

Timescape 371

Chapter 371: Ancient Traditions of Emperor-Receiving Prefecture

Everything was quiet. No one spoke. Only emotional breathing could be heard. The words that had just been spoken caused all the humans present to feel deeply moved.

Everyone had their own life story and their own experience. Whether they were mighty and grand, or low and humble, they all lived in a brutal, dog-eat-dog world. One's status couldn't change the circumstances of the world. Everyone dealt with misfortune and bitterness. And thus, all could understand the gravity of the mission statement.

As the words were spoken by a voice that cracked like thunder, Xu Qing suddenly came to truly realize what the swordsages were all about. Whether or not the swordsages lived up to the mission statement wasn't important. At the very least, it existed.

This element was the most important element of this swordsage ceremony. The atmosphere was solemn. The words spoken were dignified. Holy sunlight shone while the mission statement was uttered so loudly even the deaf could hear it. All of that ensured that the swordsages' mission would continue.

At that moment, the hearts of all humans were lifted. Brilliant sunlight shone in the dome of heaven, streaming through the lands, illuminating everything until it landed on Xu Qing and the other candidates.

There, bringing with it all the honor and glory of the swordsage mission, it created a massive staircase! It was fully 30,000 meters wide and it started right in the middle of Netherflight City. However, of all the countless humans that were looking on, only ten people qualified to climb it.

For them, it was a path that led to heaven.

It began on the surface of the earth and ended at the divine likeness of the Grand Emperor. From a distance, it was possible to see that by simply walking up those stairs, one could eventually stand in front of the Grand Emperor. The holy atmosphere in the area grew stronger. The stairs glittered with seven-colored light, and if you counted them, you would find that there were a total of 9,999.

As Xu Qing studied the situation, the voice of the grand elder echoed in his ears.

“Being a swordsage is the greatest honor possible for a human. We strive to create peace and prosperity for 30,000 generations. Thus, the stairs are 30,000 meters wide.

“An emperor represents 10,000 citizens. But an emperor is only one person. Thus, there are only 9,999 steps. That illustrates why the Swordsage Division can execute judgment on anyone except the emperor!”

As his voice echoed out, Xu Qing's eyes shone brightly. If the grand elder's previous words represented the soul of the swordsages, then the words he had spoken just now were its bones! The soul represented the mission. The bones represented the spine! The spine of the swordsages was epitomized in how they could execute judgment on anyone but the emperor! The Captain's eyes glittered with anticipation. Qing Qiu was reacting similarly, as her eyes beneath her mask shone brightly.

Next, the grand elder looked up at the divine likeness of the Grand Emperor. Clasp hands, he bowed deeply and spoke with even more respect than before.

“Grand Emperor, please present the swords.”

The two wings of swordsages all clasped hands in unison, then bowed toward the sky.

The divine likeness responded by sending out a light as red as the early morning sun spreading out over the sea. It was a light that could dispel the darkness of night, and as it shone, three even brighter beams of light emerged from the massive sword on the back of the huge statue. Moving with shocking speed, they flew down toward the 30,000-meter-wide staircase, right to the top of the 9,999 stairs. A thump rang out as they sank into the platform there. Each was 3,000 meters away from the next, and they emanated green light that flowed like water. Just looking at them, they were obviously extraordinary items.

Those three swords were not just swords. They represented authority. They were also the symbol of the swordsages. They were the command swords that swordsages wielded!

“Swordsages are champions of authority. The sword represents authority, used to safeguard the common people.”

The words were spoken like a litany by the gathered swordsages above. Their voices resounded through heaven and earth, shaking everything. As the sound of their voices faded, the old grand elder once again spoke.

“The ten of you below must win a sword to achieve victory. Listen to my orders!”

Xu Qing looked up with his eyes flashing. As of this moment, he was absolutely determined to become a swordsage.

It was the same with everyone else. That included the Captain and Qing Qiu, as well as Zhang Siyun and the young man Ning Yan, who had provoked Xu Qing earlier by attacking him. All of them stood there with eyes glittering. [1]

As they stood there raptly, the grand elder continued, “Qing Qiu, you have 40 battle spirit symbols. You may ascend 400 stairs!”

Under the eyes of all present, Qing Qiu immediately raced up to the 400th stair.

