

Timescape 361

Chapter 361: A God in the Moon!

There was a special totem 9,000 meters up the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar. It was a figure covering its face with its hands, seated on a moon. Not very many people knew about this totem, yet it wasn't top secret. It was just that the totem represented something considered taboo, and therefore, the people who knew of it weren't inclined to talk about it.

After taking control of the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar, the swordsages had studied the totem and came to realize that it depicted one of the moons of the Revered Ancient mainland.

Revered Ancient was a massive place that didn't just have a single moon. Nor did it have only a single sun. From ancient times until modern, the number of suns and moons had never been fixed. Generally, they had increased over time. In fact, when the broken face of the god arrived, there were thirty-seven suns and thirty-seven moons. They were scattered in different parts of Revered Ancient, and would all shine in the sky at the same time. What was more, every few thousand years, they would adjust their position to ensure that their light was more widely distributed.

Even still, the Revered Ancient mainland was so vast that many areas didn't benefit from sunlight. There were some species who were used to living in darkness. At the same time, there were other species who never even saw darkness.

When the broken face of the god arrived, the suns and moons suffered heavy casualties. Right now, the Revered Ancient mainland only had seventeen suns left. There were fewer moons, with only twelve remaining.

The totem 9,000 meters up the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar depicted one of those twelve surviving moons. Based on extensive research, it was determined that the totem formed after the death of a god domain cultivator. In other words, the moon in the carving obviously had some deep connections to that slain cultivator.

After making inquiries from the imperial capital, the Swordsage Court developed a theory that many species had come to believe in over the years. And that was... that the seventeen suns and twelve moons of Revered Ancient... had gods sleeping inside of them. It was a monumental matter. The countless species in existence didn't have any hard evidence to prove the theory was true, only little bits of evidence here and there. As a result, it could only be considered speculation.

But there was one thing that the species had confirmed using a special method, and that was... god domains did have gods in them.

To the innumerable species on the Revered Ancient mainland, god domains were places full of mystery, the unknown, and... terror.

All high-level entities from various species knew where the god domains were. That was because they were fixed locations that never changed. However, it wasn't easy to get inside of them. Even just getting close to them would cause one to tremble violently. And trying to force one's way in would result in certain death.

For years on end, it was known that bizarre entities would occasionally emerge from god domains. However, they were extremely rare, to the point where they were only mentioned in passing in a few records here and there. In most cases, there was one word used to describe them: godchildren.

Given all that, it was no wonder that the swordsmen paid a lot of attention to that one particular totem. Though it was only a manifestation of rancorous will, to the Swordsman Court, it was a potential source of immense gain. Unfortunately, the totem didn't activate every time someone reached it.

Thankfully... today it did activate.

What was more, it released two streams of rancorous will, one into the Captain's sea of consciousness, and the other into Xu Qing's.

Xu Qing wasn't sure what exactly was happening with the Captain. All he knew was that the soul shadow of a young man was forming in his sea of consciousness. He was blurry and indistinct, as if he might disappear at any moment. Yet it was still possible to make out the features of a handsome young man who seemed inherently luxurious. In fact, he seemed flawless to the point where he wasn't real. He seemed... bewitching.

He was covered with countless red sealing marks, and on his forehead was a moon totem. After appearing in Xu Qing's sea of consciousness, his face was completely expressionless and his eyes were empty. Looking up into heaven, he bowed deeply and began to speak in a language Xu Qing had never heard before, yet could instinctively understand.

"Milady, the shimmering moon; lead the way to Revered Ancient; all living beings suffer in bitterness; live in ease and comfort in paradise."

As his words echoed out, the moon totem on his forehead glittered with red light. As it spread out, Xu Qing realized that he could see the image of a moon behind the young man.

A red moon.

As it floated in his sea of consciousness, it shone down, casting everything in crimson. At the same time, it emanated a boundless mutagen, which raged out to invade every corner of Xu Qing's body. His mind spun.

He saw a figure on the moon, female, with long hair, her hands covering her face as she sat there unmoving. The moment Xu Qing laid eyes on her, an astonishing pressure erupted from the moon, causing his sea of consciousness to tremble, and shaking his soul. Everything turned blurry, while at the same time, the sound of vague, indistinct murmuring rose up. It was as if countless living beings were all speaking at the same time, creating an indescribable force that battered at Xu Qing's soul.

Immense pressure built up as the surrounding mutagen grew stronger. From Xu Qing's heavenly palaces to the depths of his soul. From his fleshly body to his spirit seas, to his dharma apertures. Mutagen filled everything.

It was as if he himself had become an entire world, and the moon was the broken face of the god. As that god's eyes opened, all living things experienced the Awakening of Insects, as if their very foundation was being forced to change. [1]

At the same time, a powerful divine will shot out from the moon, pressing down on Xu Qing's soul as if forcing him to surrender and offer obeisance.

"All respect to the Lady; thou shalt have everlasting life; come to the Lady's god domain; thou shalt have paradise."

The figure in Xu Qing's sea of consciousness trembled as if in anguish. Clearly it wanted him to also submit to that divine will.

However, Xu Qing just laughed, killing intent building in his heart and mind.

"I don't want everlasting life from anybody! As for god domains... the broken face of the god creates god domains by looking at them thrice. Therefore, if he looks three times at a person and they don't die, then what? I really want to know! No, you don't deserve to be in charge of me!" [2]

Eyes glittering, Xu Qing fought back with all the strength he had. The golden crow appeared in his sea of consciousness, letting loose its piercing cry and releasing blinding light. The Ghost Emperor mountain trembled as it released crushing pressure.

In response, the moon and the figure on it erupted with even stronger divine will, and also added even more mutagen to assail Xu Qing.

When Xu Qing felt that, he quietly added, "By the way, you have mutagen? Well... so do I!"

The taboo poison core in his third heavenly palace erupted with a boundless black cloud of poison that instantly filled his sea of consciousness and then headed right toward the moon! At the same time, Xu Qing's mutagen seeped out into his sea of consciousness, more and more as it attacked the moon.

As a result, the sides of the moon started to change color. As darkness filled the red, it turned into something violet.

This matter was absolutely unprecedented!

In the years the Swordsage Court had studied that totem, things always played out as they had at first with Xu Qing. The soul shadow of the young man slain by the Ghost Emperor would appear. He had no mind of his own, nor many memories. All he had were some scraps of instinct. That instinct would automatically reveal the red moon, and then release something like the power of a god to crush anything and everything in his presence.

Of course, the godly power was illusory, and based on what the Swordsage Court could determine, it was actually a materialization of what few memories the young man retained.

It was *as unrealistic as flowers in a mirror or the moon in the water*, and couldn't actually compare to the real power of a god. That was why experts from the Swordsage Court could suppress it. And when cultivators reached that point but failed, they wouldn't suffer any ill consequences. The worst that would happen was that they would be weakened mentally. However, there was no danger of being possessed.

As for the mutagen, it could easily be extruded, so there was no real danger to one's life. After all, it wasn't very strong, and was illusory in nature.

But now things were going differently. Xu Qing's mutagen was actually making a counter invasion!

Invasion was the main way mutagen manifested. For instance, when the broken face of the god arrived, the resulting aura invaded all living things. It didn't matter if they were real or illusory, they were all invaded.

As for what happened when mutagen invaded mutagen, that wasn't something that modern cultivators could even know about. Inside Xu Qing's sea of consciousness, the red moon trembled. As it did, a sigh echoed out from within, like something from far in the distance, from far out in the void, from ancient time.

It was no spoken language, but rather, like a breath.

However, the moment it happened, rumbling sounds filled Xu Qing's sea of consciousness. Within his body, explosive vibrations caused him to shake, and filled his soul with pain, as though it might collapse. His heavenly palaces were also trembling, and cracks started spreading out on them, as though they might fall to pieces. His sea of consciousness trembled, and his body shook. His organs started to fall apart. The Ghost Emperor mountain shook, and the golden crow let loose a piercing cry.

Because of all of that, as Xu Qing stood at the spot 9,000 meters up the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar, blood erupted from his mouth. At the same time, blood sprayed out of his pores, creating a blood mist around him. Intense pain filled him, and the signs of collapse grew stronger in his sea of consciousness. His vision started to fade, and he couldn't stay on his feet.

As everyone below looked on, he suddenly tumbled off the pillar.

Countless gasps rang out. Then, a blood-colored figure shot up toward him at top speed.

It was none other than Sir Bloodsmelter.

He caught Xu Qing, and then, his expression very serious, produced a golden medicinal pill that he put into his mouth. Before he could observe him to see the results, another agonized shriek rang out from the 9,000-meter spot on the pillar.

The Captain fell, blood spraying out of his mouth and blood mist appearing around him. More dramatic than that was the fact that his lower body, everything from his belly down, exploded. It almost seemed like he had eaten something that he shouldn't have eaten.

Sir Bloodsmelter's eyes narrowed as he reached out to catch the Captain with his other arm.

Xu Qing, after eating the golden medicinal pill, had already regained consciousness. He looked weak, and his sea of consciousness was damaged. But when he saw what was now in his sea of consciousness, his breath caught in his throat and his eyes started to shine.

It was a very, very small violet moon. Despite how small it was, it pulsed with hair-raising power, and was clearly in the process of maturing.

The Captain opened his eyes a moment later, and they burned with passion.

Meanwhile, a great distance away from Emperor-Receiving Prefecture, in the far west where humans rarely encroached, red light glittered in the night sky. No sun shone on those lands, and therefore, they were in perpetual night. Other than the broken face of the god in the sky, there was only one other thing: a red moon.

Bewitching moonlight glittered bright red, shining down onto lands... that were full of bones. They were scraped dry by the wind, and they filled the landscape as far as the eye could see. There were all sorts of species represented, heaped into piles. If you started digging down, it was hard to say

how long it would take before you reached soil. No one knew how long ago these nonhumans had died. Maybe a thousand years in the past. Maybe longer ago than that. But before death, all had been covering their faces.

All of a sudden, a whisper rang out from the red moon in the sky.

“Two of my godly breaths vanished. I can replenish them. For years, that’s the way it’s been. I shouldn’t wake up just because of something like this, should I? Wait, hold on. Someone... stole some of my godsource? Who was it?”

Along with the voice came a surge of mutagen in the lands below, causing everything to twist and distort.

Chapter 362: Who Was It? Oh, It Was You!

In the northern tundra in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture, next to the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar, Sir Bloodsmelter was about to take away Xu Qing and the Captain. Before he could, the pillar suddenly erupted with over a hundred beams of light that shot right toward him. The suddenness of it provoked numerous gasps from the crowd below.

Sir Bloodsmelter reacted quickly. Flicking his sleeve, he gathered the beams of light before they could even arrive, then turned and flew away.

With Xu Qing and the Captain falling one after the other, the competition over ranking was on the verge of ending. Although the others climbing the pillar could continue struggling, there was no way any of them would take first place.

The most likely contender was Qing Qiu, who was currently just past 8,700 meters, her teeth gritted as she slowly moved up.

As for the elders from the Swordsage Court who had been watching the proceedings, their eyes all glittered as they watched Sir Bloodsmelter take Xu Qing and Chen Erniu away.

“Those two little punks must have both taken a bit of the totem’s aura.”

“We’ve done a lot of research into that totem’s aura over the years, and it’s very mysterious. Unfortunately, it’s never been possible to absorb it, only use it externally.”

“It’s something they definitely can’t control. In accordance with our rules and systems, we can send someone to just take the aura back, and compensate them with military credits. That said, if they don’t agree, there’s no need to force them.”

While the elders put forth a resolution regarding the matter, Qing Qiu eventually stopped at 8,790 meters. That was her personal limit, and she couldn’t go any farther. If she tried, she might succeed, but it could destabilize her foundation. And besides, there was no way she would ever make it to 9,000 meters. To Qing Qiu’s regret, she had to release her grip and drop down.

