

Timescape 341

Chapter 341: Being Patient

Beyond the borders of the Three-Spirits Dao-Suppressing Mountain, a dilapidated dharmaship flew through the sky. From the way it wobbled, it seemed like it might fall out of the sky at any moment. It looked to be in very bad shape. From its hull to its deck, it was so full of holes it seemed just on the verge of collapsing. It gave off the sensation that whoever was flying it had no money to fix it, and had no choice but to keep using it as-is. Even more ridiculous was that every so often, random parts would fall off of the dharmaship and drop to the ground below.

It was, of course, Xu Qing's dharmaship.

Yanyan looked over the railing at the Captain, who was busy working on the side of the ship. Frowning, she said, "Big Bro Xu Qing gave control of the dharmaship to you because he trusts you. When he sees what you've done, he's going to be pissed."

As the Captain used a paintbrush to paint what appeared to be a crack on the dharmaship, he replied to Yanyan without even looking up. "Yanyan, I have to offer you some constructive criticism. How come you're so impolite? Everything is about you, you, you. You really don't have any manners, do you?"

Yanyan glared coldly at him, and the perverse energy within her started to build. She knew full well that the Captain's cultivation base was so high he could easily crush her. But only someone with a cultivation base that surpassed her grandmother's would strike fear into her heart. From the time she was small, she had made it a practice of skinning alive anyone who criticized her. Other than her Big Bro Xu Qing.

"What are you glaring at?" the Captain said. Looking annoyed, he returned her glare and continued to criticize her. "I'm telling you, silly girl, it's important to understand manners. Got it? Xu Qing calls me Eldest Brother. But what about you? Since Xu Qing calls me that, so should you. That's the most appropriate form of address to be used by any female companion of Xu Qing. Right now, only you have that honor, right? Now, admit your mistake."

"Huh?" Yanyan was taken aback, but after blinking a few times, her face suddenly turned red, and the perverse energy vanished. Sounding very meek, she said, "My mistake, Eldest Brother."

"That's better!" the Captain said, smiling broadly. Looking very pleased with himself, he waved the brush around a few more times to add some more details. "Now, you start painting the other side. That little punk Ah Qing was keeping his dharmaship too pristine. It's not befitting of the traditions of the Seventh Peak. We need to help him out in that regard." From a distance, the paint job on the dharmaship really made it seem like it was on the verge of falling apart. "Dharmaships are most effective when they look a bit beat up."

After a bit of hesitation, Yanyan took a paintbrush and started working. “I don’t understand, Eldest Brother. Why are you randomly throwing mechanical parts overboard every so often? And what’s with the smoke?”

“It’s called ‘fishing,’” the Captain explained somberly. “We’ve spent a lot of spirit stones keeping this thing flying. And since we’re not on official sect business, *we* have to pay for all that. Therefore, we need to do some ‘fishing’ to make up for it. Yanyan, I have to offer some further constructive criticism. Xu Qing is always throwing money away, but you shouldn’t be like that. You need to be frugal! Got it? I’m just helping Xu Qing save money!”

Yanyan nodded thoughtfully and committed the advice to heart.

“Besides,” the Captain continued, “we’re heading toward the northern tundra. Along the way we’ll pass through Emperor-Receiving Prefecture’s forbidden ground. And we’ll also have to pass the mainstem of the Everlasting Immortal Profundity River. It’s going to be dangerous. Disguising the dharmaship like this will make it less attractive to any powerful experts who notice it.”

The Captain applied a few final details, then vaulted onto the deck and looked around in satisfaction at his masterpiece. “Not bad. Not bad at all! It looks great like this!”

Yanyan took in the dilapidated dharmaship and still didn’t look completely convinced. She was about to ask more questions when all of a sudden, the Captain’s expression flickered and he looked in the direction of the cabin. His expression became extremely somber, and an icy coldness suddenly swelled within him. Faces appeared in his pupils, and in the blink of an eye, he started emanating a terrifying aura.

A moment later, the door to the cabin exploded, sending shrapnel out in all directions. Along with it came a roar like that of a wild beast, filled with madness and hunger. A wizened, skeletal hand suddenly latched onto the doorframe, and then a skeletal body lurched forward. It was Xu Qing. His clothing was now pitch black, and was covered with rotten flesh and blackened blood. Because of that, he stank. What was more, his sunken face made him look like an evil ghost.

The crazed look in his eyes caused Yanyan to shiver.

Meanwhile, the Captain could tell exactly what was going on. When he got really hungry, this was what he was like.

“All you did was reach the three-palace level. Did you really have to go all out like this?” The Captain rushed forward and offered a supporting arm to Xu Qing.

Yanyan was about to come to help as well.

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However, the Captain said, “Stay back, Yanyan. His mind is unstable now. He obviously ate something he wasn’t supposed to eat, and is now extremely low on life force. He’s totally starving.”

Looking like he knew exactly what he was doing, he kept supporting Xu Qing with one arm, and used the other to take a chunk of flesh out of his bag of holding. He shoved the flesh into Xu Qing's mouth.

Xu Qing swallowed it and closed his eyes. After a few breaths of time passed, he opened his eyes. Though they were still bloodshot, the crazed look was gone, and had been replaced by clarity.

"Thanks, Eldest Brother," he said in a raspy voice. "Got any more?"

"Nope. That was my last snack.... What you need to do now is go kill a bunch of living things and absorb their life force. How'd you end up like this?"

"I ate a little thingy," Xu Qing replied. The sensation of intense hunger was rising again, causing him to pant for breath. The taboo poison pill that he had inserted into his third palace had been so lacking in spirit nature that, upon awakening, he had turned into a virtual black hole, swallowing everything around it.

Though Xu Qing had anticipated something like that would happen, and had prepared for it, what was unexpected was that he would lose so much life force during the integration process. As a result, he just wasn't ready for what happened when the pill awoke.

It wasn't all bad, and in some ways, could be considered a destined opportunity for him. It meant that as long as he could give enough life force to the pill, then he could truly restore the pill. Once restored, it wouldn't be empty. Rather, it would have a boundless foundation that would cause Xu Qing's battle prowess to soar.

This third palace of his was different from all the various other types of palaces that had been seen from ancient times until modern. It would be incredibly powerful, and abounding in mystery. All it required was life force.

Except that Xu Qing could tell there was more to the story. Fully restoring the pill didn't just require life force. It also required a lot of mutagen. That left him feeling shaken, as it made him realize... that he could absorb mutagen! Technically it was the third palace and the poison pill that would do the absorbing, but for all intents and purposes it was him.

After the broken face of the god arrived, it was only mutated life forms, and some of the new species, who could do such a thing. Ordinary cultivators didn't have that ability. That was because mutagen was actually the aura of a god. In fact, some people even called it 'god power.'

Voice hoarse, Xu Qing said, "Eldest Brother, how far away are we from the nearest forbidden region?"

Seeing how nervous Yanyan looked, he gave her an encouraging nod. He had no intention of disregarding the people close to him.

"We're about half a month from Forbidden by the Sword here in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. But if you can't wait that long, we could find some nonhuman sect or nation...." The Captain was obviously worried, and his words made it clear how little he cared about nonhumans. To the Captain, Xu Qing was far more important than any nonhumans. If they had to be eaten, then they would be eaten.

Xu Qing shook his head. "I can last for half a month."

Though nonhumans would have life force and a bit of mutagen, the mutagen within them couldn't possibly compare to those in the forbidden regions and forbidden grounds. Based on what he could sense within himself, he felt that the best option was a forbidden ground.

"In that case, let's go to Forbidden by the Sword. That's the only forbidden ground in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture, and it's just as famous as Forbidden by the Phoenix in South Phoenix, and also Forbidden by the Zombie. According to the intelligence reports I've seen in the coalition, the emperor in Forbidden by the Sword has been dormant for many years. However, there have been indications that the emperor might awaken. We'll need to be careful and not do anything to stick out too much."

As he offered his explanation, the Captain tapped into his cultivation base and took control of the dharmaship. It instantly pulsed with a frigid energy, then started to accelerate, turning into a beam of light that shot off into the distance. The wind blew past the dharmaship's defenses, causing a whistling noise to echo out around it.

As they moved along, Xu Qing sat cross-legged on the deck, working hard to control his hunger. At the same time, he worked on acclimating himself to the new poison core in his third heavenly palace. He could tell that though he wasn't in an optimal state, his battle prowess was much higher. In fact, if he added in his imperial-class technique, he could already unleash four-palace power. For most Gold Core cultivators, the absolute limit they could reach was six palaces.

Now I just need to wait for my poison core to fully awaken, and then I can start thinking about how to finish my fourth palace.

Soon, the hunger within him started to get so intense that his eyes became bloodshot, and he had trouble breathing steadily. Abandoning thoughts of his cultivation base, he focused on maintaining control.

Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior and the shadow had long since gone into hiding, fearful of attracting Xu Qing's attention. Right now, Xu Qing was like some ravenous beast that struck terror into them.

At first, Yanyan was terrified of Xu Qing's aura and his skeletal appearance. But gradually she couldn't hold back from approaching him. When she got close, Xu Qing looked up, his bloodshot eyes scanning her throat before he forced himself to look away.

"Big Bro Xu Qing, you... can take a bite if you want. I'm not scared of pain." She bit her finger and, trembling, held it out to him, her eyes shining with anticipation.

He looked at her for a moment, then just closed his eyes.

Looking a bit disappointed, she pulled her hand back then walked off to the side and sat down.

The Captain looked over his shoulder as he piloted the dharmaship. He saw her offer her finger, and he saw Xu Qing ignore her. He also saw the disappointment in her eyes and couldn't help but feel a bit jealous.

Back when I got hungry like that, there was never a girl who offered her finger to me. What gives? Little Ah Qing doesn't have a romantic bone in his body. If it was me, I would have taken a nice big bite.

As time passed, Xu Qing endured, and Forbidden by the Sword got closer. Eventually, Xu Qing started to shake physically, and could tell that he was about to lose control of the deep hunger within him. That was when the pitch-black forest of Forbidden by the Sword appeared up ahead.

Before they were even inside, Xu Qing's sharp senses detected the very strong mutagen. He opened his eyes, and they shone with crimson light.

Chapter 342: The Key to Pursuing Godhood

Forbidden by the Sword was the only forbidden ground in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. It was west of the center of the prefecture, and overlapped one section of the Everlasting Immortal Profundity River. Before the river entered Forbidden by the Sword, the water was full of immortal energy. Upon entering the forbidden ground, it turned pitch black. The forbidden ground was filled with drifting fog that the sunlight couldn't penetrate. From high above it was possible to see the dark stain that was the river, but nothing more detailed than that. The fog covered everything. Though the river split Forbidden by the Sword into two sections, the fog united them.

As the Captain looked out into the pitch-black jungle, he said, "According to what I read in the coalition, Forbidden by the Sword produced a huge catastrophe 3,000 years ago. Emperor Sword awoke, causing a huge stir in Sea-Sealing County. Eventually, countless species in the county joined forces to fight and seal the emperor.

"Emperor Flame. Emperor Zombie. Emperor Sword. Those are the three emperors of those forbidden grounds, and each one is mysterious and unpredictable." By the time he finished speaking, Xu Qing had already leaped off of the dharmaship, and was a streak of prismatic light that shot into Forbidden by the Sword.

Yanyan looked worried. "Eldest Brother...."

The Captain looked at Xu Qing and smiled faintly. "It's fine. With me standing guard, I guarantee that Xu Qing will be completely safe. That said, Yanyan, I'm running a bit low on funds nowadays. Any chance...."

Yanyan tossed him a bag of holding.

The Captain's eyes lit up. Scanning the bag of holding, he suddenly looked very happy. Thumping his chest, he loudly said, "Don't worry at all, Sister-in-Law. I'll go through hell and high water if necessary to keep your husband safe!" [1]

After finishing speaking, the Captain glanced somewhat expectantly at Yanyan.

When Yanyan heard him use the term 'sister-in-law' she blushed slightly, then happily took out another bag of holding.

"Well, shoot!" the Captain said. "Yanyan, going forward, you're the only 'sister-in-law' I formally recognize!" The Captain grabbed the bag of holding, then shot off of the dharmaship in pursuit of Xu Qing.