“Chen Erniu, you have 127 battle spirit symbols. You may ascend 1,270 stairs!”

The Captain sped up to the 1,270th step.

“Zhang Siyun, you have 63 battle spirit symbols. You may ascend 630 stairs.”

“Ning Yan....”

As his voice echoed out, everyone solemnly climbed as many stairs as permitted based on the number of battle spirit symbols they had collected.

Finally it was Xu Qing’s turn.

“Xu Qing, you have 279 battle spirit symbols. You may ascend 2,790 stairs.”

Despite the solemnity of the occasion, there was a buzz from the crowd. Previously, the Captain's result had been a shock to them, but they had been able to stay silent. Xu Qing's result... was unprecedented and completely unimaginable.

Countless gazes shifted to focus on him. Whether it was the crowd in Netherflight City or the other nine candidates, everyone was deeply shaken.

Xu Qing looked up, his expression placid, and began to walk. Everyone watched as he ascended step by step. He looked like a young prince, walking up into the sky toward the Grand Emperor. He passed Ning Yan. He passed Qing Qiu, whose eyes flickered with mixed emotions. He passed the grim-faced Zhang Siyun. And he also passed the Captain, whose expression was unreadable.

After passing everyone, he kept going, walking up and up to the 2,790th stair. He was in front of everyone else. He was clearly the front runner! And he was only 7,209 stairs away from the Grand Emperor! There were nine people directly behind him, and behind them were crowds of human cultivators.

Standing in this position, Xu Qing finally realized how important it was to get extra points early in the selection process. He wasn't sure if every event worked this way. But it was certain how the event worked this time. The assessment had actually begun very early.

After Xu Qing reached his position, the grand elder above spoke again.

"Xu Qing, Chen Erniu, Zhang Siyun, you three took first place when climbing the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar. Because you climbed 9,000 meters, you may ascend another 3,000 stairs." [2]

As the names were called out, the candidates all climbed higher. Xu Qing was still in first place by a longshot. From his position, he had a better view of the statue of the Grand Emperor, as well as the scintillating swords at the top of the staircase. At the moment... he was only 4,209 stairs from the top!

Next, the booming voice spoke again.

"Zhang Siyun, you collected 48 fragments in the ghastr hollow. You may ascend 480 stairs!

"Qing Qiu, you collected 213 fragments in the ghastr hollow. You may ascend 2,130 stairs!

"Chen Erniu, you collected 301 fragments in the ghastr hollow. You may ascend 3,010 stairs!

"Xu Qing, you collected 421 fragments in the ghastr hollow. You may ascend 4,210 stairs!"

As the voice boomed, the ten candidates climbed further. With the exception of the Captain, all of them were looking at Xu Qing with mixed emotions.

That was especially true of Zhang Siyun, whose expression was incomparably grim. His killing intent toward Xu Qing was intense; after all, if Xu Qing hadn't attacked him earlier, he most

definitely wouldn't have come in ninth place. In order to save his own life, he had been forced to use a secret magic, sacrificing his fleshly body to slip out of a predicament like a cicada sloughing its skin. As a result, he had lost his bag of holding and all the fragments within it.

Now, it wasn't just Xu Qing and Chen Erniu who were ahead of him on the stairs. Qing Qiu had also passed him, although not by much.

Xu Qing didn't bother to pay attention to the fuming Zhang Siyun. He just kept climbing higher and higher. So far, no one was even close to passing him. He just kept walking higher and higher. And then, the crowd started cheering, as all eyes were focused on him. That was because... based on the stair he had previously been standing on, 4,209 was all he needed to reach the top!

As he walked, he passed the 8,000th stair, and reached the 9,000th. Then he reached 9,990. And finally... he reached 9,999! At that point, he was right in front of the centermost command sword.

The closest to him was the Captain, who was past the 7,000th stair, and after that, Qing Qiu who was at about 5,000. Right behind her was Zhang Siyun, who had just passed 3,000.

Xu Qing had climbed as high as he could, but there was still another step to take.

At that point, it wasn't just the crowds below who were focused on Xu Qing. The swordsages above were all looking down at him. It wasn't that something like this had never happened in history. But in the last several thousand years, it had never happened in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. It was the first time here! Even the nine swordsage elders were all looking at Xu Qing.

