

## Timescape 351

Chapter 351: Like the Return of an Old Friend

The Captain was currently threading his way through the crowd near the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar, trying to find a good spot to seek enlightenment. During the past three days, his efforts had all met with failure, and he was convinced it was because he had been in a bad spot. He needed to get closer. Before he could find the right spot, he suddenly got a very bad premonition.

I have really good intuition. Something is off....

The Captain then started thinking back to all the things he'd done recently.

Did the eye I left at the Ghost Emperor mountain get discovered? Were my informants in the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society discovered? Did the clone I left behind at the Three-Spirits Dao-Suppressing Mountain get found out? Did my agent in the Church of Departure turn on me? Could Flame Phoenix have found out that I planned to raid his nest? Did my archenemy in Forbidden by the Zombie finally wake up?

After a lot of thought, something occurred to him.

Did Arch-Immortal Plumdark respond?

All of a sudden, the Captain felt a headache coming on. He wasn't sure exactly what the problem was, but the lingering fear within him kept getting stronger. Finally, he cautiously left the crowd. Even after changing his aura and disguising his physical appearance, though, he still felt uneasy. Therefore, he made his way further from the pillar and found a rather remote tent to rent. Inside, he cautiously continued to seek enlightenment. Yet he still felt strange, so he performed a double-handed incantation gesture and used a secret magic to make his disguise even better.

Eventually, Xu Qing appeared. He searched near the pillar, but found no traces of the Captain. His shadow could aid to an extent, but there was a lot of area to cover. Unless Xu Qing actually went through the entire city, he would have a hard time succeeding.

After finding nothing, Xu Qing left.

A few days passed in which nothing happened. Seeing that, the Captain calmed down a bit. Although he kept his disguise up, he began to focus more deeply on seeking enlightenment.

Xu Qing didn't give up, though. He also continued to seek enlightenment, causing more of the battle spirit symbols to appear in his sea of consciousness. But he also spent time exploring all of the countless tents that made up the city. Because there were so many cultivators here, there were all sorts of markets that sold just about everything. Having seen many such markets during his time searching for the Captain, Xu Qing had an opportunity to buy some poisonous plants.

Every time he went out, he made sure to do so in disguise. In the days that had passed, he had received dueling challenges sent by chosen disciples from all over Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. News of his presence here had spread already. As the only person in the Eight Sect Coalition with dao child remuneration, his name was well known in a lot of sects. After all, he had two life lamps, an imperial-class technique, and he had killed Master Shengyun. Because of that, he was considered a force to be reckoned with among this generation of disciples.

The Swordsage Court's recruiting event was about to begin, and many people thought that they could attract attention by crushing chosen disciples from the big sects. Because of that, Xu Qing wasn't the only one to receive dueling challenges. All of the coalition chosen were dealing with the same thing, as were disciples from the other major sects.

There was only one person who didn't receive a single challenge, and that was the dao child Zhang Siyun from the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society. He was considered the top disciple of the generation in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. Everyone was saying that he already had six-palace battle prowess. For him to have accomplished that at such a young age ensured that everyone feared him and no one dared to fight him. That said, he wasn't even in the city. He had gone out to the tundra, reportedly to take advantage of the harsh environment to train.

Given that most people thought Xu Qing had three- or four-palace battle prowess, he was the obvious second choice to challenge. Even people from the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society issued challenges. However, Xu Qing had no interest in accepting any such pointless brawls.

At the moment, he was in a rather large market, browsing the stalls in the hopes of finding some special poisonous plants. There were a lot of people present, including local rogue cultivators as well as disciples from all sorts of sects. It was a bustling place.

At a certain point, Xu Qing stopped walking and looked at one particular stall. It specialized in materials for pill concocting and equipment forging, and they had some unusual medicinal plants.

That included one stalk of fivecord goldbug fungus. In Xu Qing's medicinal codex, that plant was described as being perfect for mixing poisons with other medicines. What was more, it had a unique property in that, after being harvested, it required golden energy to survive. [1]

As he approached the vendor stall, he heard someone mention his name in conversation.

"Did you hear? Li Ziliang from the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society accepted nine challenges. And he came out victorious in all nine! With a four-palace cultivation base, he's the most prominent person in the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society other than their dao child." [2]

"He's an extraordinary person. Not too long ago, he climbed to the 1,500-meter mark on the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar, but apparently that's not his limit."

"He was just born at the wrong time. If Zhang Siyun wasn't around, Li Ziliang would definitely be the current dao child of the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society."

"I heard that he already sent three dueling challenges to the quasi-dao child Xu Qing from the Eight Sect Coalition. That Xu Qing is obviously afraid of him. Most people from backwater places are like that. They don't dare show their face and actually fight. People from just about every sect are laughing about it."

Xu Qing expressionlessly looked over his shoulder to see three disciples from one of the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society's subsidiary sects. The strongest among them was in the Foundation Establishment level.

Xu Qing had seen a lot of disciples like this. They only had middling cultivation bases, but they liked to go around commentating about the top experts. It was only by sarcastically critiquing superiors that they could feel a sense of self.

Looking at all three of their faces, Xu Qing then turned back to the vendor stall and the fivecord goldbug fungus.

The proprietor was a bald cultivator with one missing eye. His remaining eye pulsed with a cold light as he sized up Xu Qing. After wrapping up the medicinal plant, he said, "That'll be 2,000 spirit stones."

Xu Qing inspected the bug fungus, then nodded and handed over the spirit stones. "Got any more?"

"Sure!" the proprietor replied, his single eye lighting up. With that, he produced a clay bottle that he carefully opened. Inside were three additional goldbug fungi that he gave to Xu Qing.

However, what attracted Xu Qing's attention even more than the medicinal plants was the clay bottle. Most commonly, cultivators would use bottles made from jade, metal, or sometimes even wood. Clay bottles weren't exactly common. Given that fivecord goldbug fungus required golden energy to stay fresh, Xu Qing was somewhat surprised. After studying the bottles, he noticed an incisive aura coming off of it.

"That has golden energy in it?" he asked, pointing at the bottle.

The bald cultivator grinned. "What's inside this bottle, Fellow Daoist, is no ordinary golden energy. It's septenary goldmetal energy from the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar. I just happened to strike it lucky when I was climbing the pillar.

"You can only store that kind of energy in a bottle like this. Normally speaking, it's considered a disposable material used in equipment forging. However, I don't have any equipment I need forged at the moment, so for the time being I was using it to keep the bug fungus fresh. Interested in buying it? It's expensive. 500,000 spirit stones!"

The bald cultivator licked his lips. He was convinced that Xu Qing was a cultivator from a big sect. After all, he had purchased the bug fungus for a hefty sum, so he obviously had money.

Xu Qing thought for a moment. The Captain had explained a bit about the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar's energies to him, and he remembered one called the septenary goldmetal energy. It made him think of his iron skewer. After mulling the matter over, he took out a jade slip and pretended to send and receive some voice messages.

Then he said, "After asking around, I confirmed that this kind of energy isn't exactly rare. I can give 50,000. Take it or leave it."

The bald cultivator really wanted to get his hands on some spirit stones to buy the medicinal pills he needed to break through from the three-flame Foundation Establishment level into Gold Core. Having assumed that Xu Qing had a lot of money, he'd named a very high price.

That said, the price Xu Qing came back with seemed laughable. Before he could say anything in response, though, Xu Qing continued speaking.

“I also have a palace-forming pill.” As the words left his mouth, he took out a medicinal pill bottle, which contained one of the pills he’d purchased before attempting his Gold Core breakthrough. He ended up never needing that pill, which was worth about 300,000 spirit stones. It would be very helpful to someone trying to reach the Gold Core level and form heavenly palaces, and was the type of thing you could normally only get in a big sect. To rogue cultivators, it was virtually priceless.

The bald cultivator’s expression turned serious. Opening the bottle, he inhaled, and then his eyes lit up. Nodding enthusiastically, he said, “Deal!”

After handing the clay bottle to Xu Qing, he closed his shop.

Xu Qing put the bottle away and turned to head back to the garrison and see if the energy would be useful for his iron skewer. Along the way, he noticed a hubbub coming from the direction of the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar.

Looking over he saw that the crowds were all focused on someone who had climbed past the 1,500-meter spot on the pillar.

It was the very same chosen from the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society who he had previously seen climbing in that position. And it was the same person the other cultivators had been talking about earlier, Li Ziliang, who had challenged Xu Qing several times, only to be ignored. He had passed his previous limit, and was now at the 1,800-meter mark. That, of course, caused the cultivators below to buzz with conversation.

As for Huang Yikun and the chosen from Seven Blood Eyes, none of them had passed 600 meters. Whether it was disciples from the Eight Sect Coalition or other sects, Li Ziliang had surpassed them all, and earned himself a lot of recognition in the process.

Xu Qing looked away without batting an eyelid. He couldn’t care less what was happening with Li Ziliang. Leaving the market, he was nearing the Eight Sect Coalition’s garrison when he noticed a daoist altar.

There were many such altars around the Supreme Beginning Netherflight City. They were locations set up by the Swordsage Court where swordsages would occasionally give lectures on various subjects. The lectures weren’t technically free, as it was customary to give a spirit stone tip to the lecturer. At the moment, there were a few dozen rogue cultivators gathered around the altar, listening to a lecture, not about cultivation, but rather, about the dao of plants and vegetation.

Xu Qing could hear an old, grizzled voice.

“Blue lotus flower syrup, also known as blue lotus syrup, is derived from the flowering buds of water lilies. It is an aromatic liquid created by a unique heating technique. It can stabilize the lungs, help control bloody coughing from fire-related techniques....”

“Golden twistgrass, also known as....”

Xu Qing stopped in place. The descriptions of the two plants were very familiar to him. In fact, they were the same as the description in his own Classic of Plants and Vegetation. Word for word. [3]

Shaken, he turned.

The sight that met his eyes caused a tremor to pass through him, and his eyes to light up.

He was looking at an emaciated old man in a gray robe. His face was very wrinkled, but his eyes glittered. There was something profoundly wise in his gaze, and his voice was gentle and kind. He looked very similar to Grandmaster Bai, although he was obviously a different person.

The light in Xu Qing's eyes faded a bit. Standing there, he listened to the lecture for a short time, then left.

#### Chapter 352: Things Turn Unusual

Darkness arrived earlier in the north than in the south. Evening came and went quickly, giving way to night. The reason was that the snow didn't like the sun, and the dome of heaven didn't like dusk. As a result, the sky turned pitch black very quickly. And the night was long.

Xu Qing stood outside his tent in the garrison, looking into the night in the direction of South Phoenix. The continent was very, very far away.

*I wonder how Chen Feiyuan is doing. And Tingyu. With them around, Teacher's grave will be well-attended to. [1]*

Xu Qing stepped into his tent. Sitting down cross-legged, he sighed and closed his eyes. After calming his heart, he took out the clay bottle.

*I hope this works.* Placing the bottle to the side, he took out the black iron skewer that had been with him for so long. He was intimately familiar with every angle and line of the skewer.

Back in the slums, one of his scholar teachers had said, "*The older people get, the more sentimental they are.*"

Xu Qing didn't completely agree with that. After all, he wasn't very old, yet he was very sentimental. Whether it was people or things, as long as they lent him a helping hand, he would never forget them. Feeling a bit emotional, he put the iron skewer into the clay bottle. Then he cast his senses into the bottle as well, to keep tabs on what was happening.

Almost immediately, he sensed a stream of golden energy stirring in the bottle. It was like a mist that swirled around the iron skewer, some of it entering the skewer, but most of it flowing on its surface, making it stronger. It was a slow process. The night had passed, and the haze of dawn filled the sky by the time the energy disappeared. All of it had entered into the skewer.

Xu Qing took the skewer out of the bottle and held it in his hand to examine it. He looked closely at every square inch of it, and afterward, he smiled. The large cracks which had appeared on the skewer were mostly gone. Of even greater significance was that the overall quality of the skewer was better than before. It was almost like it had been reforged.

Of course, Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior had more authority on the subject than anyone, so after Xu Qing summoned him, he took a long moment to inspect it.

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“Milord,” he said confidently, “I can tell the quality of the skewer has changed. It’s similar to when a cultivator achieves a breakthrough. The same type of thing has happened to the skewer. Going forward, it should transform from being a prized treasure into a magical device. Furthermore, thanks to the way I augmented it, once it’s a magical device, then it will be as powerful as any spirit weapon! In fact, you might as well just say that it already is a spirit weapon! All it needs is some time to mature.”

