared with Master Shengyun and Chu Tianqun, taking with him the gaze of that god. Without that gaze on the Eight Sect Coalition, the mutagen had no source. The transformation into a forbidden region was halted. That was, of course, the optimal conclusion of this event for the Eight Sect Coalition. If the megacity turned into a forbidden region, the results would have been catastrophic. Because the transformation wasn't complete, its effects could be reversed.⁰

The blood clouds in the dome of heaven faded, and the patriarchs and matriarchs exchanged complicated, silent glances. Now wasn't the time to discuss what had happened. They knew that the most important thing was to recover from the event. Without the slightest hesitation, they flew back into the sect and began the work of purging the mutagen and healing the injured.⁰

The Eight Sect Coalition had suffered a grievous blow, and the worst of it had been focused on... Seven Blood Eyes.⁰

At the same time, the name Torchlight was now bound to spread far and wide in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. All of the great powers would now be aware of it, and even fear it. All of it was because of that box!⁰

It could well be imagined that stories of this event in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture would spread to the other prefectures, until everyone in the county knew. In fact, word might spread even farther. After all... the light in that box was shocking beyond measure.³

All people. All species. All organizations. All of them were going to be aware of Torchlight!⁰

There had always been stories about Torchlight. For instance, rumors had circulated that people who joined them could command the power of gods.... [2]⁰

The term Torchlight itself had been the subject of a lot of analysis. An unlit torch was essentially a stick. Like kindling laying on the ground. Only when grasped in the hand would it become a torch. The word 'torch' itself implied fire, but also conveyed an element of control. When combined with the word 'light', it added a sense of brightness. And thus... they were called Torchlight!⁰

***0

As the young man who represented Torchlight took Night Dove, Master Shengyun, and Chu Tianqun away, and as the Eight Sect Coalition immediately began the repair and healing process, Xu Qing was traveling through the wilderness some distance away from the coalition.0

He had no idea what was happening back in the coalition. The last thing he remembered was his Supreme-Limitless Crown exploding, and the lifeswapping ghost doll dying three times in a row. Then he teleported away.0

When he materialized out in the wilderness, his face was ashen, and his heart was pounding like mad. He knew full well that if someone attacked him at that moment, he would almost certainly die. Though he didn't see any enemies present, he could sense dangerous auras everywhere.0

As fear lingered in his heart, he felt the instinct to rush back to Seven Blood Eyes to help. However, he knew that he was too weak to do anything. His cultivation base wasn't high enough to matter. Therefore, he didn't rush back. Instead, he masked his cultivation base fluctuations and put on a disguise. Only then did he start moving back toward the coalition. As he moved, he tried to figure out why all of this was happening. Unfortunately, his transmission jade slip didn't seem to be working.0

He felt very unsettled about that. Days passed. When he was only about a week out from the coalition, he was about to speed out of a forested area when, all of a sudden, he dropped to his haunches and narrowed his eyes.0

He saw people up ahead, moving through the moonlight.0

In the lead was a cloaked figure wearing a mask that resembled the broken face of the god. He walked casually, almost gracefully, and in his hand he held a skewer of candied fruit that didn't have a speck of dust or dirt on it. In the darkness of night, the red fruits were very conspicuous. [3]0

Next in line were three people. And two of them were Master Shengyun and his father, Chu Tianqun.

Chapter 315: Crown Prince of Violet and Cyan

A cold wind blew from the north, seemingly indifferent to life, filling heaven with frost. That wind drifted through the forest seven days away from the Eight Sect Coalition. Winter had finally come. Dead leaves fell, taking what little moisture remained in them and adding it to the mud in which they landed. The mud grew thicker. It was nighttime, so the cold was particularly harsh.

Xu Qing crouched down, a dagger in his hand, ready to take action. He wasn't sure if he could stay hidden from these people. All he could do was remain calm and quiet and hope not to disturb them. Of course, he couldn't help wondering what it meant about the sect that Master Shengyun and his father were here, safe and sound.

The other two people in the group, those with the black cloaks, emanated terrifying pressure, and made Xu Qing's flesh and blood quiver with a sense of deadly crisis. That was especially true of the one in the lead position. Even just the air around him rippled and distorted as he passed. The second cloaked figure made Xu Qing's heart sink. He recognized that person's aura; it was the very same person who had attacked him back in Seven Blood Eyes.

Xu Qing's guard went up even further.

Just then, the group stopped walking. As the cold wind blew, the cloaked figures, as well as Master Shengyun and his father, all turned to look toward Xu Qing's hiding spot.

Xu Qing's eyes narrowed. He knew that he had been spotted, but before he could decide what to do, the lead figure laughed softly, then kept walking.

However, the candied fruit shot out of his hand toward Xu Qing, along with a jade slip. They landed in the vegetation in front of him.

Xu Qing watched as the group disappeared into the darkness. He frowned. He had obviously been spotted, yet the group hadn't done anything to him. Instead, they dropped two items. The entire thing seemed absolutely bizarre. After a very long moment of thought, he looked down at the skewer of candied fruit and the jade slip. He studied them closely.

He ignored the candied fruit and instead studied the jade slip. After confirming that it seemed safe, he slipped a glove onto his hand before picking it up.

After examining it further, his eyes shone with determination. However strange this whole situation seemed, he got the feeling the explanation was in the jade slip. He cast his senses inside and heard a message.

"Long time no see, lil' bro."

Those six words struck Xu Qing to the core, causing his eyes to fill with disbelief. Heart thumping, he continued listening to the message.

"You probably know who I am. Truth be told, I really cherish the memories of our youth together."

"In my previous life, I had a lot of brothers and sisters, but I never really experienced much love and warmth. Everyone was cold and calculating. Whether it was my father the emperor, or all my brothers and sisters. They were all like that."

"But in this life, I cherish memories of dad and mom. And of course, you.... I especially love the memories of your cute little sniveling."

Xu Qing was shaking, and he could hardly control his breathing. His fingers tightened around the jade slip, and his ears buzzed. He looked up in the direction where the group of people had disappeared, and thought about that cloaked person with the mask that resembled the broken face of the god. The message from the jade slip continued to pour into his mind.

"But then I awakened the memories of my previous life. I knew immediately that I had to sacrifice everything. If I didn't complete the ceremony to the living god, then I couldn't truly be born again. I would wither away into death."

"Back then, I stood in the blood rain and looked at you sitting in the bloody sludge and the corpses, weeping helplessly, crying out for dad and mom. Truth be told, I was glad you were lucky enough to survive. I wanted to walk over to you, pat your head and say, 'Don't cry, lil' bro.'"

“I saw that candied fruit while I was walking along earlier, and remember how much you liked it, so I bought it for you. Seven Blood Eyes is fine. The peaklord from the Sixth Peak killed Bai Li, so I had Night Dove take his life. A life for a life. It’s completely reasonable.

