

Timescape 321

Chapter 321: Yanyan's Gift

Inside the cabin, Xu Qing opened his eyes.

Yanyan actually wasn't the first person to have come to visit him. Both Ding Xue and Gu Muqing had been by. Xu Qing had been acting just the same as always, not giving any indication anything was different. If anything, he was a bit quieter than before.

Upon hearing Yanyan's voice, he stood, walked out of the cabin, and looked calmly at the girl on the shore.

Seeing him, her face broke out into a wide, happy smile. At the same time, she leaped gracefully off of the shore toward his dharmaship. All she accomplished, though, was smacking into its defenses. A thump rang out, then she fell back to the shore. Climbing into a sitting position, she looked at Xu Qing with discouraged eyes that welled with tears.

Gripping her garments tightly, she said, "You don't like me, Big Bro Xu Qing? Did I do something wrong? Just tell me, I can change...."

"Cut the act," Xu Qing said quietly. "What do you want?"

The tears in her eyes vanished and a sly grin appeared on her face. Sticking her finger in her mouth, she bit it hard enough to draw blood. Something strange could be seen in her eyes as she sucked the blood. "I guess I can't fool you, Big Bro Xu Qing. But I actually love it when you look at me like that. I came to bring you a little gift."

Eyes glazing over a bit, she chuckled and waved her hand, causing seven black water barrels to appear. Each was roughly as tall as a person, and they were all tightly sealed with lids. However, sticking out of each lid was a human head. [1]

Each water barrel had a cultivator inside, and most seemed to have three-flame cultivation bases. There was one who emanated Gold Core fluctuations and had a single heavenly palace. They had all obviously been tortured, yet weren't dead. And now they were planted like flowers into pots. In response to the barrels thumping onto the ground, they opened their eyes. Upon catching sight of Yanyan, they looked completely terrified and despairing. Among the group were both men and women, and they were as pale as death. Some were missing eyes, ears, or noses, and one of them had their lips sewn shut.

"Big Bro Xu Qing," Yanyan said happily, "when I got back to Eastnether Isle I started arresting all the Night Dove operatives. Thanks to some clues I got, I was able to track down these seven. They're mid-level leaders from South Phoenix who were fleeing to Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. Thankfully, Stinker was able to catch all of them."

With that she looked at Xu Qing, her eyes shining with anticipation.

Xu Qing looked over the group of seven. It didn't take any close examination for him to confirm that they were Night Dove operatives. He had killed so many people from Night Dove that he could tell who they were from the mere rancorous energy they exuded. Beyond that, the Violent Crimes

Division had issued arrest warrants for all seven of these people. It was only their extreme caution that had enabled them to evade arrest in Seven Blood Eyes.

“Very good,” Xu Qing said, nodding at Yanyan.

That got her even more excited, to the point where she was panting slightly. Her nose flared, and her eyes glazed further as she softly said, “So, Big Bro Xu Qing, should we... get started?”

Xu Qing stepped off his dharmaship and onto the shore. Once again looking over the seven trembling figures, he eventually focused on the Gold Core cultivator.

This cultivator was a middle-aged man with a ghastly scar on his face and very intense rancorous energy. Xu Qing recognized him from the files back in Seven Blood Eyes. He was one of the top Night Dove leaders back in South Phoenix. He was a cruel and ruthless killer who was responsible for the deaths of many living treasures. And however many had died, he had trafficked countless more. This was the person with the lips sewn together, and when Xu Qing looked at him, the man made a muffled attempt to speak. His eyes pleaded for mercy. However, that plea for mercy was something this very man had seen countless times, yet had never once responded to.

Face completely expressionless, Xu Qing made a grasping gesture, and the water barrel around the man exploded.

Water burst out everywhere, and the man tumbled to the ground. His limbs had all been removed. As he struggled, he felt a powerful force wrap around him and drag him in front of Xu Qing.

As Yanyan watched excitedly, Xu Qing reached out toward the man. As he did, his hand turned illusory and passed into the man’s chest without inflicting any injury.

That said, the man could feel what was happening, and the terror within him soared higher than anything he had experienced at Yanyan’s hands back on Eastnether Isle. As he trembled, his expression became one of utter incredulity mixed with intense terror that bordered on madness. He felt the ice-cold hand entering his body, piercing into his sea of consciousness, and then groping around for his heavenly palace....

Next, that hand stabbed into the heavenly palace and wrapped around the gold core therein. Finally, the hand wrenched out the gold core!

Unimaginable pain pierced through the man, causing him to writhe in madness. Whimpering sounds made it past his sewn lips. Compared to this, the torture he had experienced on Eastnether Isle was mere child’s play. This was pain that could completely break a person. Finally, his sewn lips ripped apart, and a brutal scream erupted from his mouth. Around then, Xu Qing’s hand emerged from his chest, and gripped in it... was a gold core.

There were countless slender threads still attached to the core, but as Xu Qing pulled, they snapped.

The middle-aged cultivator spasmed violently and screamed as his heavenly palace collapsed, causing massive amounts of blood to spray out of his chest, nose, eyes, ears, and even his pores. But what caused this evil, depraved cultivator to feel even more hopeless was that, despite the blood filling his eyes, he could just barely make out Xu Qing holding his own gold core. And then the core vanished into Xu Qing.

Anyone who could see this would be absolutely terrified. That was especially true considering that Xu Qing's facial expression hadn't changed the entire time, not even when he became soaked in the spray of blood.

Yanyan's eyes shone brightly as she stared at Xu Qing. Seeing his methods, she realized that they were far more stimulating and fun than what she had used. Panting even more dramatically, she couldn't stop herself from putting her finger into her mouth, biting it, and sucking even more blood. That was apparently the only way that she could calm herself down.

Xu Qing glanced briefly at Yanyan, then waved his hand at the middle-aged cultivator. The rancorous energy that had surrounded the man erupted, transforming into countless illusory faces that pounced on the cultivator and started devouring him. Screams echoed out for several breaths of time before they faded away. He was thoroughly dead.

The cultivators in the other water barrels were all trembling, their faces masks of despair and terror. Before, they had thought Yanyan was a nightmare, but now they realized that there was a far, far worse fate to be had.

Given that they were in Foundation Establishment, they weren't much use to Xu Qing, so he sent out some divine will, causing the black iron skewer to fly out. It flew toward the remaining six cultivators in a blur, stabbing into their foreheads and extracting their souls.

It didn't spare the dead Gold Core cultivator either, as his body still contained a fading discarnate soul.

Yanyan smiled as she sucked her finger and looked at Xu Qing. It was as if the whole world around her was a blur except for Xu Qing. He was the only thing she could see clearly.

"Do you feel a bit better, Big Bro Xu Qing?"

Xu Qing looked at Yanyan and her fingers, all of which were covered with bite scars.

"Don't hurt yourself like that anymore," he said. "It's unsightly."

If anyone else said that to Yanyan, she would dig their eyes out or perhaps rip out their tongue. She wouldn't even listen to what her grandmother told her. But in response to Xu Qing, she just nodded vigorously.

"Okay, Big Bro Xu Qing. From now on, I'll only bite one finger. And I won't bite it again until after it's healed. That way there won't be scars and it won't look bad. Big Bro Xu Qing, can I... can I come onto your ship?"

"Next time," he replied calmly. "I need to work on my cultivation right now."

Turning, he walked into the cabin.

As the glow of evening covered the shore, Yanyan watched Xu Qing go back into the cabin and felt disappointed. When she had come earlier, she had felt both happy and sad. She had been happy to finally see Big Bro Xu Qing again, but sad because of what her grandmother had explained about what happened to Seven Blood Eyes. That was why she had begged her grandmother to give her enough dharma protectors to allow her to track down these seven Night Dove fugitives. Bringing them here and giving them to Big Bro Xu Qing had lifted her spirits a bit.

She just wasn't sure what to do to make Xu Qing happy. All she knew was that if someone had given her a gift like this, she would be happy. And thus, she felt disappointed.

After Xu Qing disappeared, she sat alone on the shore, gnawing on her lip. Then, she couldn't hold back anymore and lifted her hand to bite her finger.

In the end, though, she held back.

After all, Big Bro Xu Qing didn't like that.

As the moments ticked by, she struggled, her hand trembling. Eventually, a perverse energy began to build up in her. That perverse energy had always been strong in her, but her unstable emotions were now making it even stronger.

That was when Xu Qing's calm voice drifted out of the dharmaship.

"Sit down."

Stunned, Yanyan obediently sat down and looked at the dharmaship. A moment later, flute music drifted slowly out of the ship. It was melodious and peaceful, and just listening to it would cause one's thoughts to become tranquil.

Eventually, it was past dusk and the moon was out. The perverse energy in Yanyan slowly dissipated, and a smile appeared on her face.

Finally, the music stopped. She stood up.

"Thank you, Big Bro Xu Qing." Then she skipped away, happily humming the tune she had just heard.

Days passed. One morning when Xu Qing was seated cross-legged in meditation, his eyes opened, and he looked at his transmission jade slip.

Picking it up, he heard Master Seventh's stern voice speaking to him.

"I found some clues about Torchlight, and they led me to Master Shengyun. I confirmed it's not a trap. The coalition has authorized full use of force, and has posted a kill mission. Xu Qing, are you willing to come along?"

Xu Qing looked up, his expression as cold as ice. Without hesitation, he replied, *"I'm willing!"*

Chapter 322: Moonfall Gorge

There wasn't a cloud to be seen in the big, blue sky. The rays of dawn spread out, illuminating the entire Eight Sect Coalition megacity.

A roar echoed out and terrifying shockwaves rolled through the sky as a huge black dracolizard flew out from the headquarters of Seven Blood Eyes. It had massive wings that sent gale force winds out in all directions and seemed capable of obscuring the sky. It started out only 300 meters in length, but as it flew into the dome of heaven, it rapidly grew larger. In the blink of an eye, it was 3,000 meters long, but it kept growing after that until it was over 6,000 meters! On the dracolizard's back were an array of numerous buildings, within which were a host of figures.

Xu Qing was among them.

This dracolizard was one of Master Seventh's three dreadnaughts. The other people gathered on it were the other Seven Blood Eyes disciples who had accepted the kill mission. Most of them weren't going on the mission because of any sense of camaraderie or friendship. Rather, it was for the very sizable mission reward.

That was just how Seven Blood Eyes worked; everything came down to matters of profit versus risk. In a chaotic world, risk could be ignored as long as there was enough profit to be had.

On the tallest of the buildings, in the very front, Xu Qing stood with two other individuals. They were none other than Master Seventh and Sir Bloodsmelter. The wind whipped their robes and their eyes shone with frigid killing intent. The two of them were personally leading the Seven Blood Eyes forces on this mission.

Flying through the air behind the dracolizard was the Sixth Peak in its fortress form. The massive mountain emanated a grim pressure that weighed down on the hearts and minds of anyone who laid eyes on it. Whether it was because of profit or because of feelings for Master Sixth, most disciples from the Sixth Peak had chosen to come.

There were more coalition sects coming along. They included the Soaring Cloud Sword Sect, the Dark Serenity Sect, and the House of Grue Hunters. The patriarchs and matriarchs of those sects were also present. Beyond that, all eight sects had their taboo treasures ready to use.

As the taboo fluctuations rolled out, nine enormous bronze swords flew out from the Soaring Cloud Sword Sect. Patriarch Soaring Cloud and the sect leader led the way, bristling with killing intent.

From the House of Grue Hunters came a 24,000-meter grue eye that seemed to contain the cosmos within its gaze. Also within it were countless cultivators from the House of Grue Hunters.

Even more impressive was the massive gravestone that rose up from the Dark Serenity Sect. Blood-colored calligraphy on the gravestone made magical symbols that emanated a profound sensation of ancient time. Arch-Immortal Plumdark stood atop the gravestone, flanked by numerous disciples.

As the four sects rose up into the air, a massive face appeared in the air, filling the sky as it looked off into the distance. It was none other than the president of the coalition.

"Our investigation has borne fruit. Torchlight has numerous secret sanctuaries in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. Most are mere facades, but we've identified four that are not. Today, the coalition will send one sect to each of those sanctuaries to kill all Torchlight cultivators there. Today, we avenge our fallen coalition comrades! All coalition taboo treasures are active and can be used in the fighting!

"The Swordsage Court has given us their full endorsement for this mission, and will be monitoring the situation. If Night Dove's superior appears again like he did before, then he will have a hard time avoiding catastrophe!

