

## Timescape 331

### Chapter 331: Taking Teeth from the Tiger's Mouth

The last Ancient Emperor of humankind was Dark Serenity, who conquered Revered Ancient. The countless other species that existed at that time had been unable to do anything other than acknowledge allegiance to him. That was the final glory offered to humankind before the broken face of the god arrived.

The other species didn't dare to be disrespectful at that time, lest they face the wrath of the Five Greater Celestial Divisions. The number of nonhumans and evil cultivators who fell to the Five Greater Celestial Divisions couldn't even be numbered. Even just one of those five divisions could shake heaven and earth, and cause countless species to tremble in fear.

The Swordsage Division was, of course, one of the Five Greater Celestial Divisions.

However, everything fell apart after the broken face of the god arrived. That god's aura infected everything, dramatically transforming heaven and earth. And Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity could do nothing about it.

In fact, there were many Ancient Emperors and Imperial Sovereigns from the past who awoke from states of dormancy when that happened. Yet they were also powerless to fight back, and could only watch and sigh. Eventually, they were forced to abandon Revered Ancient, taking with them whatever suitable humans that were willing to follow them. Some other species left as well, departing Revered Ancient to create independent locations called holy grounds.

More commonly, species banded together to create what was now something legendary in the Revered Ancient mainland.... The holy lands.

These holy grounds and holy lands existed beyond the dome of heaven. However, though they seemed far away, they actually weren't an infinite distance from Revered Ancient. They took advantage of the fact that the broken face of the god was fixated on Revered Ancient to live for many years in peace, and even grow and expand. In other words, they had benefited from the pain and suffering of the people who had been left behind.

The countless species of Revered Ancient continued on, living and dying, rebuilding their cities and reestablishing society. And though the modern species did trace their origin to the species of the ancient past, they were now different enough to be considered unique.

Mutagen was integral to all of that.

Although Xu Qing's journey made it seem like mutagen wasn't a big factor that cultivators had to consider, the truth was that it was extremely influential to all sects. The bigger a sect or group was, the harder they had to work to deal with mutagen. And when it came to small sects, or the mortals in the world, mutagen was one of the elements that played into either their survival or their death. Not even huge sects and organizations could completely negate issues relating to mutagen. They had to rely on constant cultivation progress to suppress its effects. They couldn't do anything to get rid of the root cause.

Mutagen was an enormous potential calamity on an individual level. The slightest misstep could cause it to flare up and push a cultivator into mutation. Over the years, humans had come up with all sorts of ways of dealing with mutagen, some more effective than others. Although they couldn't

get rid of it entirely, the big sects and organizations usually didn't have to deal with full mutation situations.

Yet all cultivators knew that in the end... it was a possibility. And if a cultivator could provoke an explosion of mutagen in someone else, then all others would be weak in comparison.

That was one reason why Torchlight had caused such a sensation in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. The god above obviously had the power to rapidly push mutagen levels in a cultivator past the sustainable limit, which would cause them to mutate into a freakish monster. Unfortunately, that was just how things were. It was how the path of cultivation worked in the modern era, and there was no other road to follow.

It was only in the holy lands, or perhaps in the legendary imperial capital, where true purity could be found. Either that, or by using certain extremely special techniques that could purify the body. After all, even if someone did attain purity, as long as they breathed air or absorbed spirit power, they would be contaminated again.

That was why cultivators from countless species all dreamed about being taken to the holy lands. But the holy lands were far, far away. Only the great species in Revered Ancient had ways of contacting them. And that connection was why the great species' societies and institutions had never collapsed.

For example, humans, and their Five Greater Celestial Divisions.

As the afterglow of evening shone down onto the miserable lands below, the Swordsage Court took action.

"Humans still stand strong!" said the middle-aged man, and that was when the true battle began.

Numerous figures of glittering light descended on the Three-Spirits Dao-Suppressing Mountain, pulsing with killing energy. Only the most elite and skilled individuals could become swordsages, and thus, as the slaughter began, the disciples of the Three-Spirits Dao-Suppressing Mountain were instantly thrown into chaos.

The Three Spirits were in bad shape as well. Sword light swept across the first mountain peak. The roaring giant battered at the second mountain peak. And three swords sliced at the third mountain peak.

Heaven and earth shook. Booms rang out right and left. Roars of rage, shrieks of anguish, and the thrum of magical techniques. The sound rose into the sky, causing the clouds above to grow even thinner, and allowing more of the evening afterglow to shine down.

The middle-aged man, who held a leadership position in the Swordsage Court in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture, strode toward the first mountain peak.

The Three Spirits were manifestations of the ghost emperor's three spiritual souls. The third- and second-ranking spirits were both in the first stage of Void Returning. The highest-ranking spirit, August Spirit Sporelight, had reached the second stage years ago. However, as the sword light closed in on him, the black mist surrounding him didn't seem capable of blocking it.

Then the middle-aged cultivator arrived, bursting with energy like a river of stars.

Fighting played out high above.

Fighting played out down below.

The battle raged!

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“Now’s our chance!” the Captain said, jumping up, his eyes shining brightly.

He immediately started racing down the mountain and in the direction of August Spirit Nethersprite’s third mountain peak. In fact, he was apparently in such a rush he forgot to turn around and tell Xu Qing and Yanyan to hurry and follow.

“Come on, let’s go!” Yanyan said.

However, before she could start moving, Xu Qing casually walked up to a withered tree a short distance away. Standing in front of it, he calmly said, “Ready to go, Eldest Brother?”

The ‘Captain’ off in the distance stopped in place, a strange expression on his face. “I’m over here, little Ah Qing!”

Xu Qing ignored him. After looking at the tree for a long moment, he turned to Yanyan. “Would you like to see some very interesting images I have stored on this jade slip?”

Before she could answer, hearty laughter erupted from the tree. Then it blurred as the Captain stepped out into the open, smiling broadly and without a hint of embarrassment. “Hahaha, I was just joking around with you, little Junior Brother. You rascal! How come you’re always so serious? Come come. There’s no time to lose. We need to go get some treasure!”

The Captain burst into motion, and when he passed his clone, he waved his hand. The clone disappeared.

Yanyan’s eyes widened into a glare as she realized that the Captain had been trying to get her and Xu Qing to lead the way. Xu Qing didn’t say anything as he followed the Captain. Yanyan finally snorted coldly, and keeping her glare fixed on the Captain, followed Xu Qing.

Thus, the three of them sped along at top speed. After descending the mountain, they took advantage of the chaos to slip across the battlefield unnoticed.

Along the way, Xu Qing’s eyes turned colder and colder. Because of the chaos of battle, the cities were crumbling, and that allowed him to see more details of what was inside them. There were huge pots used to cook people. There were slabs of bloody flesh hanging from hooks. The ground was purple with gore. And there was an ever-present noxious odor. There were skulls scraped clean of flesh piled up everywhere. And there were also endless cages filled with mortals from all species, just waiting to be turned into food.

Xu Qing hadn’t seen this kind of thing very often when dealing with cultivators. But here... they were everywhere.

The Captain looked at Xu Qing and then, voice grim, said, “Kill whoever you want to kill.”

Xu Qing didn’t respond. However, a moment later he appeared in front of a Three-Spirits Gold Core cultivator with two heavenly palaces, who was just backing away from his swordsage opponent. A dagger appeared in Xu Qing’s hand, which slashed through the throat of the Gold Core cultivator.

A scream rang out and then the head flew into the air. Xu Qing, his face completely expressionless, continued onward. A moment later, he appeared behind another Three-Spirits cultivator, whose throat he viciously sliced open.

As blood sprayed everywhere, Yanyan took action, the perverse energy within her erupting out. She wasn't in Gold Core, so she targeted people she knew she could kill, ripping them apart and slicing them open.

Seeing that, the Captain didn't say anything. But as he flew onward, he passed a Three-Spirits disciple who suddenly shivered and froze solid.

Because the three of them were cloaked, they were like assassins on the battlefield. Wherever they passed, death followed. Unfortunately, due to the large numbers of swordsages involved in the fighting, Xu Qing couldn't resort to using poisons. If he had, the slaughter would have been even more brutal. Before the swordsages arrived, such actions would have attracted immediate attention. But the chaos of the fighting ensured that the screams of those they targeted, and the corpses they left behind, weren't really noticed.

Xu Qing was the kind of person who kept a clear head at virtually all times, so despite the slaughter he was unleashing, he kept heading straight toward the third mountain peak. An hour passed, and they were getting closer and closer to that peak. As they neared, they were able to see the fight playing out in the air above it.

The shockwaves coming from the first mountain peak were the strongest. The sounds echoing out from the second mountain peak were the loudest. But the third mountain peak was where the most fighting was going on.

August Spirit Nethersprite had split into three versions of herself, each of which was fighting one of the swordsage elders. Shockwaves spread out, causing whipping winds and cracking the lands.

It was in those circumstances that Xu Qing, Yanyan and the Captain slowly got closer and closer to the mountain peak. As they did, the fighting got even more chaotic. Occasionally, the Captain would stop moving and drop down to the ground to avoid attracting attention. Then he would crawl forward on hands and knees, accelerating or decelerating depending on the circumstances.

Xu Qing reacted in the same manner, as if on instinct. Yanyan didn't have the same instincts, so she reacted slower. However, she was a quick learner.

Using various methods, the three of them continued to make their way through the fighting.

Occasionally they would encounter swordsages who, though they couldn't see the three of them, noticed clues that they were present. Thankfully the Captain had come prepared, and was able to produce a certain identity medallion. With that medallion, the other swordsages did nothing more than react curiously to their presence.

As the Captain crawled forward, he looked back at Xu Qing with a pleased expression. "Well, what do you think? I told you I came prepared. You know what this is? It's a swordsage informant's medallion. I spent a lot to get this thing. In most circumstances it would be useless, but on this battlefield it provides us with the perfect cover."

Xu Qing blinked a few times then plastered an amazed look onto his face. The Captain seemed very pleased with that.

They faced danger on several occasions, but thanks to the caution of Xu Qing and the Captain, nothing came of any of it.

Another hour passed, whereupon they finally managed to crawl to the base of the third mountain peak. High above in the air, August Spirit Nethersprite's three clones were locked in vicious combat. From this vantage point it was possible to tell that none of the three clones wore the same outfit she had worn the day she showed up outside Seven Blood Eyes.

"This shrew has so many outfits! We're about to get rich, little Ah Qing. Rich!!" Eyes gleaming with avarice, the Captain leaped up, no longer cloaked, and bolted toward the mountain.

Xu Qing followed, and Yanyan trailed right behind them. Though Yanyan was slower, she had plenty of magical treasures that boosted her speed and strength. She couldn't keep up, but was close behind.

From high above, it was just barely possible to make out three figures whizzing through the chaos of battle toward the mansion grotto in the mountain. The Captain's eyes burned with a crazy look. Xu Qing's eyes glittered.

"This is totally crazy..." murmured Yanyan, whose heart was pounding.

As she looked at Xu Qing and the Captain, and thought about how they wanted to extract teeth from a tiger's mouth, she realized... that no ordinary person could possibly do this!

"And it's so exciting!" Eyes glazing over a bit, she trembled with excitement and pressed onward.

### Chapter 332: Don't Leave Valuables Out In The Open

The mass slaughter taking place on the battlefield didn't pose any hindrance to Xu Qing or the Captain. Despite being surrounded left and right by danger, they got closer and closer to the mansion grotto. As they did, Xu Qing's eyes shone brightly, and the Captain's gaze became one of fanaticism.

It was a given that the Captain had picked a perfect opportunity. Normally speaking, there was no way that any circumstance would allow Xu Qing, the Captain, and Yanyan to get anywhere near August Spirit Nethersprite's mansion grotto. Before even getting close, they would have been forced to deal with all the countless Three-Spirits disciples. After that, they would have faced the warding spells protecting the huge mountain itself. And of course, the final obstacle would have been the terrifying August Spirit Nethersprite herself. Any single one of those would have led to the complete failure of the plan, and also the almost certain death of everyone involved.

But now, all of those obstacles disappeared like wisps of smoke. The Three-Spirits disciples were all locked in battle with the swordsages, allowing the three intruders easy access to the foot of the mountain. As for all the warding spells, and the pressure normally exuded by the mountain, they were almost completely destroyed by the swordsages. Though some remnants remained, they were like nothing compared to before. Beyond that, the collapse of the mountain had revealed the cave inside.

The terrain beneath their feet was rough and broken. What was more, through the cracks in the sides of the mountains, it was possible to see bolts of lightning streaking back and forth, as well as hosts of damaged magical symbols.