Xu Qing nodded thoughtfully.

The septenary goldmetal energy had been expensive, but getting more would obviously be the fastest way to complete the process. That said, Xu Qing wasn’t sure that he’d even be able to find enough of that specific type of energy to buy.

I might as well take a look around. Also, I can take a shot at climbing the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar. Maybe I can get some of that septenary goldmetal energy on my own.

Having made that decision, he put the skewer away and closed his eyes to meditate. When the sky was bright, he opened his eyes and went out into the city to scour the markets for septenary goldmetal energy.

It was just as he had expected. The unique energies from the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar did exist, just not in great quantity. After shopping for an entire day, he only managed to buy three streams of energy. Based on his calculations, if he wanted to elevate the black iron skewer to a higher level, he would need at least thirty streams.

With such matters on his mind, he headed back to the garrison. Along the way, he went to the same daoist altar as before. Just like the previous day, that old man was there lecturing about the dao of plants and vegetation.

“Nightcorpse morning glory, also known as poisonous mountain rootmottle, refers to the stalk and root of feverfew veined turtledove chrysanthemums. It is a woody vine-type plant found in ravines of shady yin-type mountains, usually in chilly streams or jungle thickets...” [2]

His voice sounded ancient and wise. However, there were fewer rogue cultivators gathered by the altar today compared to yesterday. There were only a dozen or so this time. Xu Qing listened to the lecture for a while, then left. This time, he left a spirit stone behind.

Time passed. Half a month.

During that time, more and more human disciples from various sects arrived at the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar. As a result, the city grew more crowded and energetic. More and more cultivators were climbing the pillar on a daily basis.

However, the person who continued to remain in first place was Li Ziliang from the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society. He would soon surpass 2,400 meters. Of course, the higher one climbed, the more difficult it became to get higher.

He had issued three more dueling challenges to the coalition, all of them addressed to Xu Qing.

Xu Qing ignored them. Other than shopping for septenary goldmetal energy, he spent most of his time at that daoist altar before returning to the garrison. That was his routine for the time being.

Eventually, the old man started giving lectures about pill concocting, whereupon Xu Qing took to sitting down for entire lectures. Grandmaster Bai had focused on plants and vegetation, and didn't instruct Xu Qing much in pill concocting. For the most part, Xu Qing was self-taught in that regard, by means of trial and error. Though he had a measure of success, generally speaking, he felt that pill concocting was a weak spot for him. He listened carefully to the lectures. Nowadays, he was fairly clear-headed, but occasionally he found himself daydreaming about past times in the scavenger basecamp.

He felt more than ever that the unprepossessing old man had a high level of skill in the dao of alchemy. After all, it usually took only a single statement of his to suddenly give Xu Qing immense new insights.

“Using the principles of yin-yang polarity in alchemy is only the start. The dao of alchemy is deep and profound; to date, humans have amassed 6,000 pill concocting techniques.

“I don't hold any of those techniques on high. The reason is that they're only external manifestations of alchemy. In other words, all they can do is teach you skill in the principles of yin-yang polarity. Real skill is not about concocting and refining, but rather, about using plants and vegetation.

“All of you remember this: there are myriads upon myriads of paths. But there is only one dao. Therefore, skill in the dao of alchemy comes down to your foundation. With that foundation, you can experiment to find what methods are most suitable to you. In the final analysis, it's best to take the simplest methods and mix them into something effective.

“In my opinion 'concocting' and 'refining' are simply ways of bringing out the best medicinal aspects and combinations of plants and vegetation. All of the concocting methods are matters of skill when it comes to pill concocting. But what I hope is that cultivators who study my alchemy techniques can understand what's under the surface. That is the true way to achieve lasting success.”

Xu Qing listened in a daze, and for a brief moment, that old man actually became Grandmaster Bai in his eyes. He sat straight and listened carefully. As he did, he came to a much deeper understanding of the dao of alchemy as well as plants and vegetation. There was no question that his skill in those things was improving as a result.

What was more, he now realized he had a system upon which to build. His foundation had been forged by Grandmaster Bai, and it was incredibly sound. After that, he was completely self-taught. Through the chaos of trial and error, he had built on his foundation, focusing primarily on the dao of poison. Because of that, his overall system of the dao of alchemy had not collapsed.

Listening to this old man's lectures had helped him to *get rid of the weeds and keep the flowers*. Now, he had a clear direction to pursue.

It was similar to what Master Seventh had told him upon taking him to seek enlightenment from the Ghost Emperor mountain. Now, Xu Qing had another 'god' in his heart, shining light on the dao of alchemy.

Xu Qing felt happy. More happy than he had been in a long time. He felt like he was filling up with rich and meaningful knowledge. However, unexpected events can easily catch someone off guard, and that was what happened with Xu Qing's studies.

There was something he needed to handle.

It boiled down to certain conflicts that weren't incredibly serious, but still had to be addressed. There was friction between disciples from the Eight Sect Coalition, specifically the Dark Serenity Sect and Seven Blood Eyes, and disciples from the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society. And it related to Xu Qing. Rumors had been spreading like wildfire regarding how Xu Qing was ignoring Li Ziliang's challenges. And of course, those rumors weren't sitting well with the coalition disciples. As a result, it was only natural that friction resulted.

At a certain point, some disciples from the Dark Serenity Sect and Seven Blood Eyes actually got in a tussle with some disciples from the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society. Li Ziliang ended up stepping in to stop the fight, and unceremoniously arrested the coalition disciples, roughing them up in the process.

Then he sent a message to the coalition saying that before he would release the arrested disciples, Xu Qing had to come and apologize to him in person.

This was obviously an attempt to force Xu Qing out into the open.

News traveled fast. As disciples from other sects became aware of the situation, it quickly became the biggest news of the day. After all, Xu Qing had refused all of Li Ziliang's challenges up to this point. People who didn't know Xu Qing assumed it was a show of weakness on his part. And now everyone was wondering what Xu Qing would do in response to Li Ziliang's actions. Would he flee?

"How annoying," Xu Qing murmured, frowning. Of course, he wasn't annoyed at the coalition disciples, but rather, at Li Ziliang. It was obvious that Li Ziliang was throwing his weight around in the hopes of standing out to the swordsages. It wasn't a bad plan. However, arresting people and roughing them up was a bit excessive. And when people went overboard in matters like this, it meant that something unusual was happening.

Xu Qing thought long and hard about what that unusual aspect might be. For example, did Li Ziliang challenge him so many times because he had some ulterior motive? Based on his lackadaisical attitude, it didn't seem like he had some complicated plan underway. He was just trying to force Xu Qing to fight. And considering it wasn't a fight to the death, Xu Qing could only surmise that Li Ziliang wanted to test him out and see what he was capable of.

Whether it was in the slums or the scavenger basecamp, or even when he was first starting out in Seven Blood Eyes, Xu Qing had only ever had one way of dealing with threats. And that was to

make sure his opponents never got a second chance to threaten him. He would always kill them the first time around.

One of the things he hated most was being forced to end a fight without killing his opponent. After all, it only made sense that an opponent who survived a fight with him would hate him more than before, thus creating a big grudge. And if that person kept getting stronger, then they would be a potential calamity.

Therefore, Xu Qing took out his transmission jade slip and sent a message to Sir Bloodsmelter.

*“Patriarch, it’s prohibited to kill other cultivators in the area surrounding the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar. Does ‘the area surrounding’ the pillar mean everything? Or just Netherflight City?”*

There was a moment of silence before the patriarch responded.

*“Just the city. Look, boy, you... ah, whatever. Do what you have to do.”*

Xu Qing nodded. He clasped hands respectfully to the old man lecturing on the daoist altar, though he knew the old man wouldn’t notice. All the old man did was lecture, and he never paid attention to what was going on around him. That said, Xu Qing valued etiquette. After offering his respects, he flew up into the sky like a bolt of lightning. Once he was out of the city, he hovered in midair and spoke in a voice that echoed into the city.

“Li Ziliang, I challenge you to a fight to the death. Do you accept?”

In response to his words, the cultivators in the city erupted into chaos.

Chapter 353: Will Implantation

Xu Qing's words rumbled like thunder through the city.

All cultivators who heard him trembled, especially the disciples from all the other random sects. It had been a very long time since a duel to the death had been fought here. Dueling challenges were common, and were generally tolerated. After all, when human chosen gathered, it was hard to avoid conflicts and hierarchical friction. Add in the rules of the Swordsage Court, and it ensured that duels were actually common. Virtually every sect present had either issued dueling challenges or been given them.

But on the eve of the Swordsage Court’s recruiting event, there hadn’t been any duels to the death. Because of that, Xu Qing’s words were a big shock. Never could anyone have imagined that Xu Qing, who had refused so many challenges, causing everyone to think he was weak, would be the one to utter such murderous words. It surpassed everyone’s expectations.

“He’s so ruthless!”

“Is he the kind of person who doesn’t do much when he’s not fighting, but when he does fight, he goes for the kill?”

“I was wondering why a quasi-dao child like this Xu Qing would be so weak. Turns out he’s actually got what it takes!”

“It’s hard to say at this point. Hopefully Xu Qing isn’t just suicidal. Li Ziliang isn’t an ordinary opponent!”

The city was already abuzz with conversation as numerous cultivators flew up into the air and looked in the direction of the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society’s garrison. Everyone wanted to see how Li Ziliang would respond to the challenge. That included coalition disciples. They knew Xu Qing a lot better than the other random cultivators, and weren’t worried at all about the situation. That was even truer of the Seven Blood Eyes disciples. More and more people turned their attention to the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society. Everyone was waiting for Li Ziliang’s response.

Even people climbing the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar stopped to see what would happen. It was no exaggeration to say that, in the shortest of moments, Xu Qing’s words drew the attention of everyone present.

Xu Qing was the only person in the Eight Sect Coalition with dao child remuneration, and thus, he had a very unique standing.

Li Ziliang was the same. Though he wasn’t the Supreme Arbiter dao child, he was very well known. What was more, he had caused a big stir recently by issuing over ten challenges and winning all of them easily. He had four-palace battle prowess, and had consistently stayed at the head of the pack of the people climbing the pillar.

Some of the swordsmen were paying close attention to him. It was no surprise that a fight between him and Xu Qing was going to be a big deal.

As more and more people focused on the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society garrison, Li Ziliang was there, his expression placid, but his eyes cold. At the moment, he was hesitating. The average person didn’t know much about Xu Qing, but Li Ziliang had looked into him and knew that he wasn’t as simple as he seemed. If it wasn’t a duel to the death, he wouldn’t have hesitated to accept. Without death on the line, he would have been fine putting his all into the fight.

What was more, he was confident he would win. He knew that fighting Xu Qing would attract a lot of attention. Considering Xu Qing’s standing in the Eight Sect Coalition, if Li Ziliang won, it would be a big blow to Xu Qing. And Li Ziliang’s reputation would get a big boost. Beyond that, showing off how talented he was would attract the attention of the Swordsman Court, and could potentially get him some bonus points in the standings.

Most importantly of all, a certain person had promised him big rewards if he took advantage of this opportunity to probe Xu Qing and get a sense of his limitations. He knew full well that person was eyeing Xu Qing’s life lamps. Also, that person was very meticulous in fighting opponents, and only did so when completely confident of gaining victory.

Truth be told, Li Ziliang was also interested in Xu Qing’s life lamps. That said, he wasn’t completely prepared for a duel to the death... and thus he hesitated.

He wasn’t back at home in the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society headquarters. And if he accepted this duel, the result would be death for one participant. And given the circumstances, neither the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society nor the Eight Sect Coalition would be able to interfere and stop the fight.

However, Li Ziliang had four heavenly palaces, and very impressive battle prowess. Based on the intelligence reports he had read, Xu Qing only had three heavenly palaces. Even if he did have an imperial-class technique, there was no way he was on the same level as Li Ziliang.

A duel to the death.... If I kill him and take his life lamps, the Eight Sect Coalition won't be able to do anything about it. But the fact that Xu Qing is the one who issued the dueling challenge, he's obviously confident in winning. It's hard to say how this fight will turn out....

Li Ziliang was no idiot, and had already analyzed the situation from all angles. However, it was a situation of *if you ride a tiger, it's hard to get off*. He was the one who had already issued multiple challenges. If he didn't accept this duel to the death, he would lose all face, and all the prestige he had earned lately would evaporate.