“I left this message for you to let you know that I buried dad and mom on Mount Daybreak in Sea-Sealing County. If you have time, you can go pay them a visit.

“Goodbye, Xu Qing. I won’t be seeing you again.”

Xu Qing’s mind spun and his chest heaved as his mind went blank.

“Dad. Mom.... Master Sixth....”

The information in the jade slip came too suddenly, and didn’t seem real. Waves of shock battered his mind relentlessly. At the same time, a pain bored into his heart that was difficult to put into words. Slowly but surely, it filled him.

He didn’t want to believe that it was true. But the contents seemed real. As for Master Sixth, he would know the truth about his life or death upon returning to the sect. As for matters relating to his dad and mom, he had never spoken about that to anyone. The truth was that he knew full well that there was no way his parents could have survived the catastrophe which struck thirteen years ago. He had always held hope that he was wrong about that. But now he couldn’t fool himself any longer.

When Xu Qing thought about Master Sixth... he could envision the old man hefting his jug of alcohol. His son and wife had both died, dashing his hopes and dreams. And yet, Xu Qing couldn’t forget how the man had watched out for him. Master Sixth had cared for Xu Qing just as Master Seventh had.

Master Seventh had made a huge deal about Xu Qing becoming his apprentice. That itself was a threat to anyone in the world who had it out for Xu Qing. It made Master Seventh like a long, sharp spear.

But Master Sixth’s personality and experiences were different. He had helped out quietly and without fanfare, like a sturdy shield protecting Xu Qing from behind. In such a cold and brutal world, quiet help like that was something Xu Qing valued greatly.

There weren’t very many people who had helped him out during cold nights, who had cared about him, provided him warmth and protection. And he cherished each and every one of those people. Sadly, Sergeant Thunder was gone. Grandmaster Bai was gone. And now Master Sixth was gone.

Thinking about his dad and mom filled Xu Qing’s heart with pain, so much so that he trembled physically. The icy cold chilled him inside and out, from his soul to his skin. The jade slip in his hand shattered, and the sharp edges pierced into his palm, drawing blood. Drops of crimson and shards of jade dropped onto the dried grass at his feet. The wind blew again, and snowflakes drifted onto him, filling him with even more coldness. Then a lightning bolt crashed down, illuminating him as he stood there shaking. When the lightning bolt vanished, everything went dark again. Xu Qing stood there in the gloom. After some more time passed, another lightning bolt illuminated the area, revealing him.

He coughed up a mouthful of blood, which mixed with the snowflakes to fall to the ground. Unable to remain standing, he dropped to his knees. Rain and snow fell onto his hair, his shoulders, his face, making it impossible to tell that the liquid that fell to the ground was tears.

Xu Qing again looked in the direction where the black-cloaked figures had disappeared. A long time passed. Finally, he opened his bag of holding and took out a bamboo slip. It was covered with a host of names, most of them scratched out.

Every scratched-out name indicated someone that was dead.

As the cold raindrops fell like pearls, smashing into the ground, Xu Qing took out his iron skewer and carved another name onto the slip.

Crown Prince of Violet and Cyan.

Chapter 316: Xu Qing's Background

He inscribed the words onto his bamboo slip with extreme care, as well as a lot of force. Each stroke of each character contained boundless killing intent. Blood dripped from his palm, down the length of the iron skewer, and onto the bamboo, filling the name with blood. Perhaps it was the blood that caused Xu Qing to think about events from the past.

Thirteen years ago.

Back then, he had a home, but it all came crashing to an end on one fateful day.

The eyes of the broken god face opened, high in the dome of heaven. That gaze landed on the city where Xu Qing lived, and in an instant... heaven and earth blurred, all living things twisted and distorted, and the city disappeared.

The only thing left behind were ruins and a blood rain falling from the sky. He was the only survivor, and at first, all he could do was wallow in the blood-soaked mire, weeping.

He was only six or seven years old at that time, but even after all the years that had passed, he had never forgotten how he managed to escape that city. He had not forgotten the bitter struggle to survive, and how many things he had stuffed into his mouth that weren't really food. Back then, he had lived on the razor's edge between life and death. [1]

He ended up as a street urchin, covered in grime. Living that way, he saw the worst humanity had to offer. Over and over again. He learned to fight over food like a wild dog. He learned to bare his teeth. He learned how to be patient and vigilant. And he became accustomed to sticking to the shadows.

Eventually, he learned to kill. One winter in the slums, a burly man tried to kill him and eat him. Instead, he killed that man and stuck his head outside to mark his territory. [2]

He started to envy the people who lived in the city, with their clean clothes. He longed to be a cultivator, knowing that it would make his life better. In the end, the only thing he thought about on a daily basis was how to survive and keep on living. That was why he was so ruthless and brutal to his enemies. That was why he would seek revenge over the smallest grievance. That was also why he was so grateful when people helped him.

That was also why, when the eyes of the god opened again and looked down on the slums and the city he lived in, he wasn't afraid. For one thing, his life was already so rough that he didn't fear dying. What about it was worth being scared of?

Another thing related to... his previous experience.

After everything he had been through, he was no longer a sniveling child. That said, he had always clung to the hope that his dad and mom weren't dead. That they were looking for him.

That story was Xu Qing's secret, and it was something he had never revealed to anyone.

Thunder crashed and lightning streaked across the sky, casting Xu Qing's shadow onto the road. Xu Qing looked down at the four blood-soaked characters on his bamboo slip.

A moment later he added 'Master Shengyun's father' and 'Night Dove.'

"They all must die!" he murmured as he stood in the rain.

The extreme bitterness he had endured over the years had ended up forging an invulnerable core within him. There was nothing that could truly break him. Even the worst tragedies would just stoke his killing intent. He knew of only one way to offer sacrifices to his dead loved ones. And that was spilling blood for blood. That was what he had done for both Sergeant Thunder and Grandmaster Bai.

Looking off into the distance, he started walking. He looked incredibly fierce, like a lone wolf. But at the same time, his experiences had matured him.

He didn't look back.

It was cold and windy, but he didn't fear those things anymore.

He suddenly thought back to something Sergeant Thunder had told him. "When a person buries enough sadness in their heart, that's when they grow up."

Xu Qing felt that, as of this moment, he had grown up.

His plan was to go back to the sect and get stronger. Then he would leave Emperor-Receiving Prefecture and go find Mount Daybreak. Along the way, he would kill everyone whose name he had just carved. And not just them. He would eradicate the entire Torchlight organization.

"Every member of Torchlight must die!" he growled hoarsely. Taking out his dharmaship, he stepped aboard and became a bright beam of light that shot through the thunder and lightning toward the Eight Sect Coalition.

In the cabin, he sat down cross-legged to meditate.

Time passed slowly but surely.

Three days later, he opened his eyes.

Face completely expressionless, he looked down at his bag of holding for a moment before taking a flagon of alcohol out of it. Putting it to his lips, he drank. As the hot liquid entered his stomach, he thought back to the first time he had tasted alcohol. [3]

Sergeant Thunder had laughed at his reaction and said, “You’re too young to appreciate the flavor of liquor. You’ll like it when you’re older.”