In a few places, smoke poured out. The mountain was badly damaged, to the point where all the trees on its surface were now withered. Boulders were smashed and cracked. The entire mountain seemed like it might collapse at any moment. There were corpses everywhere, as well as living Three-Spirits cultivators. The latter were scrambling to get out of the mountain, and those that did notice Xu Qing, Yanyan and the Captain didn't bother them, and just continued fleeing.

Further up the mountain, inside the cave, it was possible to see the mansion grotto. All sorts of things were scattered on the floor.

When the Captain saw them, his eyes shone brightly. Xu Qing's heart started to race. They saw the glittering light of treasures, as well as numerous items that seemed to be crafted from immortal jade. There were many other precious items; every piece of furniture seemed to be a high-level magical device.

The place was a total mess, and thanks to the attacks of the swordmage elders, there were even the corpses of nonhuman servants laying here and there.

The mess didn't deter the Captain in the least. In fact, he accelerated. As for Xu Qing, though he was also captivated by the treasure, he noted the Captain's sudden burst of speed.

Xu Qing already had three-palace battle prowess. And while the Captain didn't seem to be in the Gold Core level yet, given his burst of speed, Xu Qing got the feeling he was roughly equivalent to that level. It wasn't a surprise. In fact, it was almost predictable. Deciding not to worry about it, Xu Qing also accelerated, sticking close to the Captain as they closed in on the mansion grotto.

Though the warding spells protecting the place were mostly destroyed, they still contained deadly power. At a certain point, Xu Qing suddenly stopped and backed up. A black thread appeared in front of him, whipping through the air and carrying with it a strong mutagen aura.

Despite how quickly he had reacted, the black thread still managed to slice off a strand of his hair.

The Captain was moving too fast to dodge out of the way, and his right hand was cut clean off. He was a vicious fellow, though, and all he did was grab the severed hand and shove back into place on the stump. A moment later, he was back to normal.

"You think some crappy warding spell is going to stop me?" he shouted. However, a moment later, light glittered in front of them as over a hundred additional threads appeared, forming a huge net that raced toward them.

Intense mutagen spread out in all directions. The threads were obviously made from raw mutagen, and were clearly the handiwork of August Spirit Nethersprite. Most cultivators viewed mutagen as something to avoid, but she had used it to create a powerful warding item.

Xu Qing's pupils constricted as the web of mutagen threads closed in. Without any hesitation, he sent his shadow out to stop it.

An instant later, the web hit the shadow.

The shadow shivered, then emitted emotional fluctuations of casual amusement. The web shivered, and then the section in front of Xu Qing vanished and he proceeded on his way. Yanyan followed in his tracks.

However, the Captain had been moving too quickly to dodge out of the way. That said, he had his own way of dealing with the situation. He just let the threads hit him and slice him into dozens of chunks. After they passed through him, the flesh and blood rapidly stitched back together. An instant later, the Captain was whole again.

“Hahaha! What do you think, little Ah Qing? My methods are so superior to yours that —” Then he noticed Xu Qing and Yanyan standing there completely unharmed. His jaw nearly dropped. “How’d you do that?”

Xu Qing blinked a few times, looked the Captain in the eyes, and shrugged. “The threads just broke. Maybe the warding spell was too badly damaged or something.”

The Captain looked at him silently, then glanced down at the red lines crisscrossing his own body. Suddenly feeling very tired, he walked over to stand next to Yanyan, behind Xu Qing. Clearing his throat, he said, “Shall we continue, little Junior Brother?”

Xu Qing looked at the Captain. The Captain looked back at him.

Without another word, Xu Qing continued toward the mansion grotto. This time, the Captain didn’t compete to be first inside. Instead, he obediently followed along with Yanyan.

And thus, the three of them moved rapidly, but also cautiously, toward the mansion grotto.

They ran into more warding spells, but managed to go around most of them. Those that they couldn’t go around were full of powerful mutagen. Therefore... the shadow was able to just consume them.

Before long, the three of them were right in front of the cave. From that position, they could already smell the fragrant aroma of perfume coming from the mansion grotto.

The battle high in the sky had reached a fever pitch. Howls of rage echoed out from the first mountain peak. The skeletal spirit on the second mountain peak was evenly matched with his opponent. As for August Spirit Nethersprite, her three clones were suffering setback after setback, provoking desperate shrieks.

“We have to hurry,” Xu Qing said. “If we’re still here after they’re done fighting, we—” Before he could finish speaking, the Captain rushed past him into the cave with eyes shining.

Xu Qing could only watch as the Captain zipped toward a statue of an immortal crane in the corner, carved from pure jade. It was glittering and resplendent, making it obvious it was no ordinary item. Opening his mouth, the Captain bit off the crane’s head and swallowed it.

“This thingy is made from immortal jade! So extravagant! You couldn’t buy it for 1,000,000 spirit stones!” The Captain excitedly stuffed the headless immortal crane into his bag of holding.

Xu Qing rushed into the mansion grotto as well. Waving his hand, he caused all of the lamps to fly toward him. All of them were clearly extraordinary, and emanated powerful fluctuations. They weren't life lamps, but they were still precious items.

It was no surprise to Xu Qing that the mansion grotto of a Void Returning cultivator would contain so many treasures. However, time was limited, and he didn't have time to go around examining everything. Therefore, he just grabbed what he could. After taking all the lamps, he started snatching pieces of furniture.

Meanwhile, the Captain went around prying out all of the pearls that were inset into the walls. Upon seeing what Xu Qing was doing with the furniture, he grinned proudly. Xu Qing didn't measure up to him in understanding the value of things, as the items inset into the walls were clearly more valuable than the furniture.

Eyebrows shooting up, Xu Qing rushed into one of the nearby sitting rooms and took the divan from against the wall. Then he started snatching all the other random things he saw and putting them into his bag of holding.

Normally speaking, the owner of a house would put their nicest things in the sitting room, so Xu Qing was convinced that he was getting some good things.

The Captain blinked a few times and then went to another of the sitting rooms. He also had a clone start grabbing things, putting his overall looting speed above Xu Qing's.

The mansion grotto was so huge that it seemed unlikely they could go through the whole thing in such a short time. Therefore, they just grabbed whatever they found. Even still, the Captain was very pleased.

Ohhhh, little Ah Qing. Back in Seazombie territory, you absorbed that elixir much faster than me. This time, I'm going to come out on top!

The Captain was in a great mood. Ever since the Seazombie heist, he had been forced to think repeatedly about how Xu Qing had absorbed more of that elixir than him. But now he was obviously going much faster than Xu Qing.

Xu Qing noticed how fast the Captain was going, but he remained calm and collected. Looking around, he noticed Yanyan, who had just arrived.

Yanyan took in the empty space in front of her, and the Captain busy at work, and she hesitated, not really sure of what to grab.

That was when Xu Qing approached.

"Yanyan, what part of a mansion grotto would be the most important to a female cultivator?"

"Her makeup table," Yanyan replied immediately.

Xu Qing's eyes glittered as he looked around, then rushed toward one of the side rooms.

After bursting inside, his willpower evaded him and he gasped loudly.

The side room was full of an assortment of mirrors, large and small. Each of them emanated powerful fluctuations that pegged them as amazing items. What was more, there were countless



small bottles and containers, all of which emanated the fragrance of medicinal items and immortal energy. Further inside, there was a wardrobe full of precious garments that all emanated terrifying auras. Any single one of those garments there was enough to make Xu Qing have trouble breathing steadily. All in all, it made his illusory heavenly palaces tremble, giving him the distinct impression that these items could help him rapidly turn heavenly palaces corporeal.

On the floor beneath him, his shadow stared excitedly at the bottles and containers; apparently they contained things that would be very useful to the shadow as well.

Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior was staring at the mirrors. His intuition was telling him that the mirrors had spirit automatons sealed in them, and that if he devoured them, his own cultivation base would rise. It would be even more effective than devouring souls.

Xu Qing inhaled sharply and, without another word, waved his hand, causing mirrors, bottles, and containers to fly over to him. Yanyan helped.

Unfortunately, the strange garments were too large and couldn't fit into his bag of holding.

That was when the Captain suddenly sensed something and rushed in. Before he could assess the situation, Xu Qing pointed at the wardrobe.

“Eldest Brother, the precious garments are right there!”

Chapter 333: A Cow Chewing a Peony

The moment the words left Xu Qing's mouth, the Captain turned and saw the wardrobe and all the glittering clothing. His eyes went wide.

There were dozens of garments, each one hanging neatly in place, folded and unwrinkled. They were hanging in such orderly fashion that not one garment touched another. Merely looking at the wardrobe, it was obvious that the owner was very fond of these outfits.

The majority of them were dresses. One of them was an emerald green muslin gown embroidered with rough silk crafted from immortal jade. It featured a large peony flower and was decorated with immortal gold that draped all the way to the floor. The hem was decorated with a pink narcissus flower motif, and overall, the garment was stunning. It was paired with a gauzy green and gold veil that, even if it were to be worn by an ordinary woman, would be completely dazzling.

There was also a cyan court garment, a sleeveless blouse with violet and blue butterflies embroidered on it. Occasionally, extremely life-like illusory projections of the butterflies would flutter around the dress. Beneath the blouse was a pleated skirt decorated with flowers and mist, with sea grass at the bottom hem. It was obviously intended to be form-fitting, and was clearly a shockingly precious item.

There was a plain white qipao spun from an unusual plant fiber. It was embroidered with branches full of blooming plum blossoms that emanated a faint impression of spirit energy. The garment also created the faint, illusory image of a strange beast.

There were dozens of precious garments, and each one was both unique and spectacular. They were obviously extremely expensive, but also emanated auras that caused the cultivation base to stir.

The Captain wasn't the only one whose eyes went wide. Yanyan had been staring at them from the moment she noticed them. That said, all the Captain cared about was how much he could sell them for, or what they would be like if he ate them. Yanyan was just entranced by their beauty.

"It was worth it!" the Captain said. Swallowing hard, he rushed toward the wardrobe, grabbed one of the garments, and tried to stuff it into his bag of holding. The strange garment was incredibly resilient, and was difficult to get inside. "I knew this was going to happen. Little Ah Qing, once we get back, you need to smooth things out with the Dark Serenity Sect. I did that for the sake of this mission. I needed this snake tooth!"

With a flourish, he produced a huge snake tooth the size of a person!

Some parts of the tooth were stained the color gold, which emanated shocking fluctuations. All it took was a glance and Xu Qing knew it was the tooth of the demon snake. Yanyan had never seen the tooth before, but it was so incredible-looking that it caused her to inhale sharply.

Holding the tooth in his hands, the Captain smiled proudly.

As Yanyan winced painfully, the Captain slashed the tooth into the emerald green muslin gown. A loud ripping sound rang out, and the garment immediately became less brilliant. At the same time, a horrendous slash mark opened on the front of it.

The Captain seemed to enjoy the sound of the garment ripping, as he went on to slash the thing to pieces. However, he didn't damage any of the decorations or the primary materials. Seeing how effective the snake tooth was made the Captain even more excited.

"Back when I first saw that shrew Nethersprite's clothes, I wondered how I would rip them apart if I ever got my hands on them. With this tooth, I, Chen Erniu, will be able to rip apart any treasure in existence!" The Captain threw his head back and laughed long and hard. "Even if the Dark Serenity Sect wants to skin me alive, I could accept it!"

Xu Qing blinked a few times, making himself look suitably moved. The Captain seemed very pleased by that. Meanwhile, Xu Qing took advantage of the moment to walk over and join the Captain in collecting the ripped-up items. There wasn't any need for discussion; the two of them both knew that they had to work together.

After that, Xu Qing grabbed the clothes, opened them up, and revealed the most valuable parts. Then the Captain would use his snake tooth to rip those parts off.

Before long, loud ripping and tearing sounds filled the room. Off to the side, Yanyan looked like she was physically in pain. Though these clothes didn't belong to her, she could imagine how violently August Spirit Nethersprite was going to react when she discovered what had happened to her clothing collection.

As she watched Xu Qing and the Captain working so hard, she quietly said, "August Spirit Nethersprite messed up by leaving her valuables out in the open for you to find. But when she finds out what happened, she's going to be pissed.... Ripping up a woman's clothing? You two are just too nasty!"