With Qing Qiu’s run ended, it seemed to signal the end of the competition. However, only half of the six-hour time limit had passed. And that was when someone walked out of the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar.

He was tall and handsome, his expression calm as his long, blue robe swirled around him like flowing water. His eyes were especially noteworthy, as they glittered brightly. What was more, there were magical symbols in his pupils. As he walked along, the air around him twisted and distorted as if in response to some technique he cultivated. In fact, it made it seem like he was piercing through space itself. It was something rarely seen among Gold Core cultivators.

His arrival on the scene attracted immediate attention. Many people inhaled sharply, and looks of reverence could be seen on faces everywhere as people stepped aside to make a path for him.

He was the dao child from the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society, Zhang Siyun. His face was tranquil as he strolled forward. He didn't like being in the presence of bugs, so he hadn't been interested in climbing the pillar with Xu Qing and the others. He waited until everyone gave up before he arrived.

As everyone looked on, he reached the pillar and started moving up. He took one step, a leap that propelled him seemingly without stop all the way to 3,000 meters.

The eyes of the onlookers glowed, but there was no chatter or cheering. It was as if everyone had expected that he would do something like that. After all, he was the top disciple in this generation among humans in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture!

Meanwhile, the swordsage elders turned their attention to him.

"This Zhang Siyun isn't bad at all. You might as well consider him a quasi-swordsage."

"His Sect Grandfather is none other than Daoist South Arbiter, who is one of the four honor guards in the county's Swordsage Palace. Though his rank is technically the same as our own, the fact that he works at the palace means that we have to address him as 'exalted' whenever we see him."

"I heard a rumor that Daoist South Arbiter asked Zhang Siyun if he wanted to skip the selection process. But the kid refused and said he wanted to participate. He wanted to become a swordsage the normal way. Only afterward would he take advantage of his Sect Grandfather's authority to bolster his standings among us swordsages."

"That just shows how confident he is. There are only three spots available, but in his mind, he already has one of them."

"There are more outstanding individuals this time than expected. We'll have to wait and see who those three spots go to."

As the swordsage elders discussed the matter, Zhang Siyun didn't slow down at all. From the 3,000-meter spot, he ascended to 5,100 meters. And then, with seemingly no effort at all, he reached 6,000 meters. It was only then that he slowed down a bit. However, all he did was pause for a moment. Then he kept moving at top speed. 6,600 meters. 7,200 meters. 7,800 meters.

If you looked very closely, you would see that he was actually panting a bit. After all, the attacks of rancorous will at that height were very intense. But then an umbrella suddenly appeared, covering him with dazzling white light.

It was his life lamp. It was different from Xu Qing's two umbrellas, which were black and seven-colored respectively. This umbrella was pure white, and it gave off a holy sensation as it burned with white flames. It looked almost like an inverted mountain, bursting with divine, holy sensations. It was a white-mountain holy-flame lamp! Massive amounts of white fire surrounded the mountain, flowing along it, burning the air that was near it.

And beneath it, Zhang Siyun was also surrounded by white fire. It emanated a white glow that created a perfect contrast to his blue robe. He seemed extraordinarily handsome, and his calm eyes abounded with a divine and holy look.

What was more, a piercing cry rang out from behind him. The air behind him shattered as a huge white dragon emerged from within him, then circled around him. It had two long dragon whiskers which undulated on either side of him. The smaller whiskers growing on its neck also rippled in the wind. It made Zhang Siyun seem like he was an otherworldly immortal that even an azure dragon would yield to.

Looking down at the ground, he thought, Those bugs from before don't deserve to stand higher than me. Now they can watch as I crush their records.

With that, he moved again, effortlessly going higher and higher. 8,100 meters. 8,400 meters. 8,700 meters. Passing the spot where Qing Qiu had been forced to give up, he reached 9,000 meters. His intention was to keep moving, but just like before, the bizarre moon totem released a flash of light. The third!

A tremor passed through Zhang Siyun.

Far from Emperor-Receiving Prefecture in the distant west of Revered Ancient, in a land of endless night where a red moon hung in the sky, a vague, indistinct voice rang out.

"Who stole some godsource from... huh? Oh, it was you."

The moment that voice spoke, Zhang Siyun, who was 9,000 meters up the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar, suddenly experienced a change in facial expression. Now, he looked completely astonished.

The calm in his eyes vanished, to be replaced with horror. Disbelief and utter incredulity swept through him as he sensed an indescribable, shocking power inundating him. It was like a god had descended, bursting with rage and extermination! It was so sudden that he was like a bug beneath the finger of a giant, incapable of fighting back. Incomparably weak.

A bloodcurdling scream escaped his lips, along with a mouthful of blood. Popping sounds rang out of him as blood sprayed from his pores. His life lamp umbrella dimmed as if it might be extinguished. The white dragon behind him let loose an agonized shriek as half of it exploded, staining the rest of it bright red with blood. Zhang Siyun experienced the same thing. His legs exploded, while the rest of his body, including his arms and torso, became a mass of mangled gore. As the effects of eradication spread, despair appeared on his face, as well as deep confusion. He really had no idea what was happening. It was all too sudden.

A figure shot out from the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society, and at the same time, several of the swordmage elders took action.

The elders weren't showing partiality. Though Xu Qing and Chen Erniu had been seriously hurt, it obviously hadn't been so serious, and didn't border on being fatal. But for some reason, it seemed that Zhang Siyun was about to be wiped out of existence. They couldn't just stand idly by while a chosen died in that manner.

In the blink of an eye, the figure from the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society arrived. Including the swordmage elders, that made a total of four Void Returning cultivators who had arrived to save Zhang Siyun.

The person from the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society was an old man. Without any hesitation he produced a huge quantity of precious materials, including an incomparably valuable 'supreme arbiter pill.' That pill had previously been intended for Zhang Siyun to use during a critical breakthrough moment. But there wasn't time to worry about that now. The terrifying life force in that pill, combined with countless other medicinal pills, was the only thing that kept Zhang Siyun's injuries in check.

Having done that, the old man from the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society took the weak and unconscious Zhang Siyun into his arms. Looking at the swordmage elders, he said, "Exalted elders, what happened?"

The three elders were also puzzled. Looking at the totem on the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar, they smiled wryly and shook their heads.

"We'll look into it right away."

The old man from the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society sighed and took Zhang Siyun away.

The event was now over. The Swordmage Court quickly sealed the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar and prohibited further climbing attempts. Then they got to work studying the pillar.

Under the shocked eyes of the crowd, Zhang Siyun was taken back to the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society garrison, where no expense was spared to heal him. Zhang Siyun was an extraordinary individual, so it only took two days for him to recover.

However, neither he, nor the old man from the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society, nor the Swordmage Court ever noticed... the real reason why he didn't end up dead.

Deeply hidden in a corner of Zhang Siyun's sea of consciousness... was a red moon. Seated atop that moon was a figure with both hands covering its face. That was particularly strange considering that the figure didn't have any facial features. Instead, its face was covered with countless tiny holes that wriggled and writhed, all while fresh blood flowed out of them.... It was very, very inauspicious.

"It wasn't him. The thief must be similar to me.... After I return, I'll find the thief and consume him. This body is weak. It needs time to get stronger. Until then... I'll continue sleeping."

The whisper from the moon grew fainter and fainter.

Zhang Siyun didn't have the ability to know what was happening. He thought everything had gone back to normal. But the truth was that there was only one reason he wasn't dead.

Back in the Eight Sect Coalition garrison, Xu Qing, who was seated cross-legged in meditation trying to recover, suddenly opened his eyes. They were filled with lingering fear and also astonishment as he looked in the direction of the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society garrison.

Chapter 363: Realizing the Truth

Xu Qing didn't feel anything specific. It was just a palpitating fear that popped up mysteriously in his heart.

"Over there..." he murmured, vigilance rising within him.

He had been very seriously injured, so the past few days had been spent solely on recovery. He was now mostly better, so he took out a transmission jade slip and sent a message to find out what had gone on recently, especially as it related to the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society.

The person he asked was none other than Sir Bloodsmelter. Xu Qing knew that simply thanking the patriarch would be meaningless. The patriarch had been the first to react when Xu Qing started falling from the 9,000-meter spot on the pillar. Xu Qing wasn't going to forget that. Nor would he forget all of the medicinal pills the patriarch had given him to aid in his recovery. When people treated him well, even a little bit, Xu Qing committed that to memory. Of course, it was the same with people who treated him poorly.

Xu Qing received an answer within moments. The patriarch explained everything that happened with the totem, including the story about the suns and moons perishing. He also told Xu Qing the secret about there being more gods than just the broken face in the sky.

After hearing all that, Xu Qing was shocked, to say the least. The information was outright sensational, but even more astonishing was that the details perfectly conformed to what he had experienced.

He suddenly thought back to Golden Crow Assimilates Myriad Spirits, and the images in the dragon chariot pulled by the giant. He had always thought it strange that, carved on the chariot was the story of the sun perishing, and yet, there was still a sun in the sky. [1]

Now he had his answer. The young man who'd once sat in that dragon chariot was one of the fallen suns.

The patriarch said that the totem on the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar depicts one of the surviving twelve moons of the Revered Ancient. It lies in the extreme west of the mainland, incomparably far from here. What's more, most species believe that the suns and moons have gods sleeping within them. I could sense breathing from the moon that appeared in my sea of consciousness.... And then there are the words spoken by that young man's soul....

The answer was right there.

A god. I used a mutagen invasion to steal that violet moon. Is it actually part of that god's power?

Xu Qing cast his senses to the violet moon within his sea of consciousness. The violet moon seemed to represent only 1/1,000,000th of the red moon, yet it was still incredibly terrifying. In fact, just

observing it, Xu Qing felt his hair standing on end. It was the same sensation he would get when looking at the closed eyes of the broken face of the god in the sky.

That said, though he felt shaken, he didn't sense any imminent danger. The violet moon was now deeply connected to him, and he had a measure of control over it. That control was very, very minimal. At the moment, doing anything with it would be incredibly difficult. At most, he could cause some of its aura to seep out.

The mutagen came from me. Therefore, whatever the mutagen invades becomes part of me.

Feeling absolutely certain of that assessment, he looked up into the sky.

Does that mean that when the god above sends mutagen down, whatever it infects is within his control? After pondering the matter for a time, his eyes flickered as he suddenly thought about the Captain.

The Captain got the same thing I did. Except his belly exploded. That must mean he tried to eat it. Definitely not the same as me. Taking out a jade slip, he sent a message to the Captain and told him about the conclusions he'd reached.

"Captain, if you absorbed some of that energy, it could be really dangerous."

"Nah, don't worry about it. I ate too much, that's all. If it was true that a god could take control of me that way, then there would already be a bunch of gods all fighting over who I belong to. Little Ah Qing, there's no need to get jealous. Girls fight over you, and it's the same in my case, except with gods." The Captain laughed heartily. "Besides, it's also possible that what's sealed inside of me isn't just a grue. You never know. Maybe I have a god sealed inside me. So maybe you should actually help me! Give me your portion as well. I'll help you deal with the pain!"

"No thanks, Captain."

Xu Qing turned off the jade slip. Based on what he knew about his Eldest Brother, the fact that he'd said such things just meant that he was able to deal with the situation. As for all the talk of him having a god sealed inside him, Xu Qing didn't believe it.

After taking some time to settle his thoughts, he started analyzing the sensation of fear he'd experienced that came from the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society.

The Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society's dao child fell from the 9,000-meter spot, and was nearly killed in body and soul. Whatever went wrong, it happened because he was the third person to climb 9,000 meters.

Having reached this point in his train of thought, certain possibilities occurred to him.

Is it possible that when the Captain and I stole some of that god's energy, it woke up? And then, when it saw Zhang Siyun...?

Xu Qing's eyes widened as he came to the conclusion that this possibility was very likely. That would explain why Zhang Siyun nearly died.