It was in Seven Blood Eyes that he learned to appreciate that flavor. And right now, he felt like the alcohol wasn’t strong enough. Taking another big drink, he walked out onto the deck and looked up at the night sky. He felt the wind on his face. He looked away from the sky and out at the lands around him.

Then he took out a flute and put it to his lips.

Eventually... a bleak and desolate song echoed out from the dharmaship.

The song drifted out unhurriedly, recounting stories of the past.

The name of the song was Parting with Sorrow. [4]

Meanwhile, out in the wilderness of Emperor-Receiving Prefecture, the Torchlight procession proceeded along silently. The young man in the lead seemed indifferent to those behind him.

Eventually, Night Dove looked up and hesitantly said, “Lord, that young man....”

“He’s my younger brother in this life.”

Night Dove inhaled, then hesitated again. “Sir, is he like you? Does he have a past life?”

The young man shook his head. “Xu Qing has no past life. He’s just an ordinary kid from an ordinary family. That said, the brotherly affection I experienced before awakening the memories of my previous life... became a hindrance.”

Night Dove thought for a bit more, then asked, “Lord, what would have happened back in Seven Blood Eyes if... I accidentally killed him?”

“You’d be dead.” the young man replied calmly without looking back.

Night Dove thought some more before coming to an understanding. His lord didn’t actually care if Xu Qing lived or died. Running into him on this occasion had been pure chance. Back when Night Dove attacked him, his lord didn’t interfere. That was because he really didn’t care if he died. It didn’t matter who tried to kill Xu Qing, he would just look on. But because of the hindrance created by brotherly affection, anyone who killed Xu Qing would also have to die. It was just a matter of course.

In the final analysis, his lord wasn’t really Xu Qing’s older brother. From beginning to end, he was the stunning individual who even people from the holy land had repeatedly tried to recruit, the person who, before he had died, pledged himself to the living god and was thus granted a second life. He was the Crown Prince of Violet and Cyan.

Bowing his head, Night Dove said, “Lord, if cutting down your hindrance will further perfect your dao heart, then I, Night Dove, will accept the responsibility!”

“I don’t cultivate the dao, so I don’t need a dao heart. What I cultivate is... godliness.” Eyes tranquil, the young man continued off into the distance.

Chapter 317: Taboo Treasure

Flute music floated with the wind.

Days later, Xu Qing finally caught sight of the Eight Sect Coalition. The afterglow of dusk highlighted the dilapidated megacity. The river water was no longer black. Once again, it pulsed with strong immortal energy. But the gaping wounds left behind by the catastrophic event could not be erased in a matter of days. Even from a distance it was possible to see construction work everywhere. It almost looked like a human body being patched up by a surgeon. Mutagen-filled smoke still curled up into the sky. It created a picture of grief that bore testament to the catastrophe which had struck.

Although the mutagen levels had dropped since the light of the god's gaze emerged from the wooden box, it still hadn't been fully dispelled. Thankfully, it was being dealt with. Sadly, though, the mental pain and anguish that resulted could not be easily removed.

Catastrophe had not just struck Seven Blood Eyes. Though the other sects had not experienced many casualties, they were still deeply affected.

As Xu Qing's dharmaship dropped out of the sky, he took everything in, including the listless eyes of the citizens. And then he retracted his gaze and headed to the Seven Blood Eyes headquarters. Upon arriving, he saw the grieving highnesses of the Sixth Peak. He saw the dejected cultivators from the other peaks, and he saw the extensive damage to everything. Keeping silent, he joined the recovery effort.

In the blink of an eye, more than ten days passed. During that time, Xu Qing didn't meet with Sir Bloodsmelter or Master Seventh. He did see the Captain, as well as Second Elder Sister and Third Elder Brother. Each one had mixed emotions in their eyes. That was especially true of the Captain, who knew of Xu Qing's special connection to Master Sixth. Claspng Xu Qing's shoulder, he sighed.

Xu Qing kept his silence.

After half a month, eighty to ninety percent of the mutagen had been purged from the Eight Sect Coalition. The rest would slowly be removed in the coming days. Despite the sorrow the various sects had experienced, spirits were slowly lifting. In terms of how to deal with the overall situation, a decision had been reached.

The Eight Sect Coalition submitted a formal petition to the Swordsage Court, asking them to treat the Torchlight threat as a top priority. They also asked the Swordsage Court to step up their efforts to hunt down Torchlight criminals.

In addition to that, the Eight Sect Coalition publicly announced that they would not rest until Torchlight was wiped out. Though they had witnessed the terror of that wooden box, if they didn't express their intent to get revenge, the coalition wouldn't need to wait for Torchlight to wipe them out. They would fall apart naturally.

Internally, there was more.... Patriarch Soaring Cloud was ousted from the senate, and though the Soaring Cloud Sword Sect was still allowed to remain as a member of the coalition, for the following century they would receive the lowest percentage of resources. The sect leader was also punished severely along with the sect. And the only way for the sect to restore its previous standing was to see Master Shengyun and Chu Tianqun dead.

The Soaring Cloud Sword Sect's taboo treasure was only half as effective as before. That was because the tree which had been placed in Seven Blood Eyes had been successfully suppressed by Master Seventh and Sir Bloodsmelter. As a result, Seven Blood Eyes now controlled half of the taboo treasure.

Going forward, all 137 sects that made up the coalition would put all of their resources into searching for Torchlight operatives. As for that wooden box, all of the important people and organizations in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture were concerned about it.

After further analysis, it became clear that the wooden box... didn't actually contain the gaze of the broken face of the god. It just *resembled* that gaze. As for the details about how it worked, not enough time had passed to gather enough clues. But one thing was certain; that item was a huge threat, and no one had any idea how to defend against it. There was obviously some mysterious explanation, except, the lack of information just made the thing seem even more terrifying.

Torchlight... really did command some of the power of a god.

Now that the coalition was back on its feet, Xu Qing decided it was time to leave Seven Blood Eyes and take a trip to the Seazombie ancestral land to see the taboo treasure, where he hoped he could open his 121st dharma aperture. Before, he had not been dead set on opening that 121st dharma aperture. But now, things were different. He would stick to his plan that he had come up with. He needed to get stronger, and to reach every limit he could reach.

Before leaving, he went to Master Sixth's grave, which was where he saw Master Seventh, who stood there with a jug of alcohol in his hand.

To Xu Qing, Master Seventh had always seemed calm and leisurely. His eyes were sharp and intelligent, as though he always had everything under control. But this Master Seventh looked different. His hair was disheveled and his eyes bloodshot. His face seemed full of guilt. Chaotic fluctuations rolled off of him, as if he were trying to achieve a breakthrough, except the process wasn't going well.