Hearing that, the Captain laughed sarcastically. “This is nothing! You should see me and little Ah Qing’s Master. Now *he’s* nasty! Back when the old man was young, I personally saw him get into a big fight with Mistress. She was so mad that she destroyed some of his favorite ancient records and jade slips.” Hefting the snake tooth, the Captain continued ripping apart clothing as he continued, “After that, Master casually pulled out a big pair of scissors and started slicing Mistress’ favorite dress apart. Right in front of her! When Mistress saw that, she was dumbstruck. But then she flipped her lid. After that, the two of them separated for three years.” [1]

Xu Qing looked at the Captain. He didn’t say anything, but he had noted that the Captain mentioned seeing something Master did ‘when he was young.’ Master was already no youngster. And that seemed to indicate that the Captain must have restarted his cultivation quite a few times.

Meanwhile, Yanyan was thinking about what that event must have felt like. After all, men usually analyzed things logically, while women would consider feelings. As a result, Yanyan could easily imagine how Xu Qing’s Master’s wife must have blown her top all those years ago.

“So nasty...” Yanyan muttered. Then she rushed inside and started helping out.

Working together, they gradually ripped apart dozens of garments. That said, the material the clothing was made of was spectacular and full of immortal energy. Plus, August Spirit Nethersprite was physically huge. As a result, each destroyed garment created a massive pile of items.

They couldn’t take everything, so they had to pick and choose between the best things. Before long, there were random bits of cloth everywhere. Some looked like blank curtains, others were full of holes and looked like the clothing of a beggar.

Around then, the booms from outside grew more intense, and the ground started shaking violently.

Noticing that, Xu Qing said, “We need to get out of here. If we don’t, we’re going to be in danger!”

Suppressing his greed, he turned to leave. Yanyan hesitated briefly, then made to join him.

The Captain had originally not been ready to give up, and had been planning to do another pass, or maybe start prying up some of the spirit jade tiles from the floor. But seeing that Xu Qing and Yanyan were about to leave, he thought back to the Seazombie incident and how he had ended up taking the blame for everything. Taking a deep breath, he gritted his teeth and rushed after Xu Qing and Yanyan as they left the mansion grotto.

Quit while you’re ahead. Quit while you’re ahead! I have to get out of the habit of being too greedy. I can’t push things too far this time!

Before long, they were out of the cave. Cloaking themselves again, they hurried down the mountain.

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Shortly after they left, a red shadow blurred toward the mansion grotto.

It was a lithe young woman in a red garment with a white mask on her face that covered her facial features. Resting across her shoulders was an enormous, black-colored, evil ghost sickle that exuded gruish fluctuations.

As she neared the mansion grotto, she sized up the area, then chuckled.

The Church elders said that of the Three Spirits, August Spirit Nethersprite has the biggest collection of treasure. I need to take this opportunity to see what exactly they were talking about!

She entered the cave, stepped into the mansion grotto, then looked around. All she saw was empty space.

*There's a big battle going on outside, and half the mountain collapsed. But strangely enough, this place seems neat and tidy.*

Then she looked more closely at the walls, and was stunned. There were numerous empty notches in the wall that seemed like they had once contained pearls. After a moment of hesitation, she went further into the mansion grotto. As she searched the various rooms, her expression turned increasingly unsightly. Even most of the furniture was gone.

Finally she found the location with all the shredded clothing, and she inhaled sharply.

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*Someone beat me here! Whoever they were, did they shapechange into a rat? Or maybe they have a personal grudge against August Spirit Nethersprite? I can't believe they destroyed her clothing.*

Turning, she raced away with her guard up.

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Further down the mountain, Xu Qing, Yanyan and the Captain were racing away, cloaked and invisible.

Their bags of holding were full, and Xu Qing didn't want to stick around. That was especially true when he thought about all the loot they had. He didn't want to re-experience what had occurred in Seazombie territory.

As for the Captain, he looked regretful, as if he wasn't satisfied yet.

"We didn't get into any trouble this time, little Ah Qing!" the Captain said.

Xu Qing didn't like the sound of that. Keeping his guard up, he pulled Yanyan along and hurried forward.

The Captain lagged a bit. Sighing, he looked up at the second mountain peak. Then he licked his lips.

"Maybe we should just go *look* at the second mountain peak."

Xu Qing was about to respond when, all of a sudden, a shocking boom rang out from up in the dome of heaven.

The sound was so intense that Xu Qing, Yanyan and the Captain, despite not being very close to it, were shaken to the core. Blood sprayed out of Xu Qing's mouth, several defensive jade slips on Yanyan shattered, and she also coughed up blood. A tremor passed through the Captain and blood sprayed out of his mouth. All three of them looked up in shock.

They saw Nethersprite's three clones fighting the three swordsages. One of the clones had just been stabbed in the chest by her swordsage opponent, then punched in the abdomen, and finally, hit with a huge sealing mark that emanated terrifying fluctuations. The clone's abdomen and chest exploded,

and she screamed in agony. Then the sealing mark slammed into her. Obviously the sealing mark was something that had been prepared in advance specifically to deal with Nethersprite. Though it wasn't a fatal blow, it did sever her connection with the clone.

As a result, the clone tumbled out of the sky, slammed into the side of the third mountain peak, then toppled onto the ground below with a rumbling boom. There, the clone lay, apparently unconscious. The open wounds on her didn't reveal flesh and blood underneath. Instead, her innards were pure immortal energy.

As the dust settled, Xu Qing looked surprised and Yanyan seemed jumpy. The Captain, however, had a very crazy look in his eyes.

#### Chapter 334: A Strange Perfume Assails the Nostrils

What drove the Captain crazy was the aura coming out of the clone's wound, and the fact that the clone in general exuded a sensation of immortal energy. That was because the clone wasn't made from flesh and blood, but rather, had been created using a spirit plant. Although it was impossible to say exactly what plant it was, for it to grow so large showed that August Spirit Nethersprite must have spent a lot of effort on it. This clone's body was itself a precious material.

At the same time, it was also astonishingly dangerous. The moment it landed on the ground, it caused the air around it to distort. It also let off terrifying fluctuations that created a powerful pressure around it. The pressure and its aura created something almost like an attack that reduced all nearby rocks and plants to ash. Even the ground started corroding. It was easy to imagine how life-threateningly dangerous it would be to approach it.

But none of that could stop the passionate and crazy look from appearing in the Captain's eyes.

"That thing is amazing! Totally amazing! It's not a flesh-and-blood clone. It was built from a spirit plant. It's a precious material! I wonder where August Spirit Nethersprite found a human-shaped plant like that!"

As the Captain trembled in excitement, Yanyan looked at him as if he were a ghost. She had come to the conclusion that he wasn't a lunatic. No, he was a suicidal psycho.

August Spirit Nethersprite's clone seemed great and all, but even at this distance, Yanyan felt a sense of deadly crisis just looking at it. Every fiber of her being was screaming at her to get away as quickly as possible. Just the invisible fluctuations coming off of the clone had destroyed everything around it. Yanyan was literally shaking. She was about to open her mouth to give her opinion when she noticed Xu Qing's facial expression. His eyes were glittering just as brightly as the Captain's.

After a moment of thought, she said, "Big Bro Xu Qing, should we go take a bite?"

Xu Qing's heart was pounding. His craziness was different from the Captain's. Precisely speaking, Xu Qing preferred to assess the danger of a situation.

Though the Captain often assessed situations before going in, it wasn't unusual for him to forget that step. As far as the Captain was concerned, if the treasure was precious enough, it didn't matter if he had to risk his life to get it. Years ago when he went after Joine's flesh, he had lost half his body for one piece, and hadn't complained. And back when he took a bite out of the zombie ancestor statue, it was because he just couldn't live without doing exciting things. Then, on Seastar Island, he ended up losing everything except his head, and had even asked Xu Qing to throw his

head back into the fray. And that was just to get a bite of Bai Li's savory flesh. In this moment, the Captain wasn't worried about danger, or pressure, or anything else. All he knew... was that there was a precious treasure right in front of him!

But Xu Qing was different. He could tell that August Spirit Nethersprite's clone was no ordinary item. He knew full well that it wasn't made from flesh and blood, but rather, had been created using a spirit plant. A precious material like that could be extremely helpful to his cultivation. That was why he was excited. Up above in midair, August Spirit Nethersprite was suffering setback after setback at the hands of three swordsages. In other words, this was a perfect opportunity. And thus, the crazy look appeared in his eyes as he decided to take a risk.

The main thing to consider was the immense pressure the clone radiated. Even Xu Qing felt a bit nervous about dealing with it, and could sense how it made him instinctively want to flee. Obviously, getting close to the clone wasn't going to be easy.

Xu Qing looked at the Captain. The Captain looked back at him. Both could see the fervor in each other's eyes.

"We need magical devices that can resist the pressure," Xu Qing said.

"I have some!" the Captain replied. Struggling to breathe steadily, he pulled out a handful of about twenty magical devices.

Xu Qing couldn't help but feel surprised at how well-prepared the Captain was.

"I actually got these before I knew we were moving to Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. I'd been planning to use them to get into Flame Phoenix's nest. I figured the pressure there would be intense. Sadly, we ended up coming here to Emperor-Receiving Prefecture, so I had to give up on my Flame Phoenix plan. They'll work perfectly here. But you're going to owe me, Xu Qing. I'm broke right now."

The Captain handed some of the magical devices to Xu Qing.

As for Yanyan, her cultivation base wasn't strong enough even with the magical devices, so after a brief discussion, Xu Qing and the Captain agreed that she shouldn't participate.

After making the final preparations, the two of them gritted their teeth, and as Yanyan watched nervously, they started running toward Nethersprite's corpse. They moved with such speed that, in the blink of an eye, they had flown several dozen meters forward. As they closed in, the pressure from the clone grew incomparably intense.

The air around them seemed to solidify, and the clone's aura pulsed with mountain-toppling, sea-draining force.

Xu Qing and the Captain could feel the effects. Their faces turned pale, and blood oozed out of the corners of their mouths. The magical devices were operating at full blast, but even with their help, the pressure was intense.

The air around the clone was visibly rippling, and that friction caused black lightning bolts to crackle here and there. It was a terrifying sight that would strike fear into the hearts of anyone who saw it.

But the idea of giving up hadn't even occurred to Xu Qing and the Captain. Dropping to the ground, they started crawling forward as fast as they could. After all, if they were standing up, it could attract lightning. But crawling would enable them to get closer much more easily. They didn't even need to talk to each other about it beforehand. They just did it in unison.

Time passed as the fighting continued up above, and massive rumbling sounds echoed out. Meanwhile, Xu Qing and the Captain got closer and closer to the clone. The pressure built. The aura grew stronger. Lightning crackled. But none of that could stop them.

As they got closer, their magical devices started having trouble. One by one they started crumbling. Even though the Captain had prepared a lot of magical devices for this specific purpose, now it seemed like he might not have prepared enough. Soon they were about 300 meters away, and the pressure got so intense that it started trying to shove them in the opposite direction. It was almost like countless hands were grabbing onto them and pushing them away from the clone.

Trembling, Xu Qing and the Captain took out some cloth strips that they had taken from August Spirit Nethersprite's mansion grotto and wrapped themselves up in them. The cloth strips managed to reduce the pressure a bit, but the force of resistance still pushed against them.

Gritting their teeth, they kept crawling forward.

All of a sudden, Xu Qing's eyes narrowed, and he looked to the side. The Captain noticed the same thing and also looked in that same direction. Instantly, the Captain's expression became like that of a wild dog ready to fight over its food. Xu Qing's guard also went up.

Both of them were looking at a distant figure crawling across the ground toward the clone. It was a person in a red robe and ponytail. They had a mask covering their face, but from the way the cloth of the garment shifted over their body, this person was obviously a young woman. Her weapon was a bit ridiculous; it was an evil ghost sickle that was absolutely massive. The top of the sickle looked like a vicious ghost head, with the blade emerging from the mouth. And the shaft was pitch black and looked like it was made from pure bone. The gruish weapon emanated astonishing fluctuations; just looking at it, it was obviously a spectacular item. Especially noteworthy was that it emanated a soft glow that surrounded the young woman and protected her from the pressure.

Right when Xu Qing and the Captain noticed the red-garbed young woman, she noticed them. They were only a few hundred meters apart, lying on the ground, looking at each other.

"Well this is weird," the Captain said. "Someone's actually trying to steal *our* stuff!" The Captain's gaze was not exactly friendly, and Xu Qing's eyes were as cold as ice.

Off in the distance, the girl in red frowned beneath her mask as she looked at Xu Qing and the Captain. When she saw the strips of cloth they were wrapped in, she instantly realized that these were the people who had ransacked the mansion grotto. Her expression turned icy.