But that doesn't make sense. If that god really woke up, there's no way that Zhang Siyun, a mere Gold Core cultivator, could have survived. He'd be dead beyond the shadow of a doubt.

The more he thought about it, the more trepidatious he felt.

Given that Zhang Siyun survived, why am I sensing fear and danger?

After more thought, his heart began to pound as a terrifying possibility occurred to him.

Zhang Siyun's near-death experience was related to that red moon. And the fact that he didn't die also relates to that moon....

His guard went up even more than before. He couldn't be absolutely sure that his assessment was correct, but staying completely on guard still seemed like the best thing to do.

Seven days passed, and it was nearly time for the true fighting to begin for the swordmage recruitment qualifications.

Quite a few notable things happened in those seven days.

For example, the inspection of the pillar didn't end, which meant that no one was allowed to climb it. Xu Qing was a bit disappointed about that.

The Ghost Emperor mountain in his sea of consciousness was growing increasingly true and real, and the face was now about ninety percent similar to his own. As for the staff that was taking shape in the Ghost Emperor mountain's hands, it was no longer mostly transparent. Instead, it was becoming very clear.

A decision had been made about the final rankings. Xu Qing, Chen Erniu, and Zhang Siyun all reached 9,000 meters, and thus they tied for first place. All of them would have one chance to gain enlightenment of that imperial-class technique.

However, that chance wouldn't come immediately. It would happen after the recruitment event was over.

The patriarch had already sent the pillar rewards to Xu Qing. Unfortunately, because they all came at once, it wasn't possible to tell which reward belonged to who. So the patriarch made the decision that, based on Xu Qing's performance, he would get seventy percent of the reward items, while Chen Erniu would get thirty.

The Captain was very happy about that. As for Xu Qing, he didn't feel like bickering.

One of the rewards was a legacy technique. It was called the Goldslaughter Secret, and cultivating it provided a measure of control over golden, metallic energy. It could even be turned into a deadly weapon. After cultivating it, Xu Qing gave it to the Captain. The Captain knew about Xu Qing trying to collect septenary goldmetal energy, so he gave all of that energy from his rewards to Xu Qing in exchange for energy that he needed. Xu Qing was originally planning to sell everything else. However, the Captain pointed out that after they went to the capital city of Sea-Sealing County, they could be useful. Given that, Xu Qing put everything away for later use.

The Captain and Xu Qing talked about whether the Swordsage Court would ask them questions about them taking the energy from the totem.

The Captain suggested that it was a good opportunity for them to come clean, and that they should just return the energy to the swordmages. Xu Qing had to admit what the Captain said made sense.

Unfortunately, Xu Qing couldn't actually do that. The energy he had wasn't from that red moon, but instead, a violet moon.

The Captain produced his stream of energy anyway, and handed it to Xu Qing.

Xu Qing was obviously surprised by the Captain's generosity.

"It's because I have something much bigger in the works. Heh heh. It's currently in the planning stages. When the time comes, I'll need your help. This time, I'm planning to eat something really satisfying."

Xu Qing thought about it for a moment.

As of now, he had enough of the septenary goldmetal energy to completely transform the iron skewer into a spirit weapon. When the process was done, Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior would be able to enter it again. It only took a moment. The black iron skewer instantly grew mightier. Then, when combined with the red tribulation lightning from the patriarch, it had the killing power of three heavenly palaces.

Xu Qing hefted it and looked very pleased.

The shadow didn't look happy to be playing second fiddle, yet didn't have any options at hand. All it could do was send Xu Qing emotional fluctuations via divine will, emphasizing that it would be obedient. It also expressed that it was both terrified and hopeful regarding the violet moon.

Xu Qing felt a bit sorry for the shadow, so he let it get closer to the moon. The shadow cautiously approached, and then bowed down in obeisance, like a wolf bowing to the moon. Then it carefully began doing cultivation exercises. It was an odd sight to Xu Qing, but it also gave him a deeper understanding of the violet moon.

Maybe the violet moon can become the core for my fifth heavenly palace.

He had finished his third heavenly palace, and had already planned things out for his fourth. The core would be his bluegreen dragon, and it would become his life essence palace.

Normally speaking, his life essence heavenly palace, which would come from the enlightenment he had gained in Qi Condensation from his Forbidden Sea dragonwhale, would have been his first heavenly palace. However, Xu Qing's path of cultivation was different from most other people. His two life lamps became heavenly palaces, and then he made another with the taboo poison pill. Therefore, it meant that his life essence palace had to be the fourth.

When he took Li Ziliang's four gold cores from his crystalline heavenly palaces, they became a part of Xu Qing's fourth palace. Based on what he could tell, it wouldn't be very long before that fourth heavenly palace was complete.

During the seven days that passed, the swordsages came looking for Xu Qing and the Captain. They explained that they knew about the god domain totem and its energy, and explained that if he returned the energy to them, he would be given military credits. To a certain extent, military credits were required for promotions among the swordsages. And even if he didn't become a swordsage, military credits could be exchanged for unique cultivation items that only the Swordsage Court had.

Xu Qing and the Captain talked it over. After putting on a show of hesitating, they finally returned one energy stream.

At the end of the seven days, the event that all of the cultivators had been waiting for was finally about to start. It was the recruitment qualification competition. There would be thousands of people who participated, but only the top ten would pass! Only those ten people would qualify to participate in the true assessment. Only they could become real swordsages!

Chapter 364: Ghastr Hollow

The swordsages wanted the best of the best, and their process was different than when sects recruited disciples. The qualifications were stricter. What was more, the process was divided into two phases.

In the first phase, the participants fought for the mere right to join the event. That section eliminated the vast majority of disciples, limiting how many people made it to the second phase. At the moment, there were 2,793 disciples from various sects who had come from all over Emperor-Receiving Prefecture in the hopes of taking advantage of this once-a-decade opportunity.

In order to proceed to the next phase, they had to get into the top ten. Only ten people would participate in the second phase, and that was because only very special people were wanted.

The finale was like a pilgrimage that all current swordsages would participate in. As per tradition, only a few people would succeed, to maintain the solemnity of the event. These recruitment assessments happened every ten years, and in the end, five people were selected. Three of them would be official swordsages, two would be adjunct swordsages.

The official swordsages were full swordsages, who wielded a command sword and were blessed by a Grand Emperor. They were true swordsages, recognized as orthodox by all heaven and earth.

The adjunct swordsages did not receive command swords, but did receive a blessing. They would proceed to the Swordsage Palace in Sea-Sealing County, where they would be reassessed. It was a deputy position, not recognized by heaven and earth, and was subject to the oversight and assessment of the swordsage elders.

Before the second phase began, there were chances to earn bonus points. That could be done by gaining enlightenment of the battle spirit symbols and by earning a rank in climbing the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar.

The sky was deep blue, with scattered white clouds. The afternoon sun shone down onto the lands, filling them with brightness. Light shone from the sky above, and then reflected off the icy snow on the ground. The juxtaposition made everything seem cold. The wind blew from the north, scattering snowflakes everywhere, and chilling the crowds of people present.

The thrum of a sword echoed out from the Swordsage Court atop the pillar, a summons to the 2,793 sect disciples and rogue cultivators who had gathered in Netherflight City.

Xu Qing and the Captain were there, standing together and looking up into the dome of heaven. Xu Qing's expression was calm, while the Captain's was one of keen anticipation.

Xu Qing wasn't surprised at all that the Captain qualified to participate. After all, he had long been preparing for this event. What Xu Qing was particularly interested in was the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society dao child Zhang Siyun, who was a short distance away.

“You’re keeping an eye on him?” the Captain said.

Xu Qing looked at the Captain and nodded.

The Captain chuckled. “You sense it too?”

Xu Qing’s eyes narrowed and he was about to ask the Captain some questions when the thrum of a sword once again rang out from above. Three figures appeared, descending from the top of the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar.

Two were old men, one was middle-aged.

They all wore government uniforms, and were so majestic it seemed like heaven and earth shook in response to their presence. They were somber beyond compare. The two old men each had a thousand dao lineaments in their eyes, and as for the middle-aged cultivator, he was even more terrifying. Countless projections swirled behind him, one after another, seemingly connected to the dome of heaven. And it seemed like his gaze could transform everything he looked at. As the pressure from him weighed down on the cultivators below, their expressions became that of reverence.

Then a voice reached the 2,793 cultivators, crashing like thunder.

“In the past, death was unlikely for participants in our recruitment events here in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. However, this day of selection will be different from the past. The Swordsage Court has agreed that the competition will take place in a ghastr hollow.”

The most common response to his words was confusion. After all, few people knew what ghastr hollows were, so only a few disciples and dao protectors from important sects reacted with knowing surprise.

Xu Qing was among those who reacted with confusion, and he turned to see if the Captain knew what was going on. The Captain’s pupils constricted in response to the words. Then he noticed Xu Qing looking at him, and he pointed down at the ground. Xu Qing thought about it for a moment.

The majestic voice paused briefly, then continued speaking. “Perhaps some of you have heard about ghastr hollows. Presumably, though, most have not.”

Everyone was paying very close attention, as they knew this information could relate directly to either their success or their failure. Xu Qing’s expression was solemn.

“All of you know the history of the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar. The ghastr hollow I refer to... is beneath the pillar!”

The crowd was clearly surprised. Xu Qing narrowed his eyes.

“Beneath the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar is a deep tunnel that leads to parts unknown. It is filled with countless ghastrs. Take note, grues and ghastrs are not the same thing.” The man looked the crowd over and then continued, “Grues are illusory. Ghastrs are corporeal. Grues are vicious and sinister. Ghastrs are brutal and tyrannical. [1]

“There are many ghastr hollows in the Revered Ancient mainland. They are all mysterious and dangerous places. However, as long as you don’t delve too deeply into them, you can keep the danger from getting out of control. The Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar is suppressing this particular ghastr hollow, and it has been for countless years.”

Xu Qing looked at the spot where the pillar entered the ground, and thought back to the stories the Captain had told about the pillar being a weapon thrown into this spot by the Ghost Emperor for a specific reason. Apparently the reason was to suppress the ghastr hollow.

But why did the Ghost Emperor do that? Is there something in the ghastr hollow that the Ghost Emperor wanted to suppress?

Xu Qing wasn’t sure of the answer to that question, but he had the feeling the Swordsage Court knew.

Looking just as majestic and dignified as before, the middle-aged man in the government uniform continued, “The portion of the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar that rests directly atop the ghastr hollow has, over the years, been corroded by the energy of the hollow. As a result, cracks have started to spread through it.

“The damage has become particularly bad in recent years, to the point where fragments of the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar have fallen into the ghastr hollow. Some have fallen to the very bottom, but others have stuck into the walls of the tunnel. Swordsages have been going in to collect the pieces and return them to the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar.

“Now it’s your turn to participate in the effort. You have three days to collect as many pieces as possible. The ten people who collect the most will advance to the second phase of the assessment.”

Everyone had serious expressions as they listened to all the details.

“Furthermore, I would like to remind everyone that ghastr hollows contain deadly danger. This is your last chance to back out. Assuming you go forward you’ll be given a special teleportation jade slip. If you encounter a deadly situation, you can use it to teleport to safety. That said, there’s no guarantee the teleportation talisman will work, as unexpected situations can always arise.”

As the words left his mouth, a host of jade slips appeared which flew out to hover in front of all the participants.

There was no way that weak-hearted people would participate in an event like this to become a swordsage, so it was no surprise that not a single person backed out. They all took the teleportation jade slips. Some people had questions.

“Exalted one, what happens if two people get the same number of fragments? How do you pick between the two?”

Voice cool, the middle-aged cultivator replied, “The rank they achieved climbing the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar will be the determining factor. Finally, I need to warn you that the rules of the Swordsage Court still apply in the ghastr hollow. Fighting is permitted, but no killing! And now, let the swordsage recruitment event begin!”

The Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar shone with blinding light, and then it began to tremble. After that, it shrank down slightly and then rose up, revealing the part that was normally underground.

Now, everyone could see that the portion of the pillar that was normally hidden actually had a mottled and damaged surface. It looked severely corroded. In fact, it was so badly damaged it could be considered in disastrous condition.

As the pillar rose, it revealed a gaping hole, out of which emanated vile black mist, along with inhuman howls. Those howls seemed full of mourning and grief, and at the same time, unending bitterness and madness. It was like... they were howls drifting up from the netherworld of the Yellow Springs. Everyone looked surprised, and some candidates even seemed hesitant about proceeding.

“What are you waiting for? Get in there!” The middle-aged cultivator’s voice boomed like thunder.

In response, the sect disciples and rogue cultivators gritted their teeth and shot into the gaping hole. Red-garbed Qing Qiu was among them, and was in the first group to make it inside. Zhang Siyun and the young man with the nose ring from the small sect followed, along with chosen from numerous other sects. Xu Qing and the Captain also followed.

It only took a moment for about ninety percent of the cultivators to enter. As the remainder stood there hesitantly, an intense rumbling sound echoed out as the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar dropped back down and once again expanded to its normal size.

The tunnel was now blocked again!

The black mist vanished, and the anguished howls faded into nothing. Everything went back to normal.

Inside the tunnel, everything was pitch black.

Once inside, Xu Qing moved to the side to find the hard-packed dirt wall. Then, keeping his guard up, he looked around. It was a bizarre place, as not even focusing one’s cultivation base on the eyes would make everything visible. At the same time, the howling from before was gone. Now, the only thing to be heard was people breathing. The darkness and claustrophobic nature of the surroundings was enough to make anyone feel pressured. A cold aura rose from below, carrying with it the noxious aroma of rotting flesh. It was enough to cause one’s hair to stand on end.

After some time, Xu Qing’s eyes adjusted, whether it was naturally or due to his cultivation base, he wasn’t sure.

He saw a huge tunnel leading down. The dirt walls were dotted with black plants, the leaves of which had ghost faces on them. The faces all seemed to be looking at the cultivators and grinning.

Of the over 2,000 people present, only about half were near the walls. The other half were already dropping down into the tunnel.

Xu Qing's eyes narrowed. Looking around, he spotted the Captain only about nine meters away. The Captain looked back at him and then pointed down. Xu Qing nodded, and the two of them prepared to release their grips and drop down. But then...

A shrill, operatic voice echoed out everywhere.

The voice seemed soft and feminine, but at the same time, piercing. The contradictory natures of the voice blended into an unspeakable song.

“In past lives forlorn, always reborn, sever lovesickness and endlessly mourn....”

It was impossible to tell if the singer was male or female. But those who heard the song felt their scalps tingling, and the skin on their back crawling. It was like a freezing autumn rain falling on one's face. [2]

Chapter 365: Ghosts

The rain in autumn is inherently cold. When it lands on your face, your chest, and your arms, it fills you with an indescribable coldness that's somehow very difficult to get rid of. It makes you shiver, and freezes you down to your bones.

The song imparted that same feeling. Xu Qing felt himself shivering uncontrollably, and suddenly found himself thinking back to that time in the forbidden region when he and Sergeant Thunder had encountered that blood mist and the women's boots. [1]

Back then he was a rogue cultivator in the Qi Condensation level, yet the cold he felt now was the same as back then. It felt like it would freeze his soul and ice over his body. Even with his extraordinary cultivation base, the sensation felt the same.

The soft, feminine voice seemed to grow more substantive, and the song became like a funeral dirge tugging at the soul. Of the more than 1,000 cultivators clinging to the walls, a few dozen went limp and started falling down. Within moments, the darkness below swallowed them up.

Those who remained were shaken, and couldn't stop the horror and amazement from showing on their faces. And that was because the voice seemed to be profoundly tremulous. Every word sung seemed to contain infinite trembling, as though the singer was full of fear and foreboding. Almost as if the song were being sung to a dead person.

As the song echoed about in the massive, pit-like tunnel, not even blocking one's ears could prevent one from hearing it. It filled the listener's souls, becoming pure mutagen that flourished in their hearts. In fact, the mutagen levels in the tunnel were soaring, and at the same time, the singing faded, until it was little more than a murmured hum.

But then, numerous cultivators gasped when another voice started singing.

“In past lives you're forlorn, I'm always reborn, who severs lovesickness and who endlessly mourns...?”

It was obviously a different singer. This voice was not as disturbing, and did not contain that shrill coldness. And yet, somehow, this singer seemed even more eerie. Shaken, everyone looked in Xu Qing's general direction. And that was because the singing was coming from there.

Xu Qing turned to look at the Captain. The Captain looked back at him with wide eyes.

Xu Qing could see that, right behind the Captain... floated a figure in a white garment.

That was the person who was singing.

The Captain's eyes narrowed, and his expression turned vicious. A face appeared within his pupils, and a cold aura suddenly erupted from within him. Opening his mouth wide to bare his teeth, he turned and viciously took a bite out of the figure behind him. The sound of teeth snapping against teeth bore evidence of how viciously he had bitten down.

However, the singing continued.

This time, though, it came from behind a different cultivator. That cultivator shivered as he experienced a sudden sensation of deadly crisis. Before he could snap the teleportation jade slip in his hand... his eyes went blank and he started singing. Then his expression turned vicious.

All of a sudden, mutagen exploded within him, so violently that he instantly mutated! Fleshy tumors rose up on his back. His arms grew many times thicker than before. Bone spikes stabbed out of his skin and through his clothing, ripping it. His legs also grew thicker, until his thighs exploded and eight blood-soaked tentacles writhed out. The biggest change, however, was to his head. His head... turned into a gigantic blue eyeball.

The eye blinked, and the cultivator vanished. He reappeared an instant later in front of a cultivator from a small sect. That cultivator was an extraordinary individual, and immediately performed an incantation gesture, causing flames to spring up around him. It didn't do any good. One of the tentacles snaked through the flames, and burrowed into his mouth.

The cultivator whimpered chokingly as he was lifted up, his neck swelling rapidly until it exploded. The tentacle emerged from the exploded section, whipping back and forth, spraying gore everywhere. The sight caused numerous surrounding disciples to gasp.

Next, the mutated cultivator blurred into motion, heading toward another person at blinding speed.

A moment later, more shrill screaming echoed out.

A few breaths of time passed during which the mutated cultivator moved from victim to victim. Then he appeared right in front of Xu Qing.

The mutated cultivator threw his arms out to grab Xu Qing, and at the same time, a gaping maw appeared on his belly.

Meanwhile, the selfish nature of humanity was on display. It wouldn't even require all 1,000 of the cultivators present to deal with the mutated cultivator. If even seven or eight of them joined forces, he wouldn't be fast enough to escape them. But no one did that. Some people took advantage of the chaos to drop further down into the tunnel. Some of them, a few hundred, took out their jade slips and snapped them. Obviously they didn't want to continue.

Everything was pure chaos.

Xu Qing wasn't paying any attention to that, though. As the vicious, mutated cultivator closed in, his eyes flashed with cold light. Instead of falling back, he accelerated, heading right toward the mutated cultivator. Clenching his hand into a fist, he unleashed the power of three heavenly palaces and his golden crow. The fist landed, and the mutated cultivator shrieked in agony as he was thrown backward.

Before he could move very far, a cold aura erupted behind him, and the Captain silently appeared. Grabbing the mutated cultivator, the Captain took a huge bite out of his blue eyeball. Another agonized shriek erupted from the mouth on the mutated cultivator's abdomen.

That was when Xu Qing arrived with another fist strike. With a boom, the mutated cultivator exploded into pieces that fell down into the depths of the pit.

There weren't many cultivators left in this area, only a few dozen. The others had either teleported away or gone deeper down into the tunnel.

The Captain spat off to the side, as if he'd eaten something nasty. "Okay, little Ah Qing. Let's split up and make the best of our time."

Xu Qing nodded, and the two of them started moving downward.

Before long, Xu Qing spotted some of the disciples who had been the first to leave the area above. They were engaged in fierce fighting. Some fought the same white-garbed figure who had appeared above, and others fought mutated cultivators. Everyone who had come to this event came prepared, so it was no surprise to Xu Qing that in the majority of cases, the human cultivators were coming out victorious. However, there were still some disciples who ended up dead before they could teleport to safety. The fight to reach the second phase was obviously going to be a very dangerous one.

Xu Qing flew down, avoiding the fighting. The further down he got, the colder it became, and the stifling sensation of pressure grew stronger. Soon, he was panting for breath, and his heart was pounding so hard he could hear it.

Even his vision was starting to dim a bit.

However, after a bit of time passed, he acclimated. Looking around, he saw that there were openings in the walls leading to passageways that went in different directions. It seemed like some sort of labyrinth. The odor of rotten flesh was not growing any fainter. Instead, it was growing stronger.

So far, he hadn't spotted a single one of the pillar fragments that were required to move onto the second phase. Given how many people had gone on ahead, it made sense that they would have taken any they spotted on the way.

After mulling the matter over, he looked around and spotted an area where the soil protruded from the wall to create a ledge. Moving over, he stood on it and looked up.

He could hear the sound of fighting, and occasionally some blood would fall down. Meanwhile, the area below seemed just as cold as before, and the strange singing was still present.

The Captain was nowhere to be seen, but that was fine. It made more sense to split up and look for pillar fragments separately.

I'm not going to take any side paths. I'm just going to keep going deeper and see what's there.

Taking a look further down, he jumped and started moving again. As he got deeper, it got darker and darker. The sense of claustrophobia grew more intense. Eventually, Xu Qing stopped in place, then backed up a bit.

Right below him was an area where smaller tunnels branched out. And standing in one of the openings was an old man in a black robe. He didn't emanate any aura whatsoever, as if he were part of the surrounding darkness. Because of that, he would be easy to miss. His hands rested at his side, and if you looked closely, he had black fingernails so long and sharp they were like claws. His back was to Xu Qing, making it impossible to see his face.

Xu Qing could see the old man trembling, almost as if he were carefully listening to the singing coming from deeper in the tunnel.

Of course, this was a ghost hollow, so Xu Qing was going to remain on guard no matter what he ran into. What attracted Xu Qing's attention was that, just past the eerie old man, there were three pillar fragments stuck in the soil.

Xu Qing thought the matter over. It seemed completely impossible that nobody had encountered this already. Yet the pillar fragments were still right there. That meant that the disciples who had seen them were either dead, hadn't tried to take them, or had tried and failed. After more consideration, Xu Qing inspected the area to make sure it wasn't an ambush, then sent a message to his shadow via divine will. The shadow surreptitiously stretched out, passed the old man, and wrapped around one of the fragments.

Right then, the old man suddenly reached out and put his hand on the fragment, moving so fast that the soil vibrated. Then he looked expressionlessly over his shoulder and right into Xu Qing's eyes. He looked like a zombie. His eye sockets were empty, and glowed with red light. And his lips curved into a smile, revealing a host of sharp teeth. Without any warning, he burst into motion, heading right toward Xu Qing. His hands reached out, and he seemed to pierce through space, causing a shrieking whistle as he clawed toward Xu Qing.

Xu Qing's eyes narrowed as a foul wind brushed against him ahead of the incoming old zombie.

As the old zombie's right hand closed in, Xu Qing suddenly flipped backward, his right foot flying up, backed by all the power of his fleshly body and cultivation base. It smashed right into the zombie's chin!

CRACK!

The zombie's head snapped back at an unnatural angle, and he tumbled backward about thirty meters.

At the same time, Xu Qing's shadow grabbed all three pillar fragments and then raced back toward Xu Qing.

The old zombie's head twisted back into place. His eye sockets glowed bright red, and he pulsed with a perverse energy as well as explosive mutagen. Then he howled like an animal as he raced back in Xu Qing's direction, his face a mask of ferocity. As he closed in, he lunged toward Xu Qing's neck, his mouth opened wide.