Yanyan blushed even harder.

Little did she know that the Captain was even more elated than her, and his eyes shone with the happiness of someone who had just unearthed new treasure.

I'm so dumb! I shouldn't be envious of little Ah Qing. I should just make sure we always bring a girl with us! That way I'll never run low on cash! Of course, that sugar momma Ding Xue has the deepest pockets of all!

Then the Captain started imagining traveling with Xu Qing and Arch-Immortal Plumdark. He could just think about her calling him Elder Brother, and that was really exciting.

When we get back, I need to send gifts to all of them in Xu Qing's name. I have to make sure they all stay close to him. Ah Qing, oh Ah Qing. You must've been really blessed in your previous life to end up with an Elder Brother like me!

Truth be told, this wasn't the first time the Captain had done something like this. After his and Xu Qing's big escapade in Seazombie territory, when the two of them became envoy disciples, he was the one who made sure that both Ding Xue and Gu Muqing were assigned to work with Xu Qing. The reality was that the sect had originally assigned Gu Muqing alone. As for Ding Xue, the Captain had secretly reached out to her and sold her the second spot. [2]

Feeling very pleased with himself, he shot after Xu Qing into the depths of Forbidden by the Sword.

As Xu Qing sped along in the jungle, mutagen poured toward him. He absorbed it all and sent it right into his third palace. He didn't slow down for an instant. At a certain point, his hand shot out and he grabbed a huge snake off of a tree. The serpent let out an agonized hiss as its body withered up. In the blink of an eye, it turned into a skeleton as all of its life force vanished.

Xu Qing's eyes glittered. Without a word, he continued on until he spotted a red creature that resembled a qilin. The beast had an extraordinary aura and a strong baleful energy, and had a long face that looked somewhat human. It was facing off against a pack of eight-legged wolves, each of which looked almost like two wolves put together, except with only one head. However, their heads were huge, being about as large as their bodies. They exuded vicious auras, and yet once the qilin-like beast stomped its hooves, they backed away with their tails between their legs.

When Xu Qing appeared between the two parties, the qilin-like beast stopped in place and erupted with a baleful aura. Xu Qing simply reached out toward it. The beast shivered, and before it could either flee or defend itself, Xu Qing's hand landed on its head. A pop rang out, and the beast withered into a skeleton over the course of only a few breaths of time.

The eight-legged wolves trembled in fear as they fled. However, Xu Qing just licked his lips and transformed into a series of afterimages as he pursued them. Moments later, he left the corpses behind as he disappeared deeper into the jungle.

Ten breaths of time later, the Captain appeared. Looking around at the corpses, he sighed in relief.

"Looks like he's doing just fine."

With that, he prepared to continue chasing after Xu Qing. Except then his eyes narrowed and his nose twitched, causing him to turn and look in a different direction in the forbidden ground. After a moment of observation, his eyes lit up.

I can't believe there's a treasure like that here! He licked his lips. Little Junior Brother should be fine. It makes more sense for me to go check out this treasure.

Having reached the conclusion that this was definitely the best idea, the Captain shifted directions and disappeared into the jungle.

Half a month flew by.

During that time, Xu Qing slaughtered with abandon. He killed any beasts he ran into and absorbed their life force to nourish his poison core. He did the same with any grues he encountered. He lost track of how many beasts he killed. Now that he had four-palace battle prowess, he could easily cut down just about everything in the periphery of the forbidden ground.

Eventually, he started working his way deeper into the forbidden ground. As he did, he found even more beasts, and the slaughter continued. He began to regain his senses. His eyes grew less glazed, and his skeletal form was filling in with flesh. His hair also grew out again.

With the additional benefit of the violet crystal, he gradually started to look the same as he had before. At most, he was a bit thinner.

Finally, he changed into a new set of clothing. The poison core in his third palace thrummed with both life force and mutagen, but was still not totally restored.

However, that wasn't a hard problem to fix. Xu Qing's hand shot out toward a swarm of huge jellyfish flying in the sky. It emanated intense coldness that caused the jungle floor to ice over, and prompted all beasts in the area to flee. There were dozens of jellyfish in the group. Within their semitransparent forms it was possible to see rotting corpses. Xu Qing had seen jellyfish like this in the forbidden region by the scavenger basecamp all those years ago.

From the look of it, these jellyfish were common in forbidden regions and forbidden grounds. Of course, he no longer felt the intense pressure they had exuded on him so long ago. The sight of them reminded Xu Qing of how easily such creatures had slaughtered low-level cultivators from the basecamp. In fact, he had personally buried one of them himself. Ol' Stony. [3]

Eyes glittering brightly, Xu Qing shot forward into the midst of the jellyfish. Booms rang out, and then lifeless jellyfish husks started dropping into the jungle below. A short time later, Xu Qing descended onto the crown of a tree, his eyes shining brightly, and thunderous rumbling sounds echoing out from within him.

Within his third palace, the poison core was now fully connected to his life essence. It was restored, as if the flame of its life force had once again been ignited. And it emitted powerful fluctuations.

It even pulsed, almost like it was a beating heart. Xu Qing could feel it, making it truly seem like it was part of him. His heart filled with excitement. Taking out his beetles, he inhaled them, and they burrowed into the depths of his body, then took up positions around the poison core.

Finally, Xu Qing looked up. Off in the distance, he could see another swarm of jellyfish heading toward him. This was an even larger swarm, and they had been attracted by his slaughter of the previous group. From the look of it, this group had hundreds of jellyfish in it. Three of them were several hundred meters in size, and radiated fluctuations equivalent to a Gold Core cultivator with two or three heavenly palaces.

I haven't even gone very deeply into this forbidden ground, and I'm already running into really powerful beasts. Well, that's fine. It's the perfect chance to see how impressive my poison core is.

Eyes flashing, he released the power of all three of his heavenly palaces, including that of the taboo poison core. A boundless poison aura erupted from him, odorless and invisible, but surging with mountain-toppling, sea-draining power. Down below, countless trees instantly started rotting. Plants crumbled into ash, and nearby beasts were so powerless they hardly had a chance to shriek in agony before they dissolved into pools of blood.

The jellyfish had no way to escape. They all started turning black, and emitted sounds of torment as they rotted and fell to the ground. Even the ground was affected. Countless bugs were infected and subterranean creatures were killed. The fog in the area vanished, and the dirt melted. Soon, outside moonlight spilled down into the area.

Everything for 1,500 meters around Xu Qing was bare and empty! Nothing existed there! There was only black soil. It was a truly appalling sight.

As Xu Qing hovered there, his shadow appeared. Turning into the shape of a tree, it bent in his direction in a bow. The tree was almost like a cape, and the surrounding devastated area created a perfect contrast for Xu Qing's bewitching good looks. In fact, he looked even more bewitching.

The black iron skewer flew out, trembling, and the image of Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior appeared, bowing and scraping.

The patriarch couldn't have been more shocked, and when he looked around, he found himself mumbling, "Is he a god...?"

His reason for that thought was the strong mutagen seeping out of the ground! It was a mutagen that didn't come from the forbidden ground itself. Rather, it came into being because of Xu Qing's poison! Most bizarre of all was that the mutagen seemed connected to Xu Qing. As if he had birthed it. As a result, it was different from the surrounding mutagen.

A tremor passed through Xu Qing. Even he was having a hard time believing what was happening. After all this... was the power of a god!

Chapter 343: VERY Anxious Patriarch

Xu Qing hovered in midair looking down at everything, his heart pounding. A long moment passed, then he took a deep breath and extended his right hand. He closed his hand into a fist, and all of the mutagen being produced in the area rushed toward him, creating a black cloud around his hand. Xu Qing still almost couldn't believe it. This completely surpassed anything he had expected would happen. However, it did make sense.

The taboo poison pill had been put into a wish box by an almighty cultivator who fought a mysterious entity from a god domain. Despite killing that mysterious entity, the almighty cultivator ended up poisoned, and only after experiencing intense torment did he manage to extrude the poison.

In other words, the taboo poison pill must have been concocted in a god domain. And god domains....

Xu Qing looked up into the dome of heaven. Black clouds covered the area, except for the 1,500-meter area around him. Now there was a gap in those clouds. Through that gap, Xu Qing could see the moon, as well as one corner of the broken face of the god.

When the god's eyes open and gaze down, that area becomes a forbidden region. The second time that gaze hits the same place, it becomes a forbidden ground. The third time, it becomes a god domain!

The Revered Ancient mainland was a huge place, but there were still very few places that the god had gazed upon three times.

God domains contain the power of gods. And Torchlight's experimental god bodies are also being used to explore that power.

As Xu Qing contemplated that, he realized that his taboo poison core wasn't just mighty. It was also a key. A key that could open the door to godhood.

I wonder if that almighty cultivator realized that.

Although there were still things Xu Qing didn't understand about the situation, and without all the proper clues, he could only speculate so much. Regardless, one thing he did know was that his poison core was spectacularly valuable. And he also knew that considering it contained some of the power of a god, he would have a hard time staying safe if people found out about it. Xu Qing had no desire to test human nature, and therefore, the poison core and its godly power would need to be a secret he kept as safe as the violet crystal.

I'm considered an expert in the dao of poison, so killing people with poison won't attract attention. That's the obvious way to explain the effects of my poison core.

After thinking the matter over more, he decided to assess his battle prowess. He now had three heavenly palaces, plus an imperial-class technique. Overall, that meant he had four-palace battle prowess. If he used poisons, then he was confident he could surpass that level. And if he used the godly power in that poison, then.... After more thought, he decided he wouldn't do that unless it was absolutely necessary.

Having reached this point in his train of thought, he took out a handful of black boluses and tossed them around. The black boluses exploded and began sucking in all the mutagen, which thus cleared the area of any traces of Xu Qing's unique mutagen. Up above, the black clouds rolled over to cover the part that had been opened, and soon, it was as if nothing had happened at all. Ordinary mutagen was already filling the area, and the only evidence left behind was the bareness of the earth.

Despite that, Xu Qing was still nervous, so he threw out some more black boluses. Only after he was absolutely certain there were no traces of his own mutagen did he turn and leave.

As he moved, he once again checked on his shadow and the black iron skewer. His gaze caused both the shadow and the patriarch to tremble.

The former could sense danger on an instinctual level, while the latter... was a person with extensive life experience. How could he not understand what was going on? Therefore, after Xu Qing glanced at him a seventh time, the patriarch appeared in projected form.

Flopping into a prostrated position, he said, "Milord, your humble servant must plead for your help, sir."

Xu Qing didn't respond. He just looked back coldly.

Looking completely honest and considerate, the patriarch met Xu Qing's gaze with eyes full of zeal. Actually, it was a gaze he had secretly learned when observing Night Dove.

"Milord, your humble servant is very worried about the possibility of being captured one day. If that happens, I'd die before revealing any of your secrets. However, it's possible an enemy could use some special soulsearch method on me. In that case, my intentions wouldn't mean much. If I revealed even the tiniest detail, well, your humble servant would hardly be able to deal with the guilt. My death wouldn't matter. But I absolutely, positively cannot reveal any of your secrets, milord.

"Therefore, I would like to humbly request that you place an eradication seal on me. The more vicious the better. I don't care. That way, if I ever get in a situation where an enemy is about to soulsearch me, I can self-detonate with a mere thought, and make sure the enemy gets nothing.

"In that manner, your humble servant could travel to the Nine Springs with a smile on his face, confident that he loyally kept his lord and master safe!"

The patriarch was feeling very clever in how he was handling this. He was very familiar with Xu Qing's personality, and knew that promises and oaths didn't mean anything to him. After all, if the patriarch himself didn't trust such things, there was no way the Fiendish Xu would. By directly pointing out what he had, he managed to surreptitiously highlight his own loyalty. This was his plan, which he hoped would do something to alleviate some of the Fiendish Xu's misgivings.

It seemed unlikely to him that the Fiendish Xu would actually place such a seal on him, otherwise he already would have. Also, he harbored a bit of hope that this might actually be an opportunity to get more freedom. That dangerous thought caused him to shiver a bit.