"What's more, the Swordsage Court has a way to counteract the light he produced with that box. With those things in mind, let the operation begin!"

As the president's words echoed out, the four sects sprang into motion, heading straight toward various teleportation portals that appeared in midair.

Seven Blood Eyes was going to the location where Master Shengyun had been spotted. Given Sir Bloodsmelter's current status in the senate, he had been able to pressure the Soaring Cloud Sword Sect into giving Seven Blood Eyes the right to handle their former disciple.

The persons responsible for Master Sixth's death were ultimately Night Dove and his lord. However, Master Shengyun and his father, Chu Tianqun, were also dangerous threats, and thus Seven Blood Eyes wanted to focus on them.

Master Shengyun had been tracked down to... the Young Arbiter Sect.

After the Young Arbiter Sect and their dam were destroyed by the coalition, a secret deal had been brokered between the coalition and the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society. That was why the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society had never made a big fuss over the matter, and by extension, had tacitly approved. The Young Arbiter Sect had been forced to swallow a bitter pill, and in the end, had no choice but to move to another location and try to rebuild their organization.

In the end, though, the Young Arbiter Sect was essentially a subsidiary branch of the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society. And thus, in order to placate the Young Arbiter Sect, the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society had increased their yearly disciple promotion quota. That meant the Young Arbiter Sect was allowed to promote more disciples to the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society than in the past.

The Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society was different from most other sects. They didn't recruit disciples from the population at large, but rather, approved disciples based on predestined affinity. That was why Li Zimei had ultimately joined their numbers. Most of their new disciples came from the over one hundred subsidiary branches that adhered to their sect. The number of disciples that could be promoted every year was based on how strong the subsidiary branch was.

In the past, the Young Arbiter Sect had been allowed to promote four disciples per year. But now, they could promote eight. That was a big change for the Young Arbiter Sect. Countless mortals and cultivators in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture longed to end up in the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society. The best starting point for such people would be one of the subsidiary branches such as the Young Arbiter Sect. After all, in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture, the most powerful organization other than the Swordsage Court, the group that was the face of humankind, was of course the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society.

For unknown reasons, after Master Shengyun betrayed his sect, he was secretly recruited by the Young Arbiter Sect. He changed his appearance as well as his name, and became one of their ordinary disciples. It seemed most likely that he wanted to use the Young Arbiter Sect to ultimately enter the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society.

Thanks to the intelligence-gathering operations carried out by the coalition and Seven Blood Eyes, Master Seventh had somehow dug up all the information about the situation. And he didn't just know that Master Shengyun was now in the Young Arbiter Sect. He had also identified other Torchlight field agents there, plus some of their conclave agents.

The only thing Seven Blood Eyes wasn't sure about was whether or not Night Dove and his lord would show up. Part of the purpose of the operation was to draw them out into the open. If they took action against any of the four coalition sects, then the coalition as a whole, plus the Swordsage Court, would step in.

Of course, the coalition was the open threat, and the Swordsage Court was the hidden threat. The Swordsage Court was obviously very interested in Night Dove and his lord.

Xu Qing was aware of all of this. Killing intent swirled in his eyes as the dracolizard and the Sixth Peak shot toward the huge teleportation portal.

Teleportation light glittered and the sky-shattering roar of the dracolizard echoed out. A moment later, the dracolizard appeared above the Moonfall Plain.

Moonfall Plain was in the far northeast of Emperor-Receiving Prefecture, between the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society and the northeastern tundra. It was a cold place, but the spirit energy was more than enough to sustain sects both small and large. In fact, there were several thousand sects there.

On the edge of Moonfall Plain was a huge canyon called Moonfall Gorge. That was the location of the Young Arbiter Sect. It had once been a mid-level sect. But after the destruction of their dam and headquarters, they ended up with less than 10,000 disciples.

It was currently afternoon, and the sun shone brightly. At the moment, most of the disciples were busy working on their cultivation. Therefore, when the huge dracolizard appeared, black clouds rolling around it as it howled, the Young Arbiter Sect was instantly thrown into chaos.

Before the Young Arbiter Sect disciples could even react, the dracolizard closed in, gale force winds sweeping about it. The Sixth Peak also descended, unleashing terrifying pulses of might.

Meanwhile, within the Seazombie ancestral land, the enormous bronze mirror hovering above the fourteen zombie ancestor statues swiveled so that it was facing the general direction of Moonfall Gorge. The zombie ancestor statues rumbled as massive power surged. Then, the seven blood-colored eyes above seven of the statues all opened. Their gazes were fixed on the distant Moonfall Gorge. All of a sudden, blood-colored light filled the canyon.

To the shock and astonishment of the Young Arbiter Sect, and especially their high-level leaders, as that blood-colored light spread out, about a thousand of their disciples started exuding a clearly-visible black energy.

The affected disciples' facial features and physical appearance started to change. As the others looked on, shocked, their true features were revealed. Many of them were ordinary Young Arbiter Sect disciples. However... there were seven or eight Gold Core disciples who were also affected. And most dramatic of all was that one of the sect's Nascent Soul grand elders also experienced the same effect, and his facial features changed to that of a stranger.

Everyone in the Young Arbiter Sect was astonished.

As for the sect leader, his face turned very grim. Everyone else was taken by surprise by what was happening, but he wasn't. Given his close relationship with the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society, there was no way he could be a traitor. In fact, the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society had warned him that Torchlight was infiltrating the Young Arbiter Sect. As a result, as soon as he saw what was happening, he issued orders.

"Disciples, kill any cultivator with black energy coming off them. They're evil Torchlight agents!"

“You don’t need to do anything!” Almost as soon as the sect leader issued those orders, Sir Bloodsmelter’s vicious voice echoed out. Sir Bloodsmelter flicked his sleeve, and the power of the Seven Blood Eyes taboo treasure surged, sealing the area.

Next, Master Seventh issued his own orders, and the Seven Blood Eyes disciples became streams of light that shot off of the dracolizard and toward the Young Arbiter Sect. They did nothing to the ordinary Young Arbiter Sect disciples. They only targeted the cultivators exuding the black energy.

Meanwhile, Xu Qing’s gaze had locked onto one of the seemingly ordinary disciples.

Thanks to the Seven Blood Eyes taboo treasure, that disciple’s true facial features had already been revealed. He was very handsome, and exuded the fluctuations of the Gold Core level. He was none other than... Master Shengyun.

Master Shengyun’s face fell. He was absolutely stupefied that Seven Blood Eyes had already managed to track him down. That said, his cultivation base was not the same as the last time he’d fought Xu Qing. For one thing, he now emitted Gold Core fluctuations. Beyond that, the golden crow in his right eye had been fully sealed. It was now dimmer. Furthermore, its effects had been reversed. Instead of leeching off of him, it was now fully under his control. It was now his own golden crow eye.

Xu Qing’s gaze was fully focused on Master Shengyun. And as soon as Master Seventh’s orders rang out, Xu Qing’s eyes surged with killing intent. He flew down into the Young Arbiter Sect and headed... straight toward Master Shengyun.

This time he was going to kill him!

Chapter 323: Within the Nine Springs

Xu Qing looked at Master Shengyun.

Master Shengyun looked back at Xu Qing.

At almost the exact same instant that Xu Qing sprang into motion, Master Shengyun suddenly shot backward at top speed. As he surged with Gold Core power, a golden crow projection emerged from his right eye, letting loose a piercing cry as it did. The golden crow was bound by countless fetters of illusory magical symbols, which stretched from the crow's body all the way back into Master Shengyun’s eye. It was a very mysterious method which allowed Master Shengyun to command an imperial-class technique, Golden Crow Assimilates Myriad Spirits, and thus be blessed by added speed from the golden crow.

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However, Xu Qing was also astoundingly fast. In the blink of an eye, he was in the Young Arbiter Sect and heading right toward Master Shengyun.

As the Seven Blood Eyes disciples charged with deadly force into the sect, intense rumbling sounds suddenly filled Moonfall Gorge. The ground shook violently, causing it to crack open. Fiery shafts of light shot up from the cracks as a massive hand erupted from the ground and stretched high into the Young Arbiter Sect. It was fully 300 meters in size and was made completely of rock. The skin

of the arm connected to the hand was covered with fiery magical symbols, and the blood that ran through its veins was lava.

Intense rumbling sounds echoed out as the ground shattered and a cloud of rubble rained down.

The hand stretched up, then slammed down onto the ground, creating another huge earthquake. It pushed down, and a massive stone giant rose high, covered in fire. Thousands of meters tall, it stood up and released a mad howl as fluctuations that far surpassed the Nascent Soul level erupted from it, sending out shockwaves everywhere.

Shockingly, a pitch-black coffin was plainly visible on the giant's chest.

And on its head were two people.

Both wore black cloaks and had masks that resembled the broken face of the god. One stood and one squatted. They were not Night Dove and the Crown Prince of Violet and Cyan, but both emanated terrifying fluctuations, and the eyes visible beneath their masks were cold and indifferent.

"I can't believe they found us."

"Our lord and master was right. Before he left, he emphasized not to underestimate any of these people."

"Given what's happening here, it seems highly possible the Eight Sect Coalition has sent people to our other three sanctuaries as well."

Torchlight was a large organization that had many more members besides Night Dove and the Crown Prince of Violet and Cyan. Their conclave agents were all illustrious people, although the vast majority of their membership was made up of field agents like Master Shengyun. The field agents of Torchlight didn't qualify to be in the conclave, and thus couldn't wear the special masks. To qualify, one had to put on a Blood-Soaked Performance and possess a Nascent Soul cultivation base at the minimum.

These two were obviously Torchlight conclave agents assigned to Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. The moment they appeared in the open, Master Seventh's gaze locked onto them. The primary goal on this trip to root out Torchlight from the Young Arbiter Sect had already been met. It had been to force the conclave agents into the open.

Master Seventh strode forward through the air directly toward the stone giant. As it glared back at him with eyes of madness, the two figures atop its head blurred as they launched attacks. When the two parties clashed, a massive boom rang out, and a tremor passed through the giant. Then its entire right arm collapsed and it staggered backward. Grim expressions appeared on the faces of the two masked agents. Master Seventh had single-handedly struck a blow so severe that it knocked three Spirit Trove enemies backward.

Meanwhile, the shockwaves of the fight were destroying the land and the canyon, sending Young Arbiter Sect disciples flying this way and that. They looked extremely alarmed, but in reality, they weren't in a lot of danger. The Seven Blood Eyes disciples were completely focused on the Torchlight field agents, who were clearly visible because of the black energy they exuded.

The only complication was that, in the chaos, the Torchlight agents were doing their best to flee.

Even the field agents of Torchlight were both ruthless and extraordinary individuals. And given that there were more than a thousand of them present, it wasn't an easy task for Seven Blood Eyes to simply wipe them out. That said, the Seven Blood Eyes taboo treasure had a huge range, and therefore, the Torchlight agents couldn't get away that easily.

Meanwhile, in the other three sanctuaries, the Dark Serenity Sect, House of Grue Hunters, and Soaring Cloud Sword Sect were also fighting conclave agents.

In all four locations, intense fighting was going on. However, all of this... was a fishing expedition. The real purpose was to see if Night Dove and his lord would appear, and if so, where! This operation wasn't some clever trap. It was open baiting!

There were *nets above and snares below*

, because all of the great powers in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture were keeping a close eye on all four of the sanctuaries. The Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society was cooperating, and even the Church of Departure had joined in. Everyone was following the lead of the Swordsage Court. And right now, everyone was waiting to see what would happen.

At the same time, everyone was on guard against Torchlight *making a feint to the east and attacking in the west*, and popping up in one of the headquarters of the sects.

Xu Qing had already started to unleash slaughter. His eyes radiated killing intent as he attacked. He wore his violet embroidered robe and had on his Violet-Heaven Supreme-Limitless Crown. His two heavenly palaces had manifested as two umbrellas above him, one with seven colors, the other pitch black. His Gold Core cultivation base fluctuations were on full display. Behind him was a golden crow letting loose a piercing cry and surrounded by a sea of flames. Xu Qing looked absolutely ruthless.

A Gold Core Torchlight agent popped up in front of him, pulsing with the aura of a single heavenly palace. Xu Qing ignored his attack, and instead thrust out his hand, which was already illusory thanks to the Gruegloom Daseizing Art. His hand pierced right into the man's sea of consciousness, through his heavenly palace, to his gold core. With one vicious move, Xu Qing ripped it out.