Although there's some risk involved, this is also a good opportunity. Besides, I have a trump card. Other than that devious psychopath Zhang Siyun, no one has ever countered my trump card.

Li Ziliang was taking his time making a decision, and thus the chatter out in the city grew louder. Eventually, the wind brought some of the voices to Li Ziliang, and it caused killing intent to flicker in his eyes.

He couldn't hesitate any longer. Laughing coldly, he said, "You're looking to get killed, Xu Qing. Don't blame me for what happens!"

He flew up into the sky, becoming the center of attention of the countless cultivators in the city. As the crowd watched, Li Ziliang became a stream of bright light that shot toward Xu Qing outside the city.

Xu Qing was dressed in violet. He had long hair and bewitchingly attractive features. His eyes were as cold as ice, but his expression was placid.

Seeing that, Li Ziliang's eyes narrowed. However, he didn't slow down. Then, just as he was about to pass out of the city limits, he suddenly accelerated to double the speed as before. He had already been moving quickly; doubling his speed was a tactic to catch his opponent off guard. What was more, he had never tapped into this level of speed during any of his previous duels.

He transformed into a series of afterimages that shot out of the city and toward Xu Qing. As he closed in, he extended his right hand.

Four heavenly palaces appeared behind him. The palaces all looked similar to each other, and were different from ordinary heavenly palaces. Collectively, they resembled a ladder made from crystal, covered with glittering magical symbols.

When Li Ziliang extended his right hand, his four palaces vibrated and then shifted position to hover directly above Xu Qing. Then they superimposed over each other, turning into what appeared to be a crystal pagoda that dropped down toward Xu Qing. It all happened in the time it takes a spark to fly off of a piece of flint. Coupled with Li Ziliang's speed, this was definitely a trump card of an attack.

As the heavenly palaces dropped, Li Ziliang projected a message to Xu Qing via divine will, something that only Xu Qing could hear.

*"I've been looking for you for a long time, Xu Qing. Do you remember the grudge we have with each other...?"*

Xu Qing didn't react to the words. He didn't recognize this person, and was certain they'd never met. Anyone who he actually had a grudge with would be on his bamboo slip. Instead, he focused on the four heavenly palaces which were currently dropping down on him with full force.

Rumbling sounds echoed out as the composite pagoda swept over Xu Qing. Lightning bolts crackled on its surface, connected it to the ground and pulled it downward at a rapid rate. However, before it could move very far, it suddenly lurched to a stop, vibrating and emanating a deafening rumbling. Then the pagoda began to collapse, crumbling into chunks that fell down toward the ground.

Xu Qing appeared, surrounded by a huge sea and nine successive tsunami waves. As the waves swept outward, they made Xu Qing seem like a sea god in the middle of all the water. Then a piercing cry rang out as a golden crow rose out of the sea behind him, sending down dazzling golden light. Within the golden light, the crow was black, and it had nineteen multi-colored tails that spread out like a burning fan.

Li Ziliang's expression flickered. He knew that Xu Qing was strong, but it was only when he launched his attack just now that he got a sense of the explosive power Xu Qing had at his disposal. In fact, it didn't feel like four-palace battle prowess to him, but rather, something akin to five-palace power.

Dammit, why didn't my Will Implantation work on him?

Even as he assessed Xu Qing, Xu Qing took action. Tsunami waves rushed toward Li Ziliang, and the golden crow followed, its wings spread wide.

Li Ziliang's pupils constricted. Dashing backward, he performed a double-handed incantation gesture.

**"Immortal Magic: True-Spirit Ice Spears!"**

Numerous ice spears materialized around him, all of them shining with crystalline light. They shot toward Xu Qing, blocking his path. However, the golden crow quickly wiped them out of existence.

**"Immortal Magic: Inflammatory Omen!"**

Instantly, a huge sea of flames appeared around him, which transformed into a fiery palm. It shot toward Xu Qing to stop his progress, but was quickly destroyed by the furious tsunami waves.

**"Immortal Magic: Four Palaces Divination Trigram!"**

The shattered fragments of the heavenly palaces blurred, then coalesced back into the form of four palaces. This time, they were arranged with two in front and two behind. It looked like a partial divination trigram which blocked Xu Qing's forward path and seemed to be in the process of analyzing him and divining information about him.

That wasn't the end of it, though. Li Ziliang waved his hand, causing a huge mirror to appear below Xu Qing. It was illusory, and was filled with countless shadowy forms that were impossible to see clearly. It contained a bizarre power that prompted the gaze to focus on it. And the less clear the figures in the mirror were, the more one wanted to see them.

Next, Li Ziliang's right hand flashed in an incantation gesture, almost as if he were performing a divination to find out information about Xu Qing.

All of a sudden, the shadowy, indistinct forms in the mirror became completely clear.

Meanwhile, Xu Qing battered his way through the heavenly palaces. As he did, Li Ziliang's face fell, and blood sprayed out of his mouth. A look of disbelief covered his face as he gasped and projected, *"I know why you don't recognize me! I can't believe they did THAT to you...."*

Looking like he'd seen a ghost, he spun in place and fled at top speed.

Xu Qing's expression remained calm as he suddenly grabbed something.

Shockingly, he didn't reach out in the direction of the fleeing Li Ziliang, but rather, he reached behind his back!

#### Chapter 354: One Battle Earns Renown

Xu Qing's eyes swirled with icy coldness as he reached back to a shadowy figure behind him, grabbed it by the throat, and dragged it out into the open. It struggled, but that didn't do any good.

When its features became clear, it was... Li Ziliang! However, his face was turning pitch black, as he had been poisoned. The moment Xu Qing touched him, the poison took effect and he started rotting.

Meanwhile, the fleeing Li Ziliang blurred and then disappeared.

As Li Ziliang struggled, his face was a mask of incredulity. "How did you know I was here? That should be impossible! What's more, your mind hasn't shown even a hint of misgivings. What... what did you experience to give you such incredible willpower??"

All past opponents that Li Ziliang had used this tactic on did the same thing. They rushed after the fleeing version of himself to kill him. After all, everyone had secrets that they wanted to keep. All of his words had been designed to arouse suspicions and doubts. Usually, people who heard them ended up distracted, and would thus chase after the fake version of Li Ziliang.

That was the whole point!

Li Ziliang had no special ability to divine information. He had no divination magic. That said, the secret magical techniques of the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society focused on will domains. Though he had not fully cultivated a will domain, he had reached the point of forming a 'will convergence'.

Will convergence wasn't just about general willpower. The word 'will' encompassed many emotional aspects. Specifically, Li Ziliang cultivated a will of suspicion. During combat, he would sow suspicion into the heart of his opponent. Tapping into that will of suspicion became a trump card that could cause his opponent's soul to destroy itself. He had used this method to kill a lot of enemies, and it had worked on everyone with the exception of the dao child Zhang Siyun.

He had assumed it would work in this fight as well. All he had to do was create distracting thoughts in Xu Qing's mind, then use a killing move on him. Once Xu Qing chased after his clone, he could strike from hiding and wipe him out.

However, on this day, he experienced failure a second time. The first time it happened, he had lived through it. The second time, he would not.

Xu Qing wasn't a fan of explaining himself to his enemies. As Li Ziliang rotted, Xu Qing's hand turned transparent, and he shoved it into Li Ziliang's heavenly palaces. His hand closed, and then he ripped out four crystalline gold cores.

Bloodcurdling screams rang out, and in that life-or-death moment, despair filled Li Ziliang's eyes.

"Someone wanted me to test you out!" he blurted. "That's why I challenged you! Don't kill me, Xu Qing. If you let me go, I can tell you who—"

A dagger appeared in Xu Qing's left hand. He slashed it through Li Ziliang's throat. Steaming blood sprayed everywhere, splattering over his garments and onto the snowy ground below.

Li Ziliang's hands shot to his neck wound as he looked at Xu Qing in disbelief. He really didn't understand why Xu Qing didn't hold back just now. Any other person would have at least asked him a question or two.

The reality was that Li Ziliang had no intention of revealing the identity of that mysterious person. But he could be deliberately mystifying, and imply that it was someone like Master Shengyun's father or some member of Xu Qing's sect. Regardless of whether his strategy worked, it would at least sow some doubts and hopefully ensure that he managed to survive this situation.

But Xu Qing had no interest, and thus, Li Ziliang's strategy was completely negated.

Deep, bitter resentment appeared in Li Ziliang's eyes. As he toppled down, that resentment turned into regret. He truly regretted his actions. He regretted being so greedy for the rewards he had been offered by that mysterious person. He regretted probing Xu Qing by challenging him so many times and even capturing his fellow disciples to force his hand. He regretted his own avarice, and his belief that he could win this fight. And even more so, he regretted accepting the challenge simply because he thought he might lose face if he didn't.

Yet none of that could surpass his confusion at why Xu Qing had not developed any will of suspicion.

And then, all of it, including his bitter resentment, became a thing of the past. Heaven and earth turned dark, as if he had been covered with a shroud. Everything outside the city was peaceful and silent. Snowflakes drifted, falling onto the corpse and the blood. Soon... the blood wasn't visible; only the unmoving corpse of Li Ziliang could be seen.

Xu Qing's expression was placid. He had heard everything Li Ziliang said before he died. But he knew that in a moment like that, such words would contain both truth and untruth. Most likely, it was true that there was someone else who had urged Li Ziliang to issue those challenges. That fit in with Xu Qing's previous suppositions. But Xu Qing didn't believe that Li Ziliang would have told the truth about who it was.

When all was said and done, Xu Qing didn't tend to trust other people. He only trusted himself.

Most likely, whoever had tasked Li Ziliang with issuing the challenges was someone that Li Ziliang couldn't say no to. And that meant that, even if Li Ziliang revealed the truth to Xu Qing, he would still have ended up dead, and probably in a very miserable fashion. Instead, Li Ziliang would have thrown out another name, one that was fake.

As far as Xu Qing was concerned, a fake name wasn't of equal value to a life. That was just how Xu Qing was. And that was how he operated. If he was in danger, but couldn't find the true source of that danger, then viciously slaughtering the minions who had been sent against him was a good way to send a threatening message.

The truth was that the question Li Ziliang had died wondering about had a very simple answer. Xu Qing didn't trust Li Ziliang. He trusted himself, his sense of judgment, and his memory.

"I've been looking for you for a long time, Xu Qing. Do you remember the grudge we have with each other...?"

That was what Li Ziliang had said. Little did Li Ziliang know that Xu Qing kept a record of his grudges on a bamboo slip. As a result, it was impossible that he could forget about someone he had a grudge with.

"I know why you don't recognize me! I can't believe they did THAT to you..." The second thing Li Ziliang had said was even less likely to do anything to Xu Qing. After all, he was already very skilled at being deceptive regarding his true capabilities. Because of that, he was very confident about his secrets. Unless an opponent directly stated something very specific, he wouldn't be fazed.

In the end, it wasn't that Li Ziliang's Will Implantation technique was deficient. Rather, he just didn't understand Xu Qing, and therefore couldn't do anything to get in his head.

"All flash, no substance," Xu Qing murmured. It was the first thing he said since the start of the fight.

Meanwhile, after a temporary moment of silence, the city erupted into shouts of astonishment and excited chatter.

"Dead?"

"Th-that... that fast? He crushed his heavenly palaces and then slit his throat! He's so decisive!"

"I can't believe he actually did it!!"

"This Xu Qing is someone you cannot provoke! He's vicious and merciless. When he fights, he kills. That was brutal! So, so brutal! No wonder he's the only person in the Eight Sect Coalition with dao child remuneration!"

Gasps and conversation filled the city as sect disciples and rogue cultivators felt deeply apprehensive.

They were apprehensive of Xu Qing's speed and ruthlessness. They couldn't see the Gruegloom Daoseizing Art at work, but they could see Li Ziliang's shriveled corpse, and the agony he had experienced before dying. They could only imagine the pain Li Ziliang must have experienced at that moment. The thought of that cold dagger blade slashing his throat made them shiver. To them, Xu Qing seemed like a vicious fiend or monster.

The Gold Core cultivators with heavenly palaces were particularly fearful when they looked at Xu Qing.

What was more, top experts from many sects were now looking very seriously in the direction of the garrisons of the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society and the Eight Sect Coalition.

The Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society was completely calm and quiet.

It was the same with the Eight Sect Coalition.