Meanwhile, Xu Qing looked deeply at the patriarch. "There's no need for a seal like that," he said coolly. "I trust you. Worst case scenario, if you get captured, I'll personally make sure you maintain complete and utter loyalty.... By the way, your current battle prowess is only at the three-flame level. That's too weak."

The patriarch trembled in alarm. The dangerous thought from moments ago vanished like smoke. Xu Qing's gaze made it obvious he knew exactly what the patriarch was thinking, and that filled the patriarch with both extreme anxiety and deep regret.

All of a sudden, the patriarch realized he hadn't thought things through all the way, and that he shouldn't have asked the Fiendish Xu to place a sealing mark on him. As a spirit automaton, he shouldn't just point out problems without providing true, complete solutions. A spirit automaton who did that wasn't a good spirit automaton. He should have thought to do the sealing on himself to begin with to show true loyalty.

I was careless. Too careless! The Fiendish Xu has clearly become a lot sharper than before. Next time I have to think through everything much more comprehensively.

With such thoughts on his mind, the patriarch realized he had to do something to fix the situation.

“Milord, I... I think I'm about to experience a breakthrough!”

Xu Qing's eyebrows shot up. He didn't see anything to indicate the patriarch was on the verge of a breakthrough. However, that was when the shadow started sending out urgent emotional fluctuations.

“I... live and... die with you... also breakthrough!”

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Xu Qing looked at the shadow and nodded. Then he shifted directions, and instead of heading out of the forbidden ground, went looking for a suitable location for a breakthrough.

It didn't take long for him to find a secluded valley. It was filled with strange plants with huge sawtooth leaves. Some drooped down, others twitched and wriggled as they slowly digested small animals they had snagged.

When Xu Qing arrived, all of the plants in the valley shrank away from him. He frowned. He wasn't happy with being so eye-catching.

After some thought, he reined in the poison from his third heavenly palace. As a result, the plants thirty meters away from him and farther all relaxed. Those closer than that still shrank away from him. That was the limit of his control over the poison core for now. After he got more familiar with it, his control would improve.

Once in the valley, Xu Qing waved his hand, and the iron skewer flew to the valley wall and quickly carved out a tunnel. It went deep underground. After checking around thoroughly to make sure everything was safe, Xu Qing entered the tunnel.

With the wave of his hand, he sent countless rocks to block the entrance, then he went to the end of the tunnel. After making various preparations in the area, he sat down and produced an oil lamp, which he lit.

As the flame illuminated his face, he said, “Who's going first?”

“Me... first....” the shadow said, sliding away from Xu Qing and onto the cave wall.

Xu Qing looked at the shadow. It resembled a huge tree, covered with over a hundred opened eyes looking mysteriously at Xu Qing.

“Milord... pills... consume....”

Xu Qing waved his hand and a host of bottles and jars flew out, which were from August Spirit Nethersprite's mansion grotto. None of them were the type that contained life force. Not any more. Checking through them, Xu Qing found a handful that would be helpful to the shadow. They were the same ones the shadow had longed for back in the mansion grotto.

The shadow was clearly excited at the sight of them. Once they were out, the bottles all exploded, as did the medicinal pills inside. They turned into a turbid, misty cloud that shot toward the shadow on the wall. The shadow sucked it in, and then instantly began to tremble. At the same time, large amounts of mutagen in the area rushed toward the shadow. As it sucked the mutagen in, more and more rushed in.

Considering they were in a forbidden ground, the mutagen was incredibly strong, and it quickly formed a whirlpool around the shadow. As the whirlpool spun, the shadow blurred, until it completely vanished into the whirlpool. Then, terrifying fluctuations started rolling out of the whirlpool.

The fluctuations soon rose higher and higher, heading from the Foundation Establishment level toward the Gold Core level. Thumping sounds rang out, almost like a heartbeat. Anyone who heard them would be very unsettled, and would get the sensation a new form of life was coming into existence inside the whirlpool.

Xu Qing watched, thinking back to what happened the last time the shadow rose to a higher level, and wondering if it would again try to rebel. If it did, he was ready to crush it.

Meanwhile, the patriarch looked on, feeling very, VERY anxious. In fact, he felt a sensation of deadly crisis.

That aura.... Little Shadow, oh Little Shadow, why do you have to do this? What am I supposed to do??

Chapter 344: Shadow Fusion Secret Magic

As Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior got more and more nervous, he happened to notice Xu Qing looking at the whirlpool. Within Xu Qing's eyes were keen anticipation.

As far as the patriarch could remember, Xu Qing had never looked at him in that way. That caused the patriarch to grow even more flustered inwardly. Lightning started flickering in his eyes, as he apparently pushed himself to the limit. Madness swelled within him as he looked at Xu Qing and spoke via divine will, "Milord, please produce those mirrors for me."

Despite being spoken with divine will, it was still possible for Xu Qing to sense the determination and madness in the words. Glancing at the patriarch, he waved his hand, sending out the collection of mirrors from August Spirit Nethersprite's mansion grotto.

Without another word, the patriarch sent the skewer flying toward the mirrors. He stabbed into the nearest one, and a scream rang out as the spirit automaton within it was devoured by the patriarch.

Xu Qing had previously inspected that so-called spirit automaton, and knew that it wasn't complete. It was more like a sliver of will, and was a long way from becoming a true spirit automaton.

Next the patriarch went on to the second, the third, and the fourth mirror.... In the blink of an eye he devoured the will of seventy percent of the mirrors. Lightning crackled around him, and it almost looked like he would completely transform into lightning. A mad howl escaped his lips.

Xu Qing was a little surprised at what was happening, as he could sense that the patriarch was putting everything on the line.

The truth was that Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior was already at his limit. Devouring more wouldn't necessarily guarantee that he would be able to break through. However, seeing Xu Qing's gaze, he felt that it was all worth it.

Around then, the whirlpool the shadow was in began emanating even more intense fluctuations. Along with them came a howl that could shake one down to the soul.

Xu Qing looked over with a serious expression.

The patriarch didn't say anything, but he eyed the mirrors with bloodshot eyes and then howled and raced toward the next one. He would devour them even if he wasn't capable of devouring them! If he failed to break through, but the shadow succeeded, then he would cease to be important. What was more, the shadow would certainly bully him, and he would have no way to fight back.

If he was that powerless, it would be easy for the shadow to find a way to secretly kill him. If he didn't end up killed, the Fiendish Xu would probably use him as cannon fodder. And even if he wasn't used as cannon fodder, he would be so weak that he would either be harmed or stolen, whereupon the Fiendish Xu would kill him with a thought.

Failure meant death. Success meant life. With those thoughts running through his head, the patriarch went completely mad.

Meanwhile, the shadow was doing the same thing. Terrifying fluctuations rolled out of the whirlpool, and the howling grew more intense. Soon, it became possible to see a black, shadowy mass rising from within the whirlpool.

It looked like a large, rectangular box. As it inched its way out of the whirlpool, its howls grew more intense. At the same time, the mutagen flowing toward the whirlpool grew stronger. The shadow was clearly struggling mightily.

This state of affairs went on for about eight hours. Then, all of a sudden, an intense rumbling sound echoed out from the whirlpool as it faded into nothing.

Left behind was a huge shadow on the wall, extremely clear and visible.

Xu Qing was openly moved. He was looking at something rectangular and wrapped up with strips of gray cloth, all of which were stained with black blood that emanated an inauspicious, gruish air. Although the shadow lay flat on the wall, Xu Qing got the sense that it was actually three-dimensional. It made it seem like he was looking at a coffin! He had never sensed anything like that from the shadow before, not even the previous time the shadow rose to another level, in which it took on the shape of a tree. If you described the previous shadow as a painting, then this shadow was something that had walked out of a painting. Xu Qing could sense it very clearly.

What was more, extraordinary fluctuations pulsed off of the black coffin, similar to the Gold Core level.

What caused Xu Qing's eyes to sparkle even more was that a host of eyes snapped open on the surface of the coffin. There were too many to count, and they all had vertical pupils. The eyes all looked at Xu Qing very coldly, and it reminded him of looking into the eyes of the god above. They were eyes that seemed to look down on all other beings as being inferior forms of life. The aloof and arrogant nature of the eyes caused Xu Qing's own eyes to suddenly grow incredibly cold.

"Looking to get killed?" Xu Qing said quietly.

The shadow shivered in response as though it were suddenly remembering everything that had happened to it in the past. The arrogant attitude disappeared, and the eyes suddenly seemed like they were fawning on Xu Qing.

"Milord... I'm... obedient..."

“You broke through, but you still can’t talk in complete sentences? What good are you?” Xu Qing’s eyes turned icier, and he suddenly radiated a violet light. Inside his third heavenly palace, his poison core vibrated.

The shadow’s trembling grew more intense, and the eyes seemed to radiate terror. In its anxiety, it released stuttering fluctuations.

“I’m... strong... useful...”

“Useful? How?” Xu Qing asked.

The strips of cloth loosened, revealing that it was actually one long cloth. It floated over toward Xu Qing.

Xu Qing simply looked on.

“Taboo... absorb all...”

Xu Qing frowned and instinctively looked at Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior. However, the patriarch was in the middle of devouring a mirror, and couldn’t help translate.

Voice cool, Xu Qing said, “I don’t understand.”

The shadow seemed to get even more anxious. Trembling, it created an image that depicted Xu Qing handing something to a kowtowing sapling.

Looking at the image, Xu Qing recalled something. Sometime back he had given a fragment of a taboo treasure to the shadow. He looked at the strip of cloth again, and an expression of surprise appeared on his face. [1]

“After you absorbed the mutagen from it, the fragment turned into this?”

The coffin-shaped shadow rocked back and forth as if it were shaking its head.

Xu Qing frowned again. Then the shadow suddenly blinked vigorously.

“Forgot... damned Golden Vajra... yes...”

Xu Qing looked at the gray strip of cloth and the black blood that stained it, then suddenly realized it looked very much like a funeral shroud. However, it didn’t stink, but instead, pulsed with immortal energy. Curious, he reached out and took hold of the cloth. Then his eyes narrowed and he released it. Looking down at his hand, he saw numerous tiny incisions, as if his palm had been stabbed with thorns or needles. As for exactly how it worked, he would study it later. He looked back at the shadow.

“That’s all?”

Seeing that Xu Qing didn’t seem very pleased, the nervous shadow quickly sent out some more fluctuations.

“Merge... transform... ultimate...”

The lid of the coffin suddenly opened, causing a loud creaking sound to echo out. Inside of it was pitch darkness.

“Milord... enter...” the shadow said fawningly.

Xu Qing’s eyes narrowed and he peered at the shadow. After considering the matter, he chuckled inwardly. The shadow had reached a higher level, but he could still crush it. If it rebelled against him, he wouldn’t keep it around any longer.

Walking forward he stepped inside the coffin. The lid closed over him.

The moment the lid sealed, the shadow shivered, and the countless eyes on the surface of the coffin closed. Then it seemed to melt like a liquid, revealing Xu Qing. However, the shadow now covered his entire body.

Xu Qing opened his eyes, and they revealed incredible astonishment.

After looking himself up and down, he burst into motion, moving much faster than before as he smashed his fist into the wall. The entire wall crumbled into ash, and the remaining force carved a 3,000-meter tunnel in that direction. What was even more shocking to Xu Qing was that he hadn’t punched with full force. He had been holding back. This was something that he could never have done given the previous level of his fleshly body.

Panting a bit, Xu Qing inspected himself. Clearly, he had reached an astonishing level compared to before, both in his defenses, speed, and strength. Because of the darkness that covered him, he couldn’t see his heavenly palaces, his cultivation base, his dharma force, or anything else.

In exchange for losing those things, he received stupefying fleshly body power.

After sending out a thought, the darkness retracted, and his skin returned to his previous state. Meanwhile, the shadow converged on his forehead in the shape of a pitch black eye.

This must be a secret magic the shadow developed after upgrading. It can fuse with me.

He performed an incantation gesture, but nothing happened.

After fusing, virtually all of my magical techniques go away, and I become a pure body cultivator. That said, I can still use my poisons. The strength involved seems to surpass the four-palace level, and is probably around five-palace level. Pure five-palace fleshly body power is completely terrifying.