After crushing and absorbing it, he moved on to a nonhuman chosen cultivator with four life flames. That chosen cultivator was famous among his people, but when Xu Qing hit him, he collapsed under a single blow, his body being shredded so badly he was unrecognizable.

Not even looking at him, Xu Qing had the golden crow devour him, then shot forward. In his right hand was a dagger of balefire which he thrust toward a burly Gold Core cultivator with a single heavenly palace. As he neared, the burly man's face fell, and he backed up. Meanwhile, a two-palace cultivator some distance away closed in at high speed.

Xu Qing accelerated, reaching a speed even faster than before. In the blink of an eye, he was on top of the burly man. He slashed his dagger viciously through the air, and the burly man's head flew off!

A moment later, the two-palace cultivator arrived and let loose an attack. Xu Qing looked up, his eyes flickering with killing intent as his Violet-Heaven Supreme-Limitless Crown released fluctuations of defense, blocking the attack. Then he clenched his hand into a fist and launched a punch!

Blood sprayed out of the two-palace cultivator's mouth. His cultivation base was in the same level as Xu Qing, but his fleshly body wasn't close to being the same. As the golden crow let loose a piercing cry, the man tried to back up. He was too late.

Xu Qing's expression was cold as he grabbed the two-palace cultivator. In that moment of intense crisis, the two-palace cultivator whipped out a life-saving item to defend himself. However, Xu Qing completely ignored that and launched a vicious attack with his head.

One head-butt. Two. Three!

He also released poisons, including his beetles, which had some of the power of the taboo poison pill. Almost instantly, the two-palace cultivator's skin started to melt. And then Xu Qing's head slammed into him again. Blood sprayed everywhere along with a bloodcurdling scream.

Xu Qing's hand pierced into the two-palace cultivator's sea of consciousness, and the heavenly palaces therein. He grabbed the man's gold cores, ripped them out, and then decapitated him. Then he continued across the battlefield at high speed. Any Torchlight agents that got close to him died, regardless of the level of their cultivation base. After all, no one higher than the three-palace level was there to stop him.

Blood sprayed as his dagger lopped off heads. Before long, there were dozens of heads rolling on the ground behind him, with headless corpses toppling down next to them. It was very shocking and ghastly.

Xu Qing radiated energy, blood, and a baleful aura that shocked anyone who saw him. Next in line was a three-flame Foundation Establishment cultivator. When Xu Qing slammed into him, he exploded into a mist of gore. Xu Qing emerged from the gore like an asura, not slowing down for even a moment as he cut down all Torchlight field agents who got in his way.

When Xu Qing spotted Gold Core enemies with three heavenly palaces, he avoided them. After all, there were Seven Blood Eyes elders present to handle them.

The battlefield was full of chaos, but Xu Qing's gaze was devoid of chaos, and was fixed solely on Master Shengyun. Every move he made was ruthlessly efficient, and thus he pierced across the field of battle and closed in relentlessly. His killing intent grew even stronger.

Meanwhile, Master Shengyun's expression was unsightly as he continued to flee.

Xu Qing closed in, his eyes wild, the golden crow behind him crying out loudly. As he neared, the golden crow suddenly seemed larger and more majestic. Rising high, it looked at everything below, then dove down. Xu Qing accelerated until he was only about 600 meters from Master Shengyun. To a Gold Core cultivator, 600 meters was a distance that could be crossed in the shortest of moments. Xu Qing was little more than a string of afterimages as he sped across that distance and appeared right in front of Master Shengyun.

Master Shengyun's face turned vicious. Knowing that flight wasn't an option, he tapped into the power of his heavenly palace. The golden crow behind him cried out as he performed an incantation gesture and shoved his hand in Xu Qing's direction. Countless beams of sword light shot out, creating a sea of swords.

Xu Qing didn't bother looking at them. His fist blasted through the sea of swords and landed right on Master Shengyun's chest.

Master Shengyun's defenses popped up to block the blow.

As that happened, Xu Qing thought about Master Sixth dying. He thought about what happened in the rain that night. And though the person in front of him wasn't the Crown Prince of Violet and Cyan, it caused his killing intent to burn to new heights. And it needed an outlet. Eyes bloodshot, Xu Qing launched a second punch, then a third, a fourth, and a fifth.... Each punch was stronger than the last. Each punch was backed by all of the power of his fleshly body and cultivation base. And they all contained some of his black beetles.

Booms echoed out as Master Shengyun staggered backward. He had defenses, but Xu Qing's successive fist strikes caused them to ripple and distort. The physical resonance created by the attacks still caused problems for him, and soon he was uncontrollably coughing up mouthfuls of blood.

Xu Qing attacked like an unstoppable tempest, not giving any pause for rest. He summoned his heavenly saber and slashed it down. He tapped into the Ninefold Tsunami, sending wild walls of sea water forth.

Master Shengyun was visibly stunned.

Finally, Xu Qing's eyes were completely bloodshot as he threw a final fist strike. At that point, the beetles had corroded Master Shengyun's defenses enough that they were done for.

Xu Qing's fist landed. The defenses exploded, and Xu Qing's fist hit Master Shengyun's chest. It was the final fist strike of Within the Nine Springs!

A tremor passed through Master Shengyun, and blood sprayed out of his mouth along with a frenzied shriek. Then a series of booms rang out inside of him.

His 121st dharma aperture exploded!

His eighth heavenly palace, still in its illusory state, shattered!

One fist had struck a mighty blow!

Chapter 324: Master Shengyun. Dead!

Things weren't over yet, though. Xu Qing's eyes were crimson and full of mad killing intent as he pressed the attack.

Meanwhile, booms rang out in the sky as Master Seventh, his expression grim and his killing intent raging, also fought fiercely to release the guilt in his heart. He had been wracked with self-blame recently, frustrated that he hadn't calculated all of the possible outcomes that had ultimately led to Master Sixth's death.

The only reason the tragedy had occurred was because he wasn't capable enough. The only reason things had turned out the way they had was that his battle prowess wasn't sufficient. He couldn't accept that. He couldn't allow it. And he most definitely could never allow something like that to happen again to someone he cared about.

Therefore, his attacks burst with killing intent. And he didn't resort to any daoist magics, as he didn't have the clarity of mind to focus on them.

He used his fists to smash everything in his path. His every attack caused rumbling sounds to fill heaven and earth. The wind screamed and the air shattered. Every fist strike contained deceptive

power, strength that could crush everything. His relentless attacks shocked the stone giant, who could do nothing but stagger backward and howl. The giant's eyes filled with pure terror at the terrifying nature of Master Seventh's battle prowess.

As Master Seventh battered the giant, cracks spread out across its body. Its left arm shattered, and then both of its legs. Its torso crumbled... causing countless boulders to rain down onto the land below.

The two conclave agents from Torchlight were visibly shocked, and their eyes radiated terror as blood oozed from their mouths. The masks covering their faces shattered, and they were already covered with serious wounds. Previously, most of the attack power had been absorbed by the giant, but with the giant gone, there was no question that these two were about to die.

“This is the great circle of Spirit Trove!!”

They howled in panic as the giant collapsed, and then they simply turned and fled.

Higher in the air was Sir Bloodsmelter, who looked down coldly at everything that was happening. With him in control, the battle was fairly one-sided. Right now, he was waiting to see if other Torchlight agents would come to the rescue, or if the agents present would somehow tap into even greater power than they had already.

There was fighting going on, both in the air and on the ground.

Moments before....

Killing intent raged in Xu Qing's eyes as he chased Master Shengyun, who was coughing up blood like mad. Master Shengyun's 121st dharma aperture had exploded, and the eighth heavenly palace he had created was now gone, provoking a bitter laugh from him. His eyes were full of madness and malice as he glared at Xu Qing.

He hated Xu Qing down to his bones! What was more, he was jealous! Completely and utterly jealous!

In the past, he had been the number one chosen in the coalition, and had enjoyed ultimate glory. His future prospects had been boundless. Outside of the sect, he shone like the sun, and inside the sect, he dominated an entire generation. But fate had not been fair to him. Despite his chosen status, despite his incredible good looks, instead of being born basking in the light, he had been cursed with a vile conjoined twin.

He hadn't given up because of that, though. Despite the constant looks of contempt thrown at him during that time, he worked hard at his cultivation, struggling and fighting to progress. And in the end, he devoured his younger brother to become a whole person.

After that, he fought hard to surpass all of his peers and reached the ultimate peak. It had been a long, bitter, and torturous struggle that only he could fully appreciate. During that time, he had come to realize that his grandfather's gaze contained, not just anticipation, but also greed. However, there was no way for Master Shengyun to refuse the life lamp which had been given him, half of it being a blessing, but half of it being a curse.

What happened after that made him convinced that fate was heartless.

He had reached dazzling heights of success in the coalition. As a result, he had believed that his fate would turn out good. Except, he only saw increased greed in the eyes of his grandfather.

Master Shengyun was no fool, but he had been forced to silently endure the situation. Except then his life lamp was stolen by Xu Qing, and he had been seriously injured. To some extent, that had been a relief. Except never in his wildest dreams could he have guessed that, in order to keep on living, he would have to be parasitized by the president's golden crow.

In the end, it drove him closer and closer to the point of true madness.

He had no way to defy his grandfather. So he could only hate Xu Qing. He had no way to defy the president. So he could only resent Xu Qing.

What gives you the right to have light in your heart, Xu Qing? What gives you the right... to live a life free of despair? We should die together!

The thought filled him with rancorous malice. When all was said and done, he hated Xu Qing with the ultimate venom, and it was all due to envy! He envied the fact that Xu Qing ultimately did have light in his heart. He envied Xu Qing's two life lamps that belonged solely to him. He envied that Xu Qing didn't have to live in torment, yet had achieved the same results as he had. More than all of that, he envied that Xu Qing had a Master who would go to great lengths to keep him safe, plus a patriarch who wasn't greedily plotting to use him. And most of all, he envied that scene which played out in the rain, and how Xu Qing had stood tall despite everything. That envy, in turn, became venomous malice.

Master Shengyun didn't care about his 121st dharma aperture. He didn't care that he had reached the Gold Core level and formed that eighth heavenly palace. He didn't care that he was able to use the golden crow. Had any of that changed anything?

The only way to come out on top is to become a god! Master Shengyun's eyes blazed with madness as that thought filled his mind. All of his hopes had rested with Torchlight. And though Seven Blood Eyes had launched this surprise attack, forcing Master Shengyun to cut many of his plans short, he still refused to lose his faith. Even though his 121st dharma aperture had collapsed and he had lost that heavenly palace, he was still convinced that he was on the path to ultimate glory.

But then Xu Qing closed in like a bolt of lightning, his fist clenched. Master Shengyun smiled, and the madness in his eyes turned fiercer as he howled and met the incoming punch with his own fist.

There was such a vast difference in battle prowess between the two that Master Shengyun wasn't even close to being a match for Xu Qing. A tremor passed through him as his right arm exploded. Screaming, he tumbled backward. Yet he still fought back. Performing an incantation gesture with his left hand, he sent streams of sword light out.

The first sword fell from above. The Darkheaven Bloodfiend Sword.

The second sword swept horizontally. The Soul-Sweeping Devil-Crushing Sword.

The third sword became ghosts with swords strapped to their backs. The Northghost Heavenwondering Sword.

This time, Xu Qing ignored them. Waving his hand, he crushed the sword falling from above. He destroyed the sword sweeping from the side. And before the eight ghosts could draw the swords from their backs, they screamed as Xu Qing's energy smashed into them.

Xu Qing's eyes raged with killing intent as he continued onward at the same speed and caught up with Master Shengyun. Not giving his opponent any time to even think, he ignored all of his defenses and reached out with the Gruegloom Daoseizing Art.

His hand became illusory and stabbed into Master Shengyun's body!

Master Shengyun had already seen this happen once. He trembled as he tried to fight back, but it didn't do any good. Eyes wide with madness, he tried to head-butt Xu Qing. At the same time, Xu Qing's hand found the other heavenly palace in Master Shengyun's sea of consciousness.

When Gold Core cultivators formed their first heavenly palace, it started out illusory. What was more, the heavenly palaces they illuminated on their breakthrough determined the ultimate limit of their strength. As for their true battle prowess, it was actually formed by making the heavenly palaces corporeal.

As for Master Shengyun, his limit had been eight, but he had only managed to turn one of them corporeal.

When Xu Qing's hand reached into him, it grabbed the only gold core he had in his single heavenly palace! He ripped it out!