They were also waiting to see the ramifications of what had just happened. Though there was a precedent for this sort of thing, in the end, the Swordsage Court held supreme, and they would make the final judgment.

They didn't have to wait long.

“You're a daredevil, boy, and also a decisive killer! In a time of peace, you wouldn't last long. But right now... the Swordsage Court needs wolf pups like you! Seven Blood Eyes has produced someone with real potential! When the time for testing comes, I truly look forward to seeing how you do!”

As the words finished echoing through the city, Sir Bloodsmelter laughed. “Xu Qing, hurry up and offer thanks to your superiors!”

Xu Qing wasn't sure he liked the term 'daredevil.' What was more, he had some ideas about what was really going on. Nonetheless, he clasped hands and bowed.

“Many thanks, Sir!”

The response from the Swordsage Court made everything clear. After all, though there hadn't been any deaths outside the city in recent days, they had occurred in the past. The Swordsage Court had never tacitly approved, much less encouraged the matter. But obviously, it didn't constitute a rules violation.

Sir Bloodsmelter knew that, and the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society knew that.

Of course, powerful sects didn't telegraph their true intentions. It didn't take long before cultivators from the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society showed up to take away Li Ziliang's corpse.

Xu Qing returned to the city. This time, it went very differently from the last time. Before, he hadn't attracted any attention. At the very most, some people had been talking about how he wasn't accepting dueling challenges. But now, people looked at him with reverence and quickly got out of his way. Now, nobody talked about him avoiding challenges. Now they knew why he had previously done so. It was for the same reason that a big eagle would refuse a challenge from a sparrow.

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High atop the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar, in front of the main palace entrance of the Swordsage Court, two swordsages stood together. One was an old man, the other was middle-aged dressed in a government uniform. Both were looking down at Xu Qing.

If Xu Qing were present, he would recognize both of them.

The old man was one of the three swordsages who had fought August Spirit Nethersprite. The middle-aged man had also been there during the battle; he was the second-stage Void Returning cultivator who had faced off against August Spirit Sporelight.

“So he’s the one you mentioned?” said the middle-aged man.

Chapter 355: Ghost Emperor Devastates Rancorous Will

“Yes, exalted one,” the old man replied. “His name is Xu Qing. He was working with someone named Chen Erniu, who, upon investigation, turns out to be his Elder Brother. The third person involved in the incident is a holy daughter from the Church of Departure in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. Her name is Qing Qiu. She’s on her way and should arrive soon.” [1]

An odd expression appeared on the old man’s face as he continued, “Their actions really drove Nethersprite crazy. Based on that, I get the feeling Nethersprite hates them more than anyone else in existence.”

The middle-aged man nodded. “There’s no rush. Let’s do the testing as normal. If we can’t destabilize Nethersprite’s mind on our own and perform the soulsearch, then we can consider using the three of them to rile her up. This Xu Qing isn’t bad at all. He has a good temperament. He’ll have good potential if he becomes a swordsage. Our county superiors are getting ready to open the ancient Forbidden by the Immortal, presumably because of the awakenings that are occurring in all the prefectures. This time, our recruitment test needs to be a bit bloodier. We’re in a different era now. We need wolf pups, not pet dogs.” [2]

When the old man heard the words Forbidden by the Immortal, his expression flickered. “They’re opening Forbidden by the Immortal? Isn’t there supposed to be some unknown god sleeping in there?”

“Exactly. Most people think that the catastrophe which befell the Revered Ancient mainland was solely due to the broken face of the god that we see in the sky. What they don’t know is that... historical records indicate the Ancient Emperors and Imperial Sovereigns weren’t forced to leave solely because the broken face showed up. There are other gods. Hidden. We don’t know what they’re waiting for. Presumably, our county superiors have their own orders to open the place and investigate.”

The middle-aged cultivator turned and left.

The old man stayed in place, a complicated expression on his face. Finally, he sighed, then faded from view.

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Seven days passed. During that time, Xu Qing went back to his previous routine. He would go to the daoist altar to listen to the old man’s lecture and learn more about plants and vegetation. No one sent him any dueling challenges. As a result, Xu Qing became the second person that no one dared to fight.

Also during those seven days, the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society's dao child returned. He attracted a lot of attention; apparently he had just made advancement with one of his magical techniques, and wasn't able to keep it hidden. Xu Qing joined the crowds in looking up into the sky at him.

Xu Qing could sense an immense pressure in the scintillating light that radiated off of the dao child. The dao child's return didn't change anything in the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society. He didn't do anything because of Li Ziliang's death. To him, Li Ziliang was irrelevant.

Was it him? Xu Qing thought. There was no way to be sure if he was the one Li Ziliang had been working for. Either way, he didn't drop his guard in the least.

Another important thing that happened during those seven days was that Xu Qing's dao of alchemy improved significantly.

It was a concept the old man mentioned, something that related to assessing unknown medicinal plants. He said it wasn't a fully fleshed-out method, just something that could be used as a supplementary aid.

By studying the vascular system of the plant, you could determine its basic category. If you knew its basic category, you could determine its characteristics. If you knew its characteristics, you could determine its medicinal properties. And if you knew its medicinal properties, you could understand it as a whole. It was an identification method that opened a whole realm of possibilities to Xu Qing.

Given his current mastery of plants and vegetation, he felt that though this new identification method wasn't one hundred percent accurate, it was at least eighty percent accurate. In the dao of alchemy that was a gap in difference similar to that between heaven and earth. However, to alchemy cultivators, even a slight advantage in being able to identify new plants could make a big difference.

In addition, Xu Qing learned a new term from the old lecturer: 'godly plants and vegetation'. He felt both familiar and unfamiliar with such plants. The reason he felt unfamiliar was that Grandmaster Bai's medicinal codex did not mention that specific term. The reason he felt familiar was that, though he didn't know the term, he had actually learned about such plants from the very beginning. In fact, he had long been searching for one.

From the time Sergeant Thunder passed away until now, he had never encountered it. It was a plant that could change one's fate for a lifetime.

"Lifespan flower," the old man said, "also known as life-extending flame and god-spirit weed, is a mutated variety of a god-type vegetation known as regeneration tree. There are actually seventy-three known mutations, but only the first type can be used in medicines. They grow randomly in forbidden regions, without any specific habitat pattern. They're extremely rare. They can be used to regrow severed limbs, reinvigorate life force, and treat any injury other than those inflicted by the god above." [3]

There were only seven or eight people gathered to listen to his lecture.

To this old man, knowledge about the dao of alchemy, and plants and vegetation, belonged to everyone. It didn't matter if he had a big audience or a small one. He would still share his knowledge.

Years ago, he had taken to wandering the lands and finding places where humans gathered. There, he would share what he knew. But as the man grew older, and his lifespan grew shorter, he found himself growing weaker and unable to travel. Now he was here beneath the Swordsage Court, sharing his knowledge of plants and vegetation with rogue cultivators. He'd had many students over the years. Therefore, he didn't pay much attention to the cultivators who came and went.

“So-called godly plants and vegetation are, at their root, things that can change one's life level. It's a subject I've been researching for years now. Specifically, I want to know why these plants seem so much better able to adapt to the arrival of the god than flesh-and-blood creatures. It's also led me to wondering if godly plants and vegetation are being used by other species to research gods.”

When Xu Qing heard that, he suddenly thought about Torchlight and Bai Li. Bai Li had used a spirit plant, and had even fused with it to release godly fluctuations. Then Xu Qing thought about Master Shengyun. He wasn't sure if the experimental god body in that battle in the Young Arbiter Sect had started out as some sort of spirit plant. But now he wanted to ask his Master about it. After all, the experimental god body was now in Seven Blood Eyes, where his Master was studying it. [4]

With such thoughts on his mind, he continued listening to the old man's lecture. Occasionally, the old man would describe something particularly profound. Given that there was no question-and-answer option in the lecture, Xu Qing would take out his medicinal codex and take some notes for future reference. Most of the other cultivators present did the same. In that manner, another half a month went by.

Xu Qing was immersed in study. Eventually, the old man finished sharing everything he knew. That evening, he looked up at the handful of cultivators sitting around him, including Xu Qing.

“That concludes my lecture series, so don't come back expecting to hear more. When your dao of alchemy breaks through to greater heights, come back and I'll give you more advanced instruction. By the way, I don't accept apprentices. I don't keep anything secret, therefore, among those who listen to my lectures, there's no difference between apprentice or not. Furthermore, we aren't connected by karma, and I prefer to keep it that way.”

The old man didn't appear to be interested in any of the other cultivators. However, he seemed to be eyeing Xu Qing's medicinal codex.

Everyone present got to their feet and bowed respectfully to the old man. Although they weren't truly apprentices, they were all deeply grateful for what they had learned over the past weeks.

There were three cultivators who looked regretful. Clearly, they had hoped that their earnest attitudes would win them the opportunity to become apprentices to the old man. Everyone who had listened to his entire lecture series was obviously a serious student of plants and vegetation. All of them could tell that this old man had reached the absolute pinnacle in knowledge of plants, vegetation, and alchemy. And considering that the old man was a swordsage, he obviously was a

very extraordinary individual. This wasn't just the case at this particular daoist altar. In the other altars throughout the city, whether the lectures were on magical techniques, cultivation methods, equipment forging, or anything else, those who listened to the lectures were all similar. But now these cultivators realized that their hopes were unfounded.

“Many thanks, Senior.”

Everyone said the same thing, bowed three times, then departed.

Xu Qing also bowed three times and left.

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When everyone was gone, the air next to the old man rippled, and a sword sage stepped out. He had an extraordinary cultivation base that thrummed with Nascent Soul fluctuations. His expression was reverential as he bowed to the old man.

“Exalted one, I'm here to escort you back.”

The old man nodded and stood. Then, just before leaving, he looked in the direction where Xu Qing had disappeared. Thinking back to the medicinal codex he'd held, he pointed in that direction.

“Where is that kid from?”

The sword sage looked surprised. Taking out a jade slip, he looked up the information.

“His name is Xu Qing,” he said quietly. “He's from Seven Blood Eyes in the Eight Sect Coalition, their quasi-dao child. He's the one who killed the chosen from the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society outside the city.”

A look of reminiscence appeared in the old man's eyes. “Seven Blood Eyes? That's a small sect originally from the continent of South Phoenix, right?”

“Yes, South Phoenix,” the sword sage replied respectfully.

“South Phoenix, huh? No wonder he has that specific medicinal codex.”

He didn't know Xu Qing, but he knew that medicinal codex. Years ago, this old man had traveled to the continent of South Phoenix to teach about plants and vegetation. In the Violet Lands, he had met a young man. The young man was a fast learner, and was immensely talented, to the point where the old man had been tempted to take him as an apprentice. But when he asked the young man if he was willing to leave his home, the young man refused. He said he wanted to stay in the Violet Lands. He hadn't forced the young man to become an apprentice. Instead, he rewarded him with a medicinal codex. A sixty-year-cycle had passed since then. But seeing that medicinal codex in Xu Qing's hand brought up old memories of the past.

The old man felt a bit of sorrow, but had no intention of asking Xu Qing about the matter. The past was the past. Shaking his head, he headed back to the Swordsage Court.

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Xu Qing returned to the garrison to review all the new information about the dao of alchemy, and make sure he had it all committed to memory. At dawn, he opened his eyes and looked in the direction of the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar.

“Time to try climbing.”

During the past month, he had learned a bit about the qualifications for the upcoming test, as well as how the test worked. For instance, there were many ways to earn bonus points for the first phase of the test. Among them were gaining enlightenment of battle spirit symbols or climbing to a certain height on the pillar.

Xu Qing had found markets where you could buy septenary goldmetal energy, but the prices were ridiculous, and he couldn't bring himself to pay that much. As a result, he had plenty of reasons to try climbing the pillar. With the exception of the Captain, all of the coalition disciples had made attempts.

Where did the Captain disappear to this time?

Leaving the garrison, he headed toward the pillar. It had been quite a while since he had seen any trace of the Captain. Since the Captain wasn't showing his face, Xu Qing decided to give up on the idea of tracking him down. Eventually, he reached the pillar.

His arrival attracted a lot of attention.

“It's Xu Qing!”

“He finally showed up!”

“I wonder how high Xu Qing will make it?”

As people discussed the matter, they cleared a path for him, and he calmly walked up to the pillar. Compared to the massive pillar, the surrounding cultivators were as insignificant as ants.