Xu Qing couldn’t help but feel astonished by the heaven-shaking, earth-toppling transformations he had gone through thanks to his trip to the Three-Spirits Dao-Suppressing Mountain.

Good preparation is the key to success, and this was the result of everything Xu Qing had worked on up to this point.

After doing a few more tests, he exercised another thought, and the black eye on his forehead left him and turned back into the shape of a coffin. The lid opened, and Xu Qing stepped out.

Waving his hand, he produced a stream of black balefire. His heavenly palaces were back to normal. That confirmed his theory about the technique. It was a secret fusion magic.

“Not bad at all!” he said with a nod, his eyes shining with approval.

Seeing how pleased Xu Qing was, the shadow got excited.

“Milord... I’m... obedient...”

The shadow had been learning from Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior. It was now pleased and relieved. Then, it looked over at the patriarch with disdain and provocation.

Chapter 345: Tribulation Incites Awesomeness

Xu Qing was very pleased with the shadow's breakthrough. And the Shadow Fusion Secret Magic was definitely shocking. It could definitely be considered a trump card, and though it differed from the secret magic utilized by the red-garbed young woman, it led to a very similar result.

The difference was that the young woman summoned a battle soul to fuse with, while Xu Qing transformed into the pure, ultimate body cultivator.

Nowadays my life lamps and poisons aren't any sort of secret. Therefore, my first layer of secrets is the shadow. The weapon wielded by the girl in red shows how effective it is to hide your assets openly. If the shadow's revealed, I can do something like that.

My second layer of secrets is Within the Nine Springs and the Shadow Fusion Secret Magic. The first isn't too difficult to keep secret. As for the second, I need to come up with some sort of mnemonic to say out loud so people don't realize what's really going on, and also catch people off guard when I use it. My third layer of secrets is my ability to produce mutagen. My fourth and final layer of secrets is, as always, the violet crystal.

Having organized his thoughts, Xu Qing looked at his coffin-shaped shadow.

I wonder if it will change form again next time it achieves a breakthrough.

He had the feeling it would. However, now wasn't the time to ask for details, especially considering how difficult it was to communicate with the shadow.

At that point, Xu Qing remembered Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior, and turned to look at him.

The patriarch was truly in agony. He twitched as countless lightning bolts coursed over him and occasionally pierced through his body. It was so painful he couldn't hold back from letting loose some screams now and then.

However, the patriarch had a sense of self-respect. When he saw the shadow looking at him scornfully, and then noticed Xu Qing looking in his direction, his eyes suddenly burned with madness. He was currently a lightning spirit, and would normally have needed some more time before building his way up to the point of transforming into a soul and provoking heavenly tribulation. That was when he should have attempted the baptism of tribulation.

But he didn't have time to worry about all that now. By devouring the other spirit automatons, he was able to advance by leaps and bounds, thus activating all of the power of lightning within them. Throwing his head back and howling, he performed a double-handed incantation gesture and then pointed upward.

"Bring on the tribulation!"

Innumerable lightning bolts emerged from the patriarch, creating a blinding display as they shot up into the ceiling of the cave. They burrowed up through the soil, then shot out of the valley, converging into a huge river that rose into the dome of heaven.

Rumbling filled the black clouds overhead as the river of lightning pierced through them. Then, thunderous booming rang out as they exploded above the cloud cover. As the booms echoed out, red

lightning bolts began to dance through the clouds, slowly gathering to form one gigantic band of red.

It even seemed to contain a will of its own as it suddenly shot down. It descended to the lands below, into the valley, and into the cave.

Somewhere else in Forbidden by the Sword, not too far away from the valley, the Captain fled madly through the jungle. Everywhere he passed froze over, leaving pure ice behind him. His face was flushed, his eyes shone, and he cackled madly as he sped along, taking occasional bites from a crimson fruit he held in his hand.

This thing is amazing! Totally amazing!! A truly holy fruit that grew out of the ultimate evil and the strongest mutagen. This thingy was born out of pure adversity. It's definitely extraordinary. I could smell it from a mile away. Hahahahaha— oh crap!

A mysterious light suddenly rose up behind him, then became something like a sharp blade that slashed through all the trees in its path.

It closed in rapidly until it seemed like it was just on the verge of slicing into the Captain. He twisted in a bizarre fashion, leaping out of the way at the last moment. In that manner he dodged the blow, though a few hairs were severed in the process. Inhaling sharply, he threw the fruit into his mouth, and without looking back, fled even faster than before. That was when he saw some lightning in the distance, and heard the rumble of thunder. His eyes lit up.

Another precious treasure? Should I go check it out? My pursuers are dangerous, and I think I woke up their chieftain. I can't believe they're being so stingy.

The Captain hesitated for a long moment. If he didn't take advantage of this situation, he would regret it later. Thus, it made sense to go have a look. Given the levels of speed he was capable of, it was entirely possible he could *kill two birds with one arrow*.

Gritting his teeth, he changed directions.

Besides, based on what he had sensed earlier, the chieftain of the species he had just encountered was suffering from an old injury, and couldn't easily be awakened. What was more, there were warding spells in the area placed by numerous species. It seemed possible they had been put in place specifically for that chieftain.

Don't tell me he's actually the subordinate of this forbidden ground's emperor? If so, maybe he was also defeated in the fighting with the countless species of Sea-Sealing County. Maybe he managed to flee back here to heal, only to be chased and sealed. With those warding spells in place, he's basically a prisoner here. This place is called Forbidden by the Sword, but is it more appropriate to call it Imprisoned by the Sword? [1]

The Captain recalled that this forbidden ground had actually been called by a different name in the past. As he continued running, he took out another crimson fruit and took a bite.

Behind him, loud rumbling sounds echoed out as a huge tree fell, knocked down by a group of six-armed giants that were angrily chasing him. The giants were all roughly 30 meters tall, with green skin and very large ears. What was most eye-catching about them, though, were their earlobes. They all had bells in their earlobes, which made melodious chiming sounds when they moved. The bells

seemed to be a natural part of their body. What was more, the mysterious light from earlier actually came from the bells. These people were a species unique to this forbidden ground. Their eyes radiated madness and killing intent as they pursued the Captain.

Among their number were a few dozen who were in the Gold Core level. Most shocking of all was that, behind them in their ancestral land, which was where the Captain had fled from, there was a faint aura of awakening. Apparently, some very powerful cultivator was waking up there.

While that wild pursuit played out, Xu Qing was back in the valley paying very close attention to Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior.

He watched as countless red lightning bolts, filled with the ultimate expression of will, shot through the soil and toward the patriarch. The patriarch shivered and screamed in agony. Red lightning bolts assailed him, piercing into his spirit body, and creating a bright red glow. This was the process of him transforming from a spirit automaton into a soul automaton.

Within that blinding light, the patriarch's body was already riddled with damage, making him look very bedraggled. He was even gasping for breath.

Meanwhile, the red lightning caused the shadow's narrowed eyes to fill with a very serious expression. However, it quickly realized that reacting in that way wasn't ideal, and it went back to looking smug and derisive.

Xu Qing could tell that this was no ordinary lightning, and his eyes glittered.

Eventually, the lightning started to fade, and the patriarch's shrieks of anguish turned into roars of rage. At the same time, the madness in his eyes grew more intense. He had successfully passed the first round of tribulation, and thus he dropped into a cross-legged position and began circulating the red light within him. He needed to prepare for the second round of tribulation. At the moment, he was incredibly weak, to the point where he was having trouble not falling over. In that state, it was going to be very difficult to pass the second round.

Xu Qing looked on thoughtfully. Meanwhile, more rumbling sounds echoed out from the sky, almost like shouts of rage. Then more red streaks filled the clouds as the second round began. Countless red lightning bolts created a blood-colored river that shot down through everything to land on the patriarch.

The patriarch opened his eyes, and they were filled with despair. That was when Xu Qing took action.

Stepping forward to the patriarch, he shoved his right hand up into the air. Instantly, two umbrellas appeared, which then transformed into heavenly palaces. When they blocked the lightning, rumbling sounds echoed out, and Xu Qing shivered. He could sense the powerful will of destruction in the lightning, and as his defenses fought back against it, both opposing forces began to diminish. He tried to absorb the lightning, but was unable.

"This heavenly tribulation has red lightning that can destroy both the soul and the body. What an interesting breakthrough, Master Freespirit." Xu Qing had never seen anything like this before. Looking down at Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior and seeing that he had largely recovered, Xu Qing asked, "Ready to continue?"

“Milord, I—”

The patriarch had been just about to say that he couldn't go on. But then he noticed the disdain and hostility in the eyes of the shadow.

Gritting his teeth, he howled, “I can do it!”

Xu Qing nodded and stepped back, allowing the lightning, which had been reduced by about half, to continue falling. In the blink of an eye, it slammed into the patriarch.

The patriarch gritted his teeth and faced it. As red lightning pierced into him, he trembled violently. His body dimmed, to the point where it looked like it might disappear. Apparently, he just couldn't deal with the tribulation.

The sensation of imminent death filled the patriarch. He smiled bitterly. He had always been a careful person who planned things out. If he provoked an enemy, he would pay any price to wipe them out. If he wasn't able to wipe them out, he would move his entire sect somewhere safe. And if that didn't work, and he faced death, he would always have a backup plan to survive. He wouldn't even balk at offering himself as a slave, as long as he kept on living.

Now he was in complete despair. As the lightning engulfed him, he began to laugh with bitter madness. He couldn't accept this result, and yet, had no choice but to feel deep regret. He didn't regret attempting the breakthrough. Instead, he regretted not taking more risks when he was young. Because he had been so focused on staying alive, he had never dared to risk his life to seize resources. Because of that, he never managed to ignite his life flame.

When he read books, he would always imagine himself in the shoes of the main character. In fact, he would fantasize about *being* the main character. He would dream of starting as a mortal and eventually rising to the highest heights.

Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior looked up at Xu Qing and bitterly shouted, “Get it in your head that Master Freespirit *also* has natural aptitude! Get it in your head, Fiendish Xu, that Master Freespirit is *also* a person with destined opportunities! Get it in your head, Ol' Devil Xu, that Master Freespirit *wasn't born to be a slave!!!*”

So why... did things end up like this...? As he thought back on his life, he just couldn't accept what was happening. His emotions stirred, filling him with despair, madness, and regret. It was especially bad because, being on the verge of death, there was so much he wanted to say, yet couldn't. It didn't matter.

With death imminent, his despair reached the pinnacle. It was the same with his madness and regret.

Xu Qing looked at Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior and sighed inwardly as he prepared to step in and save him.

But then, as the patriarch's emotions reached the most extreme level, the red lightning bolts within him suddenly lurched to a halt. Apparently, they had reached a sudden sympathetic resonance with the patriarch. It was as if... the requirements for them to become a part of him had been met.

Instantly, the lightning converged within him, circulated once, and then caused the vanishing parts of the patriarch's body to appear once again.

And now they were red!

The patriarch's body was seventy percent red, with thirty percent remaining the same as before. It indicated that his breakthrough was seventy percent complete. Thirty percent of him was spirit, seventy percent was soul. The heavenly tribulation vanished. His breakthrough had been both a failure and a success. Stunned, the patriarch looked down at his body.

First he felt confused, but then that confusion turned into elation. Then he thought back to what he had yelled moments ago, and his face turned pale. Feeling incomparably nervous, he slowly turned to Xu Qing, an expression on his face that looked more unsightly than if he were crying.

“Er... milord, I was just saying that because I had to. For a special technique I was using. In the key moment of a breakthrough, the technique requires you to say things like that... Truth be told, your humble servant's time following you, milord, has been the happiest time of my life! Seriously, milord... you really can't take anything I said seriously.”

Off to the side, the shadow grinned maliciously and shook its head.

Chapter 346: Hey, What Are You Doing Here?

When Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior saw the shadow shaking its head, he got even more nervous. He began trembling, and his expression was one of complete despair. He looked at Xu Qing and wondered if he was really done for this time.

“Milord...”

“Are you alright?” Xu Qing asked quietly, even caringly.