That gold core contained immeasurable rancorous energy, and it emanated extraordinary fluctuations. As soon as Xu Qing ripped it out, Master Shengyun screamed in agony. The gold core came out into the open, trailing streams of blood. Master Shengyun shook violently, howling in grief.

Eyes filled with killing intent, Xu Qing crushed it. A thump rang out as the gold core turned into countless particles that swept into Xu Qing. At the same time, he ruthlessly head-butted Master Shengyun.

Master Shengyun trembled as his face was smashed into a bloody pulp. And yet, he still raged with madness and aggression.

All the blood splattered on Xu Qing's face came from Master Shengyun. As for his eyes, they also contained a madness unique to him. The golden crow behind Xu Qing let loose a piercing cry as it viciously absorbed Master Shengyun.

Master Shengyun laughed as a golden crow materialized behind him as well, only to be set upon by Xu Qing's golden crow.

As the two crows snapped back and forth at each other, Xu Qing's eyes turned cold, and the killing intent in his heart reached the point where it had to be released. Grabbing Master Shengyun by the hair, Xu Qing pulled his right hand back into a fist and punched him repeatedly in the chest.

Each blow caused Master Shengyun's body to collapse more and more. His soul crumpled, whereupon Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior greedily started absorbing it. On the third punch, half of Master Shengyun's body collapsed. When the fourth punch hit, Master Shengyun screamed endlessly. Everything beneath his neck exploded into a cloud of blood, bones, and flesh that showered out in all directions. His soul was similarly destroyed.

Only his head remained. Defiance, rage, and madness gleamed in his eyes. However, there was nothing to sustain him anymore, so his eyes faded. Master Shengyun was dead!

The ground was covered with gore.

Master Shengyun's golden crow had nothing to sustain it, and was incredibly weak. Xu Qing's golden crow devoured it in a single gulp. When that happened, Xu Qing's golden crow suddenly erupted with endless fire that swept over everything in the area. Its tenth tail finished forming, and then an eleventh, twelfth, and finally a thirteenth tail appeared!

Xu Qing's imperial-class technique, Golden Crow Assimilates Myriad Spirits, had finally broken through to the second stage!

Chapter 325: Experimental God Body

Upon breaking through, the golden crow grew to twice its previous size. Its pitch-black body made it look like some paragonic wild beast from antiquity. The flames that covered it were hot enough to immolate the earth, and it exuded black smoke that crystallized the dirt below. Just looking at it from a distance, it was obviously intensely hot. In fact, the air around it distorted, and the mere sparks that floated off of it contained shocking heat. Its eyes were completely lifelike, and also exuded incomparable ferocity and aggression. It was as if anyone the crow looked at, whether they existed in the nine heavens or the ten earths, would find it impossible to escape being devoured.

Although that was only the feeling it imparted, it was enough that the golden crow was a shocking sight to everyone on the battlefield. That was especially true when it stretched out its wings and flapped them gracefully, causing the sea of flames on the ground to expand dramatically.

Within that sea of flames was Xu Qing, his hair whipping around him. His bewitchingly beautiful face would cause anyone who looked at him to feel stunned. And the fire around him created the perfect contrast for his fierce aggression.

Of course, there was more to the golden crow's breakthrough than external appearance. Xu Qing's battle prowess was improved. Now, the crow didn't provide a one-flame boost. Instead, it blessed his fleshly body with the equivalent of six-flame power. That six-flame blessing caused cracking sounds to ring out within him, and though it didn't change him in a way that was physically obvious, it completely transformed his bones, blood, and muscles.

He was rising to a new life level!

The flying golden crow cried out, then looked down at Xu Qing, its thirteen tails streams of flame swirling around him like wings of fire. The golden crow's gaze caused all the fire to sweep toward Xu Qing, surrounding him, with the crow itself like an imperial crown on his head.

With his two heavenly palaces, he was very eye-catching on the battlefield. Whether it was Seven Blood Eyes disciples or the Torchlight field agents, all of them were taken aback, and didn't dare get close to him.

Xu Qing stood there silently. He looked down at Master Shengyun's head in his own hands, whose eyes remained unclosed and staring out blankly.

All of a sudden, Xu Qing got the sensation that something was off. Master Shengyun was definitely dead. And his death made sense, considering the vast difference between one heavenly palace and two. However, Master Shengyun's father was nowhere to be seen. That was what didn't make sense. After all, the Blood-Soaked Performance had been orchestrated by Chu Tianqun for the sake

of Master Shengyun. Yet now, when Master Shengyun died, the father wasn't here. There was something unusual about the situation.

What was more... Master Shengyun had acted very strangely. He hadn't said a single thing during the entire fight, and his shouts and screams had seemed different than before. They were less piercing. That was not how Xu Qing remembered Master Shengyun acting.

Eyes narrowing, Xu Qing lifted Master Shengyun's mangled and bloody head, then grabbed his jaw and ripped it off.

Looking at it, his eyes suddenly glittered.

There was no tongue in Master Shengyun's mouth!

The event which had struck Xu Qing most deeply about Master Shengyun was when the Darkspirit Everwill Door had opened and a huge, noxious tongue had emerged. It was later that Xu Qing came to realize that when the door opened, it revealed what was in a person's heart. [1]

Master Shengyun's heart had contained that tongue. He had no idea if it was coincidence or not, but here was Master Shengyun, dead and without a tongue.

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Suddenly, an intense rumbling sound filled the dome of heaven, accompanied by terrifying fluctuations. The sound came from the giant. It was at that moment that it couldn't stand up to Master Seventh's assault, and completely collapsed, sending boulders falling to the ground like rain and creating huge craters.

Meanwhile, the black coffin which had been in the giant's chest was now fully revealed. As the sun shone down on the coffin, it seemed incredibly grisly. And then, the appalling sound of nails scraping the interior of the coffin reached the ears of everyone present.

Xu Qing's pupils constricted.

The two Torchlight conclave agents were breathing unsteadily as they backed up. But hearing that sound, their eyes filled with determination and they rapidly performed incantation gestures.

In response, the black coffin started shaking. Animalistic howls rang out from inside the coffin. The howls were so intense that many Seven Blood Eyes disciples were physically shaken, and blood oozed out of the corners of their mouths. All of them backed away from the coffin as quickly as possible. The sound contained some indescribable power that could shake the mind and intimidate the soul. It was a higher level of life that provoked instant terror and astonishment. Rumbling sounds spread out everywhere as whatever entity was inside the coffin started banging loudly on the lid, as if trying to break free.

All Seven Blood Eyes disciples in the area were backing away. Master Seventh's eyes narrowed, and Sir Bloodsmelter's gaze shone brightly.

As everyone watched, the banging on the lid grew louder and louder until the lid finally exploded. Debris showered down as shocking waves of godliness rolled out from the coffin. A terrifying pressure weighed down on everyone, while at the same time, winds screamed into the shape of a huge vortex. In virtually a single instant, the sky went from being cloudless to dark and overcast. Bolts of lightning danced and thunder boomed.

Two withered arms stretched out of the coffin, seemingly human. The hands grabbed the side of the coffin, and pulled. A terrifying body appeared. It was extremely dilapidated, with so much damage to the skin that bones were visible everywhere. It looked like a male corpse that had been dead for a very long time. He had no hair, and the skin of his face was rotting and falling off. He had two empty eye sockets, and an open mouth... with a bright red tongue.

The tongue was lustrous, which didn't match the corpse at all. It was almost as if it had been taken from a live person and added into the mouth. As the corpse rose, thunder crashed and lightning danced like silver snakes, creating stark illumination below.

Terrifying fluctuations spread out from the corpse. Within his empty eye sockets burned mysterious flames. However, what really caused Xu Qing's eyes to narrow was the tongue.

It appeared that the red tongue in the mouth of the corpse was the same tongue that was missing from Master Shengyun. The corpse radiated horrific levels of godliness, such that the mysterious flames in his eyes had a golden tinge.

That light and the eruption of godliness caused the mutagen in the area to surge wildly, influencing the sky. Black rain started to fall. This was like the presence of a god! The key was the word 'like,' as this *wasn't* a true god. He just had godliness, that was all.

The godliness on display was astounding, but this corpse was as different from a real god as fog was from ice! What was more, the fluctuations coming from the corpse were unstable, as if he might explode at any moment. Clearly, this corpse wasn't capable of sustaining that level of godliness.

Xu Qing got the sensation that the corpse had been pieced together violently, creating a new, heretofore unheard-of type of life.

Just looking at him caused Xu Qing's eyes to sting. It was as if the corpse simply couldn't be looked at. He was very gruish.

"So this is what Torchlight can do," Master Seventh murmured. "The power of a god? I've been investigating this matter for a while now. Very impressive, Torchlight. You *are* trying to fabricate a god... just as I suspected. You still have a long way to go, though.

"Patriarch, Torchlight isn't going to be sending anyone else here today. We can carry out the rest of the plan. Let's capture this experimental god body and use it as a reserve power for our sect!"

At the same time as the words left Master Seventh's mouth, the corpse threw his head back and howled. Godliness erupted, causing the mutagen levels to soar. The power of the corpse's life level erupted, and he took a step forward, ignoring the threat of the Seven Blood Eyes taboo treasure. In the blink of an eye, the corpse was up in midair.

However, Sir Bloodsmelter appeared right in front of the corpse. Innumerable blood-colored streams shot out from him, turning into a huge fist that smashed toward the corpse.

Golden light flared in the eyes of the corpse, causing the air to ripple and distort. Sir Bloodsmelter's fist looked like it was about to hit the corpse. Except, it passed right through him, almost as if the corpse and Sir Bloodsmelter didn't exist in the same dimensional space.

In the blink of an eye, Guru Eastnether appeared in midair. Obviously, she had been invisible and waiting this entire time. Right now, her eyes shone with disbelief.

"Sir Bloodsmelter, your son-in-law is right. Torchlight... is trying to fabricate a god. But they haven't succeeded yet. This thing they've created isn't strong enough, and they can't control it. Its mind has already been melted by the godliness!" Eyes glittering, she extended her right hand and pushed down with great force.

As countless streams flowed through her eyes, the area around the corpse collapsed. At the same time, the blood threads from Sir Bloodsmelter spun wildly, boring into the air toward the dimensional space occupied by the corpse.

Booms shook everything as Guru Eastnether and Sir Bloodsmelter worked together to fight the corpse. At the same time, Master Seventh's eyes glittered and he performed an incantation gesture that caused the dome of heaven to blur. A huge blood tree appeared, dropping down into the middle of the battlefield and locking down everything around it.

Meanwhile, in the Seazombie ancestral land, the fourteen zombie ancestor statues that made up the Seven Blood Eyes taboo treasure all erupted with full force. The ancient mirror turned as red as blood, and even more astonishing, an additional seven eyes appeared behind the existing seven eyes.

Fourteen eyes all opened, locking down onto the corpse on the battlefield. Then a red beam shot from the mirror, piercing through everything to land on the battlefield and once again seal it completely.

The power of two taboo treasures violently shook the Torchlight field agents and the two conclave agents. Blood sprayed out of their mouths as they were crushed on the spot. They were incapable of fighting back!

This had been Master Seventh's plan all along!

He didn't have just one goal for this fight. All of the time and painstaking effort he had spent investigating Torchlight had yielded clues. Based on those clues, he had guessed what Torchlight was planning to do in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. And that had led to this mission.

If Torchlight showed up, then the Swordsage Court would step in. But Master Seventh had come to the conclusion that if Torchlight didn't send backup to this location, it would be because they left behind something very powerful that related to godliness. Getting that item would be a big help in understanding more about Torchlight. Going forward, it was obvious that Torchlight was going to be a mortal enemy. And thus, in the same manner that he had taken so much time to study the Seazombies, he would take plenty of time to understand more about Torchlight.

As Master Seventh had once said to Xu Qing, a great era was coming, and chosen cultivators were proliferating. However... great eras didn't just pop into being overnight. It took hundreds of years for them to arrive. In fact, Master Seventh himself was one of the chosen cultivators.

There wouldn't only be a handful of individuals who rose to spectacular heights.

Chapter 326: Godly Power

Xu Qing looked up into the dome of heaven. Few people would notice the clues, but given what Xu Qing knew of the Seventh Peak and Master Seventh, he had long since come to the realization that everything happening this day was playing out according to a complicated plan devised by his Master. He had seen with his own eyes how much Master Seventh blamed himself for the death of Master Sixth. And thus, Xu Qing knew that what was happening today... was simply his Master probing Torchlight for more information.