When Master Seventh heard Xu Qing approaching, he looked over his shoulder. A new Violet-Heaven Supreme-Limitless Crown appeared in his hands, which he handed to Xu Qing, along with a piece of ink-black jade. The jade looked like a chunk of dried blood, and it emanated a very gruish aura. It seemed to be something similar to the lifeswapping ghost doll.

"Fourth Sib, I'm not going to make any dramatic demands of you. But I hope that you and your Elder Brothers and Elder Sister... can stay safe. I can't stand parting with Master Sixth, and I don't ever, ever want any of you to leave me. The world is fickle. Oh so fickle. I thought I'd planned for everything, but I had no way to plan for this. How could things have ended up this way....?"

Master Seventh sighed. Then he handed another jade slip to Xu Qing. It was an authentication device for the Seven Blood Eyes taboo treasure, which included all the details of how to operate it.

Xu Qing took it quietly, then bowed to Master Seventh. Finally, he looked at Master Sixth's grave. After a moment, he bowed deeply to the grave, then turned to his guilt-ridden Master.

"Master," he said softly, "we *will* avenge Master Sixth."

Master Seventh's gaze suddenly grew deep and meaningful. Then he looked off into the distance, his expression fierce.

"Definitely!"

As the words left his mouth, Ding Xue and her aunt appeared in the distance, both of them looking concerned. Not wanting to cause any further disturbance, Xu Qing clasped hands, then became a bright beam of light that shot in the direction of the Forbidden Sea, and beyond, the Seazombie ancestral land.

Because of the mutagen influx, the coalition's teleportation formations weren't stable, and thus Xu Qing decided that traveling by dharmaship was the best option.

Just as he reached the shore, he saw someone floating high in the sky up ahead.

She wore a plum-colored gown, and was flawlessly beautiful. She was none other than Arch-Immortal Plumdark.

Hovering there, she looked at Xu Qing.

Xu Qing ducked his head and bowed.

"Well met, Senior."

She didn't say anything in response. He waited for a long moment, then clasped hands again before continuing on his way. However he only got about 300 meters before Arch-Immortal Plumdark spoke.

"Everything happened too quickly. I didn't have a chance to interfere."

Xu Qing stopped in place, then turned.

"Thank you," he said softly. He didn't address her as Senior.

With that, he shot off into the distance. Arch-Immortal Plumdark watched him go, her expression loving and tender. Then she sighed, and her eyes became incredibly cold.

"Torchlight!" she growled.

Days passed in the blink of an eye.

As Xu Qing sped across the Forbidden Sea on his dharmaship, he eventually caught sight of the Seazombie ancestral land on the horizon. As he got closer he saw the enormous statues, above which floated the enormous bronze mirror. As it slowly rotated, it emanated a terrifying divine will that anyone who got close enough could sense.

After this location became the home of Seven Blood Eyes' taboo treasure, the entire island became affected by it. The Seazombies still lived there, but their every move and action was overseen by the treasure, so there was no chance they could even think about being disloyal. Seven Blood Eyes had arranged for disciples from all the peaks to serve here in rotation. Peaklords would come as well. In that manner, the taboo treasure was constantly guarded. Right now, Master Third was on duty.

As Xu Qing neared, the spirit automaton in the mirror sent out divine will to scan him. Coldness swept over him as he produced his identity medallion. The land on which the taboo treasure stood wasn't a place that anyone could visit. Even the highnesses of Seven Blood Eyes couldn't come

close without permission. And of course, that permission could only be given by Master Seventh or Sir Bloodsmelter.

After the divine will scanned the identity medallion, Xu Qing was approved. Instantly, the sea ahead of him surged, rising up on either side to create a path. Xu Qing proceeded forward on his dharmaship, 30-meter-tall walls of water on either side of him. All of this gave Xu Qing an even greater sense of how terrifying the taboo treasure was. Of course, it couldn't compare to what he had heard from other disciples about the beam of light that wreaked havoc on the sect.

Upon reaching the shore, Xu Qing put away his dharmaship and stepped onto what had once been the home turf of the Seazombies. The ground was violet, and covered with all sorts of strange plants. The gigantic mushrooms were still everywhere, and the air was full of glowing dandelion wisps. It was very beautiful. He saw huge jellyfish floating in the air, one of which extended its tentacles down invitingly. Atop the jellyfish were a few dozen Seven Blood Eyes disciples, all of them in Foundation Establishment. When they laid eyes on Xu Qing, they all bowed respectfully.

“Master Third received the orders from the sect, and has already arranged for dharma protectors. They're waiting by the taboo treasure. But there's no hurry, Your Highness. We're here to escort you there at your leisure.”

Because Master Seventh was now the sect leader, Xu Qing counted as a highness of the Seventh Peak, and also a highness of Seven Blood Eyes in general. Add in the prestige he had earned in the coalition, and all of these fellow disciples were being extremely respectful.

Xu Qing somberly returned their salute, then walked up the jellyfish tentacle to stand atop it. Then it moved in the direction of the taboo treasure.

This was Xu Qing's third time coming to this place. The first time was when he and the Captain went on that daring escapade. The second time was when he passed through. This third time was an official visit.

Looking around curiously, Xu Qing suddenly thought back to the Seazombies' Third Princess. It had been so long since those days that he'd almost forgotten about her, and hadn't thought to ask the Captain what happened to her.

“What have the Seazombies been up to recently?”

“Your Highness, the Seazombies are fully loyal to Seven Blood Eyes now. The souls of their patriarch and top leaders were sealed by the sect, and their zombification techniques are now under our control. Although they're allowed to continue to grow as a people, their souls must all be sealed.

“Other than that, we don't interfere with their daily affairs. They still have full autonomy in terms of their government and general society.

“That said, their royal succession hinges on sect approval. What's more, their previous king and patriarchs were taken away by Sir Bloodsmelter, and a new king and royal clan were put in place.”

Xu Qing didn't ask any more questions. Before long, they reached the location of the taboo treasure.

Fourteen enormous zombie statues rose high into the sky, emanating an aura that could shake heaven and earth. They also seemed to thrum with a sensation of ancient time. Compared to the statues, cultivators seemed like tiny ants. And that was especially true of five of the statues, which were so big it was hard to see the tops of them. At the base of the statues were buildings constructed by Seven Blood Eyes, which was where the disciples on guard duty stayed.

Xu Qing's arrival attracted a lot of attention, and everyone bowed in greeting.

"Your Highness, do you want to rest first? Or would you like to begin right away?"

Xu Qing looked up at the statues and the mirror. Taking a deep breath, he said, "If it's no trouble, I'd like to start immediately!"

Chapter 318: Life Reversal

Xu Qing didn't want to wait. In response to his words, the disciples immediately led the way forward. Before long, Xu Qing was right in the middle of the fourteen zombie ancestor statues.