Xu Qing looked up and thought about the rules related to climbing the pillar. There were two main things for climbing cultivators to consider.

The first was the rancorous will attacks. The Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar was a weapon that the Ghost Emperor had used to kill countless living beings. Because of that, it contained the rancorous energy of countless dead beings. The battle spirit of the pillar suppressed the rancorous energy. However, when you touched the pillar, you could suffer rancorous will attacks. The higher you got, the more intense those rancorous will attacks became.

When they got strong enough, they turned into the rancorous soul of one of the ancient cultivators that the Ghost Emperor had killed, which would assail a cultivator's sea of consciousness. That was the second thing to consider.

A cultivator had to drive such attacks out of their sea of consciousness before they could continue climbing. If they failed, they would be possessed, and would be removed from the pillar, thus ending their climbing effort. The higher one got, the more threatening those rancorous souls became. What was more, they were essentially born from the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar itself. Being part of it, they were said to be indestructible. Cultivators who wasted too much time dealing with them would inevitably fail in their effort.

With that information in mind, Xu Qing looked up at the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar and took a deep breath. He could clearly sense the immense pressure weighing down on him from the pillar. As it did, the Ghost Emperor mountain in his sea of consciousness began to glitter.

A moment later, Xu Qing's eyes shone as, under the eyes of all present, he started running up the pillar. His first step took him 30 meters up. He immediately sensed an attack of rancorous will, but it was so weak that it wasn't worth worrying about. He didn't stop.

120 meters. 240 meters. 390 meters.

In only four or five breaths of time, Xu Qing had already surpassed the 600-meter level. That was where he paused.

His mind had already filled with rancorous will from the pillar, and it was coalescing into a shadowy figure in his mind. An ancient, mad, and voracious energy caused a terrifying howl to echo in his sea of consciousness.

The shadowy figure was just about to finish forming.

A moment later... the Ghost Emperor mountain in Xu Qing's sea of consciousness vibrated. In response, the shadow figure shivered and then collapsed. A miserable shriek echoed out as the rancorous soul was wiped out before it could even form.

“Ghost Emperor??”

Chapter 356: Excelling From the Beginning

The Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar rose to immense heights above the northern tundra. It was 3,000 meters wide and rose high above the clouds, making it seem like it propped up heaven. There were all sorts of magical symbols and totems carved on its surface, some of them protruding as much as 30 meters, some only a few meters. Because of that, the cultivators climbing the pillar seemed very small.

Xu Qing was already at the 600-meter spot. Grabbing the edge of one of the totem carvings, he pulled himself up and stood.

The totem depicted a fierce ghost face with a very baleful aura. Understanding flickered in Xu Qing's eyes when he noted the ghost face. After all, it closely resembled the face of the figure that had been coalescing moments before in his sea of consciousness.

Not even he could have guessed that when the rancorous will formed a soul within him, the Ghost Emperor mountain would crush it. That went beyond what he understood about how the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar worked. Normally speaking, when cultivators sustained attacks from the rancorous will, they wouldn't be able to destroy the invading soul. Instead, they had to eject it from their sea of consciousness. Only after that could they continue climbing. Then, when the next attack of rancorous will began, they would repeat the process. The higher one got, the more difficult it became.

Ejecting the souls came with additional rewards, though they weren't bestowed immediately, but rather, when the participant ended their climb. Xu Qing had witnessed Li Ziliang getting a reward, and others had received similar rewards since. However, the probability of getting a reward wasn't very high. If you reached 600 meters and drove out a rancorous soul, your chances of getting a reward were roughly 1/10,000. The higher you got, the more likely you were to be rewarded.

If you failed, you would be shoved off the pillar and would fall to the ground. There was no chance of a permanent possession. The rancorous souls were part of the pillar itself, and were suppressed by its battle spirit. Thus, they couldn't actually leave the pillar.

But at the same time, they were said to be impossible to destroy. And yet, Xu Qing had definitely sensed that rancorous soul completely disappear. In fact, it was correct to say that the Ghost Emperor mountain... devoured it.

After all, when that rancorous soul screamed its last, Xu Qing had sensed the Ghost Emperor mountain becoming a bit more true and real. What was more, the ghost face totem he currently stood atop seemed slightly worn down compared to before.

It was so faint that no observer would notice it. But since Xu Qing was actually touching it, he could tell. This discovery caused his eyes to glitter. For the moment, he decided to wait and see if he had done anything to break the rules.

Shortly thereafter, he could sense a faint stream of divine will emerge from the pillar. It was emotionless and numb, but after it made contact with him, he realized that he was being assigned a reward. He didn't know exactly what the reward was, but it was there.

Meanwhile, the fact that Xu Qing had stopped was noticed by the crowd below. After his fight with Li Ziliang, everyone was paying attention to him, and that was especially true now that he was making an attempt at climbing the pillar. Whether it was the rogue cultivator or the sect disciples, everyone was paying attention.

“He stopped? He's only at 600 meters!”

“He's probably getting used to the rancorous souls. That said, he has been standing there for quite a while.”

“Don't tell me he has a strong fleshy body and some astonishing magical techniques, but has a weak soul? Is that his weakness?”

“There's no way. I heard that this Xu Qing has an Elder Brother named Chen Erniu who's incredibly handsome and has a dashing personality. People call him the number one philanthropist in the Eight Sect Coalition. He completely surpasses Xu Qing. Under his tutelage, there's no way that Xu Qing has a weakness like that!”

While the crowd speculated below, Xu Qing waited for the time it takes half an incense stick to burn. When nothing else happened, and no one came to punish him for breaking the rules, he started moving again.

He moved up at top speed, and every step he took caused stronger rancorous energy to assail him. This so-called rancorous energy was different from death energy. Death energy was usually frigid, and caused living beings to feel cold. For example, the sinister cold in forbidden regions was often made of death energy. But rancorous energy contained a coldness of emotion, especially hatred. Thus, it affected the minds of cultivators. That influence was the attack.

Xu Qing heard endless screaming, formed from the wild cries and curses of the countless living beings that had been killed by the pillar. Trying to block the sound wouldn't do any good, as it would echo into one's soul.

He climbed higher, and the rancorous energy grew stronger, building up in his mind. As it built up in his sea of consciousness, he reached the 1,200-meter spot, whereupon the rancorous will began to coalesce.

The second rancorous soul was forming.

Xu Qing was actually looking forward to it. He wanted to see if what happened the first time was just a coincidence, therefore, he did nothing to stop the second soul from forming. This second soul looked different from the first. It had two curved horns, a hulking body, and a long tail. What was more, it emanated powerful fluctuations and an ancient aura. It was like it had swum out from the River of Time. Hoarse laughter rang out from its mouth, and its eyes shone with brutality and greed.

Xu Qing waited calmly. After three breaths of time passed, the second rancorous soul was fully formed. Eyes burning with madness, it threw its head back and roared, then stretched its arms out as if ready to kill.

Meanwhile, the Ghost Emperor mountain in Xu Qing's sea of consciousness again vibrated. The second rancorous soul shivered, and the look in its eyes became one of incredulity.

“W-what... the Ghost Emperor?!?!”

A miserable shriek erupted from the soul's mouth as light from the Ghost Emperor mountain shone out. The soul shattered into pieces, and black energy from it streamed into the Ghost Emperor mountain. The entire process took ten breaths of time, then it was over.

Xu Qing watched as the Ghost Emperor mountain's face came to more closely resemble his own. His misgivings in that regard grew deeper. That said, everything that was happening seemed to be to his benefit as, yet again, the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar sent out divine will to assign him a reward. Xu Qing waited a bit before starting to move again.

Before long, he was at the 1,500-meter spot. Then 1,800 meters. Some of the magical symbols and totems he passed seemed worn down, which seemed to indicate that other people had also found ways of destroying the rancorous souls.

Before long, a third rancorous soul appeared in his sea of consciousness.

“Be suppressed!”

Before it could even fully form, Xu Qing exercised a thought, and the Ghost Emperor mountain vibrated and crushed the soul. Xu Qing continued on his way.

2,100 meters. 2,400 meters. 2,700 meters. 3,000 meters!

The higher he got, the stronger the rancorous will grew. As a result, more and more rancorous souls appeared in his sea of consciousness. From what he could tell, a new one would appear every 90-150 meters or so.

However, after going past 2,700 meters, they appeared every 60-90 meters. That increased rate made the climb much more difficult for most cultivators. But to Xu Qing, it was different.

“Be suppressed!”

“Be suppressed!!”

“Be suppressed!!!”

As Xu Qing sped along, the Ghost Emperor mountain glittered brightly and crushed one soul after another. The destroyed souls would scream, but only Xu Qing could hear them.

As the Ghost Emperor mountain continued to devour the souls, it grew more and more clear. Xu Qing's face on the mountain was more distinct, and it seemed to pulse with something somber and desolate. That grim expression, and the stifling pressure from the Ghost Emperor mountain, resulted in a godly resonance building within him.

At the same time, the mountain's connection to Xu Qing grew stronger, to the point where he got the strong sensation that, eventually, the Ghost Emperor mountain would be able to manifest outside of him.

What was even more shocking to him was that at a certain point he noticed that the Ghost Emperor mountain held something in its hands that vaguely resembled a staff! It was only an outline right now, not very clear. But even from just the shape, he could tell that the staff... looked very much like the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar. That caused waves of shock to sweep through Xu Qing. At the same time, cracks were showing up on the Ghost Emperor mountain's body. It almost seemed like it was developing too quickly, and wasn't being given enough time to stabilize.

When he reached 3,000 meters, the crowd below roared.

Before, the highest anyone had climbed was Li Ziliang, who got just past 2,400 meters. Though there were chosen from some sects who, for various reasons, had not yet participated, the reality was that Li Ziliang had reached an astonishing height. But his record had been casually smashed by Xu Qing.

"3,000 meters! I couldn't even dream of climbing that high!"

"Hmph. If the Eight Sect Coalition gave me dao child remuneration, then I could also climb 3,000 meters. That Xu Qing is just luckier than us, that's all. I bet he has family in high places in Seven Blood Eyes. He's not like us from the Frigid School. We have to fight for everything we get."

"I heard that Xu Qing grew up in some slums...."

"You believe that too? This guy kills everyone he fights. That's the kind of thing you expect from a silkpants." [1]

"You're wrong about that. Based on the intelligence reports I've read, Xu Qing is no silkpants. No, he's the kind of person who knows how to repay his debts. What's more, he shows extreme respect for his Elder Brother Chen Erniu. I even heard that he once said he would live and die together with Chen Erniu!"

"Who cares about that? I just want to see how high Xu Qing climbs and what reward he gets!"

As the crowd discussed what was happening, Xu Qing stood at a spot 3,000 meters up the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar. The wind at that height was fierce. However, the truth was that he was far, far away from the clouds. And the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar went higher past the clouds.

I think I'm done climbing for now. Thanks to the close connection he had with his Ghost Emperor mountain, he knew that he had reached the point where he shouldn't absorb any more rancorous

souls. He needed to give the cracks on the mountain time to close up before he continued. Having reached the conclusion that this was definitely the best idea, he was just getting ready to drop off the pillar when, all of a sudden, his eyes narrowed.

He had just spotted a black cloud speeding over the horizon. And within that cloud was a giant.

It was over 9,000 meters tall, green, and it emanated fluctuations of godliness. Shockingly, this was a godly entity. As it sped along in the cloud, it was possible to see over a hundred black-robed figures standing atop it. Each had indescribably cold expressions, as if they didn't even have emotions at all.

On the giant's head, there was a person wearing red. This person had an evil ghost scythe and seemed boundlessly heroic.

When Xu Qing saw that figure, his eyes narrowed even further.

It was the girl in red.

Chapter 357: Chosen Fighting it Out

Xu Qing recognized that girl in red.

As for her, she had already spotted him on the pillar, but the eyes beneath her mask didn't betray any sort of reaction. She knew who he was, and didn't care at all about his unusually good looks. From a young age, she had experienced the ugliest side of humanity, and knew that physical appearances were a shell, nothing more. Even someone with incredible good looks who provoked her would end up as a rotting corpse. It was the same end result for people who were ugly. There was no difference.

In fact, a moment later her evil ghost scythe sent her a message via divine will, and it caused her eyes to turn icy cold. "Ghost Hand and Mad Dog are here. Ghost Hand is on the pillar, and Mad Dog is in the crowd below."