As Xu Qing was thinking about that, Master Seventh took action. Rocketing up into the sky, he joined Sir Bloodsmelter and Guru Eastnether. Using the power of the Seven Blood Eyes taboo treasure and the Soaring Cloud Sword Sect blood tree, they created a massive sealing power that settled down onto the corpse with his godliness.

Master Seventh's goal was to capture this thing Torchlight had made, and use it as a research subject. With it, they could learn more about Torchlight, and also prepare a way to destroy the organization.

As Master Seventh took action, Sir Bloodsmelter looked up and clasped hands to the sky.

"Thank you for your trouble, Swordsage Court. Seven Blood Eyes requests permission to handle this corpse on our own. After the fighting is over, we'll send sixty percent of its flesh and blood to you. Furthermore, we'll wait to hear back from you before doing our research."

In response, a voice boomed like thunder.

"Request granted!"

Because the Swordsage Court had joined the mission along with the Eight Sect Coalition to provide assistance, it was required to get their permission before acting alone. Clearly, Seven Blood Eyes' actions, especially the way their plan had been carried out, had won the approval of the unseen watchers from the Swordsage Court. It wasn't just the Swordsage Court that approved. Seven Blood Eyes, despite being a relative newcomer to this part of the world, was acting admirably in the eyes of the major powers.

Similar scenes were playing out in the other three sanctuaries. All of them had been similar to the corpse in the Young Arbiter Sect. All released explosive fluctuations of godliness, and all were the outworking of Torchlight's attempt to fabricate a god. Obviously, all of them had been pieced together and then left to mature. Unfortunately for them, the attack carried out by the Eight Sect Coalition interrupted that maturation process.

Before the godly power could reach its potential, the chaos of battle erupted.

The people from Seven Blood Eyes had no idea what items had been used to create the corpses the other three sects were dealing with. But when it came to the corpse they were dealing with, it was obvious that the foundation of his intelligence was that tongue.

"It's Master Shengyun's tongue!" Xu Qing called to the sky.

When Master Seventh heard those words, his final bit of supposition was confirmed.

Just as I thought. The corpse was pieced together from different parts. The torso is from an ancient corpse. The arms and legs are from nonhumans. The head is from some plant-based species. The blood within it is from a godly entity. It has no internal organs, only powerful mutagen. And there's a concave spot on its skull where something was supposed to grow....

It must relate to some rite or ceremony. The tongue was a way to give the godly corpse intelligence. Later, Torchlight could have taken Master Shengyun's will and inserted it inside. And in that way... Master Shengyun would have had a new life. Was this an experiment of how to turn someone into a god? Sadly, its intelligence was its weakness. They failed in that regard, as the intelligence was destroyed by the godliness. And because of that, it lost any sense of will or identity.

As Master Seventh contemplated these things, the suppressed corpse released terrifying howls. He sensed that he was being restrained, and thus, the godliness within him erupted, creating wild, chaotic fluctuations that rolled out everywhere. This corpse was no god, but the powerful godly fluctuations had pushed him to a higher level of life. Because of that, this corpse was capable of unbelievable levels of strength.

For example, though all he could do was howl, those howls caused wild colors to flash in heaven and earth, and distorted everything around him.

It wasn't just the physical space around him that was affected. The surrounding Seven Blood Eyes disciples trembled visibly, and felt the impulse to drop to their knees in worship. They were unable to control themselves or resist the urge. They were like mortals who had run into some terrifying being, and couldn't control their own bodies.

All the Seven Blood Eyes disciples in the canyon, as well as all the Young Arbiter Sect disciples, collectively dropped to their knees, trembling. It was as if that was the only action that could allow them to think clearly. Even still, after they were on their knees, they still shook violently. What was more, mutations began to appear within the disciples. And those mutations... made them start to look like the corpse. The corpse was the source of the mutation, as if it could force all living beings to transform into its own image.

The only ones not forced to drop to their knees were Sir Bloodsmelter, Guru Eastnether, and Master Seventh.

And Xu Qing.

Xu Qing also trembled, but he didn't drop down. He kept his chin up, and he stared at the corpse with raw killing intent.

He had looked into the eyes of the broken face of the god. Twice. To him, some paltry being pieced together with some bits of godliness wasn't something that could force him to bow his head. As for the mutations, they appeared on him, causing fleshy tentacles to start growing from his skin.

But then the violet crystal within him glittered, and his shadow greedily began absorbing the mutagen. As a result, the mutations on Xu Qing quickly faded away.

However, the effects of the corpse's godliness weren't limited to all that. As the godliness erupted and everyone struggled to resist it, the corpse threw his head back and howled. Trembling, he sloughed off the restraints binding him and shot up into the air.

There, he looked down at everything below, extended his right hand, and pushed it down. That movement caused the ground to shake. Also, everyone present, including Master Seventh, Sir Bloodsmelter, and Guru Eastnether, suddenly saw numerous images of themselves, superimposed on their bodies.

They appeared to be images of those individuals' past and future. Collectively, they were like a book that a person could flip through to see everything about someone. It was bizarre to the extreme. In those image books, the scenes from the past were very clear, whereas the scenes from the future were blurry, as if the numerous possibilities they contained led to countless variations.

However, those countless variations were now mixing together to form one image. And that image showed everyone in the valley dying! In every single image and every single book of images, everyone was dead. Including Xu Qing.

Xu Qing's mind spun and he trembled from head to toe. He could see his own past, and the countless futures stretching ahead of him. And one of those future images was being extracted by some indescribable force, and forced to be made a reality. It was an image of him dying. Of the corpse's power filling him and causing him to experience mutation and die. This was a power that surpassed Xu Qing's level of comprehension.

However, he knew it was a moment of deadly crisis. Gritting his teeth viciously, he forced his right hand up and then waved it. Instantly, beetles flew out, thrumming with the power of the taboo poison pill. The moment they flew out, they landed on Xu Qing and started tearing into his skin.

Xu Qing shivered as he began to rot away. Suddenly, the future image of him rotting to death started to interfere with the image of him dying from the power of the godliness. It created a force of resistance. The two images fought back and forth, changing position over and over again.

"So this is godliness!" Master Seventh said, his eyes flickering with understanding. He also had to deal with the images of the future, and had come up with a similar method as Xu Qing to deal with them. By using another possible death, he replaced the future extracted by the godliness of the corpse. "Patriarch, I have the godliness I needed to complete the first step of my plan. You may now continue with the sealing!"

The Seven Blood Eyes taboo treasure and the blood tree caused crushing power to fall onto the corpse.

Master Seventh's hand flashed in an incantation gesture, causing clouds to spring forth. They took the shape of various wild beasts, each of which contained crushing power. More than a thousand appeared, and as they superimposed with each other, they transformed into an astonishing black cat. This cat had no past or future, and was so huge it contained the corpse within its mass.

Meanwhile, Sir Bloodsmelter sent out countless blood threads, each of which thrummed with terrifying fluctuations as it wrapped up the corpse. Those blood threads also lacked any past or future.

As for Guru Eastnether, her eyes glittered as she waved her hand... causing a huge flag to appear in the sky. It was none other than... the War Banner of Humankind! Most outsiders would assume that this item belonged to the coalition. But the truth was that it was Guru Eastnether's. She had only

loaned it to Seven Blood Eyes to use in their various conflicts. The banner caused bright colors to flash and the wind to scream. [1]

Among the numerous drops of blood that stained the War Banner of Humankind, there was one golden drop that shone with scintillating light. And then a finger emerged which pointed toward the corpse.

The corpse trembled and howled, and his extended right hand couldn't stand up to the force. He wanted to escape, but was powerless to do so. He could only release his godliness. He was being suppressed by Master Seventh's black cat, wrapped up by Sir Bloodsmelter's blood threads, sealed by the Seven Blood Eyes taboo treasure, locked down by the blood tree, and... crushed by the godliness from the War Banner of Humankind.

He was being fully sealed.

Moments later, the sealing was accomplished and everything went back to normal. The disciples below coughed up mouthfuls of blood. They had been seriously hurt, but weren't dead. The images of their past and future vanished. That said, the mental blow they had sustained was significant.

The images around Xu Qing vanished. As for the poison from the beetles, the power of the violet crystal quickly dealt with them. Looking at the corpse, Xu Qing felt battered by waves of shock.

"Is this... a god?"

Chapter 327: Slowly Walking a Long Road

Similar fighting was going on in the other three sanctuaries. None of the other three sects had put as much planning into the mission as Seven Blood Eyes, but the Swordsage Court was watching over everything and could step in if things got out of control. None of the other three corpses were sealed. After being suppressed, the godliness and mutagen within them built up to such intense levels that the other corpses dissolved into ashes.

The Eight Sect Coalition's mission was wrapping up. Meanwhile, in another prefecture in Sea-Sealing County, on the main road that led in to the heart of the prefecture, the Crown Prince of Violet and Cyan walked along, clad in a black cloak, wearing a mask that resembled the broken face of the god. Beneath the mask, his eyes didn't contain even a scrap of emotion. He didn't miss Emperor-Receiving Prefecture in the least bit, not any more than he'd missed the continent of South Phoenix after leaving it.

Walking respectfully behind him was Night Dove. "Lord, of the five subjects who volunteered to join the godification experiment, four were already discovered. One remains in hiding."

"No surprise there."

"I kept thorough notes regarding the powers used by the four experimental bodies, as well as their deficiencies. And I already sent that information to the fifth experiment subject. That should help with the next round of godification.

Unfortunately... there was an unexpected turn of events." Night Dove hesitated to continue.

“Go on,” said the Crown Prince of Violet and Cyan, his voice just as calm as ever.

“It happened in the Young Arbiter Sect sanctuary. Seven Blood Eyes realized what we’re attempting to accomplish. Analyzing the situation as a whole, it seems that they planned everything to capture the experimental body. The body’s self-destruct function failed and it was sealed. The mastermind behind the plot was that Master Seventh.”

By this point, Night Dove was sweating a bit. He was the one who had made all the arrangements in the four sanctuaries. Although he had not expected the sanctuaries to be discovered so soon, he could accept how things turned out. At first. But for one of the experimental god bodies to have been sealed was not within the realm of what was acceptable.

The Crown Prince of Violet and Cyan stopped walking. A long moment passed, and then he turned around and looked in the direction of Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. Beneath his mask, his eyes were no longer calm. Instead, they glittered.

“My lil’ bro’s Master, huh? He caught my attention last time. And now it seems more than ever... that there’s more to him than meets the eye. Sadly, we’re done with Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. Otherwise I might go have a chat with him.” After another long moment passed, he looked away from Emperor-Receiving Prefecture and continued on his way. “If they got it, they got it. Consider it a gift to him for taking care of my lil’ bro. Besides... godliness isn’t something that mortals can easily study or control.”

Night Dove breathed a sigh of relief as he hurried along after the crown prince.

“Lord, what exactly is godliness?”

“It’s something from a different level of life,” the crown prince replied calmly, “so I can’t explain it. You wouldn’t be able to understand it any more than an ant could understand *your* thoughts. That’s how vast the difference is between human qualities and godliness.

“Think of it this way. Let’s say a single one of your thoughts contains 3,000 elements. In that case, godly entities seek to reach a state in which one thought contains infinite elements, and each of those elements is so profound that a human like you couldn’t understand them.

“By reaching that level, or at least a certain point along the way, hē would come to see you, not as a single entity, but as countless entities. Everything about you would be plain to see. Both your past and your future would exist in hīs eyes.”

The crown prince waved his hand, and countless images sprang into being around Night Dove. They included his past and his future, and there were so many that they blurred together to create something that would shatter the mind of a mortal who looked at it.

The crown prince waved his hand again, and seven or eight of the images sprang to the forefront. They depicted Night Dove dying at the hands of different people.

“Hē can change anything and everything about you. And hē can change the images of your fate with only one element of thought.” He pinched his fingers together, and the images faded into nothing. Then he looked up at the broken face of the god in the dome of heaven. He sighed. “That’s why, ever since hē appeared, we had no choice. We had to call hīm a living god.”

When the images around Night Dove disappeared, he shivered. Then he joined his lord and master in looking up, and his eyes shone with zeal.

As the sun set, the two of them continued to walk deeper into Sea-Sealing County.

Far, far away in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture, a massive dreadnaught soared through the sky, carrying everyone from Seven Blood Eyes back toward the coalition. The mission was over. Teleportation fluctuations built up, and then wild colors flashed in heaven and earth as the Seven Blood Eyes force vanished.