There were numerous layers of defenses that kept the entire area completely under control. Plus, the powerful divine will fluctuations from the taboo treasure swept out, ensuring that anything suspicious would be quickly noticed. There were also spell formations set up everywhere, as well as innumerable magical devices. As a result, everything was completely locked down. After coming to realize all of that, Xu Qing was shaken.

In the very middle of all the statues, and right beneath the enormous mirror, Xu Qing saw a huge eight-sided altar.

A cultivator sat on each of the eight sides, and based on what Xu Qing sensed, they all had at least two heavenly palaces. As he neared, they opened their eyes. Their eyes shone brightly, and instead of arrogantly remaining seated because they were dharma protectors, they instead stood and bowed politely to Xu Qing. They knew full well who he was, and were aware that once he stepped into the Gold Core level, which could be at any moment, he would definitely surpass the two-palace level like them. As a result, there was no way they would fail to treat him with respect.

Xu Qing courteously returned their greeting, then stepped onto the altar.

Along the way, he had taken time to study the jade slip Master Seventh gave him, which explained how to use the taboo treasure. Xu Qing could do everything himself. However, that was only as it related to his own purpose for the treasure. In order to fully activate it would require assistance.

Taking a deep breath, Xu Qing walked to the very center of the altar and sat down cross-legged. After looking up briefly at the majestic mirror, he performed a double-handed incantation gesture and then pushed his hands down onto the altar on either side of him.

The surrounding Gold Core dharma protectors knew what was required of them, and did the same thing.

The altar trembled as a beam of light rose from Xu Qing, so bright that it made him blur indistinctly within it. As the dharma protectors went through their incantation gestures, light rose up from the eight sides of the altar. That light was crimson, and it merged with Xu Qing's light, creating a

blood-colored beam that entered the mirror above. The mirror vibrated, stopped rotating, and then slowly turned on its side so it was facing down toward Xu Qing. [1]

As the crimson light entered the mirror, it was reflected back out, shining down on the lands below and superimposing over the light that still shot upward. When it hit Xu Qing, he trembled as a shocking power weighed down on him. He turned almost completely transparent as a result, causing all of his 120 shining dharma apertures to be visible.

That made it much easier for him to search for the 121st aperture. Focusing his divine will inward, he began looking.

He did not meet with immediate success. After twenty breaths of time passed, the light faded away. Xu Qing opened his eyes and they shone with regret. He had not succeeded.

Remaining very courteous, Xu Qing said, "If it's not too much trouble, dharma protectors, let's try again."

The eight dharma protectors smiled and nodded, then went into more incantation gestures. More light shot up, reflected back from the mirror, and shone down on Xu Qing, who again began looking for the new dharma aperture.

He failed again.

A frown appeared on his face as the light faded. Then he thought back to what his Master had previously said about the 121st dharma aperture opening in a spot between life and death.

I suppose that's what I'm missing.

He thought back to the plan he had come up with. It was an absolutely crazy plan that would put him in a very deadly crisis. But it was without hesitation that he stood, clasped hands, and bowed.

"Master Third, I hereby request... to experience the death-to-life Seazombie zombification process!"

Upon hearing his words, the eight dharma protectors reacted with visible shock.

The Seazombie zombification process could bring a dead person back to life. However, that resurrected person would no longer be the same species. Their memories would be hazy, and they would become incomparably ruthless. Their cultivation base would become unbalanced, and they would have to exercise immense willpower and work hard at cultivation to achieve balance.

However, that was only the normal zombification process. There was another, even more heaven-defying process that was usually reserved for the Seazombie royal clan, or people with immense potential.

And that was called... life reversal!

It was very painful, but it preserved the memories perfectly, and also didn't come with a dramatic loss in cultivation base. However, it did require a willing participant, and what was more, the rate of failure was high. There were extreme pros and cons, and as a result, not every member of the royal clan attempted it.

Xu Qing had studied a lot about Seazombies in the sect files. And considering Seven Blood Eyes had long been a mortal enemy of the Seazombies, it made sense that they had done thorough research into them.

This was the plan that Xu Qing had come up with. He wanted to fabricate a moment that he could control, but would still put him in a spot between life and death. He would allow himself to be zombified, and use that moment to tap into the taboo treasure to search for his final dharma aperture. The plan was extremely dangerous. If he failed, then he would either become an actual Seazombie, or simply die.

“Have you thought this through, Xu Qing?” replied the calm voice of the scholarly looking Master Third. He looked down from above, his expression serious.

“I have,” Xu Qing replied, keeping his head bowed.

Master Third looked down at him for a moment, then sighed. He could see some of the injuries in Xu Qing that had still not healed, and knew about his close ties to Master Sixth. He shook his head.

“I can’t approve this without contacting your Master first.” Master Third took out a violet jade slip and sent a message to Master Seventh back in the coalition.

The reply came back very quickly. Master Seventh’s gruff voice echoed out, saying, “Are you sure, Xu Qing?”

“I’m sure!” Xu Qing replied with decisiveness that could sever nails and chop iron.

The violet jade slip was silent for a moment, and then Master Seventh sighed. “Help out my apprentice, Ol’ Third.”

“Orders received, Sect Leader,” Master Third said respectfully. Putting the jade slip away, he looked deeply at Xu Qing. “What exactly do you want me to do?”

“Peaklord,” Xu Qing said calmly, “please clear and seal the area, then converge the Seazombies’ zombification power on me.”

Master Third nodded. Shortly thereafter, the eight dharma protectors were gone, and the area was completely empty. Spell formations glittered as a sealing barrier went up. Then Xu Qing took out a black piece of wood and put it onto the altar in front of him.

Master Third waved his hand, and seven figures descended from above, all of them pulsing with strong mutagen. They were all Seazombie cultivators.

Each had a Nascent Soul cultivation base, and all of them inclined their heads to Master Third.

“Tap into the zombification power of one of the statues,” Master Third said. “Send it to the altar and zombify this person.”

Seazombie zombification required the use of special powers that only Seazombies had. It was an innate ability that other species couldn’t replicate. The seven Seazombie cultivators were shocked, and all looked down at the altar. However, none of them asked any questions, and they immediately went into incantation gestures. Master Third watched as, only a moment later, one of the fourteen zombie ancestor statues began thrumming loudly.

It was the seventh statue, the largest of them all, and as it vibrated, blue light spilled out. It started with the statue's legs, then went to its torso, its arms, and finally its head, until the entire thing was bright blue. Then that blue light shot toward Xu Qing.

The light spread out over both Xu Qing and the altar, causing a tremor to pass through him. It was painful, but compared to things he had experienced in the past, it wasn't anything he couldn't deal with.

Whether it was the time he got the life lamp from the Merfolk, or the destined opportunity from the dragon chariot and the giant, he had experienced pain that far surpassed this. Ignoring the pain, he kept a tranquil expression on his face. Slowly but surely, his skin started turning blue. The same thing happened with his muscles, bones, and veins. Even his dharma apertures began to transform.