Chapter 366: Ghost Faces on Paper Money

A noxious odor swept over Xu Qing. Eyes shining with cold light, he flew backward. He wasn't interested in wasting time with this old zombie. He had the pillar fragments, so now he just wanted to move on.

However, the zombie moved very quickly. From his vicious aura and perverse energy, it was obvious he wasn't going to give up until his opponent was dead.

Xu Qing's eyes glittered coldly as he sized up the zombie. The thing reminded him of the Seazombie race. His joints were clearly a bit stiff. What was more, he had ridiculous toughness, powers of regeneration, and even more noteworthy, undying characteristics.

He has no heartbeat. No blood. He lacks intelligence. He seems more like a wild animal or a mutated cultivator. That said, he's covered with the evidence of ancient time. He has no magical techniques, and both his aura and the air that surround him contain poison. It actually seems like zombie poison, with its primary function being to cause rot and decay. His fleshly body is strong, and he has battle prowess surpassing the four-palace level. Combined with his recovery powers and undying characteristics, he's actually very close to the five-palace level.

Xu Qing moved to the side to avoid another attack as he finished analyzing his opponent

He's a bit slower than me, and I bet if I used my poison core I could kill him. But that would be a waste of time. After all, he has formidable poison too. And his fingernails look like they would make great materials for use in equipment forging. If I could figure out the source of his regeneration powers, that would also be very valuable. Then at least it wouldn't be so much of a time waster.

During the time it took Xu Qing to analyze the situation, the old zombie launched several more attacks. He also seemed to be getting more and more frustrated. Suddenly he opened his mouth and spat out a black mist that shot toward Xu Qing.

I suppose I'll crush him and take all of those things away from him.

Xu Qing had made his decision. Though he was currently surrounded by poison mist, a moment later, that poison mist suddenly exploded in all directions.

A shocking aura erupted out, sweeping away all the poison. Then a blur of afterimages moved toward the old zombie, faster than his eyes could track. All the zombie knew was that the mist exploded. Then, a thud rang out as an explosive force slammed into him and sent him tumbling backward.

He slammed into the dirt sides of the tunnel 300 meters away. The wall vibrated as the old zombie struggled to wrench himself free from where he had been embedded into the wall. Before he could, a black palm arrived and slammed into his face. Another boom rang out as his head was shoved into the wall. Struggling to free himself did no good.

That was when the owner of that black hand became visible to the old zombie. It was a pitch-black figure. Its clothes, its skin. Everything about it was as dark as night. However, that darkness was currently converging onto the forehead of the figure, where it became an eye. Then the figure's facial features became clear. It was none other than Xu Qing.

When using the Shadow Fusion Secret Magic, Xu Qing lost his magical techniques, but gained the ultimate body cultivation powers. His fleshly body battle prowess surpassed the four-palace level,

and reached the peak of the five-palace level. In that state, the old zombie seemed slow. Xu Qing expressionlessly lifted his right hand, grabbed one of the old zombie's fingers, and snapped off the black nail.

After a moment of thought, he put the nail up to the zombie's neck and moved it slowly down as if looking for something, then stabbed it into his heart. There, he found a fist-sized conglomeration of black mist. It was a powerful convergence of zombie poison.

With that, he continued looking, hoping to find the source of the zombie's regenerative powers. However, after losing that black mist, the zombie trembled and started melting into a black liquid that dripped down into the tunnel below.

Seeing that, Xu Qing let the eye on his forehead spread out to cover him again. Then it transformed into a coffin, out of which he stepped.

I guess this black mist isn't just poison. It must also be the source of that zombie's strange powers.

After some thought, he put the fingernail and the mist away, then continued on his way. Things got even darker, and the noxious odor became stronger. It also got intensely cold. There was no sound other than the singing.

It seemed resentful, despairing, empty, and mournful. As the sound assailed Xu Qing, he felt increasingly out of sorts. He just couldn't get the sound out of his ears.

Eventually he stopped on an outcropping and looked down into the darkness.

Just how deep does it go? After thinking about it, he continued going down. About an hour later, his pupils suddenly constricted. A few dozen meters down, he saw some corpses hovering in the middle of the air. Dozens of them.

One of them was the cultivator from the small sect that Xu Qing had passed while climbing the pillar. It wasn't the one who had attacked him, but rather the one from the Church of Departure. Among the other cultivators, Xu Qing saw disciples from both the Eight Sect Coalition and the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society. All had died here, and bizarrely... all of them had yellow pieces of paper ritual money stuck to their faces. [1]

Beneath the paper, their faces were green and twisted ferociously, as though they had experienced intense pain before dying. Some had teleportation jade slips in their hands, but obviously had been too slow to activate them.

Stuck into the surrounding dirt walls were a host of glittering pillar fragments. Xu Qing could only imagine how many fragments existed within the corpses' bags of holding. All in all, these were among the first people to start moving down after the trial began.

However, Xu Qing didn't do anything rash. For one thing, he was worried that this could be a trap. In addition to that, he noticed that there were strips of yellow paper money fluttering about in the air around the corpses. They flew back and forth almost like butterflies, drifting in the wind that was present in the tunnel.

As Xu Qing studied the scene, some of the yellow money suddenly stopped in place, then slowly turned, revealing ghost faces on them, all of them looking at Xu Qing. The mere sight of that happening with so many pieces of paper would cause anyone's blood to run cold.

Xu Qing's eyes glittered with cold light as the pieces of paper money started flying toward him rapidly, emitting sounds of delight. It was like bizarre laughter, filled with greed and the longing for flesh, blood, and souls.

As they closed in, Xu Qing extended his right hand and pushed out. Three-palace power erupted, and the golden crow appeared behind him. The crow let loose a piercing cry, then spread its wings, causing flames to sweep out in all directions.

The paper money was swept away from Xu Qing. However, the bizarre laughter didn't go away. If anything, it grew clearer. In fact, some of the pieces of paper near him started clumping together, and as he watched, they transformed into a huge cicada. It even had wings made of paper money. The cicada spread those wings and started flying. A buzz filled the air, and at the same time, the laughter turned into speech.

"Hey you. Are you hungry? Want to eat me?"

The voice was strange, grating, and even ear-piercing. It was like an attack on Xu Qing's ears that also sent the flames around him scattering. The paper cicada took that opportunity to race toward Xu Qing. Meanwhile, all the ghost faces seemed full of greed and longing.

"Eat me, eat me, eat me...."

The words overlapped on each other, echoing out into a painful buzz that pierced Xu Qing's mind. Eyes turning cold, he was just about to launch an attack when his face sank and he shot backward.

As he did, one section of the dirt wall blurred, and then a 30-meter-wide centipede burst out into the open. However, it didn't target Xu Qing, but instead... went after the paper cicada.

The vicious-looking centipede exuded a noxious scent, and was semitransparent, as if it were partly illusory. It moved with incredible speed, snapping up the cicada with its mandibles and then landing on the opposite wall. On the back of the centipede was a young woman. Her lower half was fused with the centipede itself, as if she were permanently attached to it. She wore no clothing on her upper torso, but her long, black hair covered her. Stroking her hair with a brush she held, she burped, causing an undigested piece of paper money to float out. Grabbing it, she looked in Xu Qing's direction and smiled.

"Delicious. Don't you want a taste?"

Xu Qing's guard was up. This was a very bizarre situation. For one thing, he was fairly certain the young woman wasn't actually talking to him, but rather, someone behind him.

A black coffin suddenly appeared behind him, pulsing with an inauspicious aura. It was the shadow, who had been provoked into appearing by the young woman. A host of eyes appeared on it, all of them staring at the paper money in her hand. The eyes blinked.

"Does that blink mean something? Are you looking at this?" She held up the paper money.

Right then, something strange happened. A ghost face appeared on the paper money, and it chuckled at her.

"Are you full?" the ghost face asked.

As the words echoed out, the centipede shivered, revealing that it was being transformed into countless pieces of paper money. In fact, it would soon be a paper centipede. All of the pieces of paper money that made it up had ghost faces on them, and they were all laughing and saying the same thing.

“Are you full?”

Chapter 367: Heart of a Jackal or Fox

The young woman atop the centipede screamed shrilly. At her urging, the centipede writhed on the dirt wall, trying but failing to fling the paper money off of it. The paper money was coming from inside the centipede, spilling out and covering it. In fact, it was getting very close to the young woman.

The ghastly voices again spoke from the ghost faces on the paper money.

“Are you full?”

The voices were countless piercing cries all overlapping on each other.

The woman’s eyes glared malevolently at the paper money which she seemed helpless to do anything about. Then she sent her centipede body burrowing into the wall. As dirt sprayed everywhere, she vanished without a trace.

At the same time, the paper money on the faces of all the corpses flew up and flew toward that spot. The ghost faces laughed as the paper hit the wall and started digging in to chase the centipede. From the look of it, this place really was a big trap. But it hadn’t been laid for Xu Qing. Instead... it was laid for the bizarre centipede. Or perhaps the centipede had attracted the attention of the paper money, causing a shift in targets. Xu Qing had no way of knowing which was the case.

He looked at the spot where the centipede had disappeared, all the while staying fully on guard. Both the paper money and the centipede imparted a sense of extreme danger to him. It was something that had nothing to do with his cultivation base. Rather, that centipede seemed to have some sort of mysterious power that he could just innately sense.

It’s similar to that red moon.... I think my taboo poison core could probably kill that centipede, and maybe the violet moon too.

That said, he didn’t want to reveal his major secrets here. Keeping his guard up, he cautiously approached the corpses and took all the pillar fragments and bags of holding he could find. Continuing to move down the tunnel, he opened the bags of holding one by one to find more pillar fragments. In fact, there were over a hundred in total. Putting them all together in his own bag of holding, he continued downward.

At this depth, the noxious stench grew even more intense, and the singing became clearer. Both the frigid cold and the mutagen were more intense than ever. At the same time, he found more pillar fragments. He took every one he saw.

In that manner, time passed. An entire day went by.

During that time, Xu Qing spotted more corpses, most of them rotting so badly it was hard to tell if they were even trial participants. All of them were being slowly devoured by ravenous, ghostly figures. None of those corpses had bags of holding.

Xu Qing's caution grew, to the point where he slowed down a bit as he descended. He encountered quite a few ghosts. He saw a giant made of mounds of raw flesh, with a huge opening on its belly that consumed and vomited dirt. He saw a plant growing out of the wall that looked like a giant eye, which stared at him. He also spotted dancers in stunning dresses that looked like immortal fairies. They floated out from the mud walls, twirling and spinning. At first, they seemed beautiful, but then he realized they had no faces.

Most ordinary people would be struck with fear so badly their legs would go weak and they would flee. The darkness, the claustrophobia, the stench, along with the ghosts and the singing, would cause one's soul to tremble and one's hair to stand on end.

Xu Qing wasn't doing so badly. He had seen a lot of horror in his life, including things more terrifying than this.

As the second day slipped by, Xu Qing got deeper and deeper. He now had over two hundred pillar fragments, which was definitely quite a lot.

He was starting to wonder if he should stop going down, when all of a sudden, his shadow turned into a coffin of its own volition. All of its eyes were open, and it was staring at the nearby wall. At the same time, it sent urgent fluctuations to Xu Qing.

Xu Qing looked at the wall and sent the iron skewer flying out. The skewer shot forth and stabbed into the wall, excavating a large hole.

Eventually, a young woman on a centipede was revealed, gasping for breath. Her centipede body was now completely made of paper, and looked severely shriveled, as though its inner aspects had been sucked out, leaving only a husk behind. It was the same with the young woman's human torso, from her eyes down. And her eyes looked empty, as though she were just waiting to pass away into nothing.

Xu Qing took a look, then turned to leave. Except, then he sensed pleading fluctuations from the shadow.