They materialized above the headquarters of Seven Blood Eyes. The afterglow of evening spread out over the lands, touching the faces of the returning disciples. Many of those faces still contained traces of lingering fear.

All of them knew that the power of a god was something majestic. It could transform heaven and earth. It could change anything and everything. But those descriptions were vague and relatively meaningless. Few people knew the details of what a god could do. They just knew that the aura of a god could infect living beings, and that the gaze of a god could create forbidden regions. But now, these disciples knew more. And that little bit that they had learned... was absolutely terrifying.

That said, not all of them were fearful. Some of the cultivators, even after experiencing what they had, felt the desire to do battle burning within them.

Xu Qing was one of them. He had looked into the eyes of a god twice in the past, and had experienced more misfortune than most people. He had also experienced more good fortune as well, first, in that he had survived, and second, in that he had seen more than most people had seen.

The first thing Xu Qing did upon returning was go back to Master Sixth’s grave. After putting Master Shengyun’s severed head in front of the grave, he sat down quietly.

As the sky turned dark, he produced a jug of alcohol, took a sip, and then whispered, “It’s not over yet.”

“It’s definitely not over!” came the reply. It was Master Seventh. Walking up, he put his hand on Xu Qing’s shoulder, indicating that there was no need for him to rise and clasp hands in greeting. He looked at the severed head in front of the grave and continued, “Torchtight is trying to accomplish something that no species in the world can tolerate. And they’ve only just begun. I’ve already gathered some clues about Night Dove’s lord. I have an idea who he is, and I also know... that he comes from a

god domain. A great era is upon us, and as such, several god domains have already entered the world.”

Xu Qing didn't say anything in response.

A short time passed, and then Master Seventh patted Xu Qing's shoulder. “He's not your brother.”

Xu Qing shivered. With that, Master Seventh turned and left.

Xu Qing looked over his shoulder and watched him go. He hadn't done anything to hide the truth, yet he hadn't been eager to talk about it. Regardless, it was obvious that such matters couldn't be hidden from his Master, who had spent so much effort digging up information about Torchlight recently.

As it grew dark, Xu Qing stood, bowed to Master Sixth's grave, and then left. He walked down the mountain, out of the headquarters, and into the night. Alone.

It was the tenth month, and the wind that blew off of the sea was cold.

That said, Xu Qing didn't feel cold. Walking through the crowded, lamp-lit streets, he eventually spotted a vendor stall whose proprietor he recognized. This was the same proprietor whose stall he used to frequent back in South Phoenix. After moving to Revered Ancient, this stall didn't just serve breakfast. It stayed open all day. Perhaps because of the economic slump in the coalition in recent days, they were closing early today.

However, the proprietor noticed Xu Qing approaching, and recognized him. “Want something to eat?”

Xu Qing nodded. Entering, he sat down. A moment later, the proprietor happily served him a bowl of beef broth along with three eggs. When Xu Qing took his first sip, the familiar flavor brought a smile to his face.

The cold wind blew, but he didn't care.

The broth was delicious, and he took his time enjoying it. Once the bowl was empty, he peeled the eggs and ate them. He wasn't a fan of peeling eggs, but it brought a sense of satisfaction, so he took his time doing it right. After finishing the eggs, he handed over a few spirit coins and then clasped hands and bowed to the proprietor. The proprietor saw him out.

Xu Qing headed back to his berth. *Life goes on. There's no need to get anxious. Master Shengyun... was only the first.*

He looked up at the bright moon, his eyes shining. Then he entered the cabin of his dharmaship and sat down to meditate.

He had killed Master Shengyun and devoured the other golden crow. As a result, Xu Qing's golden crow rose to the second stage, giving him battle prowess equivalent to an additional heavenly palace. Because of that, though he only had two palaces which were corporeal, he actually could unleash three-palace battle prowess.

If you included all of his other assets, he would count as totally dominant among three-palace cultivators. And if he used the power of the taboo poison pill, and the defensive abilities of the Supreme-Limitless Crown, then he would be able to hold his own for a good amount of time against a four-palace enemy, probably long enough for the enemy to succumb to the poison.

I still need to work harder, though. I have to turn my third heavenly palace corporeal.

Inspecting himself, he found that after using the Gruegloom Daoseizing Art to take the gold cores of so many enemies, his third heavenly palace was now about halfway to being corporeal.

Although that didn't seem like very fast progress, compared to other Gold Core cultivators, he was making rapid headway. Obviously, Master Shengyun had also benefited from some destined opportunity that gave him similar rapid progress.

Thankfully, the scraps of will left behind in the gold cores Xu Qing had taken weren't able to do anything to him, thanks to the image of the Ghost Emperor mountain in his sea of consciousness.

Time slipped by slowly but surely. Eventually, a month had gone by.

During that time, the coalition was finally able to put all the chaos of the catastrophe behind them. They also intensified recruitment efforts to replenish all of the sects.

Seven Blood Eyes' position grew stronger during that time. The reason was related to Eastnether Isle. It was not that Guru Eastnether had agreed to join the coalition. Rather, she had accepted Sir Bloodsmelter's invitation for her to accept the title of 'honorary matriarch' in Seven Blood Eyes. With her, Seven Blood Eyes was far stronger than before. Add in the blood tree taboo treasure, and it meant that Seven Blood Eyes' position in the coalition was much higher. [1]

Everything was going well. Xu Qing had pushed his third heavenly palace to the point of being eighty percent corporeal. He had stabilized his emotions as well, having thought through all the matters he had to deal with.

Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior and the shadow were pushing themselves to the limit to reach breakthroughs.

Around this time... something big happened in the coalition! And it happened in the Dark Serenity Sect. Specifically, it was in the pocket dimension where the demon snake was impaled.

It happened early one morning. With no warning whatsoever, a shocking howl rocked the entire coalition as the demon snake's soul woke up. One reason it woke up was because of pure irritation. The other reason was that one of the teeth in the skeletal snake's mouth was somehow broken off.

The culprit was caught red-handed, and it was none other than Wu Jianwu from Seven Blood Eyes. Reportedly, at the moment he was arrested, he was right in front of the demon snake, reciting some poetry.... Even though the culprit was apprehended, the stolen item was never recovered....

Xu Qing was having some soup at the vendor stall when he heard the news. Yanyan sat next to him, looking very much like his wife as she peeled an egg for him. [2]

Moments later, Xu Qing put down the soup spoon and looked up to find someone hurrying toward him.

It was the Captain. After sitting down, his gaze darted back and forth guiltily as he scanned the area.

Taking another sip of soup, Xu Qing said, "What's with the facial expression, Captain? Have you been up to more misdeeds?"

The Captain cleared his throat somberly. "Watch your tongue, little Ah Qing. It's cold today, so I got a bit of a chill, that's all. Say, do you happen to remember me mentioning a really big plan I was

working on? I'm getting ready to head out of the sect for that very plan. Do you two feel like coming along?"

Chapter 328: My Precious Garments

"Come along, little Ah Qing. Elder Brother is going to take you to do something *really* big." As the Captain talked, he kept looking around furtively.

Xu Qing shook his head. "I'm not going."

"Huh? Why?" The Captain looked very anxious.

"You stirred up trouble in the Dark Serenity Sect," Xu Qing replied, "and now you want to drag me into it too. You think being around me will keep you safe."

He thought back to how the Captain had looked with such longing at the demon snake's tooth back when they went into the Dark Serenity Sect's pocket realm together. Then he thought about how the Captain and Wu Jianwu had been meeting up recently. Clearly, Wu Jianwu had foolishly let himself be duped by the Captain, who ended up making a clean getaway.

The Captain cleared his throat as he tried to think of what to do. He knew full well that he had pushed things too far, and was worried that if he didn't get Xu Qing involved, he might get slapped to death by Arch-Immortal Plumdark. However, if he *could* get Xu Qing on his side before Arch-Immortal Plumdark showed up... then Xu Qing's presence would be the Captain's key to staying safe.

Slapping himself on the chest to make himself seem like the spitting image of sincerity, the Captain glanced at Xu Qing and said, "Little Junior Brother, you really need to trust your Eldest Brother! Don't worry, I have a really amazing plan ready to go. You need to work on your heavenly palaces, right? If you come with me, you'll complete *multiple* palaces!"

Then he grabbed an egg and started peeling it.

Xu Qing's expression was the same as ever as he continued to sip his broth. Off to the side, Yanyan had a curious look on her face as she looked at the Captain. However, she didn't forget about the egg she was peeling. After it was done, she put it in Xu Qing's bowl and flashed a sweet smile.

The Captain wasn't very happy to see that. Looking down at the egg in his own hands, he thought about how great it would be to have someone peel *his* eggs for him. "Little Ah Qing, sometimes I wonder if you're even human."

Xu Qing sipped some more soup. "Captain, people from the Dark Serenity Sect are going to show up soon, don't you think?"

The Captain's eyebrows shot up. "There's no human who looks like you. Not one. Haven't you noticed? The older you get, the more demonic you look. I remember hearing about some mysterious species that's like that. I'd say it's highly likely you're actually a lost member of that species. As it turns out, little Ah Qing, I'm actually a bit of an expert on that species. Want to hear more about them?"

"No." Xu Qing finished his soup and ate another egg. He actually felt great at the moment, and wasn't affected at all by the Captain's nonsense.

The Captain was getting very anxious by now. Given how stubborn Xu Qing was being, he decided to resort to a trump card. “Deputy Director Xu, you owe me 2,000,000 spirit stones!”

“Actually, Elder Brother, I have a few jade slips here that are probably worth that much.” With that, he took out a jade slip that had images of the Captain dressed as Third Princess.

“Yanyan,” the Captain said, “I really don’t think you should join Seven Blood Eyes. You listen to me. Join the Dark Serenity Sect. Based on what I know of little Ah Qing, he has deep feelings for that place.”

Yanyan’s eyes glittered.

Meanwhile, Xu Qing sighed inside. It was becoming obvious that the Captain’s guilty conscience was troubling him so deeply that he would stop at nothing to get Xu Qing’s help.

Looking profoundly wronged, the Captain said, “I know you’ve grown up, little Ah Qing, but have you really forgotten about everything your Elder Brother has done for you? I’m your superior officer! I’m your Eldest Brother. For your sake, I angrily rebuked Master! I even told you about Master’s weaknesses! I’ve spilled blood for you! I’ve been your fall guy! I visited your hometown! We’ve bathed together! We’ve hung out together. We’ve....”

As the Captain went on and on, Yanyan’s eyes went wide, and she looked dubiously back and forth between him and Xu Qing.

Finally, Xu Qing reached into his robe and took out an apple which he handed to the Captain.

As the Captain’s eyebrows shot up, Xu Qing took out a discount card for the immortal hot spring and slid it over.

The Captain hesitated.

“Thirty percent off!” Xu Qing said, looking at the Captain.

The Captain looked at the card but didn’t take it. “Are you coming or not?”

Xu Qing sighed. He really didn’t want to go with the Captain, but given all the arguments he had made... Xu Qing finally nodded.

A smile broke out on the Captain’s face. Quickly taking the apple and the discount card, he lowered his voice and said, “Good decision, Junior Brother. Now, this time I’m being completely serious. I have a major plan. Yanyan, you’re coming with us.”

Yanyan’s eyes lit up and she nodded.

“Come on, let’s get out of here. If it gets too late, we won’t have a chance. We’ll take your dharmaship, little Ah Qing.” Rising, the Captain urged them out of the vendor stall.

Xu Qing produced his dharmaship, and the Captain immediately jumped onto the deck. Xu Qing joined him. Yanyan was about to follow when Xu Qing looked back at her.

Yanyan immediately pointed at the Captain. “He said for me to come along.”

“We need Yanyan,” the Captain explained. “She understands women, and that will make this big plan go a lot smoother.”

Xu Qing frowned but didn't say anything. Yanyan jumped onto the dharmaship. With the Captain urging him, Xu Qing performed an incantation gesture that caused the dharmaship to rumble to life. Then they shot out of Seven Blood Eyes.

About thirty breaths of time after they left, Arch-Immortal Plumdark appeared in midair, her expression cold. She took a step in the direction of the vanishing dharmaship, but then stopped and thought back to how morose Xu Qing had been acting lately.

“If you need to blow off some steam, fine. In any case, the little punk might be gone, but the old codger is still around!” Arch-Immortal Plumdark let out a cold harrumph and then stormed into the Seven Blood Eyes headquarters.