His life lamp couldn't do anything. As for the violet crystal, it trembled as if it wanted to reverse the process, but Xu Qing kept complete control over it to prevent that from happening.

Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior trembled, and the shadow felt overwhelmed with terror.

Xu Qing's aura was rapidly vanishing, and he was rapidly approaching the point of passing from life to death.

On an instinctual level, Xu Qing didn't want to die. And the violet crystal, despite how he was suppressing it, did its best to fight back against the zombification. His body was almost like a battle ground.

Xu Qing's eyes glowed blue, and when he spoke, his voice seemed more sinister. "Master Third, add in another zombie ancestor statue!"

The seven Seazombie cultivators reacted with shock to his words, and peered more closely at Xu Qing. It was very rare for anything like this to happen, to the point where only their original king had experienced something similar.

After a moment of grim silence, Master Third nodded. "Add another!"

The seven Seazombie cultivators immediately complied. The second zombie ancestor statue thrummed and emanated blue light that descended onto Xu Qing.

Time passed. Before long, three days had gone by.

Now, blue light glittered, not from two statues, but from five!

And yet, Xu Qing had not yet reached the point of passing from life to death. That said, he was getting closer and closer to that point. Just looking at Xu Qing, he seemed to abound with death energy, to the point where he looked no different from any other Seazombie. The only thing about him that wasn't blue was the flame of his life force.

The seven Seazombie cultivators were visibly surprised. None of them had ever seen a zombification take so long, not even for their former king. And he hadn't needed the power of five statues. Such a long process, and so many statues, indicated that if the process succeeded, this person would be the most outstanding Seazombie to have come along in many years.

"What is Seven Blood Eyes planning to do with a chosen disciple like this?"

"Are they creating a new king for us Seazombies?"

Chapter 319: Gold Core Heavenly Palaces

Within the Seazombie ancestral land, at the spot where the Seven Blood Eyes taboo treasure existed, blue light surged. As the process continued, it attracted more and more attention from the Seazombies and the Seven Blood Eyes disciples. That was especially true of the former, who were absolutely stunned by what was happening. As the days passed, and the Seazombies saw the blue light coming from the altar, they knew exactly what it signified.

It was because they knew that they were so shocked. It was similar with the Seven Blood Eyes disciples stationed in the area.

Master Third looked down at Xu Qing surrounded by blue light, and could sense the strong aura of death in it. It caused his heart to pound.

If it wasn't for the fact he knew Xu Qing was doing this for the sake of his 121st dharma aperture, and that there was virtually no chance Xu Qing would betray the sect, Master Third would probably think he was really trying to become a Seazombie.

As the power of multiple zombie ancestor statues poured into Xu Qing, his life force shrank, and the death aura around him grew stronger.

Six more hours passed. It was dusk and the moon had already come out. A tremor passed through Xu Qing as he reached his absolute limit. He was suppressing the violet crystal as much as possible, and thanks to the encroachment of the zombie ancestor statues, his body was on the very verge of being zombified.

On the one side of him was life. On the other side was death. This was that spot between life and death. Unfortunately, it was a very unstable state. The slightest variation would push him from that spot between life and death into... being a real zombified Seazombie.

At that critical moment, Xu Qing opened his eyes. They shone with blue light, and seemed devoid of even a scrap of emotion. Raising his right, zombified hand, he slowly pointed at the black piece of wood in front of him.

In response, powerful fluctuations rolled off of it.

All of a sudden, the Darkspirit Everwill Door appeared in front of Xu Qing. Rumbling loudly, it opened. A dazzling flash of white light appeared, completely different from the blue light. And it enveloped Xu Qing!

Compared to before... the light was even more dazzling and bright. It didn't contain even a hint of the darkness of the brutal world around it. That said, it was colder, with its previous warmth hidden inside. The light from this black door was what Xu Qing had planned to use to stabilize his position in that spot between life and death. Thanks to his encounter with Master Shengyun, as well as his subsequent research, he had come to the conclusion that the twofold ensorcellment on the door gave it a power to seal one's life force. It was a sealing power that, within the blink of an eye, would freeze him in place.

That said, there was also a golden light that appeared, which briefly attracted Xu Qing's notice. However, then he shivered from head to toe as the instability of that spot between life and death was suddenly stabilized. His life force was locked in place.

Master Third, who was overseeing the entire situation, saw what was happening and immediately dispelled the blue light from the zombie ancestor statues. Then he performed an incantation gesture, causing the giant mirror to rotate and then sent light shooting down onto Xu Qing.

Yet again, Xu Qing was wrapped up within the light of the mirror. He shivered, but was thinking with absolute clarity, and immediately sent his senses into himself to look for the 121st dharma aperture.

Master Seventh had said that each individual had dharma apertures in different places, and it was the same with the 121st. In that spot between life and death, with the help of the Seven Blood Eyes taboo treasure, Xu Qing searched and searched... and finally found the 121st dharma aperture!

Astonishingly, it was located right in the middle of his sea of consciousness. Furthermore, it didn't exist in a state of reality, but instead, was somewhat illusory.

After finding it, Xu Qing didn't hesitate to send all of the soul power within him shooting toward his sea of consciousness. Instantly, he started shaking.

It was harder to open the 121st dharma aperture than any of the other apertures. But Xu Qing was ready for the process. Dharma force flowed out of all of his other dharma apertures, converging into a stream of soul fire that shot toward the 121st.

A few breaths of time passed. Cracking sounds rang out within him, and he shook even harder. And then, the illusory 121st dharma aperture within his sea of consciousness... opened!

The moment it did, unrivaled dharma force fluctuations erupted from it. Those fluctuations were boundlessly violent, and could shake heaven and earth! That lone dharma aperture released power equivalent to 30 of his other dharma apertures. The majestic nature of that dharma force was why that single aperture could ignite a life flame.

Xu Qing's existing four life flames, despite having changed color thanks to the zombification process, all converged. And then Xu Qing's fifth life flame ignited.

As for its color... it was the ordinary red of flame.

Terrifying fluctuations rolled out from the fire, filling Xu Qing, and instantly shattering that state of existence between life and death. In the blink of an eye, the aura of death surrounding him vanished.

Because the process had not been completed, the zombification Xu Qing had experienced could be reversed. What was more, the power of the violet crystal was unleashed. Though Xu Qing hid the crystal itself using his shadow, it still did a good job of rapidly restoring his life force.

Gradually, another of the life flames turned red, then another.... When all five of his life flames were back to their normal color, intense life force surged through him. His skin returned to its previous condition, and his hair no longer looked dry and withered. The entire process took about eight hours. At that point, he opened his eyes. He was completely back to normal!

He had successfully returned from the point between life and death. He had opened his 121st dharma aperture! Seeing what had happened, the seven Seazombie cultivators up above seemed both regretful and respectful.

No one would dare to look down on someone who had opened 121 dharma apertures. That person would reach the ultimate limits of the Gold Core level. And of course, the Seazombies knew who Xu Qing was, and that he had life lamps.