Xu Qing's expression was placid as he stood at the top of the stairs, right below the statue of the Grand Emperor. Then he took his final step. He clasped hands and bowed.

All of the swordsages watched.

The grand elder nodded. "Now, everyone, be on your best behavior as you... take a sword!"

The moment the words left his mouth, the people on the stairs started racing up as fast as they could. They didn't even hesitate to use secret magics to shoot up toward the 9,999th stair.

Xu Qing, who stood as high as possible on the staircase, reached out, took the command sword, then turned and looked down at everyone. As he stood there, the command sword glittered brilliantly, illuminating him. At the same time, sunlight from the divine likeness behind him shone down.

To everyone below, it seemed like, at that moment, he and the Grand Emperor were superimposed. In that moment of brilliance, with his face as fair as jade, the brilliant light made him seem like he was a Grand Emperor returned to life.

Chapter 372: The Consequences of Provoking Xu Qing

The swordsage recruitment trial was an event full of holiness and dignity. It was the most orthodox of human ceremonies, and was something that no sect could match. The swordsages had resources that other organizations simply couldn't tap into. Because of that, the ceremony and rules were naturally unique.

In a chaotic world, ceremonies were very important. The darker it got, and the colder it got, the more important it became to have fire. And that fire... could fuel the legacy of all humanity. That fire was the human bloodline, and it represented the very spirit of all humankind. Ceremonies

represented the spirit of legacy. The more formal a ceremony, and the more holy it was, the deeper impression that legacy would give. It could be branded onto the soul itself, never to be dispersed. This was a swordsmanship ceremony, but at the same time, it was a ceremony for all humanity.

In the dome of heaven, the swordsmen were organized by rank into two wings. The wing-like shape of their formation had significance; it was a symbol of how they offered protection. With their wings, they would offer shelter to humanity. Beyond that, they were willing to spread their wings wide and fly to the highest heights, all for the sake of humankind.

The nine swordsmanship elders had solemn expressions on their faces as they bore witness to the events playing out. That itself was part of the ceremony. There were four on each side, and one in the middle. Arrayed at different heights, they resembled a mountain or a sword. They represented the cutting edge of the swordsmen. They represented the command sword. The sunrise glow illuminated them from behind. Combined with the divine likeness of the Grand Emperor, his gaze encompassing all heaven and earth, meant they were the protectors of the legacy of humankind.

Beneath the gaze of that god, standing 30,000 meters in the sky, was Xu Qing, his hand gripping the command sword. His clothes rippled in the wind, and his hair swayed around him. However, he stood unmoving. There was no need to use the words 'energy' or 'aura' to describe his grandeur. The look in his eyes, and the position upon which he stood, were more than enough.

That was because only one person stood in that paramount position on the staircase. Xu Qing.

His grandeur was profound. It was profound because of how the statue of the Grand Emperor seemed to superimpose over him. And it was profound because of the swordsmanship mission.

Normally speaking, this swordsmanship ceremony was not supposed to focus profound grandeur on a single person. After all, in the end, it was merely an entry ceremony for new recruits. True grandeur was supposed to come later, when a swordsmanship rose through the ranks and was promoted.

But then Xu Qing came along.

During the assessment process, he climbed higher on the staircase than anyone in history. The other candidates had to scramble to the top, but he was already there.

All he had to do was pick up one of the command swords. The moment he did so, he stopped being a participant and turned into a witness. He bore witness to what was happening on the stairs below, and all of the figures rushing up. There were now only two command swords left, which meant that only two people would succeed.

Xu Qing, of course, was the type of person who would seek revenge over the smallest grievance. He absolutely did not want Zhang Siyun to succeed. And the rules didn't prohibit him from interfering. As long as he didn't do anything too excessive, it seemed likely he could take action.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said calmly, "be careful of Zhang Siyun. He has a transposition magic that only requires line of sight to activate. In the ghost hollow, he used it on me in a very underhanded way."

In response to his words, the expressions of the other candidates on the staircase flickered.

The Captain didn't slow down an iota. Blue light flickered around him, and suddenly he blurred, making it difficult for anyone to be able to see him clearly. Then he accelerated dramatically, leaping 3,000 meters in a single bound. After that, he continued speeding upward.

His goal was the command sword 3,000 meters to the left of Xu Qing.