To the patriarch, his tone of voice was like a spring breeze. His eyes widened, and he started breathing heavily. He could never have imagined that the Fiendish Xu would ask, not about the words he had spoken, but rather, about his wellbeing. Waves of emotions swept through him, and they were more intense because of how close he had come to death. His heart raced with joy and exultation, filling him with an indescribable feeling. All he knew was that his heart was racing because of Xu Qing.

Then he thought back to all of the novels he'd read throughout his life, especially scenes where things like this happened. Usually the person in his situation would say something akin to “together we something-or-other on the same year, month, and day” and “oh great god, something, yada yada,” and then would conclude with “I'll accompany you loyally through life” or “let history bear witness that fate has changed your loyal servant's life forever.”

Based on what usually happened in novels, Xu Qing must have been his lord and master in a previous life, which meant that it was actually foreordained that he would go through countless trials and tribulations with him.

That's got to be it! the patriarch thought excitedly.

He had never felt this way before, not ever. Feeling overwhelmed with gratitude, he said, “Don't worry, milord. Your humble servant is fine. I'm just very excited that time itself can bear witness as I once again wage war in your name. In this life, milord, I am devoted to your service!”

Xu Qing looked at the patriarch quizzically. The patriarch seemed to be acting a bit strangely, but given his history, Xu Qing just accepted the words and nodded.

Off to the side, the shadow was stunned. Looking deeply at the patriarch, it committed the words he had just spoken to memory so that it could use them one day.

“Your breakthrough wasn’t a complete success, I take it?” Xu Qing asked.

“Milord, though your humble servant didn’t completely succeed, I can tell that I’m different from before.” The patriarch lifted his right hand, and a tremor passed through him as a red lightning bolt appeared. It looked very weak, but on a substructural level, Xu Qing could tell that it was exactly the same as the tribulation lightning.

Looking at the somewhat pathetic lightning bolt, the patriarch felt a bit guilty, so he said, “It’s not much... but I’m mostly a soul automaton now. Once I’m back in the iron skewer, it’ll be beyond amazing!” Then he blurred into motion as he shot back toward the skewer to prove his point.

The moment he entered, the black skewer started shaking. Cracking sounds rang out from inside, and red magical symbols appeared on its surface. As the skewer transformed, it emanated a terrifying aura. Red sparks danced on its surface, causing its pitch-black color to change into something more violet.

When Xu Qing saw the skewer that had been at his side for so long transforming in such an extraordinary way, he looked more closely at it. However, that was when the patriarch screamed, while at the same time, three large cracks appeared on the surface of the skewer. The cracks were very deep, and it looked like if they grew any larger, the skewer would crumble to pieces.

Xu Qing’s expression flickered. Quickly grabbing the skewer, he scanned it with divine will, whereupon his expression became even more unsightly.

The patriarch then appeared. Choosing his words very carefully, he said, “Milord, upon trying to take possession of this treasure, I found that its level is actually too low.... It’s suitable for anything below Gold Core. But now that I’m seventy percent a soul automaton, I’ve gone past that limit. And the power of the red tribulation lightning is more than the skewer can bear.”

Xu Qing looked at the skewer in his hand for a long moment. He’d been using this item since he was a child. Whether it was before his time in the slums, or after. Whether it was in the scavenger basecamp or his early days in Seven Blood Eyes. He had always used this weapon to kill enemies. Whether it was day or night, he always had that skewer ready to use, even when he slept.

“If that’s the case,” he said, “there’s nothing we can do for now. Once we’re back in the sect, I’ll figure out a way to reforge the skewer and hopefully raise it to a higher level.” He put the skewer away and took out a magical treasure he’d acquired in a small nation while traveling. That would serve as the patriarch’s temporary abode.

With that done, he flicked his sleeve, sending both the patriarch and the shadow back into a state of concealment.

“Time to get out of here.”

With both the shadow and the patriarch at a higher level, his battle prowess had improved a bit. As for the changes he had personally experienced, he planned to contemplate them after he was back

on his dharmaship. After all, this was a forbidden ground, not a place to leave one's guard down. The tribulation he had provoked had been sizable, and it was entirely likely that it had attracted the attention of unknown entities.

With that, he started moving. Upon reaching the blocked entrance of the tunnel, he waved his hand, causing the opening to blast open.

Before he could leave, his expression flickered, and he turned to look in a different direction.

Some distance away in the jungle was a group of 30-meter-tall giants, howling as they ran along. All of them emanated powerful fluctuations, with a dozen or so who were in the Gold Core level. And there were two or three who gave Xu Qing the sensation that they had five or six heavenly palaces. His eyes narrowed.

What also caused him to inhale sharply was a thunderous rumbling off in the distance, a sound that could shake the mind, bringing with it incredible, terrifying pressure. Wild colors flashed in heaven and earth, winds screamed, and the earth quaked. It seemed like some immense entity was struggling to free itself in that distant location.

The giants nearby were chasing... the Captain.

All it took was a single glance to realize that the Captain must have done something to anger them.

They were all running right in Xu Qing's direction. Sighing, he turned and fled.

The Captain spotted Xu Qing and was delighted.

"Hey, what are you doing here?" the Captain shouted. "Did you find some treasure or something? Lemme see! Don't worry, that big fellow isn't going to have an easy time getting free. Maybe he's awake, but the place where he was sleeping is a quagmire, and only half of his head was visible. Also there were warding spells from all sorts of species there."

Off in the distance, a boom rang out, and then crevices snaked out through the ground. A violent aura raged out into the open, along with a gale force wind. From the look of it, some of the warding spells had shattered.

The wild wind slowed down both Xu Qing and the Captain, but actually helped the giants to speed up.

As a result, the distance between the two parties closed.

"Shoot, don't tell me they're actually going to catch up." The Captain accelerated rapidly as he tried to catch up to Xu Qing.

Xu Qing didn't even look over his shoulder, but he did wave his hand behind him to help the Captain.

The Captain felt himself pulled forward until he was right behind Xu Qing.

However, the wind was really causing problems. It wasn't long before Xu Qing could actually smell the breath of the giants behind him. Feeling annoyed, he asked, "What exactly did you do, Captain?"

“Nothing! I was following you earlier to make sure you didn’t get into any trouble. Then I smelled something good, and went to take a look. Want to guess what I found? I saw a bunch of these oafs worshiping some kind of fruit. I simply couldn’t let them continue to do something so idiotic and uncivilized, so I took the fruit.”

“Then what?” Xu Qing asked.

“Nothing at all!” the Captain said, looking as though he couldn’t understand at all why people would get so angry at him for simply taking some fruit.

Xu Qing didn’t believe him, and took a moment to look at the Captain’s mouth.

The Captain blinked a few times. Lowering his voice as he ran, he said, “I’m serious. Nothing happened. It’s just that when I was leaving... I saw their chieftain’s head sticking out of that quagmire, and he happened to have a wooden sword stuck in his head. It looked good, so I took a bite. It was disgusting. Disgusting!”

The Captain cleared his throat.

Xu Qing didn’t say anything.

“Aiya, fine,” the Captain said guiltily. “Two bites. I took two bites, that’s all!” As he ran madly, perhaps it was his speed or perhaps the fact that he’d eaten too much, but either way, he let loose a big burp.

Xu Qing sighed. He got the feeling the Captain never took just one or two bites of anything, but wasn’t inclined to press him. Tapping into his cultivation base, he kept moving forward.

Unfortunately, the giants were still closing in.

The Captain’s eyes glittered with cold light as he performed an incantation gesture and shoved his hand behind him. Blue light shot out, creating a huge sea that spread out and froze everything solid. Xu Qing released some poison from his heavenly palace, which drifted behind them and started melting everything. Instantly, screams of agony rang out. Some of the giants had been frozen in place, and others had been poisoned. As a result, they had no choice but to slow down in their pursuit.

All of a sudden, a roar of rage echoed out in the distance, and the shockwaves of struggle grew more intense. A dense mist rolled out, almost like someone breathing, and it was heading straight toward Xu Qing and the Captain. When it slammed into them, Xu Qing’s Violet-Heaven Supreme-Limitless Crown glittered brightly, yet he still coughed up blood like mad, and his bones made cracking sounds. Blood also sprayed out of the Captain’s mouth, and his body became riddled with wounds. Both looked shocked as they accelerated as dramatically as possible.

Thankfully, they weren’t close to the center of Forbidden by the Sword, but rather, just past the periphery. After moving at top speed for about six hours, they finally burst out of the forbidden ground.

They didn’t dare to slow down for a moment. Moving as fast as their cultivation bases would allow, they continued to flee. Meanwhile, behind them in the depths of Forbidden by the Sword, a roar echoed into the sky as a huge figure slowly rose up. It was so gargantuan that, despite being so far

away, they could still see it. Its head seemed to touch the sky, and it emanated an absolutely terrifying aura. It was just barely possible to see the figure's nose... which was so badly damaged it might as well not have a nose.

As the giant roared, it took a step in the direction of the Captain and Xu Qing.

Their faces fell.

However, that was when numerous streams of light appeared, thrumming with a dao resonance. They created a sealing mark that landed on the giant, locking it in place so that it could do nothing but roar.

Despite how far away Xu Qing and the Captain were, that roaring still caused blood to spray from their mouths, and cracks to spread out on their skin. Charging away from Forbidden by the Sword, they reached the dharmaship. Once on board, Xu Qing panted for breath as he looked at the distant giant's nose. Then he turned and looked deeply at the Captain.

The Captain cleared his throat and changed the subject. "Well, shoot. He really did get free. He must have been one of the subordinates of Emperor Sword. What a tough fellow."

Meanwhile, Yanyan looked on, her eyes wide and her mind blank. She really just couldn't understand how Xu Qing and the Captain could have caused such a huge ruckus on their short trip into Forbidden by the Sword.

Chapter 347: Life is So Hard

The moment they were on the dharmaship, they sent it speeding off into the distance.¹

Both Xu Qing and the Captain were feeling very jumpy as they occasionally looked back in the direction of the forbidden ground. They saw the giant struggling, causing the clouds to churn and lightning to crash as he fought back against the web of restriction.⁰

Xu Qing's heart pounded with lingering fear.⁰

Off to the side, the Captain sighed ruefully. "It's just as I suspected. Forbidden by the Sword is actually Imprisoned by the Sword! Actually, in the past, this forbidden ground was called Spiritsound. Later, after the species of Sea-Sealing County suppressed it, it changed from Spiritsound to Imprisoned by the Sword."⁰

Xu Qing listened thoughtfully. He had been curious about that as well, as he remembered Master Seventh saying that the forbidden ground was called Spiritsound, whereas the Captain had called it Forbidden by the Sword. [1]⁰

As the dharmaship sped along, Yanyan looked at the bedraggled Xu Qing and Captain. After hesitating a moment, she said, "Big Bro Xu Qing, didn't you go to recover your life force? And Eldest Brother, didn't you go to stand guard over Big Bro Xu Qing? How... did you end up causing such a big stir?"⁰

Yanyan was also feeling lingering fear. She'd seen that huge giant, and had been so terrified she felt shaken to the core.⁰

Upon hearing her words, Xu Qing expressionlessly looked at the Captain, specifically, his nose.⁰

The Captain blinked a few times. Not looking embarrassed at all, he tossed a half-eaten fruit to Xu Qing.⁰

“I saved that for you, little Junior Brother. It took effort not to eat the whole thing. Ai. That’s just how I am as a person. Whenever I run into nice things, I always think of my little Junior Brother.”⁰

Xu Qing caught the fruit, whereupon his expression flickered. He looked at it.⁰

Within that half-eaten fruit was some sort of unique aura. It didn’t seem to have much effect on the fleshly body. However, after inhaling its aroma, Xu Qing felt his mind stirring. That was all he needed to realize that this fruit had a nourishing effect on the soul.⁰

“I don’t know much about that thingy,” the Captain said, his eyebrows dancing up and down as he recalled his escapade. “I’ve never seen it before. I just saw those oafs worshiping it, so I stole it and took a bite. It’s definitely a big help to the soul.”⁰