"You want to save her?" Xu Qing asked in amazement. It was his first time sensing any emotional fluctuations like this from the shadow.

"Aura... familiar.... Want...."

After thinking the matter over, Xu Qing nodded. "I can try. Worst case scenario, I fail, and she still dies."

The coffin-form shadow shook back and forth. Xu Qing eyed it curiously, but had long since grown used to the way Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior had skewed the shadow's communication ability.

He approached the centipede in the dirt wall.

The woman's eyes shifted to him, and they rippled with recognition. However, everything beneath her eyes had turned to paper, and she couldn't speak.

Xu Qing looked down at her, then tapped into his third heavenly palace. The power of taboo poison roiled out and seeped toward the centipede woman. In the blink of an eye, it invaded her form. Her eyes shone with terror. Meanwhile, the ghost faces on the pieces of paper that made up her body

turned to glare at Xu Qing, then opened their mouths wide. However, instead of the ghastly voices that had previously come out, the only thing they did was scream in agony.

Xu Qing's poison spread rapidly through the paper money, turning it black and causing it to melt. The process took some time, but eventually all the paper money was a sticky fluid that flowed down into the mud.

After the paper money was gone, Xu Qing's poison started invading the centipede.

Everything beneath the young woman's eyes rotted, and her eyes turned emptier. Then Xu Qing's third heavenly palace vibrated, and all of the poison outside his body, including that in the centipede woman, swirled back into Xu Qing.

When it was over, the centipede woman shivered, then struggled to lift her head and look at Xu Qing. Finally, she turned and burrowed back into the wall.

Xu Qing didn't pay any attention to her after that. Standing at the edge of the pit he'd just excavated, he decided that, in order to ensure he got into the top ten, he needed to find some more pillar fragments.

Hopping back into the tunnel, he started his descent again. Another half a day went by, during which time his search brought his total fragment count up to 243.

There was now only half a day left until the time limit was up. Xu Qing wasn't interested in searching for more fragments, and was getting ready to leave. However, just as he picked up what he'd determined would be his last fragment, his pupils suddenly constricted. He had just spotted a living person. It was the first actual person he had encountered for over a day and a half.

It was the dao child of the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society, Zhang Siyun!

He was further down in the tunnel. He had just barreled out of one of the cross-tunnels, all the while fighting with a ghost. They both moved with incredible speed, and the booms from the blows they exchanged were quickly absorbed by the mud, ensuring that the sound of their combat didn't go very far.

The ghost was very tough and vicious. It was humanoid, but had no skin. Its entire body was wizened and cracked, like a corpse that had been burned to death. Yet it was very agile and fast. In fact, Zhang Siyun was having a hard time landing any meaningful blows.

Every time the ghost attacked, it would send black flames sweeping out in all directions. Based on its aura, Xu Qing could tell this was the most powerful thing he'd encountered in the tunnel.

It was at the six-palace level. Especially noteworthy was the fact that the black flames didn't emanate heat, but rather, cold. It was netherflame, something that could severely harm souls.

Zhang Siyun's expression was unsightly. He had been locked in combat with this immolated zombie ghost for a long time now. He had used secret magics to destroy it, only to find that it would reform moments later, seemingly unharmed. He had even used a soul-slaughtering trump card, only to find it useless. The ghost seemed undying and indestructible, and would occasionally release bizarre power that even he found terrifying.

Dammit. I'm so close! Why did this five elements zombie have to jump out all of a sudden? Don't tell me that Sect Grandfather calculated wrong? Did something change down below?

Zhang Siyun's expression was profoundly grim. The reason he had refused his Sect Grandfather's suggestion to let him skip the recruitment event was that he specifically wanted to explore the ghost hollow. He had known from the beginning that the trial would happen here. And his Sect Grandfather had made it clear to him that the upper levels of the ghost hollow had an item that, if he could acquire it, would bring incredible good fortune. His Sect Grandfather had also explained all of the details about what was in the ghost hollow. Because of that, he had immediately come to this spot.

However, his path had been blocked by this ghost, and it was fighting so fiercely he couldn't proceed. If he tried to simply get past it, it would suddenly reveal even more astonishing magics. He could tell that this terrifying zombie wasn't anything that could be considered ordinary. In fact, he knew its origin.

"This isn't going to work..." he murmured, his expression turning grimmer. As he tried to come up with a solution, he backed away, only to find that the zombie rushed right toward him.

His eyes glittered, and he was about to release another attack when he noticed Xu Qing, who had just arrived.

There was only about 600 meters between the two of them. Though the surroundings were dark, they could both see each other, and even caught each other's eyes. Xu Qing's eyebrows shot up. Looking into the depths of the tunnel beyond, he backed up a bit. He had no interest in getting involved in this fight, and instead decided to just leave.

"It's you!" Zhang Siyun said, his eyes shining with strange light.

Without any hesitation, and even ignoring the incoming zombie, he quickly performed an incantation gesture with both hands.

His entire body then rippled, and spatial fluctuations rolled out of him in all directions. He then smacked his forehead with his right hand, causing it to split open. Inside the opening appeared a hand-sized, black-colored goat. It stuck its head out, looking at Xu Qing, and then opened its mouth.

"BLEAT!"

Xu Qing was backing away when it happened. But then his mind spun, and he heard cracking sounds all around him, as if the space around him was shattering. Two of the shattered pieces shifted position and then stitched back together. Then more. The world around him spun and began to get clear again. When he looked around, his face turned grim as he realized that he was now in the spot previously occupied by Zhang Siyun.

Meanwhile, Zhang Siyun was now in the spot he had just occupied. Unexpectedly, they had been transposed!

And now, that immolated zombie was rushing right toward Xu Qing!

Zhang Siyun chuckled. Then, taking advantage of the fact that the zombie was now focused on Xu Qing, he sped down deeper into the tunnel.

Xu Qing watched him go, his eyes turning as cold as ice.

Chapter 368: In a Life of Hesitation, In a Future of Frustration

The dao child Zhang Siyun from the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society had a secret transposition technique that could be used to switch positions with an opponent. The first time it was used, it was virtually impossible to counter.

Xu Qing heard Zhang Siyun chuckle, and committed the sound to memory. However, now was not the time to think about such things, as the immolated zombie was right on top of him.

Xu Qing knew that if this zombie had caused problems for Zhang Siyun, it was obviously very strong. Not being careless at all, he backed up, performed a double-handed incantation gesture, and sent tsunami waves crashing into the fierce zombie. His shadow formed a coffin, and Xu Qing ducked inside.

Rumbling sounds echoed out as the magical tsunami waves swept the zombie backward.

Meanwhile, Xu Qing finished fusing with his shadow, causing him to turn pitch black. Eyes glittering with incisive light, he chose not to attack. Instead, he backed away again. He was much faster than before considering his fleshly body was now comparable to the peak of the five-palace level. As he backed up, he launched a fist strike.

At almost the exact same instant that the fist landed, the magically-formed tsunami waters exploded, and the burning zombie shot out. It moved so quickly Xu Qing had a hard time tracking its motion. It was a blur that sped through the spray of water to arrive right in front of him.

A piercing shriek reached Xu Qing's ears as the zombie met his fist strike with its own fist. A tremor passed through Xu Qing as immense force hit him. Even with his current fleshly body power, he couldn't match up to this level of strength.

Rumbling sounds filled him as he staggered backward until he slammed into the muddy wall.

That's definitely six-palace battle prowess! Yet this thing didn't chase Zhang Siyun, so it's obviously not very intelligent. It has instincts like an animal. But actually, as long as it has instincts, that makes this whole thing easier! It's watching me closely, and it only sped up when I sped up. And the fact it met my fist with its own fist proves that it's not very intelligent.

He could sense how terrifying the zombie was. Its magical techniques were so-so, with its most astonishing aspect being its fleshly body. Its fleshly body power was at the six-palace level.

When Xu Qing fused with his shadow, he could reach the peak of the five-palace level in terms of fleshly body power, but not even that was enough to fight back. He couldn't track his opponent's movements, and wasn't as strong as it. However, the surroundings limited the advantages of speed, as they were confined by the walls of the tunnel. As long as he kept his opponent attacking him straight on, Xu Qing had ways to negate the speed advantage.

That was why he wasn't trying to dodge out of the way. That would open him up to attacks from all sides.

Instead, he backed straight up until he slammed into the wall. That meant that behind him was nothing but the wall. The wall was also to his left and right, and the only open space was right in front of him. Meanwhile, the taboo poison core in his third palace was vibrating rapidly as poison emerged from it to gather in front of him.

As Xu Qing slammed into the wall, the zombie howled. Red flames erupted around it, turning into a host of mouths that lunged toward Xu Qing.

Xu Qing couldn't evade, as he was stuck in the wall. Therefore, he just shrank in on himself like a hedgehog.

Flames went wild, and the zombie's aura swept everywhere. It became a streak of afterimage as it shot forward, launching another fist strike right at Xu Qing in the wall.

A boom rang out, and Xu Qing's face went ashen. The wall behind him crumbled as he was shoved deeper in. However, the zombie also backed up, and instead of pure madness in its eyes, there was, for the first time, a trace of dread. And that was because its right arm was rotting!

Then a bolt of red lightning erupted out from inside it, provoking another howl. Red lightning crackled inside its body, crystallizing its flesh and blood and causing it to emanate frigid energy. After, the red lightning shot back toward the wall, revealing a black iron skewer within it, which came to hover in front of Xu Qing.

Xu Qing coughed up blood as the darkness that covered his body converged on his forehead in the shape of an eye. The shadow in eye form glared at the zombie. Beneath that eye was Xu Qing's calm face, his eyes cold as he stared at the zombie. He knew that his fleshly body couldn't compare to his opponent. He also couldn't match up in terms of magical techniques. Nor was he an equal in speed. But by embedding himself in the wall, he forced the battleground to be right in front of him.

He was limiting the spots where his opponent could attack from. That was because he could tell that this immolated zombie didn't have the same level of intelligence as a cultivator. In other words, it had no way to create complicated battle strategies.

What was more, Xu Qing's taboo poison core vastly surpassed his fleshly body in terms of being a trump card. It ensured that every time his opponent attacked him, they would get poisoned. Then all he had to do was buy time and wait for the poison to take effect.

The tunnel went silent as the zombie glared at Xu Qing, its expression a mix of irritation and fear as its right arm continued to rot away. Finally, it howled, violently suppressed its fear, and raced toward Xu Qing again, bursting with six-palace battle prowess.

A huge boom rang out, mixed into which was a howl. A moment later, the immolated zombie shot backward with astonishing speed.

Its right arm had melted into nothing, and the taboo poison was spreading into its torso, which was now rotting dramatically. The zombie's expression was one of madness, but the fear was now even more obvious. In fact, it seemed to border on terror.

In front of it, Xu Qing was stuck in the wall, blood oozing out of his eyes, ears, nose, and mouth. Thankfully, the violet crystal within him was constantly at work healing him, allowing him to endure. The area in front of Xu Qing was full of strong poison, which corroded everything and even exuded mutagen. Xu Qing wasn't looking at that, though. His eyes were fixed on the zombie, and they burned with killing intent. However, he didn't make a move. Instead, he extended his hand toward the zombie and then made a beckoning gesture.

"Come. Let's keep fighting."

The zombie erupted with a furious howl, and yet its expression contained more hesitation and dread than ever. Seeing that, Xu Qing placed his hands down into the wall on either side and pulled himself out. As he stood, taboo poison power swirled around him.

Xu Qing wasn't sure why Zhang Siyun got wrapped up in such a long fight with this zombie considering the dao child had six-palace power. But Xu Qing knew how wild animals behaved, and he knew that there was no better time than this moment to scare his opponent into fleeing.

That was even more the case when you got an animal to react instinctively. Therefore, rather than getting involved in a drawn-out fight, Xu Qing hoped to get his opponent to simply leave.