Zhang Siyun's face remained expressionless. Because of his losses in the ghastr hollow, he had fallen severely behind in the competition. He had also been badly hurt. As a result, he had planned to use his transposition technique to switch places with either Chen Erniu or Qing Qiu. After all, Xu Qing had already found a way to deal with his transposition technique, and beyond that, had taken the lead in the event. Then there was the fact that the grand elder had just said to 'be on your best behavior.' And finally, considering that holding a command sword meant that you were a swordsage, it seemed very dangerous to try to switch places with Xu Qing.

Unfortunately, Xu Qing had spoken so quickly that Zhang Siyun couldn't possibly have been prepared. Before he could even use his transposition technique, Xu Qing interfered. Zhang Siyun was understandably shocked, but didn't give up. Instead, he shifted targets to Qing Qiu.

Meanwhile, the Captain shot forward with blinding speed, seemingly ignoring the immense pressure weighing down on the staircase. In the blink of an eye, he reached the command sword and grabbed it excitedly. Then he turned to look at Xu Qing.

Xu Qing looked back at him.

They each grinned.

It wasn't lost on Xu Qing that the swordsages above hadn't done anything to interfere when he spoke moments ago. Therefore, he decided to speak again.

"Zhang Siyun, you coveted that pentagonal log cabin in the ghastr hollow, and even planned to destroy it. What's more, you know the ghastr hollow like the back of your own hand. You might claim to be unaware of what lay down there, and you might want us to believe you didn't have ulterior motives, except... no one believes you! Your plots, your schemes, and your very actions are all extremely suspicious! As a swordsage, I, Xu Qing, hereby request that the various elders of the Swordsage Court inspect Zhang Siyun!"

Zhang Siyun was currently speeding past the 7,000th stair. At the same time, he was targeting Qing Qiu, who was around the 9,000th stair. When he heard Xu Qing's words, it struck him deeply. Not even Li Ziliang's Will Implantation techniques worked on him, mostly because they were based on lies. That made the technique easy to resist.

But... Xu Qing didn't just openly reveal his own secrets. Beyond that, he actually requested that the elders inspect him! This was no Will Implantation. This was outright humiliation!

Zhang Siyun knew that he didn't have time for a lengthy explanation. But at the same time, he had no idea how to smooth things over in the heat of the moment. But he couldn't say anything!

Therefore, he tried to stay calm. "That's absolute nonsense!"

Then he kept working on his transposition technique. Unfortunately, what had just played out caused big problems for his ability to focus mentally.

Exactly as his transposition technique locked onto Qing Qiu and activated, her eyes glittered, and she shot backward at high speed.

The further one got up the stairs, the greater the pressure, and the slower one moved. But moving backward was easy. Considering that she was actually attempting to accelerate backward, that made it so that, in the shortest of moments, she was able to drop back down to roughly the 3,000th stair.

The transposition technique worked!

Zhang Siyun successfully moved from the 7,000th stair to roughly the 3,000th. Meanwhile, Qing Qiu switched to the 7,000th!

Before, they had only been about 2,000 stairs apart. Now they were about 4,000 stairs apart!

In the blink of an eye, an evil ghost suddenly appeared above Qing Qiu. It had previously been building up power, and now it looked back at Zhang Siyun, opened its mouth, then snapped it shut.

A tremor passed through Zhang Siyun as his defenses automatically fought back against the attack. At the same time, the backlash from his own technique hit him, forcing him to stop in place. Qing Qiu's method of dealing with his transposition technique was simple. But the simpler such methods were, the more difficult they were to anticipate.

Meanwhile, Qing Qiu took advantage of the moment to employ a secret magic. Red light glowed around her as numerous shadowy projections of herself appeared. Then she spat out seven mouthfuls of blood to achieve a dramatic acceleration. Using that boost, she shot to the top of the stairs and grabbed the third command sword.

The moment she grabbed it, she coughed up a huge mouthful of blood which contained chunks of internal organs. Obviously that secret magic had come with a huge price, and a dangerous backlash. She sagged in place so unstably it seemed like she might collapse. However, by leaning against her evil ghost scythe, she was able to remain standing. Though she was very weak at that moment, her eyes shone with determination.

For some reason, Xu Qing felt like he had seen that exact same look before, though he wasn't sure where.