Xu Qing didn’t mind that the Captain had already taken some bites out of the fruit. Having grown up in the slums, he had even stolen half-eaten food from dogs. Given that, eating after the Captain wasn’t a big deal at all. He put it in his mouth and swallowed it. He felt something cool and refreshing flowing through him, settling in his sea of consciousness and causing it to tremble. Then it expanded slightly and grew more solid. Those were signs of the soul growing stronger. Xu Qing licked his lips, then looked at the Captain and prepared to ask some questions about that giant in the forbidden ground.⁰

“Captain—”⁰

“Nope, I don’t have any more!” the Captain interrupted. Almost as soon as the words left his mouth, he realized he probably shouldn’t have snapped. Blinking a few times, he cleared his throat and said, “Little Ah Qing, we need to head to the Swordsage Court next. You listen to me. That place is amazing.”⁰

Xu Qing eyed the Captain suspiciously. There definitely seemed to be something strange going on here. Eyes narrowing he quietly said, “Eldest Brother, if I hadn’t given you thirty percent of that dao blood, then my breakthrough would have been a lot safer. But you are my Eldest Brother after all...”¹

The Captain sighed, then tossed another fruit to Xu Qing.⁰

Xu Qing caught it. “Life is so hard sometimes. Eldest Brother, the world is a fickle place, so the day might eventually come when you don’t have a little Junior Brother like me around. If I’m not able to travel the world with you, I hope that when you reach the peak of everything, and stand in the dome of heaven, you can take a moment to look down at everything below... for my sake.”¹

The branch had nine fruits on it.⁰

Xu Qing nearly gasped at the sight of the branch. He had previously assumed the Captain probably took six or seven fruits. It was a complete surprise to have him hand over an entire branch.⁰

“Eldest Brother, you didn’t take their entire fruit tree, did you?”⁰

The Captain cleared his throat and vigorously shook his head.0

Yanyan blinked a few times and said, "Life is so hard..."0

"Fine, fine, FINE!" Looking supremely helpless, the Captain took out three fruits and gave them to Yanyan.0

Yanyan smiled happily, rushed over to Xu Qing, and handed him the fruits. "Here you go, Big Bro Xu Qing."0

Seeing that, the Captain's eyes went wide, and he felt more depressed than ever. Xu Qing hadn't even asked Yanyan for those fruits!0

Xu Qing didn't care how many total fruits the Captain had. After eating all the ones he had, he felt some dramatic transformations to his sea of consciousness. His soul also seemed much stronger. He suddenly felt stuffed.0

That meant that his soul had reached its limit. As they continued to travel, he sat down cross-legged and began stabilizing himself after the breakthrough.0

Before long, half a month had passed. That was when they heard running water beneath the dharmaship. Looking over the edge, they saw the mighty mainstem of the Everlasting Immortal Profundity River, where it intersected with the Supreme Arbiter Salvation Mountains. The water raged as loudly as the sea as it rushed through a huge gorge that split the Supreme Arbiter Salvation Mountains in two. There were many waterfalls in that spot, making it as beautiful as a painting.0

It was Yanyan's first time seeing anything as beautiful as that, and she was completely entranced.0

Xu Qing had seen this place on their previous river patrol, so after glancing at it, he took out the shroud, which pulsed with immortal energy. It was really a fragment of a taboo treasure, so one could only imagine what the full treasure must have been like. The gray cloth was stained with black blood, making it impossible to even imagine what it looked like as a whole, but the powerful immortal energy was something Xu Qing simply couldn't ignore.0

Xu Qing's eyes gleamed. Fragments of taboo treasures had all sorts of uses. But perhaps because of their dilapidated nature, it wasn't possible to determine such usages by means of divine will. One had to experiment. It had been fairly obvious what to do with the black piece of wood, or the little mirror. But this strip of cloth was more complicated.0

After studying it, Xu Qing activated the defenses of his Supreme-Limitless Crown, then once again touched the strip of cloth. Despite the defenses being in place, the countless needles still stabbed into his skin.0

After some thought, Xu Qing took out the embryonic dagger the Captain had given him, which emanated a black glow and was covered with gruish decorations.0

Previously, Xu Qing had been thinking of waiting until he got back to the sect, then finding an appropriate object to serve as the hilt of the blade. But this strip of cloth gave him a new idea.0

He thought about it some more, then decided to do an experiment. By wrapping the cloth around the end of the blade, he created a simple hilt. Having accomplished these things, he gripped the dagger properly. He immediately felt pain, but he had good recovery capability and a high pain tolerance. Therefore, his facial expression didn't change.0

With his right hand, he held the hilt as tightly as possible.0

Then he gently pushed the tip of the blade against his left hand. As soon as it touched his skin, he felt a stabbing sensation. Apparently, the effect of the shroud passed into the blade itself.0

“As expected!” he said. “Yanyan, activate your defenses.”0

She had been observing him the entire time, so when she heard his words, she didn't hesitate for a moment to comply. She took out a jade slip her grandmother had given her and activated it, causing a defensive shield to appear around her.0

Xu Qing immediately thrust the dagger forward. It passed right through Yanyan's defensive shield, then stopped at her throat.0

Yanyan didn't flinch at all. Obviously she completely trusted Xu Qing.0

Xu Qing pulled the dagger back, looking very pleased.0

The Captain had also been watching, and he exclaimed, “That's no ordinary piece of cloth!”0

Xu Qing nodded. He did some more experiments to confirm that the two different items really did have amazing effects when combined. He had the feeling that the secret of his shadow was going to be revealed eventually, and when that happened, he needed to be ready.0

He sent out some divine will, and the shadow, without revealing itself physically, sent a stream of itself to form an eye on the dagger. The eye looked normal at first, but if you looked at it closely, you would find that it seemed alive. If you looked at it, it would look back at you.0

The only problem was that coming up with rhymes and mnemonics wasn't Xu Qing's forte. Therefore, he asked Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior to help. It didn't take long for the well-read patriarch to come up with something.0

Xu Qing repeated the lines inwardly. They seemed a bit odd, but at the moment he couldn't think of anything better, so he decided not to use them for now. That left the patriarch feeling a bit disappointed.0

The four lines were actually a little scheme in disguise.0

Meanwhile, the dharmaship left the Everlasting Immortal Profundity River behind and kept going north. Gradually, the color of the surrounding terrain changed from black to white. As the temperature dropped and days passed, their surroundings became full of snow and wind.

Snowflakes fluttered everywhere, piling in heaps atop the dharmaship's defenses, almost like a white blanket. It became difficult to see their surroundings clearly. The snow fell harder, until it was clearly a storm. The wind screamed, and everything was cold and icy.

Xu Qing wasn't unfamiliar with snow. In his early years, winter had been a deadly challenge. That said, he hadn't seen many big snowstorms like this.

"We're finally in the northern tundra," the Captain said, his voice rising above the wind. "At this speed, it should only take about two more months until we reach the border of Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. That's where the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar is. And that's where we'll find the main headquarters of the Swordsage Court."

Chapter 348: Supreme Arbiter Life Lamp

Hearing the Captain's words, Xu Qing looked off toward the distant, hazy horizon.

"Little Ah Qing, the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar is actually the weapon of the South Tor Ghost Emperor. A lot of people in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture know that, but based on the intelligence reports I saw in the coalition, the truth is that many years back, the Ghost Emperor actually threw that weapon there of his own volition before he died.

"According to the legends, the Ghost Emperor put the weapon there to suppress something very mysterious.

"In recent years, the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar has been stirring, and some people have theorized that it's being caused by whatever the pillar is suppressing. Others speculate that it's actually because the Ghost Emperor is about to awaken. Given that the Swordsage Court attacked the Three-Spirits Dao-Suppressing Mountain, I guess we'll find out the truth soon enough."

Xu Qing thought about it for a moment. "Eldest Brother, did Emperor-Receiving Prefecture's Swordsage Court choose that spot for their headquarters because of that suppression situation?"

"That's the big question. After all, the Ghost Emperor... is just too strong. The Swordsage Court can't even compare. Of course, that doesn't really matter to us personally. Our main concern is how to become a swordsage." The Captain's face was full of anticipation. "The swordsage's recruitment event is coming up soon, and I already asked around to get the details. Basically, anyone can participate as long as they're human and under the age of twenty-six. There's no requirement or limitation in terms of cultivation base.

"Once we reach the borders of the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar, we won't need to disguise ourselves. The Swordsage Court prohibits nonhumans from

entering the city. Also, humans are forbidden from killing each other in the area surrounding the pillar, although fighting is permitted.

“I found a file in the coalition that describes the recruitment test process, so I basically know how the whole thing goes. This year, the recruits will be tested in two phases. The first phase involves simply getting a spot as a potential swordmage recruit. Normally speaking, only ten percent of the participants get a spot, so the competition is very fierce. The second phase is the actual recruitment test. Normally speaking, ten people at the most pass that test, and sometimes it’s as few as three to five. The end result is that each and every swordmage is an extraordinary individual.”

“That few?” Xu Qing said in surprise. Back at the Three-Spirits Dao-Suppressing Mountain, he had seen a large number of swordmages, and as it turned out, all of them had gone through that testing process.

The Captain could tell what Xu Qing was thinking. “Most swordmages in a prefecture are actually from other prefectures. Only a handful are locals. That’s one of the rules they have.

“If we do well in the test and become swordmages, then we’ll probably be assigned to another prefecture. But that will actually happen a lot later. New swordmages are always sent to the Swordmage Palace in Sea-Sealing County to learn swordmage secret magics and legacies.

“Later we’ll be given official assignments based on the current state of affairs. Once you’re a swordmage, you have the right to travel on the human ferries. The seven counties inhabited by humans are so huge that ordinary people could never travel through all of them, unless they’re an almighty cultivator. Otherwise, the only way to get from place to place is to take one of those ferries. Disciples from the sects rarely get that chance.”

As Xu Qing listened attentively, he realized that becoming a swordmage would be instrumental in being able to travel the outside world.

Yanyan also listened very carefully. She also wanted to become a swordmage now, as that meant she would be able to be with her Big Bro Xu Qing.

A month passed.

The dharmaship shot through the air northward, getting closer and closer to the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar.

During the month that passed, Xu Qing finally gained a clear understanding of the powers Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior and the shadow had gained from their respective breakthroughs.

Given what the patriarch was capable of, he was roughly equivalent to a Gold Core cultivator with a single heavenly palace. Because the breakthrough wasn’t complete, Xu Qing got the sense that after he became a full soul automaton, he would be stronger and have more abilities. That said, the

patriarch had greater control of lightning. Unlike before, he could tap into lightning to increase his speed to a limit that far surpassed anything from before.

He had another trump card as well, and that was the red tribulation lightning. That specific lightning contained a will of destruction that was absolutely frightening. When unleashed, it could surpass the strength of a heavenly palace, and would have the potential to kill an enemy with a single strike.

With the patriarch interpreting, Xu Qing got a good understanding of what the shadow was capable of now. It now had the secret magic to fuse with Xu Qing and boost his body cultivation power. It also had all its old abilities. However, it could now consume someone else's shadow much more quickly. In addition to that, its shadow eyes now had a new ability.

It was the ability of extermination.

The truth was that the shadow had always had that ability, except it was too weak, so Xu Qing had never paid much attention to it. But after its recent breakthrough, the extermination magic became almost ridiculously strong. When the shadow used multiple eyes together, the power of extermination it could unleash was enough that Xu Qing now took it seriously.

All things considered, Xu Qing's current battle prowess was as different from his previous battle prowess as heaven was from earth. He also had more tools at his disposal when fighting. With a host of strategies available to him, it would make it a lot easier to deal with complicated situations and cunning enemies.

Without my poisons and the Shadow Fusion Secret Magic, I can definitely kill anyone under the five-palace level! With the Shadow Fusion Secret Magic, I can crush anyone under the six-palace level. Add in poison... and I should be able to fight a six-palace enemy. Although the differences between palaces in Gold Core is vast, and I would probably end up seriously injured, I should be able to kill such an opponent! If I use all of my secrets together

....

He hoped that he never had to try that, because if he did, it would mean he was fighting an incomparably powerful enemy.

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Eventually, the heavy snowfall ceased, and the winds died down. Things became clear again, and they could see the countless stars glittering in the dome of heaven. Surrounding them were endless fields of ice and towering, snowy mountains. There were tiny black spots on the mountains, which were scattered boulders sticking up.