Chuckling silently, she stared at Xu Qing on the pillar for a moment before looking away. Killing was prohibited in this place, so she was already devising a plan to secretly put them to death.

Xu Qing's eyes were just as cold as hers as he released his grip on the pillar and began his descent. The moment he lost contact with the pillar, numerous beams of light shot out. There were so many that the people in the crowd below instantly started shouting out exclamations of astonishment.

"Look at all those light beams!"

"Oh my god!!"

"That's totally absurd!!"

"No wonder that guy is known as the Junior Brother of Chen Erniu. Awesome! Maybe we should all start calling him Xu San'niu!" [1]

Back when Xu Qing climbed to 3,000 meters and became the first place participant in the event, the crowd below had discussed the matter, but not cried out in shock. But now they couldn't contain their astonishment.

After all, to see so many beams of light coming off the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar really was absurd. Other people who climbed the pillar would be lucky to get three beams of light. And if they were unlucky, they might not get any. After all, there was a fixed probability of getting rewards. The higher you climbed, the more rancorous souls you had to deal with, and your chances of getting a reward increased. But it was still ridiculous that Xu Qing got a total of sixteen beams of light. Each of those beams was dazzling and glittering, and attracted the attention of all onlookers. Everyone was shaken.

Xu Qing, on the other hand, wasn't surprised. As he had already come to find out, as long as he actually destroyed a rancorous soul in his sea of consciousness, the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar would connect to him via divine will to assign a reward. And he had crushed a total of sixteen rancorous souls.

Therefore, he had been prepared for this, and had already planned for how to react. After all, it would be difficult to explain what happened by claiming he'd just gotten lucky. The people in the city weren't fools, and would obviously start speculating about how he'd accomplished it. And Xu Qing felt it was better to guide those speculations instead of letting them run rampant.

Therefore, he sent out over seventy battle spirit symbols, which swirled around him, pulsing with a shocking battle spirit. The sight of those battle spirit symbols caused an immediate uproar. Within the crowd was a pock-faced middle-aged man who, upon seeing Xu Qing's battle spirit symbols, suddenly felt a bit disappointed at the forty that he had collected.

As the crowd cried out in surprise, and the battle spirit symbols swirled, the sixteen beams of light from the pillar swept toward Xu Qing, surrounding him with a host of colorful energy streams that settled onto his palm. He could sense three streams of septenary goldmetal energy, with the rest being things like secondary springstart energy and tenstem relighting energy.

Sadly, there were no technique legacies. That was understandable, as techniques were the rarest reward from the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar. Among all the successive generations of cultivators who had climbed the ancient weapon, only about three hundred had ever received technique legacies. Besides, such destined opportunities only came on when you climbed higher than 3,000 meters.

That said, Xu Qing was pleased with the sixteen streams of energy he'd acquired, especially the septenary goldmetal energy. As for the others, he could sell or trade them to other people.

As the crowd looked on in amazement and envy, Xu Qing landed on the ground and left the area. His use of the battle spirit symbols might have fooled the cultivators in the crowd, but he knew there was no way he had fooled the Swordsage Court. That said, if they dug into the matter and learned the truth, he wasn't worried. He had acquired his Ghost Emperor mountain in an aboveboard manner. What was more, during his climb, he had sensed that other magical symbols and totems on the pillar were already worn down before he got there, indicating that other people had done similar things in the past.

Because of that, he wasn't very worried. Under the reverential gazes of the surrounding disciples of various sects, he returned to the garrison.

Once he was back, he summoned the Mute and had him go out into the city to look for people interested in trading septenary goldmetal energy for the extra streams of energy he'd acquired. The

Mute couldn't speak, but he had other ways to communicate, and immediately set about looking for trading partners.

Xu Qing sat down cross-legged and started refining the Ghost Emperor mountain, easing it out of the 'stuffed' state it was in. At the same time, he continued ensorcelling his iron skewer.

In that manner, ten days flew by.

During that time, rumors about Xu Qing flew through the city. Many cultivators had come to the conclusion that the seventy battle spirit symbols were the reason why he had been rewarded so handsomely. There were other speculations as well. However, none of the other theories had much weight to them. Therefore, most people agreed that the battle spirit symbols were the key to getting rewards. Everyone was talking about it.

Coincidentally, someone found a passage in one of the ancient records which mentioned a similar event seven hundred years in the past. In that instance, a Gold Core cultivator climbed to a height of more than 4,500 meters and got a reward of over twenty beams of light. At that time, that person had displayed over sixty battle spirit symbols. That person later went on to pass the recruitment test and become a swordsage. Later, he climbed the pillar a few more times, and got even higher, but didn't get any more spectacular rewards. The ancient record didn't contain details about that person's identity. Regardless, this passage convinced a lot of people that enlightenment of the battle spirit symbol was integral to the pillar rewards.

On the tenth day after Xu Qing had finished his climb, the girl in red appeared and started her own climb. That event attracted a lot of attention, as she had a very high status.

She was Qing Qiu, a holy daughter of the Church of Departure. She was a fast climber, and on her first run she quickly went past the 3,000-meter spot, surpassing Xu Qing. That itself caused a big commotion, yet she wasn't done. She eventually climbed to 4,500 meters, securing the first place spot in the rankings. After that, she released her grip and dropped down, earning two rewards.

The fact that Qing Qiu and Xu Qing had taken the first and second place spots lit a fire under disciples from many other sects who had refrained from climbing the pillar up to this point. In the following days, disciples who had been keeping their battle prowess hidden emerged like bamboo after a spring rain. Quite a few climbed to 1,800 meters, with some surpassing 2,400 meters. There were even seven or eight who climbed past 3,000 meters.

Of that group, three were from small sects, but the others were from major sects like the Church of Departure, the Eight Sect Coalition, and the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society.

The contender from the Church of Departure was a young man. The contender from the Eight Sect Coalition was actually a bit of a surprise to Xu Qing. It was Sima Ru from the House of Grue Hunters, who had been in seclusion in the garrison up to this point. Upon finally showing her face, she climbed to 3,000 meters on her first try. [2]

One of the contenders from one of the small sects was a young man of about sixteen or seventeen years of age. He climbed to a height of 4,200 meters, almost surpassing Qing Qiu, but not quite.

That said, Qing Qiu was no longer in first place. That spot was occupied by a middle-aged cultivator from another small sect. He was nothing special to look at, and had previously spent most of his time talking to people in the crowd. He had been especially fond of emphasizing how Xu Qing was very close with his Elder Brother Chen Erniu. Because of that, most people laughed at

him when he started climbing. However, that laughter quickly faded away. When he passed the 3,000-meter mark, those who had been laughing felt shaken. And when he reached 4,500 meters, they were dumbstruck. He only stopped when he reached 5,700 meters.

The onlookers were astonished. What was more, people began speculating about his age and cultivation base. After all, he looked like a middle-aged man. However, according to the rules for the Swordsage Court recruitment event, you couldn't be older than twenty-five to participate.

When Qing Qiu found out she'd been surpassed, she made her second climb, and this time she climbed past 5,400 meters. All the other contenders made new climbing attempts as well. In no time at all, the hosts of chosen had the entire city abuzz.

Around that time, Xu Qing fully refined the Ghost Emperor mountain in his sea of consciousness. The cracks in its surface were gone, and it was more true and real than ever. As for its facial features, they were about seventy percent similar to Xu Qing's. It emanated a dao resonance which filled Xu Qing's sea of consciousness, nourishing his soul, strengthening it and causing its eyes to shine more brightly.

The ensorcelling of the iron skewer was going well. Although the Mute didn't manage to trade away all of Xu Qing's excess streams of energy, he did manage to get seven streams of septenary goldmetal energy. All of the damage to the skewer was gone, and it was well on its way to becoming a magical device.

Seeing that, Xu Qing's eyes shone. Then... he prepared to climb the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar again.

I need to get enough septenary goldmetal energy this time!

With such thoughts in mind, he headed toward the pillar. People noticed him immediately. After all, everyone had been waiting for Xu Qing's next climb. They wanted to see if he would take back the first place slot. It wasn't just ordinary disciples who were watching. The other chosen who had taken spots in the standings were also paying very close attention.

When Xu Qing arrived and leaped onto the pillar, many other chosen took action. Qing Qiu was the first. She rushed toward the pillar with the mindset of fighting Xu Qing, just in a different way than before. Other chosen felt the same. In fact, everyone who had previously passed the 3,000-meter mark started climbing again. One of them was the middle-aged cultivator, who blinked a few times before starting his climb. The scene grabbed the attention of virtually all the cultivators in the city, and even the patriarchs of the sects. What was more, the Swordsage Court was now paying attention.

The chosen were fighting it out!

Chapter 358: Driven by Rewards

Everyone was watching the competition, from the crowds below, to the patriarchs, to the elders from the Swordsage Court.

The swordsage elders were paying especially close attention as they sat there looking down. They were very interested in knowing who would claw their way to first place. Taking first place wasn't a requirement to advance to the next phase, and the rankings didn't necessarily correlate directly to battle prowess. However, the candidates' performance when climbing the Supreme Beginning

Netherflight Pillar would give a clue as to how they would perform later. Furthermore, it would reveal who had stable souls and strong minds.

Anyone who performed well at the pillar would be monitored by the swordsages even after the recruitment event. In fact, someone who did really well, but eventually failed during the second phase, might still have opportunities to work with the Swordsage Court in other capacities. Everyone knew that, including both spectators and participants.

To all disciples of human sects, climbing the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar was a very important opportunity to show what they were capable of. In fact, just about all disciples present would take a shot at climbing the pillar and submitting their results.

Not many people were able to climb past 3,000 meters. In fact, the majority couldn't. Furthermore, it was very easy to judge how high the various participants were able to climb. Being able to climb past 1,500 meters but not surpass 3,000 meters was considered average, and constituted a passing score.

What really interested the Swordsage Court were those candidates who were able to climb past 3,000 meters. They were also looking to see if anyone could surpass 6,000 meters. And they were especially interested in finding out if anyone could break the record which had stood for many years: 8,100 meters.

In fact, the elders were chatting amongst themselves about the proceedings.

“Very interesting. This Xu Qing is doing well. He’s made enough of an impression that it’s set a good benchmark for others to try to surpass.”

“I’m guessing that Qing Qiu from the Church of Departure will climb past the 6,000-meter point. She’s quite the young woman. Unless something unexpected happens, I think she’ll make it into the second phase. That said, it seems she has it out for Xu Qing. If she can turn that grudge into fuel for the competition, it’ll do her a lot of good.”

“And then there’s that kid from the small sect. He seems to have an unusual bloodline, and is apparently on the verge of some sort of ancestral awakening. Xu Qing also lit a fire under him. I bet he’ll climb past 6,000 meters also.”

“There’s also that shifty-eyed freak in the group, the one who just had to go and disguise himself as a middle-aged man. He’s got all sorts of weird stuff hidden in his body. In fact, when I first laid eyes on him, I thought he was a nonhuman and almost killed him.”

“I’m actually intrigued by Seven Blood Eyes. They have two disciples with a lot of potential. That Xu Qing obviously has his own way of destroying the rancorous souls. The fact that he killed Li Ziliang, and then got praised by us as a result, has really whipped the other candidates into a frenzy.”

“It’s all because of him that they’re all working so hard. He was the perfect catalyst to get the competition going hard and strong!”

“Don’t forget the dao child from the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society. He’s definitely worth keeping an eye on.”

As they looked on, the competition on the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar was really heating up.

Over ten individuals were speeding up the pillar rapidly.

Xu Qing was not in the first place position. The reason was that he didn’t care about the rankings, but rather, the rewards. Therefore, he took every opportunity to bring in as much rancorous will into his sea of consciousness as possible. In contrast, the other participants were doing the opposite in the hopes of getting up the pillar faster. As a result of that, Xu Qing was falling farther and farther behind in the rankings.

The first person to surpass him was Qing Qiu. Beneath her mask, her eyes were cold. She moved quickly, leaping 30 meters with each movement. It was almost as if she didn’t care about the attacks of rancorous will.

Next was the young man from the small sect. He wasn’t very tall, and was rather emaciated, with disheveled and bright, sparkling eyes. Most eye-catching about the young man was the fact that he had a prominent nose ring. That nose ring emanated a red glow that looked unusually bizarre and fantastic.