After a brief moment in which the three of them sized each other up, they all started crawling forward at top speed, fierce expressions in their eyes.

After getting within 300 meters of the clone, the lightning, the fluctuations, and the pressure all grew more intense. Thankfully for Xu Qing and the Captain, their magical devices combined with the strips of cloth ensured that they weren't slowed down at all.

The most difficult thing to deal with was the force of expulsion created by the clone's aura. It was so strong that, if they relaxed for even a fraction of a moment, they would be shoved backward. In fact, that force of expulsion created screaming winds that whipped their hair and clothes into a frenzy. And they couldn't even keep their eyes fully open. Eventually, they were forced to slow down a bit.

Meanwhile, the young woman in red had such amazing protection from her weapon that she didn't slow down at all. She was already about 120 meters from the clone's head.

Seeing that, the Captain started to get very anxious. Biting the tip of his tongue, he spat out some blood. As a result, a sleeping face appeared in the pupil of his eye that resembled him, except nefarious and bizarre.

At the same time, the Captain's aura changed, becoming cold and frigid. Simultaneously, he shot forward with a burst of speed, passing Xu Qing and getting within 90 meters of the clone.

Xu Qing, meanwhile, was only about 150 meters away. Eyes narrowing, he sent some fluctuations to his shadow, which responded by rapidly stretching forward ahead of him.

The pressure didn't seem to affect the shadow at all, which made sense considering what happened back in the Merfolk Isles, when the shadow ignored the pressure in the mural to get a lamp for Xu Qing. The pressure here was actually far inferior to that pressure.

It didn't take long for the shadow to reach the clone, wrap around its ear, and then start pulling Xu Qing forward. Instantly, Xu Qing accelerated, virtually ignoring the force of expulsion as he got closer and closer to the clone's head.

120 meters. 90 meters. 60 meters. 30 meters.

He was moving faster than both the Captain and the red-garbed girl. A moment later, he was right in front of the clone's neck! After reaching that spot, Xu Qing didn't hesitate for a moment. Instead of being stingy, he turned back toward the Captain, who was about 30 meters away, and made a grasping gesture. With his help, the Captain accelerated, getting closer and closer until he was right next to Xu Qing. However, his eyes were fixed on the seemingly fair skin of August Spirit Nethersprite's clone.

"The nose. The nose! Absorb the nose! That's the highest spot. That's where the energy converges!"

Xu Qing looked up at the very prominent nose.

All of a sudden, he thought back to when people had been teleporting into Seven Blood Eyes and he saw August Spirit Nethersprite for the first time. Back then, she had been looking at herself in a mirror, and had seemed very pleased with her nose.

Without the slightest hesitation, he lunged toward the clone's nose. Eyes burning with fanaticism, the Captain also lunged in the same direction.

Chapter 335: Girl from the Church of Departure

Rumbling filled the sky, echoing back and forth as August Spirit Nethersprite's two remaining clones fought the three swordmage elders. The shockwaves rose high into the sky, higher than it was



even possible to see. Thanks to the intense fighting, they had no attention to spare on what was happening on the ground below.

As one of the three spiritual souls of the Ghost Emperor, August Spirit Nethersprite was in the first stage of Void Returning, but was actually able to fight with power comparable to the peak of the first stage. Even more amazing than that was that she had an undying ability. Unless all three of the spiritual souls and all seven of the physical souls were all killed, she essentially had endless life force.

This was one of the reasons the Swordsage Court in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture had gone for many years without making a move on the Three Spirits. They were just that hard to deal with.

But now the Swordsage Court had come, dead set on coming out victorious. Because of that, the three swordsage elders continued to fight with full force against August Spirit Nethersprite, and weren't paying attention to anything else.

Down below, Xu Qing and the Captain lunged at the nose, one coming from the left, the other from the right.

A few dozen meters away, the red-garbed young woman gritted her teeth and kept climbing forward. When she saw her two competitors about to beat her to the punch, her heart filled with irritation. Truth be told, she hadn't benefited much after leaving that mansion grotto, and had been planning to go to some other locations to look around. That was when August Spirit Nethersprite's clone fell from above. After seeing that strange sight, she had unhesitatingly hurried in the direction of the clone's head. Based on the information she was privy to, August Spirit Nethersprite's clones were types of spirit plants whose quintessence was located in their head.

*These two are wearing disguises, so I can't tell what group they're from.* The young woman's eyes flashed with cold light, and as she gritted her teeth, her evil ghost sickle radiated a black glow. The evil ghost's eyes were open, and they pulsed with a mysterious glow. With the augmentation it gave, the young woman in red suddenly accelerated. Yet she was still too slow.

Xu Qing and the Captain had forced their way through the pressure to arrive right in front of the clone's nose.

The clone was enormous; compared to its face, Xu Qing and the Captain were like tiny worms. Each one stood in front of one massive nostril, focusing fully on absorbing the clone.

The Captain absorbed like mad, gripping the nostril with both arms as an image of himself appeared in his pupils. It looked very gruish. Thanks to his vicious efforts, that particular side of the nose quickly started turning gray, unlike the rest of the skin.

Xu Qing, not willing to be outdone, extended his right hand, which turned illusory as he used the Gruegloom Daoseizing Art on the nose. Although he couldn't shove his hand all the way in, he was able to have a measure of success.

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As boundless immortal power rushed into him, the shadow and Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior saw what was happening and excitedly got to work. The shadow directly spread to the skin of the clone, while the patriarch... having boasted so openly to Xu Qing that he could achieve a breakthrough in

three months, was now feeling very nervous, and went all out, piercing right into August Spirit Nethersprite's nostril.

When Xu Qing saw that, a strange expression appeared in his eyes. However, he didn't pay much attention. What was more, beneath his clothing, his skin started to burn as the Golden Crow Assimilates Myriad Spirits totem tattoo stirred. The crow opened its eyes. However, Xu Qing kept it under control and prevented it from spreading out on its own. Instead, it extended through his arm, into the nose, whereupon it began its own absorption.

As the cry of the golden crow echoed in Xu Qing's mind, the tattoo beneath his clothing rippled, not with thirteen tails, but with seventeen. Back when the golden crow devoured the ravagemist bird, it had developed a total of thirteen tails. After the battle with Master Shengyun, it ascended to the second stage of its development, at which time there were no changes to the tails. Instead, its general physical appearance and inner constitution transformed.

After upgrading to the second stage, it had grown rapidly. Now, seventeen tails covered most of the skin on Xu Qing's upper half. Though his clothing covered most of that, it still emanated intense heat. Xu Qing's eyes glittered in response to the golden crow's advancement, and had it work all-out to absorb more of the clone.

In a very short period of time, Xu Qing's side of the nose also turned gray. At the same time, the majestic power that poured into him caused his third heavenly palace to rapidly become more corporeal.

Previously, his third heavenly palace had been more than half corporeal. Now, with this immortal energy rushing into him, it quickly passed the level of ninety percent. It was now very close to being complete! However, that was the limit. In order to finish the process, the palace needed a gold core inside it. Each gold core required study and preparation before making it.

In many cases, cultivators would acquire them externally. Usually, Gold Core cultivators would have multiple such cores. In other words, they would use some item as a core, put it into the heavenly palace, and thus make it their life essence treasure.

Xu Qing's life lamps had worked in just that way.

Forming one's own gold cores was another option. Usually that relied on some sort of magical technique, and would require immense amounts of power. That was why different Gold Core cultivators chose to advance in different ways.

Xu Qing eventually wanted to take the taboo poison pill from the wish box and, just like his life lamps, turn it into one of his gold cores, which he would then use to control his third heavenly palace.

However, given how many people could see him here, he didn't want to take out the taboo pill. After thinking the matter over, Xu Qing decided to send more immortal energy into his fourth heavenly palace. Except he quickly realized that was a bad idea. The fourth heavenly palace couldn't accept any immortal energy, as if there were something blocking the way to it. The immortal energy converged around his fourth heavenly palace, piling up but unable to enter it. Apparently, advancement had to be made in increments, and one heavenly palace had to be complete before a second could be worked on. Until then, it was completely illusory.

That was fine with Xu Qing. If he couldn't put the energy into his next palace, he would just store it in his sea of consciousness. After he put the taboo poison pill into his third palace, then he would have all that energy ready for the fourth. Without hesitation, he began absorbing even more energy, sending it rushing into his sea of consciousness.

However, that was when something unexpected happened. As the immortal energy grew in his sea of consciousness, the Ghost Emperor mountain therein suddenly twitched. And then it exuded a massive gravitational force, and started sucking in the immortal energy like mad. As that happened, the Ghost Emperor mountain started shining even more brightly, while at the same time, the previously empty face began to fill with vague details.

And those details... were immediately recognizable to Xu Qing. They were his own facial features!

At least, that was what it seemed at this stage when the features were not completely clear. Either way, it was startling. That said, he didn't put too much thought to it at the moment, and instead kept absorbing the energy.

Eventually, the spot where his hand had penetrated the nose was completely gray, and that effect was spreading as more immortal energy rushed into the Ghost Emperor mountain.

There was something unusual about this Ghost Emperor mountain. From what Xu Qing could sense, it was somewhat different from the actual Ghost Emperor mountain that he had observed. Though it originated from the real mountain, the version in Xu Qing's sea of consciousness, after being developed by him, was an independent thing.... Most importantly, it was becoming corporeal, and was linked to him in countless ways.

That was a big shock, and he immediately decided that he would have to ask his Master about what was happening.

While Xu Qing was wrapped up in such thoughts, the Captain was madly absorbing immortal energy, causing the gray color to quickly spread over the entire nose.

That was when the young woman in red arrived. Glaring coldly at Xu Qing and the Captain, she climbed over to the clone's forehead and started her own absorbing efforts. She took the immortal energy in a very ferocious manner. And a projection of the evil ghost emerged from her scythe, and also started absorbing energy. Meanwhile, a strange image appeared behind her.

Shockingly, it looked like a lake of blood! It emanated a boundless killing intent and an intensely baleful aura, as if the lake contained vicious evil that was difficult to put into words.

The moment the lake appeared, Xu Qing looked at it. The golden crow within him also looked straight at the lake of blood. The golden crow's reaction was very telling to Xu Qing.

That's an imperial-class technique. And from the fluctuations, it's not first stage, it's second stage!

Meanwhile, the Captain looked over, eyes shining, and quietly said, "Legend has it that, countless years ago, the Arbiter of Destiny, leader of the Church of Departure, came from the holy lands and gave an imperial-class technique to each of the nine factions of the church, which has adherents among all species and who worship different Ancient Emperors and Imperial Sovereigns.

"Gaining enlightenment is a very demanding process, and thus only a small number of people ever succeed. Among the faction who adhere to Ancient Emperor Dark

Serenity, the technique is called the Serenity-Hell Blood-Sea Dao. One characteristic of the technique is that you make sacrifices to the holy lands. That's not necessarily unique. But what is unique is that each sacrifice becomes more dangerous and likely to kill you!"

The young woman in red glared icily at the Captain, but didn't say anything as she continued absorbing energy. The Captain's eyes narrowed and he sped up his absorption efforts. Xu Qing did the same. In that manner, the three of them went crazy on August Spirit Nethersprite's clone. Before long, the entire nose and all of the forehead were gray. Then the patches of gray met and spread to the rest of the face, until it looked like the face of a dead person. In fact, it was even possible to see black patches popping up here and there.

When that happened, Xu Qing pulled his hand out. It seemed like the right time to go. The fact that the clone's face was turning pitch black was just too eye-catching.

Xu Qing looked at the Captain and gave him a look indicating that they should leave.

The Captain saw Xu Qing's look, then glanced at the young woman in red, and was glad that there was someone here to take the blame for this instead of him. The Captain released his grip on the nose, and the force of expulsion immediately sent him tumbling away. Xu Qing was about to do the same when...

All of a sudden, a golden light erupted from the clone's nose, and a gold drop of liquid appeared.

"Void Returning dao blood!!" the Captain shrieked. He instantly went crazy trying to fight his way back to the nose, but there was no way he could do that in a short time.

Shaken, Xu Qing noticed that the Ghost Emperor mountain inside of him was trembling in response to the golden drop of blood.

The young woman in red breathed heavily, and her eyes shone with light as she jumped in the direction of the blood. She moved quickly.

But Xu Qing moved even more quickly.

Chapter 336: Run, Buddy!