And that was exactly what happened. As Xu Qing sent taboo poison power swirling around him as if he were preparing for a huge attack, the fear in the zombie's eyes grew so intense that it started backing up.

Then, it let loose a few more howls before shooting up into the tunnel, leaving Xu Qing alone.

Xu Qing coughed up some blood as he looked up into the tunnel. Then he looked down, and his eyes grew colder than ever. He knew that Zhang Siyun was strong. Before, when he had come to the conclusion Zhang Siyun was connected to that red moon, he had known he was dangerous. However, he couldn't let the matter stand as it was.

We're under the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar, which is controlled by the Swordsage Court. Zhang Siyun might have some bizarre abilities, but if he tries something underhanded, someone should step in. It will be dangerous to go after him, but... if I'm not willing to at least go check it out and see if there are some good opportunities, then I might as well just go back to South Phoenix!

The time limit for this phase was rapidly approaching, therefore, Xu Qing's eyes shone with determination as he sped down through the tunnel as fast as he could. Along the way, he tapped into his taboo poison core and surrounded himself with poison. If nothing else, it might keep away things like that immolated zombie.

As he descended, he once again caught sight of some paper money. There were numerous pieces floating about.

Upon spotting them, Xu Qing decided to climb down the wall itself.

Time passed. It was now only about an hour until time was up. At this point, most disciples chose to activate their jade slips and teleport away.

There were few cultivators left. And when it came to the depths of the tunnel, there were only two: Zhang Siyun and Xu Qing.

There was more and more paper money, and the noxious stench grew stronger. It was cold, and the mutagen was more abundant. The singing was clearer than ever.

After enough time had passed for an incense stick to burn, Xu Qing lurched to a halt. Remaining motionless on the wall, he narrowed his eyes, concealed his presence, and looked to a spot about 300 meters down.

There he saw a very strange building; it was a log cabin. It looked very dilapidated, as if it had existed for countless years of time, to the point where the wood was starting to decay. The structure

was pentagonal, and each corner had a gray iron chain attached to it that stretched out to the wall of the tunnel.

Actually, the chains were suspending the cabin in midair.

There was a faint red light shining out from the cabin window, seemingly cast by a lamp. Through the window of the cabin, and also through the various decayed parts of the walls, Xu could see a person inside. It was a woman wearing a red opera costume. She sat at the window, her fair hand extended as she tossed out paper money. The paper money scattered, caught up in a cold wind as it flowed outward and upward. In addition to the paper money and the hand with skin as fair as jade, Xu Qing saw a red lamp inside the window. [1]

Obviously, this was the source of the paper money he'd seen. As for that hand, the moment he laid eyes on it, his heart filled with dread.

Then he looked more closely at the lamp, and his heart flip-flopped. That oil lamp... was none other than a life lamp!

The singing that he had been hearing this whole time came from within that log cabin, and it echoed out into the claustrophobic darkness more clearly than ever.

“In a life of hesitation, in a future of frustration, who is it that waits for me in reincarnation...?”

The voice was beautiful, sinister, and as cold as ice. It was impossible to say who the song was being sung for. Perhaps it was Xu Qing. Perhaps it was Zhang Siyun. Or perhaps it was for some other entity that lurked deeper in the darkness of the tunnel.

Chapter 369: The Third God!

The singing accompanied the fluttering paper money as it swirled around the log cabin. The song was intensely mournful and the surroundings were bizarre. It seemed as if some ceremony or rite was underway, something that had been going on for an indeterminable period of time.

In Xu Qing's eyes, the pentagonal log cabin almost seemed to be some sort of altar. That was because, on the corners of the pentagonal cabin, where the chains connected, sat three terrifying zombies.

The first zombie was dripping wet and so severely decayed that it was impossible to tell if it was male or female. It faced the log cabin, a tattered black robe draped over its frame, making it seem like it had been ravaged by time. The fluids of death which dripped down it seemed to contain some unimaginable power that preserved an image of the moment in which the zombie died. Despite how much time had passed, it was obvious.

It was a drowned zombie.

The second zombie also wore a tattered black robe, and was also facing the cabin. Its hands were at its own abdomen, and were in the middle of ripping apart its own belly, revealing the abdominal cavity beneath. There were no organs inside. It had been emptied out, although there was still something within the cavity, not quite visible. That was because, in life, this zombie had apparently seen something that prompted it to bend over in prostration.

It was a dissected zombie.

The third zombie was a little different from the other two. It had a red vine wrapped around its waist, the thorns of which pierced its belly. The vine continued upward to wrap around its throat. The ends of the vine were held in the zombie's hands, as if it had tied the vine around itself and pulled it tight to end its own life.

It was a strangled zombie. [1]

All three zombies were bizarre through and through, and they were why Xu Qing got the impression this was some sort of rite or ceremony.

On the cabin's fourth corner, there was no zombie. Instead, there was an unmarked gravestone. Normally speaking, a gravestone was placed atop a grave. Except, there was no grave here. Yet, the place clearly seemed like some sort of tomb.

Xu Qing looked at the second zombie, the dissected one, and examined it more closely. That was when he noticed that there was some dirt inside the dissected zombie's abdominal cavity. And in that dirt was a very small grave, within which was the partially buried zombie of a baby. That was the fourth zombie.

Seeing all that, Xu Qing shifted his attention to the fifth corner of the cabin. There, he saw scorch marks surrounding the spot where a zombie had once sat.

It immediately made him think of the immolated zombie he had just fought.

“Metal to dissect. Wood to strangle. Water to drown. Fire to immolate. Earth to bury.”

Xu Qing had no idea what this ceremony was about, but he knew that these four zombies and the log cabin they surrounded were absolutely terrifying. The atmosphere was stifling, and his hair stood on end thanks to the singing, as well as the aura and the mutagen from deeper in the tunnel. The aura caused his mind and heart to tremble. It was a feeling he had last experienced in the presence of the red moon. Xu Qing knew that, deeper in the darkness, there was definitely some unimaginable entity.

It was clear that Zhang Siyun knew about this as well. Xu Qing had already spotted him several hundred meters further down, carefully climbing down the wall. He was moving quickly but carefully, clearly fearful of disturbing the woman in the cabin or the zombies. Right now, he was only about thirty meters away from one of the iron chains connecting to the cabin.

Xu Qing watched Zhang Siyun, his eyes cold. As he did, he carefully took out a mirror, a black piece of wood, and a bag full of medicinal pills. The pills were black boluses, which would explode and then suck in the surrounding mutagen. In this sinister and mutagen-filled tunnel, there was no better pill than a black bolus to attract attention.

Xu Qing extended the bag in his left hand, and then dumped it upside down right above the unsuspecting Zhang Siyun. Hundreds of black boluses tumbled out. [2]

As Zhang Siyun carefully crawled along, his expression suddenly flickered, and he looked up to see Xu Qing and the medicinal pills. Alarmed, he was about to do something to block the pills when Xu Qing quietly spoke.

“Detonate!”

The black boluses exploded, creating a deafening boom. At the same time, massive amounts of mutagen surged into motion.

In the blink of an eye, a massive vortex appeared, creating a tideflow power and a heaven-shaking, earth-shattering noise. The flow of mutagen was so intense that, if you likened it to water, then it created a massive tidal wave. Everything below blurred. The pentagonal log cabin trembled, and the singing abruptly stopped.

The four zombies seated cross-legged around the cabin all opened their eyes, which radiated astonishing madness and brutality. Howling in rage, they all looked in the direction of Zhang Siyun! Fiendish rage erupted violently.

Zhang Siyun's face fell, and his heart filled with indescribable astonishment and fury. For one thing, it was obvious that Xu Qing had somehow dealt with the immolated zombie that he himself couldn't deal with. Not only that, Xu Qing was doing something to specifically target him and cause problems. All of that caused Zhang Siyun's rage to boil. Not only was his plan spoiled, but also, he was now facing immense danger. Eyes bloodshot, he started an incantation gesture with the goal of switching positions with Xu Qing.

This time, Xu Qing was ready. He had experienced that technique before, and thus, it was only natural that he would be prepared to deal with it. As soon as Zhang Siyun made his move, Xu Qing held up the small mirror. The mirror glittered, shining light directly into Zhang Siyun's eyes. Zhang Siyun's heart thumped as his soul was suddenly locked in place, negating his technique. [3]

And then Xu Qing activated the black piece of wood. The Darkspirit Everwill Door popped into being, faced Zhang Siyun, and opened.

What emerged was a rotting heart. The moment it appeared, Zhang Siyun shivered, and an expression of confusion overtook his face. The Darkspirit Everwill Door had received a twofold ensorcellment, allowing it to lock one's life force in place. And now... Zhang Siyun's life force was frozen solid. There was no way for him to continue with his magical technique. Taking advantage of the moment, Xu Qing backed away from him and then flew higher into the air.

However, what he'd done so far wasn't enough to abate his killing intent. Therefore, he sent his shadow stretching out toward Zhang Siyun. Given that Zhang Siyun was locked in place, it was easy for the shadow to grab him and throw him in the direction of the zombies by the cabin.

The rules stated that you couldn't kill someone, and Xu Qing wouldn't break those rules. Given that the swordsages had repeatedly emphasized that aspect, it seemed obvious that they would have a way to monitor such things. In all likelihood, they were using the teleportation jade slips for that purpose. However, there were no rules about lending someone a knife and having them do your dirty work for you.

With that done, the shadow slid back to Xu Qing, who shot 3,000 meters up in an instant.

From his vantage point, he could see everything below. He saw the snarling zombies, and Zhang Siyun howling in anguish now that he was free to move again.

He still has a life lamp! Eyes narrowing, Xu Qing was just waiting for Zhang Siyun to die so that he could go in and take his life lamp. But then, a sense of deadly crisis filled him that caused all his hair to stand on end, and filled his heart with waves of astonishment. And that was because, in what had previously been inky darkness below, he saw light.

He looked down, and instantly his head spun. Everything in his view twisted and distorted, turning blurry. His soul, his flesh, and his blood all felt like they might be ripped to shreds.

Below him, he didn't just see five chains and a log cabin. Beneath the cabin, down in the pitch black, something else had appeared....

It was an eye!

A huge, golden eye!

It was massive, being just as large as the tunnel itself. It was as if some unimaginable entity was sleeping at the very bottom of the tunnel, and that the tunnel was merely an eye hole to look up.

Now, it had awakened, and was looking up through that eye hole. The gaze was cold, as if all living beings were bugs to it, as if the only way to coexist with it was to transfer life force directly to it. This was the pressure created by a disparity in life level!

A single glance at it caused Xu Qing's hair, eyes, fingers, flesh, and blood all seem to gain their own consciousness. It was like they weren't part of him, and were about to rip away from him. Immense mutagen inundated him, to the point where he was just about to mutate. Indescribable pain ripped through every corner of his body.

Xu Qing thought to teleport away, but couldn't do it. He could only wait as that immense will sought to rip him apart. Within him, the violet moon glittered and his taboo poison core erupted, dispelling the pressure and forcing him to move upward. However, the aura from the golden eye was too terrifying, and thus, Xu Qing gradually slowed down. Seeing that, he was about to summon his shadow to cover himself.

That was when a centipede burst out of the wall and rushed toward him. The woman atop the centipede grabbed Xu Qing's arm, then flew madly back toward the wall with him in tow. Her cultivation base wasn't on the same level as Xu Qing's, but the gaze from below didn't seem to affect her. Moving at top speed, she climbed up the wall, quickly moving 3,000 meters. Meanwhile, the tremulous singing once again echoed out from below.

"In past lives forlorn, always reborn, sever lovesickness and endlessly mourn...."

"In a life of hesitation, in a future of frustration, who is it that waits for me in reincarnation...."

It was sad and beautiful as it echoed through the tunnel. All of a sudden, the golden eye closed as if the song had special significance to him.