As that young man flew up the pillar and past Xu Qing, another young woman was also ascending rapidly. She was from the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society, and had cold eyes and a white daoist robe. She looked almost like a crane, beautiful and holy as she ascended. She also surpassed Xu Qing. She had never done much to make a name for herself in the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society, so few people had ever heard of her. But now here she was, climbing higher than anyone else in the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society other than their dao child.

Other than her, no one from the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society was able to climb higher than 3,000 meters. At the most, some of them made it to somewhere between 2,400 to 2,700.

Li Ziliang probably would have reached 3,000 meters, were it not for him dying unexpectedly.

Of course, the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society was the top organization in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture other than the Swordsage Court, so it was only natural that they had profound resources. As a result, they had more disciples who got to the 2,400-2,700-meter area than any other group.

After them was the Church of Departure, and finally, weakest of all among the large organizations, the Eight Sect Coalition.

When Xu Qing saw so many people passing him, his expression remained the same as ever. He didn’t seem like he cared at all. He just kept moving up bit by bit. With every movement, he sustained attacks of rancorous will, causing the rancorous souls to form in his sea of consciousness.

The Ghost Emperor mountain crushed them all, causing it to grow increasingly true and real, and making its facial features more distinct. Xu Qing could sense that, after absorbing the dao blood

from August Spirit Nethersprite, his Ghost Emperor mountain was vastly different than before. And the staff that was gradually taking form in its hands caused Xu Qing's heart to fill with anticipation.

In fact, he was moving slowly on purpose, trying to get more rancorous will. Because of how much time he was taking, Sima Ru soon appeared behind him. Without so much as glancing at him, she passed him.

There were a few other cultivators from small sects who had previously climbed past 3,000 meters who did the same.

There was also the pock-faced middle-aged man. As the saying goes, he who hasn't made a splash yet will often make the biggest splash of all.

Upon speeding by Xu Qing, he glanced over out of the corner of his eye and looked very pleased with himself. Given that he had recently taken first place, he was being watched by the crowd just as much as Xu Qing was.

Xu Qing glanced at the man passing him, then sent a divine will message to his shadow. After getting an affirmative response from the shadow, he stared deeply at the middle-aged man.

The fact that so many people were passing Xu Qing caused quite a lot of discussion in the crowd. However, Xu Qing's expression was the same as ever as he slowly and steadily kept climbing. By the time he reached the 3,000-meter spot, he had already destroyed nineteen rancorous souls. He was very pleased with how things were going.

I got more this time than last time.

Although Xu Qing was feeling pleased, the Swordsage Court elders weren't very pleased.

"Xu Qing is going slowly on purpose! He doesn't care at all that he's been surpassed by so many people. That's not how this competition is supposed to work!"

"That's right. Given his reputation, if he doesn't take the event seriously, then it could harm the spirit of competition among the other participants. He's climbing too slowly."

"The only way for these people to show their true potential is to have lively competition. It seems to me we need to stop rewarding him. That's how the 8,100-meter record was set years ago, right? It's just too bad no one ever reached 9,000 meters."

"Forbidden by the Immortal is going to open soon, which means we need more people with strong wills and durable souls. Given that, I don't think we need to follow every single rule down to the letter. As long as the rewards are appropriate, that's fine!"

"Besides, I'm very much looking forward to seeing if anyone will reach 9,000 meters this time."

“9,000 meters?? If I recall, that magical symbol is the manifestation of the only god domain cultivator the Ghost Emperor ever killed.”

Before long, just as Xu Qing was preparing to continue moving, a majestic voice echoed out from the Swordsage Court atop the pillar.

“Whoever climbs the highest on the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar in the next six hours will be rewarded with an initial round of enlightenment of a human imperial-class technique!”

The announcement caused an immediate uproar among the crowds in Netherflight City.

“Human imperial-class technique??”

“Normally speaking, that kind of reward is only given to swordsages who perform some meritorious service. An imperial-class technique! And it’s specifically for humans!”

“Human imperial-class techniques are considered most orthodox when used by humans. Most sects in the seven counties and one region controlled by us humans actually use imperial-class techniques designed for nonhumans. The best imperial-class techniques for humans are the ones designed for us! They provide the greatest likelihood of unlocking innate abilities related to bloodline!”

“It looks like they want this competition to heat up! That’s why they’re offering this reward!”

The crowd was in an uproar, and the candidates on the pillar were equally shaken.

Qing Qiu’s eyes shone with an unusual light. The pock-faced middle-aged man’s eyebrows shot up. The young man from the small sect started breathing heavily. And everyone else had similar reactions. They weren’t the only ones who were moved. The dao child Zhang Siyun, who was currently seated in meditation, suddenly opened his phoenix-like eyes and looked in the direction of the pillar. Xu Qing also looked up. Even he was moved by the prospect of an imperial-class technique.

Xu Qing thought about the situation. There’s a six-hour time limit. That means I can’t go slow and steady. Nor can I spend time destroying rancorous souls. I guess now... I really do have to fight to get first place!

Having made his decision, it was without the slightest hesitation that he burst into motion. Moving at top speed, he started ascending the pillar. He wasn’t the only one. All the other participants also started moving up with blinding speed. In the shortest of moments, the competition on the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar reached a fever pitch.

At the moment, there were seven people higher than Xu Qing.

Red-garbed Qing Qiu was in first place. The young man from the small sect was in second. And the pock-faced middle-aged man was the dark horse in third place. The young woman from the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society with the cold demeanor was in fourth. In fifth was Sima Ru.

Sixth place was occupied by a young man from the Church of Departure, who wore a black robe and emanated icy coldness. In seventh was another cultivator from a small sect. He was actually struggling to get any higher; apparently 3,900 meters was his limit. In fact, his struggles seemed in vain. In the space of about ten breaths of time, Xu Qing blasted past him from below.

Xu Qing was now in seventh!

Things didn't stop there. Now that Xu Qing had a goal, he wasn't holding anything back. Rancorous will assailed him, becoming rancorous souls that howled into his sea of consciousness. However, it didn't do anything.

He ignored their cries, crushed them, and kept moving. His actions immediately drew the attention of the cultivators below. What was more, the cultivators below him on the pillar gritted their teeth and focused on climbing higher and faster.

Up above, the sword sage elders seemed very pleased.

"That's better!"

"That's the drive you expect from young people! Now, let's see who ends up in first place!"

Chapter 359: The Youths Compete

Xu Qing sped along, moving dozens of meters with each step, quickly leaving behind the young man who had previously been in seventh place.

That young man watched him go, feeling both anxious and powerless.

The disparity between us... is just too great.

He knew that Xu Qing was strong. After all, Xu Qing had been the first to reach 3,000 meters. He also knew he couldn't compare to Xu Qing. But he had never imagined that Xu Qing would be so terrifyingly beyond him. As far as he was concerned, being able to move so quickly while at such a great height was outrageous and nearly unbelievable. Thanks to the rancorous will attacks from the pillar, he was trembling in both body and soul. And his sea of consciousness felt like it was being ripped apart.

Xu Qing, meanwhile, was moving upward without any trouble at all. After having refined his Ghost Emperor mountain, its capacity increased significantly. Eventually, the rancorous souls appeared in his sea of consciousness every thirty meters. They took all sorts of shapes and forms, but Xu Qing could tell that most were nonhuman. The humans among them were the minority.

Before, he had taken his time studying them before crushing them. But now, his eyes glittered with cold light as he crushed them with impunity! The Ghost Emperor mountain in his sea of consciousness shone with bright light, and rocked back and forth, becoming almost like a god that wiped the rancorous souls out of existence.

Moving up at top speed, Xu Qing soon reached 4,200 meters. Before long, he was at 4,500 meters.

That was where the black-garbed young man from the Church of Departure was. The young man was going all out as he climbed higher and higher. His eyes were even bloodshot. However, compared to Xu Qing, he was moving very slow.

Xu Qing whizzed up from behind him and then passed him.

The young man looked over as he passed, and his eyes turned cold. Letting loose a shout, he quickly moved up by several dozen meters in an attempt to pass Xu Qing. But then his sea of consciousness shivered, and blood sprayed out of his mouth. He couldn't move any further, and was forced to tightly grip the protruding totem, then simply watch bitterly as Xu Qing kept moving higher.

Before he joined the Church of Departure, he was considered a chosen cultivator in his hometown. He had surpassed many of his peers, and had done the same after joining the church. He had long believed that he was a true chosen, and that he qualified to become one of the Ancient Emperors and Imperial Sovereigns. It was for his own future that he had joined the Church of Departure. It was only after joining a sect that he came to realize *there are always more talented people out there, just as there are always higher heavens out there.*

It had been a big blow to him. He had hoped to take advantage of his young age to join the Swordsage Court. Unfortunately for him, Emperor-Receiving Prefecture as a whole was vastly larger than the Church of Departure, and that meant that there were even more chosen cultivators to deal with. All he could do now was watch as Xu Qing climbed higher and higher.

4,500 meters. 4,650 meters. 4,800 meters!

Xu Qing wasn't paying attention to the people he passed. He was now in sixth place, and just ahead of him was Sima Ru.

She was panting for breath as she ascended one meter after another. Her eyes shone with determination, and she had a tenacious expression on her face. She didn't spare a single glance for Xu Qing as he approached.

Xu Qing didn't speak any more than she did. He just passed her and took fifth place.

Behind him, Sima Ru gripped the totem, her hand trembling and her teeth gritted.

Xu Qing still had not slowed down. Having passed Sima Ru, he soon reached 5,100 meters. There was someone there; it was the young woman with a cold demeanor from the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society. She was currently in fourth place.

Her jaw was clenched and both of her hands were slick with blood. Determination filled her eyes as she slowly crawled up. Unfortunately, no matter how hard she tried, she kept going slower and slower. She was obviously very close to her limit.

She saw Xu Qing. Xu Qing saw her.

In her bedraggled state, the speed Xu Qing was capable of made her breathe unsteadily. And she could do nothing but glare as he raced past her to reach 5,400 meters.

That was the first location where Xu Qing sustained a berserk attack of rancorous will that pushed his Ghost Emperor mountain toward the point of being full. Normally speaking, he would have stopped right then and there. But he chose not to. Instead, he continued.

Ahead of him were three people. There was the young man with the nose ring, the pock-faced fellow whose identity Xu Qing had already deduced, and... red-garbed Qing Qiu who had already passed 5,700 meters and was about to reach 6,000.

Upon spotting Xu Qing, she leaped into motion, becoming the first to reach 6,000 meters. That caused the crowd to burst into cheering.

That said, she was too high to really hear the crowd. And she was surrounded by whipping winds that drove away all such sounds. Of even greater significance was the intense rancorous will that screamed into her mind and forced her to maintain full concentration. She was feeling a lot of pressure because of Xu Qing. The fact that he was now only 600 meters away caused her to grind her teeth. Meanwhile, her evil ghost scythe glowed with a red light that surrounded her. Blue veins bulged out on her forehead as she moved up with another burst of speed.

However, there was someone else who suddenly accelerated dramatically, and that was... the pock-faced middle-aged man. He was surrounded by frigid coldness that caused ice to form around him on the pillar. Thanks to his burst of speed, he became the second person to reach 6,000 meters.

The third was the young man with the nose ring, and the fourth was Xu Qing.

Though the Ghost Emperor mountain was close to being full, Xu Qing didn't slow down. Actually, being able to rely on the mountain had made his mind and soul more resilient, which itself allowed him to keep climbing.

Although it seemed like he had succeeded because of the mountain, the truth was that cultivators who could climb this high had to have their own special methods of success.

Xu Qing sailed past the young man with the nose ring. As he did, the young man glared at him defiantly, then gritted his teeth, performed an incantation gesture and pointed in Xu Qing's direction. It seemed to be a transference technique of some sort, as vast quantities of rancorous will poured out of him and headed toward Xu Qing.

Xu Qing's eyes glittered coldly. In the entire time he had been climbing the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar, this was the first time someone had made a move against him.

The young man's strange transference technique caused the shrill howling in Xu Qing's ears to grow louder. Then, rancorous will surged into his sea of consciousness, quickly turning into a massive winged nonhuman with the head of an eagle and the body of a human. It was pitch-black and emanated terrifying fluctuations as it let loose a destructive howl into Xu Qing's sea of consciousness.

Because of how full the Ghost Emperor mountain was, it couldn't emit blinding light. Xu Qing's sea of consciousness began vibrating, but that lasted for only a moment, until he snorted coldly and tapped into his poison core in his third heavenly palace.

The howling rancorous spirit suddenly did a double take, then blurted, "God domain!"