The young woman in red was obviously an extraordinary individual. As her eyes flashed, the blood lake behind her seethed, and an eye floated up from its depths. The eye had a vertical pupil and seemed intensely malevolent. It also created crushing pressure that formed a world of blood in the area.

The eye... looked at Xu Qing.

Xu Qing... completely ignored the eye!

This young woman was only in the one-palace level. Her imperial-class technique was also in the second stage, making her battle prowess equivalent to the two-palace level. Combined with her decisive attack methods, she was the kind of person who would generally be able to easily overwhelm any opponent.

But she didn't understand how strong Xu Qing really was. He had two palaces, but made it a practice of keeping them covered, which made it hard to tell his true level. He also didn't

commonly reveal his second-stage imperial-class technique. Without taking time to examine him very closely, it wasn't possible to tell how strong he actually was.

Therefore, it didn't matter how the girl in red struggled, it didn't do her any good.

Everything happened in an instant. Xu Qing rose to the three-palace level of battle prowess, and his cultivation base erupted. Ignoring the attack of the young woman in red, he reached out and grabbed the golden drop of blood. With it in hand, he shot backward, taking advantage of the force of repulsion to get further speed.

It was over in the time it takes a spark to fly off of a piece of flint. The young woman's face fell as the drop of blood was whisked out from under her nose. Eyes filling with killing intent, she waved her hand, causing her evil ghost scythe's eyes to turn bright red again.

"You're very deceptive. But I can also pull off three-palace strength!" The young woman bit the tip of her tongue and spat out a mouthful of blood onto the evil ghost scythe. At the same time, her eyes glowed just as red as the evil ghost's.

"Acknowledge the call of Departure, dao lineaments are evasive; The Emperor, Dark Serenity, blesses this individual; Let the battle soul descend, bring help to adherents who show faith; Let the departure begin!"

It sounded like some chant in an ancient cadence. As the words echoed out, heaven and earth was affected, and a sinister wind began to blow. The wind ignored any pressure in the area, swirling rapidly to gather around the young woman, or more specifically, the evil ghost scythe. Thanks to the wind, the evil ghost's eyes grew even redder, as did those of the young woman. When they couldn't be any more red, the evil ghost's mouth suddenly opened, and it lunged toward the young woman and bit into her arm.

The young woman shivered as though she were being blessed by great force. Then she looked up, and her eyes contained intense aggression. Raising her right hand, she looked at the fleeing Xu Qing and made a beckoning gesture. Then she spoke, her voice gritty and hoarse.

"Get back here!"

It reverberated as though her voice had been mixed with the voice of an old woman, and it sounded incredibly vile. This seemed like a secret magic in which this young woman allowed herself to be possessed by the ancient soul of a fallen warrior, thus immensely boosting her battle prowess and strength.

The moment she spoke, Xu Qing shivered as an invisible force closed in around him, binding him in place and then dragging him toward the young woman.

Seeing what was happening, the Captain shouted, "Watch out, buddy! That shrew is using a Church of Departure secret magic to fuse herself with a battle soul!"

Xu Qing frowned. As he sensed the strange, gruish nature of the power within him, the Ghost Emperor mountain in his sea of consciousness glittered brightly, and the power binding him collapsed. Xu Qing blurred into motion, once again heading away from the clone.

However, the young woman in red hadn't actually been trying to drag Xu Qing back to her, and had operated under the assumption it wouldn't work. She was actually just trying to delay him a bit so

that she could chase him down. A fraction of a second after making the beckoning gesture, she rocketed in his direction.

Even as Xu Qing dispelled the binding power around him, the young woman closed in, bursting with three-palace battle prowess. Moving with shocking momentum, she brandished her scythe and swept it right toward Xu Qing. The weapon was as long as a person was tall, and though it looked corporeal, it was actually illusory. Because of that, it moved with unbelievable speed. It created a black, moon-shaped string of afterimages that split through the air and sliced right at Xu Qing's neck!

The scythe moved with incredible speed, and she followed, her eyes filled with both killing intent and confidence.

She had also killed three-palace cultivators.

The evil ghost scythe was considered a holy item in the church, and was one-of-a-kind. It had a very unique history, and based on church teachings, was connected to the holy lands. It could bypass any and all defenses; nothing that an opponent had prepared in advance for defensive purposes would do any good.

Suddenly, the Captain shouted again. "Watch out, buddy! The shrew fights dirty! I just remembered what that scythe is. It's a holy relic from the Church of Departure. I heard that it's not corporeal, so it can bypass all defenses!"

Xu Qing's eyes narrowed. He could sense that the black scythe was extraordinary, and that the young woman's secret magic was astonishing. With a burst of speed, he dodged right out of the way of the incoming blade. Unfortunately, despite avoiding the blow, the pressure radiating from the scythe caused Xu Qing's cultivation base to teeter unstably. It was the first time he had experienced anything like that.

The young woman twirled the scythe around and brought it back for a second blow, yet again targeting his neck.

Xu Qing's eyes glittered coldly as he dodged backward again, while simultaneously trying to stabilize his cultivation base. As she pressed the attack further, he kept a close eye on the scythe, which allowed him to confirm that it wasn't corporeal. It was actually formed from a magical technique.

After making a fifth scythe attack and bringing it swinging around for a sixth time, Xu Qing's eyes flickered with understanding, and he suddenly threw out his right hand to block the weapon.

As the weapon neared, his hand suddenly went from being flesh and blood to being transparent.

It was none other than his Gruegloom Daoseizing Art. With his hand in the Gruegloom state, he could ignore the power of magical techniques. That was one of the innate abilities of Grueglooms, and was something very rare. As a result, the young woman's scythe went right through his hand.

As she reacted with shock, his eyes flickered with killing intent and he used the Gruegloom hand to grab the back end of the scythe. Gripping it hard, he pulled himself forward with a yank. Now, the only thing separating them was a distance equivalent to the length of the scythe.

It all happened so quickly that all the young woman could do was look shocked as Xu Qing viciously smashed his forehead into her mask.

A pop rang out, and she uttered a muffled grunt as a huge crack appeared down the length of her mask. Then Xu Qing performed an incantation gesture with his left hand, causing a massive sea to spring up around him. The power of the Ninefold Tsunami erupted, causing a huge wave to appear. As Xu Qing pushed out, the first wave screamed past him and raged toward the young woman.

She shivered as a defensive glow appeared around her, blocking the first wave.

Xu Qing wasn't surprised. This young woman was obviously someone important in the Church of Departure, so it was a given she would have amazing defenses. Feeling no sense of urgency, he sent the second, third, and fourth waves smashing into her defenses one after another.

Because the young woman's attention was focused on the waves and Xu Qing's hand gripping her scythe, she didn't notice that a host of tiny beetles had begun congregating on her defenses, and were spitting out corrosive poison.

She didn't know Xu Qing, and thus wasn't aware of his fighting style and how ruthless he was. However, she could tell that there was something slightly different about him now compared to before. His hand was clamped onto her scythe like an iron vise, and no matter how she struggled, she couldn't wrench her weapon free.

That, plus the mere fact that he had been able to ignore the attack of her scythe, had her mentally reeling with shock. From the time she had won the approval and legacy of the scythe in her church until now, it was impossible to count how many villainous figures in the church she had slain. The Church of Departure was no virtuous organization, and in fact, it was rife with innumerable fanatics and lunatics.

Even though she had a family member in a position of power in the church, she couldn't rely on that person to watch over her at every moment, and therefore, had been forced to rely on herself to survive. By hard work and slaughter, she had slowly clawed her own way into a position of power, and had thus earned the freedom to go out on her own. Though she was still a long way from achieving her dream, there was one thing that was certain; this scythe had been an extremely important asset. Because of all that, no matter what happened in this situation, she couldn't just let go of her weapon.

As the beetles corroded her defensive shields, the ninth tsunami wave slammed into the defenses. As they crumbled into pieces, the killing intent in Xu Qing's eyes flickered. He extended his right hand, causing a black dagger of flame to appear there, which he slashed viciously into the young woman's snow-white neck. Blood sprayed everywhere, but her head did not fly off.

In fact, a sensation of intense deadly crisis suddenly erupted within Xu Qing, causing every inch of his flesh to shiver.

Off in the distance, the Captain's eyes went wide, and he suddenly shouted, "Holy crap!! Run, buddy! There's something off with this shrew. That's the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society's incredibly-difficult-to-master Supreme Arbiter Blood Will Domain! Even a slight measure of success with that technique is incredibly difficult. I heard that in order to gain enlightenment of the Blood Will Domain, you have to have at least two distinct personalities!

"With every additional personality, your eyes lose some of their color. And when you get ten personalities, the only thing left is the color of blood. That's considered the ultimate level of success!

“Is this person from the Church of Departure or the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society? This is too weird!!”

Without any hesitation, Xu Qing released the scythe and flew backward.

As he did, a boundless red light erupted from the young woman. As it spread out, it seemed to transform into a hell of blood. A gruish, horrific cackle rang out from the young woman’s mouth.

“Heh heh heh.” The young woman looked up. Though blood poured down her neck, the wound wasn’t fatal. Reaching up, she touched it, then looked at the blood on her hands. Eyes glittering, she shifted her gaze to Xu Qing. “Are you the one who hurt me?”

Chapter 337: Nethersprite Goes Mad

Xu Qing erupted with speed, using the force of expulsion to accelerate even more dramatically. By the time a single sound came out of the mouth of the young woman in red, he was already more than 150 meters away, right next to the Captain. Even from there, it was possible to see the young woman’s eyes flashing. Xu Qing felt very unsettled. However, that was when the Captain reached out and grabbed his arm.0

“Don’t move!”0

Xu Qing froze in place. With the Captain’s words in mind, he looked thoughtfully at the young woman in red.0

She stood in place, seemingly in a daze as she looked at the blood on her hands. Then she waved those hands, and the blood turned into a mist that spread out in all directions. The mist grew increasingly dense, ultimately transforming into numerous streams of blood that swirled around the young woman. More and more appeared. In the blink of an eye, there were hundreds, like snakes of blood, emanating terrifying pressure, but at the same time, a sweet fragrance.0

It was extremely bizarre! And more and more kept springing into being.0

As the dazed look in the young woman’s eyes grew stronger, the blood streams split into two main sections, but at the same time, continued to proliferate. Soon, the hundreds of streams were over a thousand in number, and they began forming ring after ring around her.0

Anyone who saw this would be shocked to the core. What was more, a sinister wind blew around her, eventually touching Xu Qing, causing his hair to stand on end and his eyes to narrow.0

Xu Qing’s years of engaging in both slaughter and battle had imparted to him an instinct related to danger. That instinct, plus the Captain’s words, left him with absolutely no uncertainty; he shouldn’t do anything right now.0

Anything he did would almost certainly result in his own death.1

It was a strange feeling that he didn’t fully comprehend. After all, this young woman in red clearly did not surpass the three-palace level. But Xu Qing still sensed incredible danger from her.0

The Captain also remained motionless, his expression serious as he stared at the young woman in red.0



Xu Qing could sense the increasing urgency in the Captain's voice.0

Meanwhile, his own eyes narrowed as he stared at the young woman in red.0

There was no sound being uttered anywhere nearby. There was only the whimper of the wind, along with cracking sounds coming from August Spirit Nethersprite's clone. Also faintly audible were the sounds of corrosion coming from the clone's face, like blisters forming and popping. From a distance, it was possible to see that, having taken that dao blood, the face was starting to rot.0

With the golden drop of blood having been taken away by Xu Qing, the clone of August Spirit Nethersprite started transforming into something very ugly and strange.0

The gray skin on the face started to turn pitch black.0

However, Xu Qing and the Captain weren't paying very close attention to that, as they were focused on the young woman in red.0

Meanwhile, the young woman still seemed to be in just as much of a daze as before. She was looking in the direction of Xu Qing and the Captain, yet at the same time didn't seem to be looking at them at all.0

"Was it you two?" she asked softly.0

Her gaze, plus her repeated words, caused the vigilance in Xu Qing's heart to increase. The golden crow tattoo began to heat up, and the Violet-Heaven Supreme-Limitless Crown on his head started glowing brightly. His heavenly palaces trembled, and the beetles in the area started converging on each other, as if they were getting ready to fight.0

The Captain was reacting similarly. He was emanating an intense coldness, and both of his pupils had faces in them, and they seemed very unstable.0

As the two parties faced off, the young woman in red lifted her right foot. Screaming sounds rang out as the streams of blood that surrounded her proliferated and simultaneously shot toward Xu Qing and the Captain.0