Master Third breathed a sigh of relief, and his eyes shone with admiration. However, he didn't say anything to interrupt. He knew that next... Xu Qing was going to try to reach the Gold Core level. He waved his hand to send away the Seazombie cultivators. After sealing the area even more tightly, he chose to act as dharma protector.

Master Seventh himself had asked him to do that. And whether it was because of the favor to Master Seventh, or for the sake of the sect in general, Master Third was going to take the responsibility seriously. He wouldn't let any accidents happen during Xu Qing's breakthrough. Truth be told, it would be unlikely for any accidents to happen in this place. It would be hard to find somewhere safer in all of Seven Blood Eyes.

A moment later, Xu Qing opened his eyes and took a few deep breaths. He could sense that Master Third had secured the area, so he closed his eyes and started the breakthrough!

For all intents and purposes, there was nothing to do after you reached five flames, other than break through.

Rising from Foundation Establishment to Gold Core involved burning life flames to the limit, and using them to illuminate the heavenly palaces.

Illuminated heavenly palaces, though illusory, would never go away.

What cultivators had to do was, in the years after the breakthrough, turn the illuminated but illusory heavenly palaces into corporeal palaces. By adding the might of a gold core to them, they would become true heavenly palaces.

In response to Xu Qing's thoughts, his five life flames burned high and bright.

121 dharma apertures were like a hundred and twenty-one furnaces. And that was especially true of the final aperture. Countless flaming strands became five life flames, which radiated incredibly dazzling light that filled Xu Qing.

Within his sea of consciousness, above the life flames, the faint corner of his first illusory heavenly palace had been visible before. But now, it was revealed, as though a curtain had been pulled aside. A moment later, it was bathed in light. It resembled an enormous palatial mansion, bursting with holiness and dignity. It was the most basic and simplistic appearance for a heavenly palace. All humans had illusory heavenly palaces that looked like this.

Such matters were determined by the bloodline of a species. As for how it looked when it became corporeal, that would depend on the techniques practiced by the cultivator.

As Xu Qing's five life flames burned high and bright... a second illusory heavenly palace appeared above the first.

After that was a third and a fourth....

Massive rumbling sounds echoed out in his sea of consciousness. Lightning crashed. Then his fifth illusory heavenly palace appeared.

From bottom to top, the five heavenly palaces looked majestic. What was more, the light of the life flames was still going. A sixth heavenly palace was revealed within his sea of consciousness.

Above the sixth heavenly palace was a thick mist that blocked any further progress of the light. Six heavenly palaces was the limit for cultivators with three life flames. That was because the palaces beyond that existed in the life mist, which was impenetrable to the light of life flames.

But Xu Qing was an exception. As his five life flames burned brightly, a seventh illusory heavenly palace appeared within the mist.

After that, as the dazzling light pierced into the mist, an eighth became visible. Eight illusory heavenly palaces caused his sea of consciousness to tremble, and at the same time, caused him to emanate shocking fluctuations that kicked up a raging vortex around him. Boundless amounts of spirit energy were sucked in.

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“Next,” he murmured, “my life lamps will become life palaces!”

With that, he hoisted up the seven-colored wind-chanting lamp within his sea of consciousness. The lamp shot past the six illusory heavenly palaces and into the life mist. After passing the seventh and eighth palaces, it reached the highest point, where it unleashed shocking might.

Consummately brilliant light emanated out, causing a ninth heavenly palace to appear around the lamp. This palace was not illusory. It was corporeal!

The process took about an hour. After that, Xu Qing’s ninth heavenly palace was there in the life mist.

The seven-colored wind-chanting lamp had become like a gold core of its own, suppressing the ninth heavenly palace and... completing it!

The power of a single heavenly palace instantly erupted from Xu Qing as he sat cross-legged on the altar. Wild colors flashed in heaven and earth, and a deafening rumbling sound echoed out.

However, things weren’t over yet. Next, he took the black umbrella-shaped life lamp and hoisted it high!

Chapter 320: Advancing by Leaps and Bounds

Three flames illuminated six palaces. Four flames illuminated seven palaces. Five flames illuminated eight palaces!

Right now, the six illusory heavenly palaces that existed below the life mist radiated splendor. The power of their united structure pushed the cultivation base from Foundation Establishment firmly into the Gold Core level.

Within the life mist were the seventh and eighth heavenly palaces. Though they were surrounded by mist, they were also radiant. However, the ninth palace was more amazing and majestic than the eighth below it.

That ninth palace had been formed from the seven-colored wind-chanting lamp, and its blinding radiance pierced through the life mist and shone on everything around it. With the seven-colored wind-chanting lamp in place, terrifying fluctuations rolled out, creating a shocking pressure. After all, a single palace contained the power of six flames.

Then Xu Qing lifted up his second life lamp, and thunderous rumbling sounds filled his sea of consciousness. It sounded like the howl of a godly being, with all living things shouting in response. The black umbrella pierced through everything, flying above the ninth heavenly palace. There, it released dazzling light like a sea, sweeping over everything. At that point, a heavenly palace took shape around the black life lamp.

This palace was not illusory. It was corporeal!

It was... the tenth palace!

It was different from the ninth palace formed from the seven-colored lamp. This tenth palace was pitch black and covered with black flames. It looked almost like a necropolis from the underworld. It seemed shocking and ghastly, but at the same time, it surged with intense power. As a result, Xu Qing's battle prowess instantly advanced by leaps and bounds, soaring past its previous level!

He hadn't just reached the Gold Core level, he had instantly formed two full heavenly palaces!

On the Revered Ancient mainland, the Gold Core level with its heavenly palaces was a watershed point. Cultivators under Gold Core were considered low-level, and were all considered to be building a foundation. But once you stepped into Gold Core, your foundation was complete, and your cultivation took a huge leap forward.

What was more, Xu Qing's breakthrough was far superior to most of the Gold Core experts in the coalition. For example, even after many years had passed, Sima Ru still had not yet completed her second heavenly palace. That just went to show how valuable life lamps were.

Of course, Xu Qing's battle prowess wasn't just improved by his breakthrough, it also benefited by his constantly transforming imperial-class technique. Comprehensively speaking, his battle prowess already surpassed that of an ordinary cultivator with two heavenly palaces. And that wasn't even bringing his poisons into the picture.

Right now, he was already on the verge of completing his third heavenly palace, and if he put a poison core in it, his battle prowess would be even more astonishing.

Then, as he slowly transformed his remaining heavenly palaces from illusory to corporeal, and eventually had a total of ten of them, his battle prowess would reach an absolutely astonishing level compared to others in the same level as him. It wouldn't be a drawn-out process, simply because his Gold Core technique was very unique.

Xu Qing opened his eyes, and within his mind swirled the Gruegloom Daoseizing Art his Master had imparted to him. As it spread out and became part of his heart and mind, his right hand slowly became transparent. It was almost like it existed between illusory and corporeal. Xu Qing looked down at his hand and could sense a terrifying aura in it, something boundlessly gruish.