Because of the intense mutagen, ghosts appeared everywhere, all of them howling with shrill brutality.

Shaken, Xu Qing looked down.

Everything about this ghost hollow was extremely bizarre. The ceremony with the log cabin was apparently specifically here... to keep whatever was in the depths of the tunnel asleep.

As for this centipede woman, she was different from the other ghosts Xu Qing had encountered. She had saved him in a critical moment, most likely because Xu Qing had saved her. The act of repaying

kindnesses was not something Xu Qing had seen in any kind of grue or ghast. He looked at her with mixed emotions in his eyes, but she wasn't looking back.

She was just speeding upward. After they went another 3,000 meters up, she stopped. There, she nodded at him, then spat out a collection of pillar fragments. There were at least 107 or 108 of them. With that, she burrowed back into the wall and disappeared.

Xu Qing grabbed the fragments and looked around at the danger surrounding him in the form of countless ghastrs. Then he took out the teleportation jade slip. It was already shining with bright light.

The first phase was over. Xu Qing didn't need to crush the jade slip. It automatically began the teleportation. He hesitated for a moment, but in the end, didn't toss it away from him. Bright light rose up and surrounded him. In the last moment before he teleported away, he looked down into the dark tunnel.

What secrets are hidden here...? Who set up that altar? Was that woman in the log cabin dead or alive? Why can her song cause that god to sleep?

This was the third god Xu Qing had encountered.

The first was the broken face.

The second was the red moon.

Chapter 370: Swordsage Mission Statement

Outside the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar, it was a clear day, and the sky was as blue as ever. The winter wind occasionally blew snow through Netherflight City and onto the crowds therein.

Only about 2,000 people had joined the recruitment event. Of those, most had teleported out before the conclusion, and now stood there with lingering fear visible on their faces. Their experiences in the ghast hollow had been profoundly frightening. Just as the middle-aged man in the government uniform had mentioned three days before, the dangers inside could indeed be deadly.

Xu Qing stood in the crowd. He was in the last group of people to be teleported out. The moment he had materialized, he'd looked around to see who else came out with him.

The Captain was there, covered with wounds. However, he still had all four of his limbs. That said, he was missing an eye and both his ears, plus he had a huge gash on his belly which he held together with one arm. Seeing Xu Qing, he flashed a grin. Even though he only had one eye left, he still looked very pleased with himself. Clearly, he was happy with how he had benefited in the tunnel. Xu Qing had seen a god, but there were many side tunnels that others had entered, and they had surely seen other strange things.

Xu Qing also spotted red-garbed Qing Qiu. She had come out in the same group as Xu Qing, which meant she stuck it out to the very end. Her mask was covered with blood, as was the rest of her body. And her evil ghost scythe seemed to be chewing something, while at the same time struggling to breathe.

There was someone else that Xu Qing had hoped not to see.

It was Zhang Siyun. He clearly had life-saving strategies that had kept him from dying. That said, he was in a very weak state. He had incredibly high mutagen levels, and was popping pills like mad in the hopes of cleansing himself. He had a wound stretching from his forehead down to his chest, a very deep scratch mark that revealed bone. Were it any deeper, it probably would have sliced him in half.

Xu Qing looked at Zhang Siyun. Zhang Siyun looked back, his expression grim and his eyes cold. Xu Qing's face was completely expressionless as he looked away.

There was no way the Swordsage Court didn't know about the god in the ghastr hollow. And given that, it seemed possible that the swordsages were the one who had set up that pentagonal log cabin to keep that god asleep.

Of course, that was all speculation. Maybe the log cabin had existed before the Swordsage Court showed up. Either way, it didn't change the final result. And that was... the red life lamp in the log cabin couldn't be taken away. If the Swordsage Court set the whole thing up, then they naturally wouldn't let anyone just take it. If it existed before them, and the swordsages hadn't been able to take it, then there was no way a candidate in the recruitment event would be able to.

Then what exactly was Zhang Siyun doing there?

Without more information, Xu Qing couldn't come up with any good theories.

However, when he thought back to the song the woman in the log cabin had been singing, he was struck with a sudden sensation. From the very beginning, it seemed as if the singer were using two lines of song to explain the story of the ghastr hollow. In frustration, someone had cut their lovesickness into countless flower petals. Those petals were like paper money that floated endlessly in mourning. Each petal contained longing. And whether in a past life or the current one, that someone was waiting. They were waiting for all of that lovesickness to gather together into a whole, and reveal the subject of longing. The only question was whether the individual in waiting was the woman in the log cabin, or the god at the bottom of the ghastr hollow.

Xu Qing sat there in silence. The more he learned about the world he lived in, the more complicated and mysterious it seemed.

Looking over, he noticed another cultivator who had teleported out at the same time as him. He was trembling. And then, a beam of light shot out from the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar and wiped him out of existence. The man's death instantly dispelled Xu Qing's speculations about the ghastr hollow. As his pupils constricted, an emotionless voice echoed out from the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar.

"Inspection revealed he killed a fellow human. Punishment: eradication."

Xu Qing had previously speculated that the teleportation jade slips were also able to check whether or not they were following the rules. Now it seemed he was right. What was more, after checking, he noticed that he didn't have any pillar fragments. The fragments must have been taken away when he teleported out, and then added back into the pillar. Clearly, the swordsages had their ways of checking the records.

As the cold wind blew, and the candidates all stood there waiting, brilliant light appeared in the dome of heaven. Numerous figures descended, all of them clad in government uniforms. At first there were a few dozen that came to hover overhead, but more and more appeared, until there were

hundreds. The pressure they emanated weighed down everywhere as more continued to arrive. The candidates were all shaken, while the observers in the crowd, as well as the dao protectors from the various sects, all looked on somberly.

Before long, there were several thousand figures hovering in the air above. All of them emanated extraordinary cultivation base fluctuations, with the weakest being the Gold Core level. There were also Nascent Soul and Spirit Trove experts present. Each and every individual had the exact same type of greatsword strapped to their back.

It was green and inscribed with the character ‘yuan.’ [1]

With that and their government uniforms, they seemed like members of a well-oiled machine. Their auras mixed, creating a massive force that could crush all enemies and destroy foes from any and all species!

What a majestic display!

These were all of the swordsages who were members of the Swordsage Court in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. They were arrayed in two formations, almost like huge wings.

Netherflight City was completely silent. Not a single person in any of the tents spoke. Everyone held their breath as they looked up into the sky. They all knew that in a moment... a grand swordsage ceremony would take place! This was what always happened before the second phase of the swordsage recruitment event. It was a very important ceremony with very specific formalities.

After all, the swordsages represented one of the Five Greater Celestial Divisions of humankind. As a result, this ceremony represented the dignity of all humans.

As everyone looked on reverently, the clouds parted and an intense rumbling sound echoed out. As it grew louder, a seven-colored vortex appeared high above. Nine massive beams of light emerged from the vortex. They were Void Returning experts, any of whom could be the patriarch of a major sect in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. Instead, they were... the nine highest-ranking elders of the Swordsage Court!

Their expressions were somber as they emerged. Four moved to the left and four to the right, taking up positions by the two wings. And in the middle was one person. This person was the grand elder of the Swordsage Court in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture, and as such, was the highest ranking swordsage.

When Xu Qing laid eyes on him, his jaw nearly dropped. The grand elder was the very same old man whose alchemy lectures he had attended, the one who reminded him so much of Grandmaster Bai. Xu Qing had assumed all along that the old man ranked high in the Swordsage Court. But it had never even occurred to him that he could possibly be the leader!

As Xu Qing reeled in shock, a middle-aged man stepped out from the left wing. His expression was grave as he looked at the grand elder, clasped hands and bowed deeply.

“The Swordsage Court of Emperor-Receiving Prefecture has a total of 4,311 swordsages. Today, all 4,311 are present. Not a single one is missing. We humbly submit to your scrutiny, Grand Elder.”

The grand elder nodded. “Reveal the name list.”

“Yes, Grand Elder!” said the middle-aged cultivator. Expression solemn, he looked down at the ground and spoke in a resonant voice. “After being reviewed by the Swordsage Court, the following name list has been reported to the Swordsage Palace. Based on the number of fragments collected, ten humans have been selected to qualify for an imperial audience as swordsages!

“The name list is as follows.

“Xu Qing. Chen Erniu. Qing Qiu. Zhang Siyun. Ning Yan....” [2]

Every name that was spoken was accompanied by gasps from the crowd. Eventually, all ten names had been listed out. “The ten of you... step forward!”

Xu Qing took a deep breath and stepped out of the crowd. The Captain did the same, as well as all the others. They stood in front of the group of other candidates, about 30 meters apart from each other. They were the complete center of attention.

At that point, the middle-aged swordsage bowed to the grand elder and then returned to his spot.

The grand elder looked down at Xu Qing and the others for a moment. Then he solemnly turned toward the seven-colored vortex, clasped hands and bowed. When he spoke, his ancient voice was hoarse and filled with incomparable solemnity.

“We hereby request that Yuan Zaiji, Grand Emperor of Immortal Ultrabrilliance, Uniter of Humanity and Exalted Celestial of Swordsages, deign to visit our court.”

As soon as he finished speaking, all of the other swordsages in both wings, including the eight elders, all bowed deeply to the vortex and joined their voices to say the same thing.

“We hereby request that Yuan Zaiji, Grand Emperor of Immortal Ultrabrilliance, Uniter of Humanity and Exalted Celestial of Swordsages, deign to visit our court.”

It was a ceremony carried out with utmost formality, and it put the orthodox traditions of humanity on full display. Xu Qing’s expression was somber and dignified.

As the voices of the swordsages echoed into the vortex, brilliant light shone out. Scintillating shafts of multi-colored sunlight filled the sky, illuminating the lands and lighting up the clouds. [3]

Then, a divine likeness appeared within the vortex, a statue that could cause anyone who looked at it to feel shaken down to the soul. It was a statue so majestic it seemed capable of propping up heaven and earth. It bore the likeness of a middle-aged man whose expression was threatening without being angry. His eyes glittered with bright light, and he wore a flowing imperial robe with nine dragons on it. He had a heavenly imperial crown, and strapped to his back was a green greatsword with the character “yuan” carved on it, just like the swords worn by all the swordsages!

The arrival of this divine likeness caused everything in the dome of heaven to tremble. Wild colors flashed in heaven and earth, and winds screamed!

All the humans below were deeply shaken, and they felt their energy and blood surging beyond their control. It was like a connection built into their bloodline that caused their minds to reel.

This was the Grand Emperor of humankind! This was the founder of the Swordsage Division!

Without thinking about it consciously, everyone bowed their heads, even Sir Bloodsmelter and the other sect patriarchs. They willingly, and with the utmost respect, offered obeisance to the divine likeness of the Grand Emperor of humanity.

Xu Qing did the same, his heart pounding.

All of a sudden, he found himself thinking of the Ghost Emperor. Clearly, compared to the Grand Emperor of humanity, the Ghost Emperor was somewhat deficient. Looking at the Grand Emperor's facial features, Xu Qing realized that it was about seventy percent similar to the statues he had seen of Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity.

As everyone offered obeisance, the swordmage grand elder spoke in a solemn tone.

“In accordance with the orders set forth by that most Ancient of Emperors, Dark Serenity of the fourth stage of the Heavenly Dao, our Swordmage Palace wields the sword for the sake of humanity, severs any vile destiny from the commoners, and spreads sunlight into heaven and earth. Therefore, Grand Emperor, by way of corroboration of our mission, please disseminate the light of sunrise throughout the lands!”

His voice echoed like thunder through the dome of heaven, into the hearts of all the swordmages, and into the minds of all the onlookers. They were especially moving to Xu Qing and the other candidates. They were like bells ringing throughout all heaven and earth with deafening loudness! That was because... this was the mission statement of the swordmages!

Sever vile destiny from the commoners, spread light through heaven and earth!

That... was what it meant to be a swordmage!