Right at that time, a fierce voice rang out from above.0

“What are you people doing??”<sup>2</sup>

It crashed like a thousand thunderclaps, creating a shockwave that caused Xu Qing and the Captain to tumble backward, trembling and coughing mouthfuls of blood.<sup>0</sup>

The streams of blood surrounding the young woman whipped wildly left and right, then smashed back into her. Her face twisted and distorted, while at the same time, the blankness in her eyes turned into something fierce and aggressive. Without any hesitation, she turned and fled off into the distance.<sup>0</sup>

Xu Qing and the Captain had no time to pay any attention to her, and also fled.<sup>0</sup>

Meanwhile, one of August Spirit Nethersprite’s other clones dropped down, rage in her eyes, blood seeping out of the corners of her mouth, her clothes damaged and torn. Because of being locked in battle high above, she hadn’t been paying attention to everything below. But at a certain point, she noticed the three little humans near her clone, and had sensed that something was off. Heart pounding, she’d ignored any injuries she sustained to back away from the fighting and look down. What she saw caused her to tremble with disbelief.<sup>0</sup>

Her clone’s face was turning pitch black! She saw the melting facial features. She saw the incredible ugliness. Considering how beautiful of a woman she was, all of those things turned into a wave of heaven-shaking, earth-shattering irritation.<sup>0</sup>

August Spirit Nethersprite started trembling and panting. Her mind filled with rage that could incinerate heaven and destroy anything in existence.<sup>0</sup>

“You people!! You people... are looking to DIE!!!” As she howled madly, she shoved one hand in the direction of Xu Qing and the Captain, and the other hand in the direction of the young woman in red.<sup>0</sup>

However, that was when two swordmage elders dropped down from the dome of heaven.<sup>0</sup>

They could see the corrosion on the face of the downed clone, and in their shock, also noticed Xu Qing, the Captain, and the young woman in red, all fleeing the area.<sup>0</sup>

Although all were in disguise, the two elders could see them clearly. They could tell they were human, and could also guess that they were members of the major human powers in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. Given that, it was likely they were connected to the Swordsage Court in some ways. If they weren’t, they wouldn’t have been able to determine when the Swordsage Court would carry out this plan of theirs, and thus take advantage of the moment.<sup>0</sup>

Regardless, considering these three were humans, the elders felt a responsibility to help keep them safe. Waving their hands, they sent out powerful divine abilities to block the path of August Spirit Nethersprite.<sup>0</sup>

August Spirit Nethersprite shrieked in rage. However, because of the deadly crisis, she had no choice but to abandon her attack on Xu Qing and the others.<sup>0</sup>

Her clothes were so damaged that they had lost their defensive capabilities. She was forced to wave her hand in the direction of her mansion grotto to produce replacement clothing for use in the fighting.5

In response to her gesture, the mansion grotto rumbled, and numerous sets of clothing flew in her direction.0

A moment later, August Spirit Nethersprite's eyes went wide with shock. Lurching through the air toward her were numerous sets of dilapidated garments. In fact, calling them dilapidated was somewhat charitable. Any bits of decoration that adorned them were long gone. In fact, they were in such a different state than before that they were basically just strips of extremely damaged cloth.0

August Spirit Nethersprite wasn't the only one to be stunned by the sight. The two swordmage elders were equally shocked. Seeing the horrifically damaged state of the clothing, they suddenly glanced at the three young people down below. Then they transmitted messages to each other.0

As for August Spirit Nethersprite... seeing the damaged clothing made her face turn pale. Every single one of those garments were special to her in some way, and the sight of them made her tremble. Her heart felt like it was being ripped apart and she let loose a howl of grief.0

"I'm going to take all three of you and shred your bones to dust! I'll destroy you in body and soul!!"0

Her piercing voice echoed high into the sky, full of anger and hatred.0

August Spirit Nethersprite was so frenzied that she seemed to lose her mind, and shot toward Xu Qing and the Captain with profound killing intent. Her third clone, high above, also shrieked in anger and raced toward the young woman in red. She was absolutely dead set on killing these three interlopers no matter the cost! Unfortunately for her, this sudden action created a perfect opportunity for the three swordmage elders.0

As Nethersprite seemed to lose her mind, they tapped into the full power of their cultivation bases to block her way. Thanks to their interference, there was no way for August Spirit Nethersprite to reach the culprits. That, in turn, drove her further into madness, and forced the three swordmage elders to fight even harder. Everyone down below could see what was happening.0

The Captain and Xu Qing were numb with shock as they tried to pick up speed. The young woman in red, was still furious, but also extremely resentful considering she didn't have anything to do with the mansion grotto situation.0

Of course, offering explanations wouldn't do any good, so all she could do was grit her teeth and keep racing away.0

The three of them moved at top speed. Thus, Xu Qing and the Captain quickly reached Yanyan, who looked terrified and confused. None of them spoke a word. Xu Qing grabbed Yanyan and pulled out his dharmaship. The Captain was right behind him.0

Instantly, the dharmaship turned into a stream of light that shot off into the distance, leaving the central part of the Three-Spirits Dao-Suppressing Mountain.1

Behind them, August Spirit Nethersprite's howls grew more intense, shrill, painful, and full of madness. To her, this day was truly a great catastrophe. Not only did the Swordsage Court show up to crush her. Not only did she lose a clone. Not only did she lose a drop of golden blood. Beyond all that, her most precious clothing was ripped to shreds. To a woman as beautiful as her, it wouldn't matter if she had an even higher cultivation base than she did. Never before had she been so insulted.<sup>1</sup>

In fact, she hated those three thieves far more than she hated the entire Swordsage Court!

Chapter 338: Let's Travel the World Together

"It was worth it. It was worth it!!" As Xu Qing's dharmaship sped away from the central part of the Three-Spirits Dao-Suppressing Mountain territory, the fighting behind them got even more intense.

The Captain lay sprawled on the deck, recovering and catching his breath, but looking completely and utterly content. He even burped a few times. "Hahaha! Doing big things with you is the best, little Ah Qing. I can't believe I got away completely in one piece this time! That's unheard-of!" Looking extremely pleased with himself, the Captain sat up and slapped his hands onto the deck on either side of him. Sighing, he continued, "You have no idea, little Ah Qing. Whenever Zhang San and I worked together in the past, I'd always lose an arm or a leg! And it's worse when I operate alone. Sometimes I almost lost everything including my head. And Zhang San would always end up with the best loot."

Xu Qing sat cross-legged on the deck, still in disguise. Truth be told, he didn't completely believe the Captain.

Seeing the way Xu Qing was looking at him, the Captain blinked a few times. He could tell what Xu Qing was thinking. However, instead of giving any indication of that, he sighed. "I know, I know. When it comes to talk of things like the spirit of loyalty and self-sacrifice... friendship.... Well, Zhang San is a true bro. He has all of that. Not even I'm shameless enough to deny that.

"Usually, I just let him have the lion's share, and I take the leftovers. Whatever scraps there may be. Ai. It's just not like working with you, little Junior Brother. We always split everything 50/50. That's the way it's always been, and it's only fair."

The Captain could clearly lie without his heart rate increasing by an iota. He didn't blush either. He seemed absolutely sincere.

Xu Qing's guard was already up, and he could guess that the Captain was trying to pull a fast one.

"What are you looking at me like that for, little Junior Brother? Ohhhhhhhh. I get it. You want me to be a good example. No problem! We're fellow apprentices, right? Bros! 50/50 is a really good way to split things up. And as your Eldest Brother, I should set a good example. Therefore, I'm going to give you a 50% discount on the 3,000,000 spirit stones you owe me."

The Captain slapped his chest and opened his mouth even wider to speak. Unfortunately, as a result, some of the immortal energy he had absorbed from August Spirit Nethersprite's clone started seeping out.

He snapped his mouth shut. There was no way he was willing to lose what he had worked so hard to gain.

Xu Qing looked at him. He knew exactly what the Captain was getting at. "Captain, I'm planning to go into seclusion."

"Little Ah Qing, eating by yourself isn't a good habit to get into!" After speaking that single sentence, the immortal energy started seeping out of his mouth again.

Xu Qing blinked a few times. As his shadow secretly absorbed the immortal energy which was spilling out, Xu Qing expressionlessly produced an apple and tossed it to the Captain.

The Captain instinctively caught it, then looked back in confusion at Xu Qing. "Can't you just be a good person for once, little Junior Brother?"

"Sure," Xu Qing replied with a nod. Closing his eyes, he tapped into his third heavenly palace and prepared to put the taboo poison pill into it.

The process would be dangerous, but Xu Qing had worked hard studying that pill. It wasn't a complete pill, and was also extremely old, such that its spirit nature was extremely deteriorated. After being exposed to the outside world, that deterioration had continued until the pill was almost completely dead. It was like a pool of water with no source to refill it. Therefore, using it as soon as possible seemed like the best way to take advantage of it.

Xu Qing had benefited dramatically in this event. His bag of holding was packed, including many nourishing treasures. At the same time, the mirrors and bottles he had taken would be very beneficial to Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior and the shadow. In fact, there were too many things for him to audit in a short time.

Most importantly of all was how he had packed his sea of consciousness with immortal energy, and how the ghost emperor mountain there had benefited. Xu Qing had taken control of the ghost emperor mountain to stop it from devouring the immortal energy. As a result, the vague outline of the face on it only resembled Xu Qing by about twenty to thirty percent. He wasn't sure what would happen if he continued the process, and wanted to consult his Master first.

Beyond all that was the drop of blood he had snatched out of the grasp of the young woman in red. He wasn't sure how that blood would come in useful, but he could tell how it caused the Ghost Emperor mountain to tremble. What was more, it emanated an intense sensation of life force, and even more notable, a dao resonance.

Based on his previous observations and analysis, he was fairly certain it was something August Spirit Nethersprite had used to control her clone.

As Xu Qing thought about these matters, the Captain looked at him impatiently, thinking enviously about that final item he had acquired. The drop of blood.

It was Xu Qing who had laid hands on it, so the Captain couldn't go so far as to openly ask for it. However, he had made it very clear by implication that he was interested. The pain on his face grew more apparent, and then his expression turned bleak. Taking out a jug of alcohol, he looked up into the sky and took a drink. "Life is so hard. I lost over twenty magical devices that defend against crushing pressure. I lost more than forty magical devices used for disguise. And most importantly of

all, the potential calamity hidden within me could erupt at any time. Little Junior Brother, it's entirely possible that, one day, you might not have me around."

Xu Qing opened his eyes, looked at the Captain, and then tossed him a little bottle. Inside of it was thirty percent of the blood.

"Is that enough?" Xu Qing asked.

The Captain snatched it, and the pained look in his eyes vanished. Eyebrows shooting up, he laughed heartily. "Enough. Definitely enough! You're a true delight, little Junior Brother. From now on, if there's anything you need, your Eldest Brother will be here for you! No questions asked!" The Captain then drank the entire bottle. After, a tremor passed through him, and he sighed excitedly. "I can open another seal! Little Ah Qing, your Eldest Brother isn't stingy. Take this!"

With that, he pulled a box out of his robe and tossed it to Xu Qing. "I found that thing in some ruins once. Seeing that red-garbed shrew bullying you earlier made me think of it. It's yours now. When we're back home, I'll have a hilt made for it."

Xu Qing caught the box and opened it. Inside was a black blade with no hilt attached. Glittering with cold light, it was obviously very sharp. There were natural striations on its surface that formed the shape of a strange, gruish eye.

Xu Qing liked it immediately. The truth was it had been a long time since he had a personal dagger. Although he had his balefire dagger, there was something different about a weapon that you could actually hold in your hand.

With a sincere look in his eyes, he turned to the Captain and said, "Thank you, Eldest Brother."

"Thanks? For what? Going forward we're going to do a lot of big stuff together. I'm already working on the next plan. Although, the most important thing right now is to take advantage of everything we looted to get stronger. Then we can go to the Swordsage Court and become swordsages!" From the way the Captain's eyes gleamed, it was obvious he was dead set on becoming a swordsage. "Trust me, my little Junior Brother. Becoming a swordsage is our path to the core of humankind! Emperor-Receiving Prefecture is too small, after all. In the big wide world we live in, there are countless beautiful possibilities for the future. And they're just waiting for us to get to them!

"I want to get to the imperial capital. I want to cultivate a human imperial-class technique. I want to travel across Revered Ancient. I want to do big things. I want to go check out the so-called holy lands! There are a lot of things I want, and that's why I do crazy things. Little Junior Brother, let's travel the world together!"