Before Xu Qing could even crush the soul, it collapsed and burrowed out of him. Apparently, it was fleeing, as it rushed right back toward the young man with the nose ring.

As it bored into the young man, he shivered. In the blink of an eye, his sea of consciousness was thrown into chaos. Blood sprayed out of his mouth, and before he could do more than blink, he was shoved off of the pillar.

He was injured, but wouldn't die. However, he realized he had done something potentially fatal, and thus, he didn't dare to look in Xu Qing's direction, and just flew away, his face pale.

Xu Qing glanced at him coldly before continuing his climb. Taking first place was more important; he could deal with the young man later.

Moving quickly, Xu Qing passed 6,000 meters. 150 meters ahead of him was the pock-faced man, and 300 meters away was Qing Qiu.

Just as Xu Qing was assessing what was above him, the pock-faced man looked over his shoulder. Their eyes met.

“Long time no see, Captain,” Xu Qing said calmly. During the past month, every time he saw a disciple from the Dark Serenity Sect it made him think of that letter, and filled him with the desire to give the Captain a good thrashing.

The Captain cleared his throat and then chuckled. “Want to have another competition, little Ah Qing? If you win, I’ll let you beat me up. But if you lose, then you have to pay me the money you owe and then obediently take me with you to see Arch-Immortal Plumdark and settle things. Otherwise, I won’t dare return to the sect or see the patriarch. Without a freaking home to go back to, my life is going to turn into pure suffering.”

Xu Qing’s eyes glittered coldly. He could tell that the Captain was being serious, so he gave him a serious nod in return.

Their first competition had been back in the Forbidden Sea. The loser had been forced to dress up like a woman, specifically, a Seazombie princess. [1]

This was their second competition.

As the two of them came to an agreement, Qing Qiu, who was much higher up, was listening to a divine will message from her evil ghost scythe.

*“That’s them. Mad Dog and Ghost Hand are both right behind you. I just heard them talking about competing to see which of them would take first place. It’s absolutely ridiculous and completely presumptuous. It’s like you don’t even exist to them! How can you hold back? Why don’t you just turn around and take them down with you in mutual destruction?”*

“You’re always going on and on about mutual destruction!” Qing Qiu growled. “Can you just shut up for once?” Her eyes shone crimson, and red light surrounded her as she accelerated, quickly reaching the 6,600 meter point.

However, that was when the Captain started moving. Blue light erupted from him, illuminating the dome of heaven and everything around him. What was more, it was just barely possible to see the veins beneath his skin. In fact, if you could pierce through his skin and look directly at his blood, you would see that it wasn’t red, but rather, blue. Within his pupils were faces. And within the pupils of those faces’ eyes were more faces. Layer after layer, they made a deeply nefarious feeling that came with incredible speed.

In one leap, he went 300 meters! With three leaps, he passed Qing Qiu and reached 6,900 meters!

Up above, the swordsage elders seemed shocked as they looked at the Captain.

“A forbidden nightmare magic! A dao of spirit-sealing!”

“Some almighty being sealed an unknown entity in that kid! Whoever that almighty being was, they were so powerful! And the daoist magic was concealed, making it impossible to see what’s sealed inside!”

Chapter 360: A Figure Seated on a Moon

When the Captain suddenly accelerated dramatically, Qing Qiu’s expression flickered with defiance. The red glow surrounding her grew stronger, spreading out in all directions until it became like a sea of blood. With that sea of blood bolstering her, she also started moving much more quickly, passing the 6,600-meter point. However, she was still a good distance from the Captain, and obviously wouldn’t be able to catch up easily.

As her eyes shone crimson, she suddenly felt an astonishing aura approaching from behind her. Turning to look over her shoulder, her eyes suddenly stung as though she were looking directly into the sun.

It was none other than Xu Qing. The golden crow was completely manifest behind him, its full 300-meter size on full display. Not only did it radiate a majestic might, but also, it shone with dazzling light. Its nineteen, multicolored tails created a sea of flames that swept out in all directions around the pillar. Within the fire was Xu Qing, moving rapidly. With one movement, he reached the 6,300-meter point.

As for the resentful souls that formed in his sea of consciousness, he was completely ignoring them. Then he extended his right hand, and two umbrellas appeared overhead. One was pitch black and dripped with dark flames. It made him seem mysterious and enigmatic, and it also posed an obstacle to the rancorous will, which became dramatically weakened when trying to pass it. The other umbrella was like a glittering treasure with a seven-colored glow, surrounded by a sound like chanting wind. As it purified Xu Qing, whatever rancorous will tried to enter him simply crumbled. His third heavenly palace was also active, and every vibration sent out destructive power to the rancorous souls.

With all of those blessings, Xu Qing’s aura was so strong it shook the dome of heaven, and caused wild winds to sweep about. Then he took another step, taking him to 6,600 meters, exactly as high as Qing Qiu. However, he wasn’t anywhere close to being done. His glittering eyes didn’t pause for a moment to shift to Qing Qiu, but instead were fixed on the Captain.

They were bros, and also fellow daoists. Beyond that, they were the rare type of companions who were able to keep pace with each other on their path of cultivation. It actually didn’t matter who was first and who wasn’t. What was important was that both of them had their own goals, and were working hard to reach them. Both of them were following their own path and their own dreams. They could progress together, and they could even make sacrifices for the sake of their friendship. But one thing they couldn’t do was take it easy on each other.

If they were going to compete, they wouldn’t hold anything back! That was the way Xu Qing thought of it. And that was how the Captain thought of it too.

Xu Qing was moving again. The golden crow let loose a piercing cry, then merged into Xu Qing, becoming like a yellow robe around him, and bringing out the full potential of his fleshly body power.

It seemed to fill him with boundless energy, causing his energy and blood to surge. It wasn't something that caused his body to bulk up, yet anyone that could lay eyes on him would be able to sense something like an entire burning heaven and earth within him.

With that terrifying fleshly body power, Xu Qing took a third step.

When his foot landed, the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar vibrated. Then he moved again, surpassing Qing Qiu and appearing at the 6,900 meter spot. He appeared... right next to the Captain.

The Captain looked at Xu Qing with glittering eyes. However, his forehead was dotted with sweat; clearly, his astonishing burst of speed hadn't been easy. There was no way he would admit that, though. Instead, he laughed heartily.

“Nice job, little Junior Brother! Sadly for you, I'm just warming up!” With that, the Captain moved forward to the 6,990 mark, surpassing Xu Qing.

Xu Qing also leaped forward, passing the Captain to reach 7,110 meters. Though he wasn't sweating, he was panting a bit. Raising his eyebrows, he quietly said, “So am I, Eldest Brother.”

Suddenly, a howl from behind reached their ears, and they saw a bright red glow that surpassed 300 meters. Qing Qiu's unique laughter echoed out from within that red glow, along with a very dangerous aura.

“Heh heh... you two are very amusing.”

Suddenly, she accelerated dramatically, heading right toward Xu Qing and the Captain. Xu Qing didn't bother looking back. He just continued. The Captain did the same. All three moved with shocking speed up the pillar.

7,200 meters. 7,500 meters. 7,800 meters!

At that point, the limitations of Qing Qiu's cultivation base became evident. She had reached the end of her explosive advance, and began to slow down. However, Xu Qing and the Captain were still moving at top speed.

Both passed 7,800 meters. As they sped up, each would occasionally glance at the other. One was gasping for breath, the other was covered with sweat.

All the while, they were exchanging words.

“You're not going to last, little Junior Brother. And what's with all the huffing and puffing? It's so loud I bet the people down on the ground can hear you. Ai, it's just like I told you before. You're too young. Not physically capable of this kind of thing.”

“Eldest Brother, you're leaving a river of sweat behind you on the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar. Why don't you stop and rest for a bit? I'm worried you'll get dehydrated.”

Even as they bantered, they secretly accelerated, each of them trying to shake the other. Both were climbing higher and higher, trying to take the first place spot.

All Qing Qiu could do was look at them and grind her teeth. “How come I always have to run into those two damned idiots?”

Even worse, she could hear their banter, and it made it impossible for her to keep her cool. It was worse given the terrifying attacks by the rancorous will. It was much harder than before to drive out or possibly destroy the rancorous souls in her sea of consciousness. She had no concentration left to think about talking, yet Xu Qing and the Captain had the energy to exchange sarcastic comments.

“Those two have serious mental problems!” she growled.

Meanwhile, the evil ghost scythe was sending her thoughts via divine will. *“Go for it! Go for broke! Let’s end things with them in mutual destruction!”*

Meanwhile, Xu Qing and the Captain passed 8,100 meters and reached 8,400 meters. From that height, everything below looked like tiny miniatures. The people in the crowd were too small to see clearly. In fact, all of Netherflight City could be obscured with a single hand.

Surrounding them were swirling mists and strong winds. That said, they were still very far away from the top of the pillar. The attacks of rancorous will were incredibly strong. And they didn’t limit themselves to the sea of consciousness, but rather, the entire body.

Every square inch of their flesh and blood was filled with rancorous will. Xu Qing, even with his third heavenly palace helping to fight back, was finding it difficult to get rid of the rancorous will. Even his life lamps were unstable. It wasn’t that they weren’t strong enough, but rather, the fact that his cultivation base was limited. It was the same with Golden Crow Assimilates Myriad Spirits, which seemed very weary.

After all, this height surpassed all of the various records that the Swordsage Court kept during their recruitment events. From ancient times until modern, though there had been people who climbed this high, their cultivation bases were much higher, meaning that they didn’t qualify to be recruits.

Xu Qing and the Captain weren’t bantering as much as before. But they were still bantering.

“You’re not going to last, little Ah Qing!” the Captain said, sweat dripping down him. Even he was starting to pant for breath. However, he was 15 meters higher than Xu Qing.

“I still have poisons I can use, Captain,” Xu Qing said. He pushed off with both legs, flying past the Captain and grabbing onto the edge of one of the totems. Pulling himself up, he went farther than the 15 meters separating him and the Captain.

The mention of poison caused the Captain’s expression to flicker. Then he saw Xu Qing surpass him, and his eyes flickered with a crazy light. “I have trump cards left too!”

Suddenly, he leaned over and bit into one of the magical symbols. A crunching sound rang out. Though he didn’t manage to actually take a bite out of the symbol, he did leave some teeth marks in it. What was more, close examination would reveal that there was a lot more rancorous will in that particular symbol. Unexpectedly, the Captain hadn’t been taking a bite, but rather, vomiting up

rancorous will! All of the rancorous energy that had built up in him had been sent into that magical symbol.

Looking suddenly much more relaxed, he accelerated with shocking speed, directly passing 8,400 meters to reach 8,700. And then he continued to 9,000 meters.

Xu Qing's eyes narrowed. As for Qing Qiu, she couldn't have been more shocked. At the same time, her evil ghost scythe exclaimed, "*That's Mad Dog for you!*"

When Xu Qing saw the Captain reach 9,000 meters, his eyes also glittered with a crazy look. Suddenly, his poison core in his third heavenly palace erupted with boundless poison, spreading out to cover him. None of it seeped out into the open; every bit entered his flesh and blood. His taboo poison core could poison all living things. And rancorous energy counted as a living thing!

It was something Xu Qing had learned firsthand when dealing with that giant monk's head from the ghost ward back in Forbidden by the Phoenix. [1]

As the poison spread through him, whatever rancorous will was left behind in his flesh, blood, and sea of consciousness... all let loose howls of grief as it was eradicated.

The Captain used vomiting. Xu Qing used extermination. They were *different approaches with equally satisfactory outcomes*.

Xu Qing accelerated, quickly reaching 8,700 meters. And then, just as the Captain reached 9,000 meters, Xu Qing caught up!

At that location, there was a special totem design. It was a humanoid shape covering its face as it sat atop a moon. The moment the two of them reached that spot, the totem flickered, sending out two ripples of rancorous will that pulsed with godliness. Those ripples went right toward Xu Qing and the Captain, and then pierced into them.

A tremor passed through Xu Qing. The same thing happened to the Captain.

They stopped in place there at 9,000 meters as a figure appeared in each of their seas of consciousness.

\*\*\*

High above in the Swordsage Court, the elders' eyes glittered brightly.

"Finally... some candidates reached 9,000 meters!"

"Based on our analysis, the magical symbol there... depicts one of the handful of surviving moons of the group of thirty-seven that once existed in the Revered Ancient mainland."