Shortly thereafter, the enraged voice of Master Seventh echoed out from the mountain.

“Chen Erniu! You think you're hot stuff? Don't show your face back here again! If you do, I'll break your legs!”

His voice was so loud that, despite being so far away, Xu Qing heard him. He looked over at the Captain.

The Captain was looking very pleased with himself, but when Xu Qing looked at him, he cleared his throat. “The old man is secretly telling me to stay away for a while. Ai. Master really does love me.”

“He seems pretty serious this time,” Xu Qing replied. Looking down at his transmission jade slip, he realized there was a voice message.

It was Master Seventh, and it sounded like he was grinding his teeth as he said, *“Is your Eldest Brother with you? That little brat used a treasure I gave him as a gift to split himself up into two clones and do something really bad! He's got a lot of nerve doing what he did. And then he actually turned off his jade slip so I couldn't send him messages! You tell your Eldest Brother that the patriarch is so pissed off that he suggested your Eldest Brother's legs be broken. And I fully support the idea!”*

The Captain couldn't hear the message, as it was sent directly into Xu Qing's mind.

Smiling proudly, the Captain said, “You don't understand. The person who *really* cares about me isn't Master. It's the patriarch. Worst case scenario, I just go plead my case with him. It's something you just couldn't pull off, little Ah Qing. Only I, the patriarch's most cherished junior apprentice, could do so. But I wouldn't worry about it. There's nothing you can do anyway. I simply know how to please the old-timers more than you do. You see, they like my energetic spirit.”

Xu Qing put away the jade slip and decided not to convey the message to the Captain.

As the dharmaship flew onward, the Captain started to explain his plan. “We're going to pull off something *really* big this time!” Glancing back one more time in the direction of the sect, he finally breathed a sigh of relief. “Our destination this time is the Three-Spirits Dao-Suppressing Mountain!”

Xu Qing's expression turned serious, and he prepared to turn the dharmaship around. The last thing he wanted to do was go on a suicide mission.

"Hey, stop!" the Captain said. "This plan will go off without a hitch, I guarantee it. I have good information this time. Our mark is the third of the Three Spirits. August Spirit Nethersprite. Remember the clothes she was wearing last time we saw her? She was acting all high and mighty, but what I was focused on were those precious garments of mine.

"Most important of all is that I got an intelligence report indicating the Swordsage Court is going to target the Three Spirits. They'll take action soon, so what we're going to do is sneak in ahead of time. Then, when the Swordsage Court finally makes their move, we'll take advantage of the chaos to get ahold of my precious garments.

"Every one of those pieces of clothing is a precious treasure. Little Ah Qing, all you have to do is absorb some of that treasure, and you'll be able to complete multiple heavenly palaces!" The Captain was almost breathless with excitement. Clearly he had been thinking about that clothing for a long time. [1]

"Besides, why do you think I went to all the trouble of getting that snake tooth from the Dark Serenity Sect? Because it can cut clothing! Without the tooth, it would have been too hard. But *with* the tooth, it'll be a breeze."

When Yanyan heard this absolutely crazy plan, even she couldn't hold back from gasping. She was a bit insane herself, being sometimes compelled to suck her own blood, but that didn't mean she was tired of living. The Captain seemed absolutely crazy to her. After all, he was talking about targeting a cultivator as powerful as Yanyan's own grandmother.

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And he was planning to steal her clothes.... It was obviously going to be an incredibly daring operation, and getting caught would equate to instant death. After all, they would be dealing with *three* Void Returning experts, not just one.

Even if the swordsages really did launch an assault, the whole thing would still be extremely dangerous. Yanyan did understand women, and she knew that they often loved their own clothing more than anything else. Touching a woman's clothing could truly enrage her.

But then Yanyan noticed the thoughtful look on Xu Qing's face, and she blinked a few times and held her tongue.

After some thought and analysis, Xu Qing decided that it wasn't a bad idea. However, he still had some reservations, so he said, "I'm willing to give it a shot. But those clothes looked like some sort of battle getup. If August Spirit Nethersprite is out fighting, won't she be wearing that same clothing?"

A disdainful look appeared in the Captain's eyes. "No matter what else she is, she's still a woman! And she's obviously obsessed with looking beautiful. Don't forget that when we saw her last, she checked herself out in a mirror as she flew along."

Xu Qing hesitated.

Seeing that he didn't understand the point, the Captain felt even more superior than before. Clearing his throat, he looked at Yanyan. "Yanyan, how many outfits do you have?"

"Not many..." she replied, blinking a few times. Then she added, "Only enough to fill a single mountain. But anybody who touches my clothes will die! Except Big Bro Xu Qing, of course."

Looking down his nose even more arrogantly, the Captain gave Xu Qing a meaningful glance.

"Understand now? August Spirit Nethersprite doesn't have just one single set of clothes. Who do you think she is? YOU? And even if she does wear that same outfit, who cares? There'll be other similar stuff there for the taking. Heh. A woman doesn't just have one single set of nice clothes. Obviously, little Ah Qing, I know a lot more about women than you do. Therefore, we're definitely going to make out like bandits!"

Xu Qing didn't say anything.

"By the way, the Swordsage Court is going to have their recruiting event soon. After the plan is seen through, we can go over there and check it out. I've already thought everything through. If we can do something impressive at Three-Spirits Dao-Suppressing Mountain, and make a good impression on the top swordsages, then it might improve our chances of doing well in the recruitment event.

"Trust me, little Junior Brother. Everything I'm doing is all to make it easier for us to get into the Swordsage Court!"

Chapter 329: Three Spiritual Souls, Seven Physical Souls

The Three-Spirits Dao-Suppressing Mountain was similar to the Eight Sect Coalition in that it was located in the south of Emperor-Receiving Prefecture, next to the Supreme Arbiter Salvation Mountains. Those mountains were massive, and were rife with pestilential energy. There were all sorts of evil, villainous groups there, and of course, there was no end to the grues. In some respects, it was almost the same as a forbidden region.

The mountain range split the southern part of Emperor-Receiving Prefecture into two halves. One half was almost a paradise, or at least, was a place where laughter could be heard. The other half was like a hell, where weeping was a luxury, and numbness was the most common thing.

That other half was controlled by the Three-Spirits Dao-Suppressing Mountain, and was the most vicious place in the mortal world other than the forbidden grounds. It was nearly half as large as all of the continent of South Phoenix, and was filled with 137 nations of both humans and nonhumans.

Whether it was day or night, those 137 nations were almost completely silent. It wasn't that they were unoccupied, but rather, the people there lived in neverending torment, as they were basically animals waiting to be slaughtered and eaten. And food didn't have the right to talk. That was why the inhabitants of those 137 nations never spoke, and the only sounds they made were agonized shrieks.

The sky was quiet as well. At the moment, it was nighttime, and the thick clouds blocked the moonlight.

Skeletons were piled everywhere, and their marrow was fuel for the underworld fire that provided the only light. The skeletons had no flesh on them; they were pure bone. Some had obviously been in place for a long time, while others had only recently been tossed into piles.

Such piles were everywhere, and they were large enough that they were almost like mountains. They could be found roughly every 250 kilometers. It was only possible to imagine how many countless mortals had died through the years to make those mountains of bones. Because of all that death, the aura of death in this place was particularly intense. The ground was stained by the blood, and was a dark violet color that was absolutely horrendous in appearance. A noxious odor filled the air that would cause most ordinary people to vomit until they had nothing left to spit out but bile.

The trees were red from having absorbed the blood in the soil. They were incomparably grisly in appearance, and most of them had naked, desiccated corpses impaled on them. The corpses swayed in the wind, like meat hanging from the roof of a butcher shop. Looking closely, it was obvious that the corpses had been painted with a substance that stimulated their auras. Those auras then attracted vicious birds and grues that could then be hunted and killed.

In addition to the trees, there were also blood lakes. Such lakes bubbled and boiled, and any passing disciples from the Three-Spirits Dao-Suppressing Mountain would drink from them and look very satisfied.

As the dharmaship sailed through the air, Xu Qing quietly took in the sights. The Captain seemed equally speechless, and even Yanyan, who herself had quite a bit of perverse energy, was taken completely aback.

On a previous occasion, Xu Qing and the Captain had run into a group called the Minor Three Spirits, but compared to this, it seemed like they didn't even deserve to use the word 'minor' to describe themselves. There was nothing that could compare to this. [1]

"People talk about the 137 nations here," the Captain said, "but the truth is that there aren't even a hundred nowadays. And that's why the Three-Spirits Dao-Suppressing Mountain has been going outside of their borders more often to capture small nations. The number 137 has special meaning to the Three Spirits, which is why they generally try to replace every lost nation with a new one."

"Given how advanced the Three Spirits' cultivation is," Yanyan said, "why do they need to consume the flesh and blood of mortal species? It seems like it wouldn't be of any use to them."

"The Three Spirits are the manifestation of the three spiritual souls of the South Tor Ghost Emperor," Xu Qing said. He went on to convey to the Captain and Yanyan all the things his Master had explained to him. At the same time, he noted inwardly that the Ghost Emperor mountain in his sea of consciousness seemed different compared to before. It was as if it had come more alive upon entering this place. That was intriguing to Xu Qing, and he already had some theories about why it was happening.

The Captain listened to his explanation and then nodded. "It makes sense. 137 nations. 1 body. 3 spiritual souls. 7 physical souls. Everything conforms to some rule that they abide by."

As Xu Qing sensed the changes to the Ghost Emperor mountain within him, he looked down at a blood lake and noted the Three-Spirits Dao-Suppressing Mountain disciples drinking from it. "According to what Master said, after the Ghost Emperor perished, he brought nourishment to Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. Doesn't that mean that all the locals have some of his blood in them? If so, then it sort of makes sense why the Three Spirits would devour people.... It's basically a way for them to get stronger."

"Exactly," the Captain said, his eyes glittering. "It seems highly likely that's the case. That said, we don't know for sure, and I don't think we should push too hard to find out more details."

The dharmaship passed over the blood lake silently. Though it was a massive ship, the disciples below didn't notice it. Upon entering Three-Spirits Dao-Suppressing Mountain territory, the Captain had produced an object that could completely cloak the dharmaship.

Xu Qing looked once more at the disciples below, then abandoned any ideas of capturing some to study. The most important thing was to stay out of sight, and therefore, it didn't make sense to get distracted and do something that might reveal their presence.

Half a month flew by.

During that time, the dharmaship got closer and closer to the headquarters of Three-Spirits Dao-Suppressing Mountain territory. They saw more and more brutality, and also noticed quite a few nations that had been completely emptied out. Such places were cities of death, filled with darkness and wandering grues. They were miserable places. However, Xu Qing could tell that the Ghost Emperor mountain in his sea of consciousness was growing more true and real. In fact, it was also starting to emit glowing light, which made Xu Qing more cautious in dealing with it.

After another three days passed, Xu Qing and the Captain both agreed that they shouldn't go any further in the dharmaship. It was just too big, and even with the Captain's cloaking device, they weren't confident it could go further without being noticed.

Yanyan had been behaving perfectly during the journey. What she had seen on the ground below left her quiet and reserved. Her perverse energy was stronger, but she wasn't a purely evil person. Occasionally, Xu Qing spotted traces of empathy and indignation in her eyes.

Xu Qing put his dharmaship away and the three of them dropped to the ground. At that point, the Captain produced a handful of magical devices.

"I've been preparing for a long time to retrieve my precious garments," he said. "And thus, I gathered all these things, which we can use to conceal ourselves and our auras. If one isn't sufficient, use five. If five don't work, use ten!" With that, he distributed them between himself, Xu Qing, and Yanyan.

After activating them, the three of them sped on their way deeper into the territory of the Three-Spirits Dao-Suppressing Mountain.

They didn't stop along the way. Another half a month went by. That was when they caught sight of a massive mountain off in the distance, as dark as night, with three towering peaks that pierced the clouds. The three peaks seemed boundless, so imposing that they could shake the dome of heaven. Any who looked at them would be shaken deeply, both because of the grandeur of the mountain, and also because of the powerful cultivators who resided there. It was as if those mountain peaks contained spirits that made people instinctively drop and pay obeisance.

Xu Qing, the Captain, and Yanyan all stopped in place as soon as they saw the mountain.

This huge dark mountain with its three peaks was none other than the Three-Spirits Dao-Suppressing Mountain! Above the cloudy peak of each mountain was a massive illusory image that resembled a funnel absorbing dark mist from the dome of heaven. Within that mist it was possible to see three outstandingly large thrones.