Xu Qing's eyes glittered as he listened, and when the Captain finished talking, he nodded. He was going to remember those words.

Let's travel the world together!

Off to the side, Yanyan blinked a few times and said, "You can take me too."

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As the dharmaship carried them away, the fighting in the Three-Spirits Dao-Suppressing Mountain grew more intense. The swordsages had truly come prepared to achieve their goals.

It reached the point where the Three-Spirits Dao-Suppressing Mountain prepared to unleash their taboo treasure. However, that was when an enormous palace appeared and suppressed it.

The Seven Fiends, who were the manifestation of the ghost emperor's seven physical souls, sensed what was happening and tried to provide assistance. However, the Swordsage Court had already put contingencies in place to prevent them from helping.

There was no way to change the ultimate course of this battle. In the end, August Spirit Nethersprite was captured by the Swordsage Court. She had been the true goal of the mission. The reason was that she was the weakest, and thus, the easiest to capture.

All they needed to do was get control of one of the three spiritual souls, and it would make it impossible for the ghost emperor to awaken. With that goal having been met, it was time for the swordsages to fall back. Even if they were stronger than they were, continuing the fight past that point would have been troublesome. Those were the orders from their superiors in the county. If things got too complicated, and the county forces had to step in, it would indicate that the prefectural forces weren't capable of handling things on their own.

And thus, after capturing August Spirit Nethersprite, the Swordsage Court departed.

The other two spirits watched them go. Both of them were individuals who had lived for many, many years, and they had suspected from the beginning that something like this was going to happen. They knew that Nethersprite wasn't going to die. Instead, she would serve as something of a hostage. The Swordsage Court obviously knew that killing her would be too risky.

And thus, the battle ended.

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Some distance away from the Three-Spirits Dao-Suppressing Mountain, on top of another random mountain, the crimson evening light shone down as a mountain breeze stirred a red garment.

The red-garbed young woman had her evil ghost scythe slung over her shoulder as she stood looking in the direction of the Three Spirits' territory.

On her neck was a freshly healed scar.

The scar was ghastly; clearly if it had been any deeper it would have severed major blood vessels, and maybe cut through her windpipe.

After a long moment passed, the young woman shifted her gaze to the direction in which Xu Qing and the Captain had disappeared. Her gaze sharpened. Then, beneath her cracked white mask, a smile appeared.

"I'm going to remember their names!" she murmured.

The evil ghost's eyes opened, and the ghost transmitted a question to her via divine will. "*What are their names?*"

"Mad Dog and Ghost Hand!" she replied quietly.

The evil ghost nodded and committed the two names to memory, that way it would notice if they ever showed up nearby again.

“Say,” she continued, “do you mind reminding me of the names of everyone I’ve taken out? I don’t want to forget any of them.”

*“Jabbering Hound. Fossil. Nursemaid. Six-Fingers. Donkey Head....”* The evil ghost scythe started reciting the names. One after another, soon passing a hundred. The young woman in red listened as she walked along. At a certain point, a strange-looking crystal appeared in her hand, which she used to rub at the scar on her neck. Strangely, as she rubbed, the scar slowly vanished. [1]

“All I need to do is finish a few more missions, and I’ll be promoted. Then I can finally leave Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. Then maybe I can finally take a trip back to that scavenger basecamp.”

The wind blew, and the evening sun shone down on her red garment.

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Far, far away from her, Xu Qing sat on the dharmaship deck and pulled out a bamboo slip. Thinking back to the killing intent in the eyes of the red-garbed girl, he added a name to the list.

‘Girl in Red.’

Chapter 339: The Transformation Begins

Many of the names on the bamboo slip had been scratched out. But there was one name that was very prominent. The characters were a magenta color, thanks to the blood that had previously run into them but later dried up.

Crown Prince of Violet and Cyan.

As Xu Qing looked at the name, his expression was seemingly calm and emotionless. But the hand with which he held his iron skewer tightened imperceptibly. He eventually put the bamboo slip away and looked up into the crimson evening sky. Some time passed, and he turned to the Captain and Yanyan.

“I’m going into seclusion for a while,” he said quietly.

Yanyan could tell that his mood had dipped, so she just nodded.

Meanwhile, the Captain laughed heartily. “Go ahead, little Ah Qing. With your Elder Brother here, you can safely break through to the three-palace level.”

“Eldest Brother,” Xu Qing said, “it’s possible that some poison might seep out from the cabin. I wouldn’t get too close. In case something dramatic happens... the two of you should get as far away as possible. Don’t worry about me, I’ll be fine.”

The Captain had been planning to brag a bit more, but hearing that, he thought for a moment and then went to the other side of the dharmaship. Having dealt with Xu Qing’s poisons on a few occasions, he knew how vicious they could be.



Yanyan also backed away, her eyes wide. She couldn't help but think to all of the Night Dove operatives she'd seen poisoned back in the Violent Crimes Division cellblock.

Seeing the two of them back away made Xu Qing feel a bit better. After all, he was planning to try to put the taboo poison pill into one of his heavenly palaces. Though he'd had this plan for a while, it had always seemed too dangerous, and besides, there were certain aspects he wasn't sure about.

Not knowing how long he would be in seclusion, he passed control of the dharmaship to the Captain, then walked to the cabin. Just before going inside, he suddenly thought of something and turned to look over his shoulder at the Captain.

“Eldest Brother, how come I've never seen *your* dharmaboat?”

Hearing that question caused a pleased look to appear on the Captain's face. “It's hidden in a secret location,” he said proudly. “Powering up. It'll be done soon. Once it's done and I reveal it, I guarantee you the old man is going to be totally shocked.”

Xu Qing was used to the Captain's hyperbole, so he merely nodded and walked into the cabin. Once inside, he closed the door and sat down cross-legged. Hands flashing in a double-handed incantation gesture, he tapped into the spell formation to seal the cabin and prevent any energy or auras from seeping outside. Then he took out some magical devices which he set up around him.

Having done that, he took a deep breath, opened his bag of holding, and started arranging everything else. Taking out all of the mirrors and bottles from August Spirit Nethersprite's mansion grotto, he carefully inspected them and put them in order, setting aside everything that related to life force. After all, life force was the only thing that would help in resisting the effects of the taboo poison pill.

Continuing to go through everything in his bag of holding, he made all of his final preparations, and after a short time contemplating what he was about to do, took out the wish box. He didn't open it at first. Instead, he took out the old jade slip that had been inside.

The jade slip was still infected by traces of poison, but Xu Qing's resistance had reached the point where it didn't affect him. And with the regenerative powers of the violet crystal in him, though his hands turned black when touching it, they didn't start to rot. He sent some divine will into the jade slip, whereupon an ancient voice reverberated in his mind like thunder.

*“What makes a great dao?”*

*“Three thousand great daos, all may be holy. Might one of them be the dao of poison?”*

*“People of the world disdain the treacherous and vicious. They disdain the poisonous and vile. How could those who mock it as a minor dao turn it into a great weapon?”*

*“In the past, I did think the same, and spurned the vile methods of poison. One day, I cut down a nonhuman who emerged from a god domain. This cultivator commanded shocking battle prowess, and walked an incredibly treacherous dao. Before dying, his poisonous eyes glared at me, causing my cultivation to drop by an entire realm in a single day. Ten days later, I was a mortal. I lived for a sixty-year-cycle in the mundane world,*

*experiencing endless torment and suffering. I wasted endless precious materials, but finally drove the poison from my body and collected it into a pill.*

*“Afterwards, I researched that pill until the apocalypse began. I never fully succeeded, and thus, am leaving behind this partially completed pill.*

*“This pill is a poison, and it is also taboo! If you are a high-level cultivator, do not attempt to use it. You will be damned by myriad tribulations and will die beyond the shadow of a doubt. Seek a low-level Gold Core cultivator with one heavenly palace, then use this poison pill as their gold core. That person will become a poison core cultivator like no other in existence.*

*“Only in this way can one transform the soul and truly walk the path of the taboo pill!*

*“Based on my calculations, the path of the taboo pill uses poison to shake all living beings. Use the taboo to eradicate myriad worlds. Ultimate dread and terror! Or perhaps, fathom the magic of god domains to be the archenemy of all peoples!”*

Xu Qing’s eyes gleamed with determination.

The plan is to take the taboo poison pill and put it into my heavenly palace.... Based on what this Senior said, he wanted to do the same thing. I refuse to believe that he didn’t do tests regarding that process.

Obviously, no such tests succeeded.

Regardless of anything, this is going to be dangerous. I have no idea what transformations might occur. Everything is unknown.

And yet, he seemed no less decisive than before.

I’ve been constantly working at getting used to the poison. I definitely have a certain level of resistance. Plus, my beetles can stay inside the pill for short periods of time. Though my resistance hasn’t reached the ultimate level, I think it’s gone as far as it can go. It’ll be hard to improve it any further.

What’s more, the taboo poison pill has lost most of its spirit nature, and will soon be a dead pill. And it wasn’t even a complete pill to begin with. It seems like a big waste to let it just waste away and eventually become dead and useless. Why not absorb it and see if I can restore it? There’s no way to know what will happen if it dies, but maintaining the status quo isn’t going to help me reach my goal. I need to get stronger, regardless of how dangerous the process.

Taking a deep breath, he reached inside to his third heavenly palace, which was already ninety-nine percent materialized. All it lacked was a gold core to make it complete.

*“On the path of cultivation, the only way to succeed is to take big risks!”*

Reaching out, he opened the wish box. Inside was a black poison pill. Even before, the pill had been shriveled, having lost much of the life it once contained. After Xu Qing opened the wish box, and the pill was exposed to the outside world, it began to shrivel even more dramatically. Xu Qing had

long since come to realize that if things proceeded in that way, the pill would become empty and useless. Upon opening the wish box, a poisonous energy erupted out, causing Xu Qing to tremble.

Though he had built a resistance to the pill, and also had his violet crystal, the effects of the taboo poison pill still caused his entire body to turn black. He wasn't worried about that. Eyes flickering with determination, he reached out and took the pill from the box. Next, his hand became transparent like a Gruegloom's. However, the poison pill was so shocking that, even though Xu Qing's hand was in that state, it was still filled with black streaks. Not even being in that state could spare his hand the effects of the pill's poison.

Xu Qing ignored that. Using his Gruegloom hand to control the pill, he inserted it into his dantian region. It entered his sea of consciousness, and then touched the heavenly palace. Xu Qing had used the Gruegloom hand on many occasions, but this was his first time using it on himself. [1]

This was the method he had come up with to make his plan succeed.

If he consumed the pill, he didn't think his fleshly body would survive. But if he used the Gruegloom hand to directly insert it into his heavenly palace, then he was confident he would have good chances of succeeding. Without the slightest hesitation, he pushed the pill against his third heavenly palace.

The process was painful by itself, and the poison effects made it worse. Xu Qing was shaking. However, he gritted his teeth and didn't pause for a moment. He knew that the more quickly he finished, the better. Relying on his great perseverance, he pushed the pill inside the third heavenly palace, then carefully released it. After that, he quickly pulled his hand out. Despite the speed with which he worked, the pain was so intense that he shivered and coughed up a mouthful of blood.

His internal organs were affected, and pulsed with pain. Then, before Xu Qing could acclimate, his third heavenly palace suddenly erupted with wild fluctuations. The poison pill therein erupted with poison power, causing the heavenly palace to surge with mountain-toppling, sea-draining force. Those fluctuations rapidly filled Xu Qing's sea of consciousness, then spread to influence his soul and the rest of his body.

Xu Qing shivered as rot spread through him. His sea of consciousness began to shrivel, and his soul started fading.

The taboo poison pill was terrifyingly strong. At the same time, streams of light shot out from every brick and tile of the third palace, which swirled around the pulsing poison pill. It was both a fusion and a transformation.

Any external gold core that a cultivator put into one of their heavenly palaces would take time to be integrated. And when the integration process was complete, that item would have changed into a life essence treasure for that cultivator.

Previously, the third heavenly palace had been golden in color. But as the streams of light wrapped up the pill, blackness spread to the palace, and it slowly started changing color.

It was a slow process. Xu Qing could sense that when the third heavenly palace turned completely black, it would mean that the poison pill had been fully integrated, and it would be connected to him. Then he would be able to fully control the heavenly palace, and retract all of the poison that had seeped into the rest of his body.

The time that passed would be a deadly test for Xu Qing. If he failed to integrate the poison pill, then that failure would result in him being killed in body and soul.