The wind was so frigid that when Xu Qing stuck his hand out into it, it felt like his flesh would freeze in a matter of moments. There were no mortal kingdoms here. The climate was so horrible that they literally couldn't survive. Only cultivators could handle the cold.

"This feels amazing!" cried the Captain from the front of the dharmaship.

Xu Qing looked in his direction.

The Captain stood at the prow, outside of the defensive shield. He faced the wind, his arms outstretched, his face a mask of contentment. Apparently, he didn't think anything of the frigid cold.

After all, his magical techniques created intense coldness, and in an environment like this, that effect would be enhanced.

“I’ve been thinking about coming here for a long time, little Ah Qing. This place is much more comfortable than the sect.”

The Captain laughed heartily. But then, his expression of contentment changed, and his eyes narrowed as he turned to look off into the distance.

Xu Qing noticed the same thing, and also turned to look.

Yanyan had not noticed what they had, but seeing their reaction, she also turned. Her eyes were not sharp enough to spot what was on the horizon. However, Xu Qing and the Captain could see that, far off in the distance was a group of dozens of flying ships, whizzing in their general direction.

The ships looked like elongated willow leaves, with the prow and the stern curved upward. Even more unique, they were made from crystal or spirit stone. When the sunlight struck them, they dazzled with blinding light. The ships came in all sizes, but as they neared, it became obvious that there was one main ship being guarded by all the other ships. The main ship was a different color than the other ships, being deep blue. It had long banners attached to it that snapped in the wind. Embroidered on those banners were the characters Supreme Arbiter.

Xu Qing and the Captain had seen ships like this before back on the Everlasting Immortal Profundity River. They belonged to the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society. [1]

Standing atop the various ships were disciples in white robes. There were both men and women, and they all seemed profound and unearthly. What was more, the mist that swirled around the ships made them seem like immortals.

Standing on the blue ship was a young man who was dressed differently than his fellow disciples. His robe was blue, and the way it flowed down his lean frame made him seem like a lone pine tree. He had skin as fair as jade, sword-like eyebrows, and a generally majestic appearance. His hands were clasped behind his back as he stood at the prow, his expression tranquil and indifferent, as though he were so noble that he existed at the ultimate peak of all humanity. There were few things in this world that could surprise him. [2]

As the convoy approached Xu Qing’s dharmaship, it didn’t slow down an iota.

They represented the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society, and forgetting the Swordsage Court, the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society was considered the top human sect in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. When the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society traveled, it was only natural that people from all the other sects would make way for them.

The ships created airwaves as they passed which hit Xu Qing’s dharmaship and caused it to wobble backward.

Xu Qing and the Captain looked on with eyes narrowed.

Not one disciple on any of the flying ships turned their heads to look at them. Their cold indifference was palpable as they sped off into the distance.

Obviously, they were also heading toward the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar.

“Now *that’s* impressive!” the Captain said, his eyebrows dancing up and down as he watched the ships disappearing over the horizon. “Once we’re back in the sect, I’ll have to check the intelligence reports to see what good stuff the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society has.”

“That one guy was obviously really strong,” Xu Qing said, referring to the young man in blue. From the young man’s fluctuations, Xu Qing could tell that he had a life lamp. This was the only person he had ever encountered who had a life lamp, other than Master Shengyun.

“That’s the dao child of the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society, Zhang Siyun. For years, he managed to outdo Master Shengyun here in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. He’s basically considered the top chosen in the current generation of disciples. [3]

“He surpassed Master Shengyun even in Foundation Establishment, and when he reached Gold Core, he left Master Shengyun in the dust. I heard he has a life lamp and an imperial-class technique. What’s more, he has nine Supreme Vastness Solitary Sabers, which makes it an imperial-class seed. According to the coalition intelligence reports, Zhang Siyun only has four heavenly palaces, but has battle prowess equivalent to six palaces. In fact, it might even be higher.

“Say, little Ah Qing, don’t tell me you were eying his life lamp? Should we find an opportunity to ‘meet’ him?”

Xu Qing shook his head.

The Captain blinked a few times and then chuckled darkly. “He’s not like Master Shengyun. If he dies, the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society would be enraged, and I doubt even the old man could smooth things out for us.”

Chapter 349: Netherflight City

The Captain’s words contained a reminder. Any person who didn’t know the Captain would assume he was warning Xu Qing that if he impulsively took that life lamp, it would cause big problems.

But Xu Qing instantly picked up on the hidden meaning in the Captain’s words. What he was actually saying was that taking the life lamp would be fine as long as Xu Qing didn’t leave behind any evidence that he was responsible. Also, the Captain wanted to come along.

That said, Xu Qing had no plans to go after the life lamp. It wasn’t because of Zhang Siyun’s amazing background. Rather, he had never interacted with Zhang Siyun, and didn’t have any reason to want him dead.

Xu Qing shook his head again. “I’m not going to bother him.”

The Captain raised his eyebrows and smiled enigmatically. “Being deceptive with me too? Come on, little Ah Qing. You already have battle prowess that surpasses the five-palace level, don’t you?”

Xu Qing didn't answer the question. He just kept looking north, toward the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar and the border of Emperor-Receiving Prefecture.

"Eldest Brother, do you know where Mount Daybreak is?" he asked. [1]

Looking surprised, the Captain said, "Mount Daybreak? Let me think...." A moment later he continued, "I think I saw that place on a map of Sea-Sealing County I saw once. That's actually not very far away. Supposedly, in antiquity, there was a sun palace there." [2]

Xu Qing nodded but didn't ask any further questions.

Time passed. The journey went smoothly. Occasionally they would run into other strange flying ships. They all flew different flags, but they were all heading in the same direction.

Most of the ships carried young cultivators with extraordinary cultivation bases. The Swordsage Court's recruitment announcement was a big deal among the human organizations in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. Chosen members from sects large and small were all heading to join the event. After all, becoming a swordsage would elevate one's status both within the sect and without it, and would bring a better future and more destined opportunities.

After another month went by, Xu Qing finally spotted an astonishing pillar off in the distance. It was fully 3,000 meters thick, pitch-black, and had countless magical symbols and totems carved onto its surface. This was the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar, and it filled one with an indescribable feeling.

Closer examination would reveal that the magical symbols all contained a naturally-occurring dao resonance. It was the same with the totems. They depicted countless bizarre creatures, each of which exuded terrifying pressure. Anyone who saw the huge pillar would feel the urge to drop down and do obeisance.

It pierced the clouds and rose so high it wasn't possible to see exactly where it ended. However, through the clouds, it was just barely possible to see the vague image of a palace. It was a palace that suppressed the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar, and suppressed everything else in the world. However, not even that suppressing force could stop the shocking battle spirit that emanated from the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar. It was obviously a powerful weapon that had ended the lives of countless living beings in the past, and as a result, was filled with a terrifying rancorous energy. However, the battle spirit ensured that the rancorous energy didn't seep out. The only thing that could escape were howls of grief that echoed into the minds of those who looked at the pillar.

Xu Qing felt shaken. But what was even more shocking to him was that the Ghost Emperor mountain in his sea of consciousness was stirring. It was almost as if the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar were calling out to it. And at the same time... the pillar also seemed to be trembling slightly.

Xu Qing inhaled sharply. That said, it wasn't completely unexpected. Back at the Three-Spirits Dao-Suppressing Mountain, the Ghost Emperor's image within him had reacted similarly. The difference was that the reaction this time was stronger.

"When later generations studied the Ghost Emperor," the Captain said, "they speculated that the pillar was his most important weapon, and that he always carried

it with him into battle. The Ghost Emperor's origin has always been a mystery. Nobody knows what species he was. We just know that he was born at an inauspicious time, and only achieved his dao after the broken face of the god arrived.

"We also don't know who his main enemy was. We just know that, when he was just about to die, he threw his weapon into the tundra, then sat down next to the sea, closed his eyes, and passed away into meditation. Some people say that when he died, he was facing the sea to the south, as if he were waiting for something."

As the Captain talked, his voice grew softer and softer until it was almost a whisper.

Xu Qing could sense the Ghost Emperor mountain within his sea of consciousness. Though the face was somewhat blurry, it still resembled his own face.

Maintaining silence, Xu Qing looked at the lands surrounding the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar.

The ground was brilliant white, covered with countless domed tents. There had to be hundreds of thousands of them, creating a very unique city around the pillar. There were no mortals anywhere. These people were cultivators from far and wide. Most were rogue cultivators, and all were humans. There wasn't a single nonhuman to be seen.

There was only one requirement to either live or practice cultivation around the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar. And that was... you had to be human.

The unique thing about the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar was that after seeking enlightenment from its battle spirit for a certain amount of time, it would cause sealing marks to appear in one's mind which would be very beneficial in cultivation.

What was more, the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar had legacies. Humans who climbed the pillar, and if they had the right destined opportunities, could gain enlightenment of these legacies. That was why a lot of rogue human cultivators would gather here. As a result, the place bustled with noise and excitement.

Of course, there were also sects who flew their flag there, and had entire tented garrisons set up. Sects from Emperor-Receiving Prefecture were the most common. The Eight Sect Coalition was no exception.

From a distance, Netherflight City looked like a forest filled with clamoring crowds. Gathered at the base of the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar was a group of several thousand, all of them looking up and chatting amongst themselves.

Upon noticing that, Xu Qing looked closer and realized that there were people on the surface of the pillar. There were over a hundred, and they had all ascended to different heights. Some were climbing. Others were meditating on portions of the magical symbols or totems that stuck out of the surface of the pillar. Many were looking up to a figure who was higher up on the pillar than anyone else. It was a young man wearing the daoist robe of the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society. He wasn't the dao child of the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society. He was another chosen who ranked lower than the dao child. Xu Qing recognized him from the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society convoy they'd seen a month before.

He was currently at about 1,500 meters, which seemed his limit. In fact, after some struggle, he lost his grip and fell. As he descended, a blue light emerged from the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar and shot toward him. The elated chosen reached out, whereupon the blue light turned into a misty blue energy that he grabbed.

Xu Qing had no idea what it was, but he could hear the crowd cheering below.

“So, he was bestowed with secondary springstart energy. That can provide a big boost to life force!”

“The higher you get, the better chance you have at good rewards!”

“That might not be a technique legacy, but secondary springstart energy is still pretty good.”

Hearing the discussion, Xu Qing looked curiously at the misty blue energy in the hand of the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society disciple.

“That’s how the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar works,” the Captain said, his eyes shining with anticipation. “The higher you climb, the better chance you have at getting something good.”

“Based on the intelligence reports I’ve read, the good fortune bestowed by the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar comes in the form of legacies, but also, it gives out special types of energy. For example, the secondary springstart energy relates to life force. The tenstem relighting energy relates to alchemy. The septenary metallic energy is good for equipment forging. [3]

“And then there’s the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar itself. By seeking enlightenment of its battle spirit, you can get very special and helpful sealing marks on your sea of consciousness that give you extraordinary killing power. That option isn’t very difficult. I mean, just looking at the pillar, I can sense enlightenment. Doing so will get you credit during the swordsage recruitment test.”

Xu Qing nodded, having already decided he would seek enlightenment.

Upon seeing Xu Qing look so serious, the Captain felt very pleased. The truth was that gaining enlightenment of that sealing mark was very difficult. However, in order to emphasize his superiority as the Eldest Brother, he had made it sound very simple. Therefore, when Xu Qing took a long time, it would make him, Chen Erniu, seem that much more formidable.

It was in this manner that Xu Qing, the Captain, and Yanyan got closer and closer to Netherflight City. Eventually, Xu Qing put his dharmaship away. Dropping down into the tents, they moved in the direction of the Eight Sect Coalition’s garrison. The city was crowded now, and it was expensive to rent accommodations, so to save money, it was only natural they would head to their own sect’s area.

They soon arrived. The Eight Sect Coalition garrison was set up not very far from the pillar itself, and had over a hundred tents set up. Once inside, Xu Qing, the Captain, and Yanyan dropped their

disguises. When their true faces were revealed, the other coalition disciples immediately noticed them.