As Xu Qing searched through his memories, Zhang Siyun stood there in defeat. Fury burned in his heart as he glared at Xu Qing. Looking up to the swordsages in the dome of heaven, he cried, "Xu Qing slandered me! He interfered with the assessment! This matter—"

"I'll step in to explain things for my little Junior Brother," the Captain interrupted, sounding very serious. "Sorry about all this, Zhang Siyun. It was all just a misunderstanding. You're really a good person!" The Captain blinked a few times, then looked over at Qing Qiu who was currently gasping for breath. "What do you think, Fellow Daoist Qing Qiu?"

Qing Qiu hated Mad Dog and Ghost Hand, but she also knew that this matter related to her own position in the final standings.

"I agree that it was a misunderstanding," she said coldly. "Sorry about that, Zhang Siyun. You're a good person."

Both had openly called Zhang Siyun a good person. However, that didn't do anything to dispel the rage in Zhang Siyun's heart. In fact, it made it worse. He was just about to say something further when a middle-aged man stepped out from the left wing. It was the same man who had previously read out the name list.

He clasped hands and bowed to the grand elder. Obviously, he had noted that the grand elder didn't say anything regarding what was going on. Given how long he had served with this grand elder, he could tell what the man was thinking. In fact, he was the very same person who, that day at the altar, the grand elder had asked for more information about Xu Qing. Even back then he had been able to discern from the look in the grand elder's eyes what he thought about Xu Qing. [1]

Turning to the staircase, he spoke in a solemn voice that echoed through heaven and earth.

“The swordsage recruitment event is now over.”

The other candidates on the 9,999-step staircase all vanished and reappeared down below. Including Zhang Siyun. He stood there with his hands balled into fists, his eyes bloodshot, and his heart bursting with rancorous energy. Next to him was Ning Yan from the small sect, who had previously tried to attack Xu Qing on the pillar. Ning Yan's face was ashen, and his expression one of disappointment. However, deep within his eyes, there was still a bit of hope.

It was the same with all the other candidates. They were all sad but hopeful. After all, they still had a chance. That said, no matter how defiant and emotional they were, nobody was paying any attention to them right now. All eyes were on the figures atop the holy staircase.

There stood Xu Qing, the Captain, and Qing Qiu.

“On this day, three people have been selected as swordsages. Xu Qing. Chen Erniu. Qing Qiu. Congratulations to all of you.”

As he spoke their names, he looked from one to the other, though his gaze lingered longest on Xu Qing. Then he clasped hands and bowed to them.

The rest of the swordsages did the same. Expressions solemn, they bowed. It was a welcoming bow that did not relate to matters of seniority. All new swordsages were treated with the same respect.

Looking very solemn, Xu Qing and the others returned the bow.

“Henceforth, the three of you are officially swordsages.” the middle-aged man continued. “Furthermore, by resolution of the Swordsage Court, disciple Ning Yan, you are hereby declared a runner-up, and are now an adjunct swordsage. You will be sent to the Swordsage Palace in the county above for your appointment and further training. There, you'll have another chance to acquire a command sword and possibly become an official swordsage.

“By further resolution of the Swordsage Court, disciple Zhang Siyun, you are hereby appointed as a swordsage despite not passing the assessment. However, there are only three command swords in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. Therefore, you will be sent to the Swordsage Palace in Sea-Sealing County to request your command sword.

“Now, the two of you approach.”

Ning Yan hurried out and started climbing the stairs. As he ran up, his eyes shone brightly, and he was trembling.

Everyone in the audience looked, moved.

Meanwhile, the other candidates sighed with regret. All of them had been hoping to be declared a runner-up. After all, there were always runners-up in swordsmanship recruitment events. Although not every adjunct swordsmanship who was sent to the county above would end up receiving an appointment, at least it was an opportunity.

Zhang Siyun was the only one who looked just as angry as before. Walking forward, he climbed up the stairs along with Ning Yan. When he reached the top, he stood off to the side.

Xu Qing looked over calmly at Ning Yan.

When Ning Yan noticed that, he shrank back a bit. He had been excited, but now he suddenly felt like a bucket of cold water had been poured on his head. He didn't even dare to meet Xu Qing's eyes.

Xu Qing then turned to look at Zhang Siyun, and noted the coldness in his eyes. Xu Qing, meanwhile, looked completely expressionless. Finally, he turned his attention to the dome of heaven as he waited for the ceremony to finish.