On the third mountain was a throne of crystal. It was extremely extravagant and dazzling, and atop it sat a stunningly beautiful woman. She was gargantuan, but at the same time, beautifully proportioned. She was enchanting, and her eyes were so flirtatious that any man who looked at her would feel his insides stirring with desire. In fact, someone who looked at her long enough would become completely entranced with her. This woman was the same one Xu Qing and the Captain had previously seen.

She was the human soul of the Ghost Emperor. August Spirit Nethersprite.

As she sat there, she held a mirror that she used to admire her own beauty. Occasionally, she would wave her hand, and countless screaming mortals would fly up and swirl in the air around her. She seemed to think of them as tasty snacks. One by one, she would grab them in her fingers and put them into her mouth. She would chew, then swallow. As she did, her skin grew fairer and better-looking.

The second throne was even more terrifying. It was constructed from pitch-black beast bones, and looked like a massive skull. It was surrounded by countless deceased souls, all of whom howled in agony. Sitting on that throne was a massive cultivator. He was huge, but also incredibly skinny, almost to the point of looking skeletal. He had no hair. The only thing about him that wasn't incredibly bony was his back, which was hunched and looked almost like a small mountain.

That 'mountain' was actually some sort of cancerous growth, covered with horrid, greenish-red veins. It almost looked like that growth had absorbed all of the other flesh and blood on his body. It pulsed rhythmically, and emanated a sound like pounding war drums. That growth seemed to weigh down heavily on him, causing him to gasp for breath. Every so often, he would open his mouth, and a vortex would appear nearby, out of which hundreds of living beings would fly. Into his mouth they went, and he chewed them up.

Because of eating too many in one bite, blood flowed down his chin. Yet that only made him seem more vicious. This skeletal cultivator on the second mountain was the second-ranking member of the Three Spirits.

He was the earthly soul, August Spirit Sunslaughter!

Those two images were shocking to Xu Qing, the Captain, and Yanyan. But they almost couldn't compare to the first mountain!

The throne on the first mountain was hard to see clearly. But it was shockingly terrifying nonetheless. In fact, the second and third mountain couldn't even compare to it. Only this mountain could be called consummately brutal! That was because the spirit on this mountain was the manifestation of the strongest of all souls, the heavenly soul!

August Spirit Spotlight!

Chapter 330: The Afterglow Remains

Xu Qing, the Captain, and Yanyan all reacted with shock. They had come to this place with a basic understanding of what it was like, and had already seen much on their travels. But seeing the brutality on display on these three mountains filled their hearts with waves of astonishment.

However, that astonishment had different results among the three of them. It caused Yanyan to tremble. It caused Xu Qing to activate all of the cloaking treasures he had. And it caused the Captain... to stare at the three thrones with his eyes glittering brightly.

“Treasures. They're precious treasures!!”

Yanyan looked over at the Captain as if she were looking at a ghost.

Xu Qing, on the other hand, was used to his behavior and ignored him. After some further thought, he passed a handful of cloaking treasures to Yanyan. That finally shifted Yanyan's attention away from the mountains. Eyes shining, she took the treasures, then couldn't stop herself from slowly biting her finger.

Xu Qing's gaze dropped from the mountains to the lands below them. They were currently lying on a boulder atop a low-lying mountain, looking over the edge at everything below. The low-lying mountain was part of a mountain range that was dwarfed by the three-peaked mountain, but it was high enough to give them a good view.

From a distance, the dark three-peaked mountain was surrounded by swirling mists that took the shape of huge ghost heads that flew here and there moaning.

The lands beneath the huge mountain were dotted with dark cities. They were bustling places filled with bizarre screams and bloodthirsty cackling. The cities were inhabited by Three-Spirits Dao-Suppressing Mountain disciples, as well as countless mortals who served as slaves, servants, and food. All of them lived lives worse than death.

The Three-Spirits Dao-Suppressing Mountain disciples came from just about every species imaginable, but they were all vicious and ruthless individuals. They had ultimately found their way here and, benefiting from the protection of the Three Spirits, became disciples. There were low-level cultivators as well, either people who had been conscripted forcibly, or who had somehow climbed from the ranks of the mortals. All of them had lost any shred of humanity, and were vicious to the core. That was the only way to survive in a place like this.

Xu Qing took it all in. There were innumerable vicious and monstrous enemies that were the first barrier to deal with in reaching the actual Three-Spirits Dao-Suppressing Mountain. Many of them were powerful experts. Even just looking at them casually, Xu Qing could sense numerous powerful auras.

Thankfully, Xu Qing, Yanyan and the Captain were concealing their own auras. As long as they didn't do anything to stand out, they wouldn't attract any attention. However, that was only because

they hadn't approached close enough to be detected by the sect's spell formation. This situation was different from the time they had infiltrated Seazombie territory. They couldn't just brazenly strut in. They needed the right opportunity to come along.

"It's not going to be easy to get in there," Xu Qing said. "Eldest Brother, when did you say the Swordsage Court is going to arrive?"

"Soon," the Captain replied. "Relax, we're not in a hurry. We're in a good hiding spot here. Let's just stay put and wait." The Captain licked his lips and suppressed his anticipation.

Xu Qing nodded and continued to lay there silently. Yanyan, meanwhile, kept a close grip on the treasures Xu Qing had given her. Blushing a bit, she scooted a bit closer to Xu Qing so that her left hand brushed against him. That caused her to shiver as if she'd received an electric shock, and her eyes glazed over.

Xu Qing was about to move away from her when, out of nowhere, a ripple passed through the air toward them. Xu Qing froze.

The ripple passed their position and then disappeared.

"That's the Three-Spirits peripheral scanning formation," the Captain explained quietly. "Don't worry about it. As long as we don't jump out into the open and make a scene, it'll ignore us. It's only looking for Nascent Soul cultivators and higher. As far as the Three-Spirits Dao-Suppressing Mountain is concerned, anyone under the Nascent Soul level is a bug."

Xu Qing didn't reply. Taking out a few more cloaking treasures and activating them, he then gave a signal to Yanyan, and the two of them moved a short distance away from the Captain. After all these years, Xu Qing knew that the Captain was sometimes unreliable.

Seeing that, the Captain's eyebrows shot up in displeasure. "You've changed, little Ah Qing! What are you doing way over there?"

Xu Qing looked back at the Captain, who was now a good distance away. "Eldest Brother, did Master happen to give you a new treasure recently?"

"Are you kidding me? No way! The old man's way too stingy. By the way, little Ah Qing, any chance you have any apples on you? I'm a bit hungry." The Captain's expression was so smooth there wasn't even a hint he was lying.

Xu Qing didn't respond. He took out some apples and threw them over, then sprinkled poison powder in the area around himself.

The Captain blinked a few times and then sighed.

Yanyan was confused by their behavior, but didn't ask any questions.

Thus, three days passed.

“Captain,” Xu Qing said, “if the Swordsage Court doesn’t show up, we can’t just sit around waiting forever. Do you have a Plan B ready?”

“The Swordsage Court is definitely going to show up!” the Captain said firmly.

“You’re that sure?”

“Absolutely. I paid a lot of money for that intelligence report!” The Captain’s eyes glittered as though he were reviewing his complex plan of action.

Xu Qing considered his words and chose not to say anything further.

A few days passed.

Xu Qing looked over at the Captain.

The Captain took a deep breath and nodded as confidently as before. “Don’t worry!”

About a week passed.

During that time, a few dangerous incidents occurred.

Three-Spirits disciples flew by a few times on patrol, and nearly spotted them. The worst situation was when some of those disciples sensed something unusual, and actually searched the mountain where they were hiding.

Xu Qing kept his cloaking treasures activated, and also had his shadow assist. Yanyan obviously had treasures of her own, and therefore, neither of them were spotted.

The Captain activated his cloaking treasures at the last minute, vanishing from sight. When he did, Xu Qing looked down at his shadow. It was night, so no one could see the shadow as it stretched toward a boulder not too far away.

Xu Qing stared expressionlessly at that exact spot. In the location the shadow was pointing to, at the base of the boulder, was a barely opened eye.

Something’s not right here. How did little Ah Qing spot me? Don’t tell me Master told him about the treasure that can create a clone and transform my true form? This little brat is too smart for his own good. He’s no fun at all.

That boulder was the Captain’s hiding spot. That was his true form, while off in the distance... he had a much more easily visible clone. His original plan had been to wait until the Swordsage Court showed up, and in the resulting chaos, have his clone lead the way for Xu Qing and Yanyan, while his true form followed behind secretly. That would be a lot safer in general, and would also give him opportunities to surreptitiously get more loot.

He had tried to use similar tactics both in the Merfolk Isles and in the Seazombie restricted area, although on both those occasions his efforts failed. When following Xu Qing in the Merfolk Isles, he had ended up getting poisoned. And in the Seazombie restricted area, he ended up taking the blame for the entire nose-explosion incident. He had never been happy about that, and had hoped that with this new treasure from his Master, he would finally come out on top.

Sadly, Xu Qing’s gaze from moments ago made him feel a bit guilty. After the Three-Spirits disciples were gone, he shifted positions.

Three more days passed. They had now been waiting for about a month. As evening fell, a lightning bolt suddenly pierced through the dark clouds in the sky. The massive lightning bolt was 30,000 meters in length, and seemed to completely split apart the dome of heaven. Thunder ripped through the sky, shaking everything.

After the main lightning bolt struck, countless smaller lightning bolts spread out, turning the area into a chaotic city of lightning.

Then the clouds parted and the pounding of war drums echoed out. Simultaneously, a beam of sword light descended from on high. It was massive, and was surrounded by thousands of dao lineaments that gave it the power to sunder heaven. It emanated boundless might, making it seem like heavenly tribulation as it shot... toward the first peak of the Three-Spirits Dao-Suppressing Mountain!

A sword descended, causing the first mountain peak to shake violently.

At the same time, a black mist erupted to resist the sword light. Heaven and earth shook as they fought. Meanwhile, a voice that could shake the mind echoed out from the mist.

“Elders from the Swordsage Court??”

The response from within the sword light made things very clear.

“The Swordsage Court is here on order from the county itself to suppress the Three Spirits!”

The sudden turn of events was shocking even to the Three Spirits, and it threw the surrounding lands into an instant uproar.

But before anything else could happen, two hands stretched down from the sky and viciously ripped apart the dark cloud cover. Numerous swordsages appeared, wearing the formal attire of the Swordsage Court. In the blink of an eye, they transformed into beams of sword light that shot downward. At the same time, the giant that had ripped apart the cloud cover threw his head back and howled, then charged toward the second mountain peak. Clenching his hand into a fist, he unleashed a strike that shook the entire mountain, causing cracks to appear on its surface.

Three figures stood atop the giant’s head, all of them pulsing with astonishing auras. Their eyes all contained countless streams of light. In unison, they stepped forth toward the third mountain peak.

Before they even arrived, their sword energy slammed into the mountain! Intense cracking sounds rang out from the third mountain peak as defenses and warding spells collapsed. Half of the mountain directly collapsed, and the remaining part tilted precariously to the side. The intense pressure it had previously radiated was already dissipating.

Thanks to the damage, an immense cave temple became visible inside, within which was the mansion grotto of August Spirit Nethersprite. Up above in the sky, August Spirit Nethersprite’s face suddenly turned incomparably vicious.

The skeletal giant on the second mountain peak stood. “Swordsage Court,” he shouted furiously, “aren’t you aware of the consequences you’ll face for attacking us? We’ve played our assigned role and haven’t overstepped our bounds. And we haven’t responded to the call of the Ghost Emperor.

Are you trying to force our hand? Do you want us to merge into the Ghost Emperor and wake him up?"

"Back in the age of the Ancient Emperors," came the response, "you measly spirits wouldn't count as anything more than backwater bandits. It's only now that humankind is in decline that you dare to utter such threats."

The words were spoken by a middle-aged man hovering high in the sky. He wore a government uniform and an official hat decorated with dao lineaments. He seemed calm and at ease, and carried an ancient sword strapped to his back. His garments flapped in the wind, and sword energy swirled around him. Shockingly, he was flanked by innumerable projections that resembled himself. Each was larger than the one before it, and it made it seem like he was connected to the dome of heaven.

This indicated he was in the second stage of Void Returning.

The clouds behind him were ripped to shreds, revealing the evening sun that hadn't shone onto these miserable lands for years on end.

Although it was only an afterglow, it was still dazzling!

Just like humankind.