If he shoved that hand into the sea of consciousness of an enemy, he could break open their heavenly palaces and take the gold core therein. But there was more. Xu Qing could sense that his right hand could create a very powerful threat to grues.

Master said that when I cultivate this art to completion, my whole body can enter that same state between illusory and corporeal, allowing me to evade all sorts of dangers.

His eyes shone with determination. He now felt more anxious than ever to progress with his cultivation and get even stronger.

Shortly after, he took a deep breath; he knew that he had to work even harder than before. With that, his hand returned to normal.

Looking calm, he stood and bowed with deep respect to Master Third, who had acted as dharma protector for him.

“Thank you for your trouble, Master Third.”

Xu Qing knew that Master Third had been watching over him for the sake of his own Master, but that didn’t make him any less grateful.

Up above, Master Third’s eyes shone brightly as he looked at Xu Qing. He did nothing to mask the praise in his expression. As far as he was concerned, Xu Qing was the most spectacular disciple to rise up in Seven Blood Eyes for years.

“Keep on living, and you’ll play an important role in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture in the future,” he said.

Xu Qing again clasped hands and bowed.

Master Third waved his hand, and the surrounding spell formation deactivated. Then he vanished.

Xu Qing looked at the spot where he had vanished, then glanced at the huge bronze mirror overhead. Then he took out his dharmaship and reached out to it mentally. The spirit automaton inside let out a howl, and power comparable to Gold Core erupted out. The ship shot off into the distance.

Moving at top speed, Xu Qing reached the harbor, then continued on to the Forbidden Sea without stopping.

When he came, he was a four-flame Foundation Establishment cultivator. When he left, he was a two-palace Gold Core expert.

The difference in battle prowess between those two levels was like the difference between the sky and the land.

After shooting off into the distance, Xu Qing suddenly said, “Master Freespirit.”

“Milord!” The black iron skewer appeared next to Xu Qing, and Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior came out as an illusory projection. He looked fearful and a bit apprehensive as he dropped to his knees.

“Your battle prowess is weak. If you aren’t able to keep pace with me—” Xu Qing wasn’t able to finish his sentence.

The patriarch shivered, then threw his head back and smacked his chest forcefully.

“Don’t worry, milord! Your humble servant has long prepared for this moment. I was just preparing to give you an update, milord. It won’t take me any longer than six months— no, wait. Three months!! At that point, your humble servant’s lightning spirit body can be upgraded and will change from spirit to soul!”

The patriarch’s eyes were bloodshot, and he looked ready to go all out.

The truth was that he was actually a long way from a breakthrough point. But he had no choice right now. If he didn't start working a lot harder, then given Xu Qing's current state, the patriarch knew he would end up as cannon fodder.

That said, if he wanted to break through in three months, he needed resources. After a bit of hesitation, he cautiously said, "Milord, just so you know, I can also absorb souls. In the past, I needed to absorb magical devices to form my lightning spirit body. But to become a lightning soul, I need a lot of souls...."

"Okay." Xu Qing glanced at the patriarch. Earlier, he had been planning to say that if the patriarch couldn't keep pace, he would set him free. After all, Xu Qing was pleased with how hard the patriarch had worked in recent years. But after hearing what the patriarch just said, Xu Qing thought for a moment and then decided not to mention what he had been about to say.

Meanwhile, the shadow saw all of this happening and immediately released some fluctuations.

"Three... also!!

"Pieces... I... three... breakthrough!"

There was no need for Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior to translate. Xu Qing understood enough just from listening. The shadow was talking about the taboo treasure fragment he had taken from Sima Ling. In the past, Xu Qing had always hesitated to comply, fearful of the shadow's instinctive drive to fight back. [1]

But now that he was in the Gold Core level, things were different. Therefore, he nodded and waved his hand. The fragment landed on the deck atop the shadow. The shadow reacted with delight. Instantly spreading out to cover the fragment, it greedily started absorbing it.

A few days later, Xu Qing saw the Eight Sect Coalition's port up ahead. He had been gone for the better part of the month, which wasn't very long. But thanks to the hard work of everyone in the coalition, there were almost no signs remaining of the catastrophe which had struck.

The mutagen had been almost completely driven out, and whatever remained was so faint that the immortal energy from the Everlasting Immortal Profundity River made it impossible to detect. What was more, the coalition had set up a lot of new formations to drive out mutagen. Most of the buildings had been repaired. The main thing that remained was the mental pressure and grim attitude which had taken hold among the people.

Xu Qing sent a message to his Master notifying him of his return, but didn't contact anyone else.

Back at his berth, he settled down cross-legged to familiarize himself more with being in the Gold Core level and having heavenly palaces. He also started doing more research into the Gruelgloom Daoseizing Art. In addition to that, he spent some time improving his magical techniques. Whether it was the Dark Serenity Curse, the Ninefold Tsunami, or Within the Nine Springs, they all needed deep examination.

What was more, his bluegreen dragon could also be transformed. The bluegreen dragon came from his life essence and his dharma apertures. In fact, if he didn't have that poison pill or his life lamps,

then the dragon would have become his first gold core, which he would place in his first heavenly palace.

That said, Xu Qing wasn't planning to abandon it. He planned to work on the poison pill and his life essence gold core at the same time.

Closing his eyes, he cast his senses out to his imperial-class technique. As for Golden Crow Assimilates Myriad Spirits, I need to devour something else to get it to the second stage.

Days passed as Xu Qing familiarized himself with his new cultivation level. As the coalition got back to normal, intelligence reports began to pour in about Torchlight.

In Seven Blood Eyes, it was Master Seventh who handled the reports, and began to personally coordinate the search for more clues. Both Seven Blood Eyes and the Eight Sect Coalition as a whole needed to vent their frustrations in the form of slaughter. And Xu Qing was in exactly the same position. However, a thorough investigation was something that would take time. And nobody was willing to underestimate Torchlight. Everything had to be done safely.

Before the intelligence reports could all come in and be verified, a visitor came to Seven Blood Eyes. It was a delegation from Eastnether Isle in the Forbidden Sea, and it was made up of a group of several hundred cultivators.

Leading the group was Guru Eastnether along with her granddaughter Yanyan.

As close allies of Seven Blood Eyes, they had obviously been concerned with what recently happened. And they had come to confer with Seven Blood Eyes, and create a plan to deal with Torchlight and get revenge.

Almost as soon as Sir Bloodsmelter and Master Seventh sat down with Guru Eastnether to start discussing matters, Yanyan secretly slipped away.

She obviously cared a lot about Seven Blood Eyes, and knew a lot about it. And that was especially true of Xu Qing. She didn't even need to ask anyone where Xu Qing was. Before long, she had found his berth.

Standing outside of his dharmaship, she softly said, "Oh, Big Bro Xu Qing, I've missed you so much!"