Xu Qing shivered as intense poison spread to every inch of him. The pain grew so intense and piercing that eventually he couldn't hold back from letting loose an agonized shriek. This pain was worse than anything he had experienced when risking his life in the past. Whether it was in the temple in the Merfolk Isles, or the incident with the dragon chariot, this surpassed everything. The difference was that those past situations had involved external pain, and this was internal. [2]

Because of that pain being external, he had been able to fight back against it. But in this case, the pain came from inside.

That said, he wasn't completely unfamiliar with this feeling. On that one particular night in the rain when his heart was ripped apart, and when the walls protecting his mind had crumbled. That was the worst pain he had ever experienced. Compared to that, this didn't count as much. [3]

Because of that, Xu Qing didn't want to cry out. Eyes bloodshot, he gritted his teeth and transformed his scream into the sound of teeth grinding against each other.

Meanwhile, the violet crystal in his chest sent violet light streaming through him to help him resist. The golden crow appeared, sending out flames that augmented his fleshly body. And within his sea of consciousness, the immortal energy he'd stockpiled was also present to aid. The two life lamps in his other heavenly palaces manifested as umbrellas, providing blessings. And then there was black light emanating out from the ghost emperor mountain.

Time passed.

Chapter 340: Golden Light on the Wrist!

Three days passed. During that time, the taboo poison pill slowly began to integrate with his third palace.

Ten percent. Twenty percent. Thirty percent....

Much of Xu Qing's body was rotting, but he simply sat in place and focused on fighting against it. Over the past three days, he hadn't just relied on his violet crystal, the life lamps, and the ghost emperor mountain. He had also released all of his beetles. Under his control, the beetles had bored into him and begun feeding on the poison that filled his flesh and blood.

Those were the various methods Xu Qing had prepared as his first line of defense.

However, the poison power of the pill was so intense that even all of those preparations weren't enough. As a result, his body was visibly rotting. All he could do now was focus fully on the integration process and hopefully step past the point of death.

Four more days passed, and the taboo poison pill was seventy percent integrated into the third heavenly palace. Those four days had been full of pain and torment for Xu Qing. By the end of them, he was left feeling weak and powerless, with no option left other than to endure.

The spot upon which he sat was covered with black gore, which was his own rotten flesh and blood. His clothing hung limp over his shriveled, rotten frame. Not much flesh could be seen on his hands; they were mostly black bone. The poison from the taboo pill was wreaking havoc on him, to the

point where his sea of consciousness was dilapidated and his soul was incomparably dim. It looked like he was heading straight toward death.

Just being able to hold out for this long showed how deeply prepared Xu Qing was. Not even the almighty figure who had put the pill into the wish box had ever done something like this. After all, if he had, then he wouldn't have put the pill into the wish box to begin with. If someone as almighty as that person had been unable to succeed, it went to show how difficult this effort was.

Everything Xu Qing was doing was based on theory. Even though he had two life lamps, the Ghost Emperor mountain, natural resistance, and the black beetles, he was still like an oil lamp flickering on the verge of being extinguished. The violet crystal continued to pump life force into him, forestalling death, but... he would eventually reach a limit.

The shadow was emitting constant fluctuations of emotion, and Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior looked extremely nervous. Both could sense the aura of death building up around Xu Qing, and it filled them with mixed emotions.

That said, Xu Qing's awe-inspiring veins of steel ensured that neither of them dared to think about betraying him in the moment. And even if such thoughts did occur to them, they wouldn't act on them.

Another half a day went by. Xu Qing's legs were now only black bones, and his hair was gone. His face was once bewitchingly attractive, but now it looked skeletal. The floor beneath his feet was covered with rotten flesh and black blood. His eyelids were gone, and the eyes in the socket seemed lifeless. His life force was rapidly draining away. The violet crystal couldn't do any more. It looked like Xu Qing was about to fail.

But then, at the very last moment, his eyes suddenly glittered. The sight caused Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior and the shadow to shiver inwardly.

Ignoring them, Xu Qing looked down, a motion which caused popping sounds to ring out. It seemed like the slightest amount of force applied to his head would knock it off his shoulders.

After looking down, Xu Qing expended great effort to reach out with a hand that had only a few scraps of flesh on it. With that hand, he picked up a tiny bottle in front of him. He crushed the bottle, and the drop of Void Returning dao blood inside shot into his body.

This was Xu Qing's second line of defense.

The blood entered him, and caused life force to spread through him. It nourished his flesh and blood, and also caused the Ghost Emperor mountain in his sea of consciousness to shine brightly.

That said, though there was life force in the blood, what was more relevant was the dao resonance it contained. Though the pure life force was useful, it had limitations. But to the Ghost Emperor mountain, the dao resonance was very useful. As soon as the Ghost Emperor mountain absorbed the dao resonance, it instantly became more corporeal.

It emanated a stronger resonance of its own, and what was more, it looked even more similar to Xu Qing. In fact, it seemed to be only one step away from being a perfect materialization of him. That materialization would be such a fundamental change that, without the dao blood, it wouldn't be possible. The role of dao blood was like the bestowal of soul seeds or spirit roots.

Under normal circumstances, Xu Qing would have taken more time to observe the mountain. But he couldn't spare the attention right now. Relying on the life force from the dao blood, he endured another day. His third heavenly palace had gone from being seventy percent black to eighty percent. After that, the rotting effects on his body grew even more intense. Shivering, he took out a piece of wood and put it down in front of him.

This was his third line of defense.

The black wood glittered, and then a large black door appeared, which slowly opened, releasing white light that could lock one's life force in place.

The moment the light appeared from within the Darkspirit Everwill Door, it became a sealing force that froze his life force. Back when he had gone through the Seazombies' zombification process, that sealing light had worked perfectly. But right now... it couldn't stop the process that was playing out, only slow it down. The poison from this taboo poison pill was too formidable. Only raw life force could fight back against it; no other methods would be completely successful. That said, at least the light helped. [1]

With the time Xu Qing had bought, his violet crystal was able to fight back against the poison pill, which bought him additional time.

Another day passed. The third heavenly palace within him was now ninety percent black. However, that was when the sealing power of the door ceased being effective.

Ninety percent, huh...?

Xu Qing's eyes were dull and he couldn't see clearly. But he wasn't in a state of panic. Despite everything, he was still fully in control. He was just severely weakened, and that was as he had anticipated.

Xu Qing looked down at all the bottles and jars that he'd taken from August Spirit Nethersprite. They all had medicinal pills in them, and though they were a mixed and varied lot, Xu Qing had analyzed them all and set out the ones that contained varying amounts of life force.

These were going to be his fourth line of defense.

Without hesitation, he smashed the bottles, causing a host of multicolored medicinal pills to fly into him. As they melted, they released waves of life force to nourish him. The individual effects were only middling, but given how many of them there were, the cumulative effects were sufficient.

It was at this time that Xu Qing's gaze suddenly shifted to his right wrist. There was no flesh or blood there, only blackened bone. Looking at the bone of his wrist, Xu Qing's dim eyes suddenly flickered with confusion.

There was something there, glowing a faint golden color. It was so weak that, normally speaking, it would have been impossible to spot. And with flesh covering it, it would be even more difficult to notice. Not even divine will would be able to find it, much less the physical sense organs. It appeared very briefly, flashing for a moment before disappearing. [2]

After it was gone, Xu Qing didn't get any sense it had done something. There had been no change to his situation.

As he pondered that briefly, life force surged out even faster from the medicinal pills. As it filled him, nourishing his body, the poison power from within his third heavenly palace waned slightly.

At the same time, the integration of the taboo pill sped up. The third palace went from being ninety percent black in color... all the way to a hundred percent! The moment the pill fully integrated, Xu Qing suddenly sensed a connection to it in his mind. A tremor passed through him, and the poison within him retracted back into the third heavenly palace.

The violet crystal started to heal his extremely weak body, though this time it seemed to be happening a bit faster than it normally did in the past. His flesh started growing back. His sea of consciousness was restored. His soul began to shine brightly. Beneath his garment, his muscles filled in. Though he still looked much thinner than before, he was already much improved.

Eventually, the powers of the violet crystal went back to normal.

There was something unusual about all of that, and it caused him to think back to that sudden flash of golden light on his wrist. If he hadn't noticed that golden flash, then he might not have thought anything about how things turned out. He might have just been too excited about the result to think about the sequence of events. But analyzing it now, he was convinced that it was simply too coincidental. Something unusual had happened.

What really happened?

Rising to his feet, he looked down at his right wrist.

Meanwhile, now that the taboo poison pill was fully integrated into his third heavenly palace, and also connected to his own life force, it began to show signs of reviving. It was just as Xu Qing had predicted.

Those signs of reviving manifested in ravenous hunger. Xu Qing shivered as the flesh that had just recovered instantly started to wither again. Though there was no rotting like before, the consistent withering made him feel incredibly hungry.

The sensation caused his eyes to turn bloodshot. It was similar to what happened back when he cultivated Golden Crow Assimilates Myriad Spirits. [3]

Breathing unsteadily, he turned to look at Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior and the shadow. The patriarch and shadow nearly screamed in response, and could only tremble and look at him in terror.

Xu Qing seemed to struggle to control himself as saliva dripped down his chin.

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Far out in the Forbidden Sea, a great distance away from Emperor-Receiving Prefecture, were the sprawling ruins of a city deep beneath the surface of the water. Precisely speaking, those ruins had sunk down into the darkness and gloom of the sea.

Someone with eyes that could pierce the darkness would be able to see countless ancient structures there. They had collapsed innumerable years in the ancient past, and had been interred in the sea since then. The ruins were decayed and dead, but it was still possible to see occasional dilapidated statues within the city. Without exception, all of those statues depicted women in black suits of armor. All of them were extraordinarily beautiful and majestic. Each of them had a white snake coiling around them.

Deep beneath the ruins of that city was an enormous cave temple that the mutagen-filled seawater had not encroached upon. Within the temple were two things: a teleportation portal and an eminently majestic altar.

Atop the altar was a skeleton.

Looking at the skeleton, it was obvious it had been a woman in the past. She had obviously been tall in life. Surrounding her were two skeletons, one of a snake, the other of a dragon. The way they were coiled allowed her to sit on the head of the dragon, while the snake's head was next to her. It seemed like they had been standing as dharma protectors for her, and had ultimately died with her.

Seated in front of the skeleton of the woman, right in the middle of the altar, was a person. She was a spectacularly beautiful young woman with skin as fair as snow. She wore a white dress as she sat there cross-legged. Her long eyelashes fluttered slightly, and her face was a bit flush. Suddenly, she coughed up a mouthful of blood which splashed onto the ground as well as her white dress.

The moment that happened, a shout of rage echoed from off in the distance.

“Damnation! DAMNATION! How many times is this going to happen? Just what did you do? Don't you want to live?? I can't believe you secretly took a slip of your life essence and attached it to that Xu bastard! ARRGGGHHHH!!”

The enraged shouting came from the innkeeper from Plankspring Way. Though he was shouting curses, his face was full of tenderness as he rushed over and put a medicinal pill into the mouth of the teetering young woman.

“Ling'er! You shouldn't use your innate abilities that way. That little bastard is going to die young. You can't just casually bless him with your destiny aura whenever you feel like it!”

The young woman's eyelashes fluttered as she opened her eyes. Her gaze was innocent and pure as she timidly said, “Big Bro Xu Qing won't die young.”

The innkeeper was so mad he nearly coughed up blood. Looking down at Ling'er, he stamped his foot and sighed.

“Damnation! I should never have gone to Seven Blood Eyes to sell that grue. And why didn't I just kill that little bastard the first time I saw him? If I had known things would turn out like this, I would have put him to death the moment I laid eyes on him. I just don't get it. You've only been around him a few times? Nothing happened! What do you even like about him??”

Hearing this, Ling'er's eyes glazed over slightly. “I don't know. I just know I love him. And when I'm close to him, I feel happy. My heart beats faster, and I feel worried he might not like me. As long as Big Bro Xu Qing is happy, I'm happy.”

“You! You're just too young, that's all. You don't understand anything about love, so how could you say you love him? Just wait until you're a bit older and know what you really want. Then you'll understand what love is!” The innkeeper was speaking from his heart.



As for Ling'er, her eyes seemed to further glaze over. Then she looked up at the old innkeeper. "Papa, I don't understand what you grown-ups mean when you talk about love. Do you mean loving someone is about wanting to get something from them? Is that really loving them? Or is it loving yourself?"

The innkeeper's jaw nearly dropped. Then he opened his mouth to say something. However, after seeing the innocent look in Ling'er's eyes, he decided not to say anything at all.