The Captain and Yanyan didn't attract much attention, but Xu Qing did. Given that he had dao child remuneration, and was very well-known in the coalition, it caused numerous coalition disciples to immediately clasp hands and bow in his direction. There were a bit over a hundred disciples present, most of them in Foundation Establishment, with only a few in Gold Core. Few of them qualified to be swordsages, as they didn't meet the age requirement. Rather, they had been sent here by the sect for training purposes.

There weren't many from Seven Blood Eyes. The Mute was there, and when he saw Xu Qing and the Captain, he bowed reverentially. Then he hurried over to Xu Qing's side and started looking around vigilantly.

After settling in, Xu Qing learned from the Seven Blood Eyes disciples that this group had been led here by Sir Bloodsmelter and Yanyan's grandmother. Also present were the sect leaders of the House of Grue Hunters and the Heavenmirror Treasure Sect.

Master Seventh hadn't come.

However, upon arriving, the patriarch and the other top cultivators had apparently gone directly to the Swordsage Court to discuss some unknown matter. Because of that, Xu Qing decided he wouldn't immediately go offer formal greetings.

Yanyan felt a bit guilty, as she had secretly left Seven Blood Eyes without telling anyone. When she heard her grandmother was present, she was about to say something to Xu Qing when her transmission jade slip vibrated. Looking at it, she sighed.

"Big Bro Xu Qing, my grandma knows I'm here. I have to go see her and smooth things over. Otherwise, she'll never let me out of her sight again."

Meanwhile, the Captain was breathing a sigh of relief that Arch-Immortal Plumdark hadn't come. "I wonder why the patriarch is here. Probably because of me. He always seems very serious, but the truth is that he really likes me. He probably wants to encourage me to go back to the sect. Sadly, you're not on the same level as me, little Ah Qing. You're just not well-spoken! Remember, when we get back, as long as you pay me what you owe, I can give you a few tips on how to suck up to the old-timers."

Xu Qing looked at him, blinking. "You're right, Eldest Brother. In fact, I suggest you go right now to offer greetings to the patriarch. He might even have some advice about the recruitment test. You might learn some things that will help both of us."

"That's a good point!" The Captain's eyes lit up, and he took a few steps before stopping and looking suspiciously at Xu Qing. "Hold on, little Ah Qing. You don't usually say things like that. Something's off here...."

Xu Qing simply looked curiously at the Captain.

The Captain looked back suspiciously. However, before he could say anything, a cold, booming snort rang out from above, causing everything to tremble.

“The Swordsage Court is off-limits to all nonhumans! Any nonhuman who encroaches will be slaughtered!”

Chapter 350: A Message From Plumdark

As the voice echoed through the city, the countless humans therein looked up into the dome of heaven.

A figure was descending from the cloudy apex of the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar. He was middle-aged and looked very intimidating in his government uniform. His head was adorned with a sky-blue cap inlaid with silver, and his hands were covered in violet scale gloves. On his back was a greatsword wrapped in black cloth, with only the hilt visible.

Shockingly, three massive abyssal vortexes appeared along with him. The abyssal vortexes looked like natural phenomena, and caused everything around them to shake. The feeling they imparted made it seem like each one contained a secret trove within it. Anguished howls, enraged roars, and terrifying fluctuations emerged from the three secret troves, almost as if enormous, fiendish entities were imprisoned within them.

Wild colors flashed everywhere, and the wind swept back and forth as he clenched his right hand into a fist and launched a strike toward a distant spot in the sky. His action caused the three secret troves behind him to erupt with dazzling light. Countless flying swords appeared, filling the space between heaven and earth with something like a flood.

Every individual sword radiated hair-raising power, as if it could split apart the dome of heaven and pulverize space itself. And all of them were shooting off into the distance.

At the same time, a howl echoed through the sky as a blurry figure appeared. Previously, that figure had been in concealment, but it could no longer hide its fluctuations, and was forced to reveal itself.

It was an extremely ugly beast. Precisely speaking, it was an enormous maggot with overlapping flaps of skin covering it. It was 3,000 meters long, was covered with viscous fluid, and it reeked. Sticking out from its head were two feelers. Each feeler had a head on the end, one male, one female. They had green skin, red eyes, and vicious facial expressions. Shockingly, the maggot also had a head on its tail. It was an old man who was currently belching out black mist. As the mist billowed out, the enormous maggot shot backward at high speed.

However, it was too slow. Countless flying swords shot down, stabbing into its repulsive body. None of its defenses were useful in any way. In the shortest of moments, the swords slashed it to pieces in grisly fashion.

Only the three heads managed to survive, and they started fleeing in the black mist. Of course, the idea that they would escape was pure fantasy. After the beast’s massive body collapsed, the man in the government uniform took a step forward. Moving with incredible speed, he lifted his right hand, causing countless swords to converge there and take the shape of a massive green sword.

He swept the sword down, and the female head exploded. His second sword attack destroyed the male head. For his third attack, he threw the sword, causing a green flood dragon to surge out and devour the old man’s head in a single bite.

After those things were accomplished, heaven and earth went still. All the cultivators below were deeply shaken.

Voice cool, the middle-aged man said, “Recently, the Swordsage Court operated on orders to crush the Three-Spirits Dao-Suppressing Mountain and take August Spirit Nethersprite captive. Because of that, these demons, devils, ghosts, and monsters are on the move. That’s what this was about. Let me reiterate the rules of the Swordsage Court. This area is off-limits to nonhumans. Only humans can set foot here!”

The man performed an incantation gesture and pointed at the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar. In response, the pillar vibrated, and the battle spirit within it erupted out. It contained deadly extermination, as well as a baleful, tyrannical energy that spread out in all directions.

Shockwaves filled an area of 5,000 kilometers, completely unstoppable. The battle spirit seemed conscious as it swept through all the cultivators present. Apparently, it was screening them. Occasionally, popping sounds rang out here and there as several hundred individuals in the city exploded. Seven or eight flew up into the air, only to scream in agony as they died.

A moment later, everything went back to normal.

With that done, the middle-aged man vanished back up into the clouds.

After a long moment of silence, gasps and cries of astonishment could be heard. Xu Qing took a deep breath, as did the Captain. They had also been scanned by that battle spirit. Even though both were human, and knew that there wouldn’t be any problems, the feeling they had experienced left them both feeling jumpy. It also went to show how domineering the Swordsage Court was.

Obviously, the man in the government uniform had been in the Spirit Trove level, not Void Returning. However, once he showed his face, all of the patriarchs in the various sects were completely cowed, not by his cultivation base, but by his identity.

He represented the true orthodoxy of humanity, one of the Five Greater Celestial Divisions, the Swordsage Court!

After enough time had passed for an incense stick to burn, the city was back to normal. That said, the eyes of all the cultivators shone brightly, and many of them couldn’t help but look toward the top of the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar, where Emperor-Receiving Prefecture’s Swordsage Court was headquartered.

The actions taken by the Swordsage Court just now ensured that the vast majority of disciples present were very enlivened. The Captain was included. In fact, he was already dreaming about what it would be like for him to be a swordsage.

Though Xu Qing also wanted to become a swordsage, what was more impressive to him was what happened with the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar. When the pillar vibrated earlier, he had clearly sensed a similar vibration in the Ghost Emperor mountain in his sea of consciousness. What was more, a few dozen magical symbols had appeared on the mountain. Those symbols contained a very powerful battle spirit that was very thought-provoking to him.

Are they the battle spirit symbols the Captain was talking about? I guess they really are easy to get.

That said, Xu Qing wasn’t absolutely sure of that assessment.

Regardless, he could tell that it was possible to extract the symbols. He waved his hand and exercised a thought, whereupon one of the symbols disappeared from his sea of consciousness and

reappeared on his palm. It glittered with bright light and a tremendous battle spirit. Xu Qing could already sense that the symbol could be used as a magical technique to unleash deadly killing power.

“Eldest Brother, is this the battle spi—”

“Battle spirit symbol?” the Captain said, looking stunned. However, he quickly regained his composure. Sounding relaxed, he continued, “That thingy... isn’t anything to take lightly. Not bad. Not bad at all. Now you have a shot at some bonus points! So... when did you gain enlightenment?”

“When the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar vibrated. They just appeared in my sea of consciousness.” Something strange seemed to be going on with the Captain, though Xu Qing wasn’t sure of the details.

Meanwhile, the Captain cleared his throat and, ignoring the disappointment he felt in his heart, laughed heartily. “You have good powers of understanding, little Ah Qing. That said, you’re not quite on my level. You see, I also gained enlightenment just now. So remember not to get cocky. One symbol doesn’t really count for much. After all, I got five, but I didn’t say anything. And that’s because you have to get nine to get any bonus points.”

Xu Qing sensed the dozens of battle spirit symbols in his sea of consciousness, but didn’t say anything. He was getting the sense that gaining enlightenment of those symbols wasn’t as easy as the Captain made it out to be.

“Alright, you keep working on that enlightenment! I’m going to go see the patriarch.” With that, the Captain prepared to leave and seek enlightenment of the symbols somewhere else. After seeing how easily Xu Qing succeeded, he was now feeling a lot of pressure. That was especially true considering how he’d previously made a big deal about how easy it was. If he couldn’t succeed soon, it would become a case of picking up a rock only to drop it on one’s own foot.

Seeing the Captain leaving, Xu Qing decided to do some more work with the symbols, and turned to head to his accommodations.

However, the two of them had only taken a few steps when the Captain suddenly stopped in place. It was only at this point that he realized that, moments ago, Xu Qing had used the word ‘they.’

Eyes widening, he turned in place. “Hold on, Xu Qing. Did you just say ‘they’?”

Xu Qing stopped in place.

“How... how many did you gain enlightenment of?” the Captain asked carefully.

Xu Qing looked at him, then waved his hand, causing thirty symbols to fly out and swirl around his hand, pulsing with an intense battle spirit.

The Captain slumped visibly. “You got all of those just now?”

“Yeah. You were right, Captain. It wasn’t hard at all.” Xu Qing blinked a few times.

The Captain wasn’t sure what to say. He just knew he suddenly felt very tired.

Turning, he hurried away and didn't look back. Inside he was fuming, and had already decided that he was going to sit in front of the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar and work nonstop until he had forty symbols.

No, forty isn't enough. I'll get sixty!

Xu Qing grinned inwardly, then turned and went into his residence. Once inside, he set up his various defenses, then sat down cross-legged to study the symbols. He knew why all of those symbols had appeared at the same time. It was obviously related to the Ghost Emperor mountain. After all, both things had the same origin.

Xu Qing lost himself in study. Three days passed in a flash.

On the third day, Huang Yikun showed up. Clearly he hadn't come of his own accord. All he did was toss a jade slip to Xu Qing and say, "The matriarch said to give this to you." Then he left. [1]

When Huang Yikun said 'matriarch,' he was referring to Arch-Immortal Plumdark.

Xu Qing hesitated for a moment, then picked up the jade slip and sent some divine will into it. Instantly, Arch-Immortal Plumdark's languid, enticing voice filled his mind.

"Do you miss me, child?"

Xu Qing sat there in silence.

"I really liked the gifts you sent me before you left."

Xu Qing looked up in the direction of the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar, to where he assumed the Captain was.

"I also read your letter. Oh, you! I would never have guessed that a quiet person like you would write such audacious things.... You said you wanted to focus on getting stronger, and wanted to avoid gossip. And since it's not easy for us to meet in public very often, you decided communicating by letter would be best. Since you asked for a reply, I sent it to you with Huang Yikun."

Xu Qing's eyes went wide.

"I saw your request about Chen Erniu. Considering all the things you promised, I can just forget about the situation with him. For the time being, I won't bother him. But don't you forget about all those promises you made!"

Xu Qing was having trouble controlling his breathing.

"I heard you were going to the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar. Can you make sure things go smoothly for the Dark Serenity Sect disciples there? Then hurry back. By the way, regarding the way you wanted me to address you. Oh, child, you really are something else. For now, that can't happen. I need to see how you behave going forward."

Veins bulged on Xu Qing's forehead. For quite a while, he sat in place trying to calm down. Then he took out his bamboo slip, found the Captain's name, and forcefully scratched out the question mark behind it.