Somehow, the middle-aged man's voice grew even more somber as he continued, “And now, as all swordsmen here bear witness, the five of you will approach the divine likeness of the Grand Emperor. There, your heart will be assessed and you will make your pledge. After, you will receive a blessing from the Grand Emperor.”

Apparently, this part of the ceremony was of utmost importance to the swordsmen.

“This is the final and most critical aspect of becoming a swordsmanship. The Grand Emperor will observe you closely, therefore, all of you must answer with utmost sincerity and from your heart. None of us will be privy to what you say in response. Only you and the Grand Emperor will know. The divine likeness of the Grand Emperor will shine light based on your answer.

“However high the light shines, that will represent how much the Grand Emperor approves of your answer. From ancient times until now in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture, new swordsmen usually provoke light from between 180 to about 3,000 meters.”

The Captain leaned over to Xu Qing and blinked a few times. Given the solemnity of the occasion, he didn't dare to speak out loud, so instead, he projected a message to Xu Qing via divine will.

“Hey, little Ah Qing. Guess what? It's a total sham when they say you get a blessing.

“You listen to me. There are two purposes to this part of the event. The first is to make sure that you're actually human. The other is to serve as a swearing-in

ceremony. Trust me, all you need to do in response to the Grand Emperor's question is make yourself look as good as possible.

"The results don't affect your status as a swordmage, and there's no actual reward. At most, you might gain some face.

"That said, you have to think carefully about how you brag. Even though it won't affect your status, I've heard that they record the results in your official record, and that it can affect further promotions and whatnot. So think long and hard before you answer.

"As you might imagine, though, I don't need to do anything like that. I've been preparing for his moment for a very, very long time. After we got here to Emperor-Receiving Prefecture, I spent a lot of money to get a list of all the questions the Grand Emperor has asked over the past several thousand years. I even got some of the questions from other prefectures. In total, I got access to 1,789 commonly asked questions.

"With those questions, I, your Eldest Brother, was able to spend time thinking about the absolute best answer to all of them. Then, I memorized those answers. I can recite each one perfectly!

"Hmmmphh! You might have taken first place just now, but in the next section, I can tell you ahead of time that my light will shine the highest!"

The Captain's eyebrows danced up and down as he looked at Xu Qing, seemingly extremely pleased with how far-reaching and all-encompassing his strategic skills were.

Xu Qing ignored him. He didn't care how high that light ended up shining. If it didn't affect his status as a swordmage, and there was no reward, then it was essentially meaningless. Therefore, he would just answer from his heart.

As Xu Qing pondered that, the middle-aged cultivator's somber voice echoed from above.

"All of you advance 300 meters!"

Xu Qing began to walk, as did the others, until they were all getting very close to the divine likeness of the Grand Emperor.

Chapter 373: Body of a God

Just as the Captain had said, this 'assessment of the heart' was essentially just a swearing-in ceremony. When the divine likeness of the Grand Emperor asked a question, and the answer given, it was a method to confirm that the candidate was human, and also assess their temperament. It wasn't very important in the sense that, even if one completely failed, they would still become a swordmage.

It was important in the sense that the results could affect future promotions and assignments. Generally speaking, when matters relating to humankind itself were involved, the light emitted

during the Grand Emperor's assessment would be a very important factor. Though cheating was possible, the only way to succeed at that would be to have the power to swindle the divine likeness.

Though the statue was not actually the fallen remains of the Grand Emperor, it was connected to the statue in the imperial capital, by means of a fragment of the Grand Emperor's soul. And because all of the various statues had been worshiped by humans for many years, they had developed shocking abilities. That was why the statues were the epitome of holiness among humans, and now watched over the swordsmen.

As Xu Qing and the others approached, the pressure of the statue weighed down on them, and the heart assessment began.

The first to be questioned wasn't Xu Qing, it was Qing Qiu. A seven-colored glow emerged from the statue's forehead, which shone down on her. Everyone down below watched solemnly, and the swordsmen above bore witness with their gazes.

Qing Qiu shivered, and her evil ghost scythe trembled and closed its eyes, not daring to even move. The scythe could sense the divine will sweeping over it and then converging on Qing Qiu. None of the observers could sense that divine will and how majestic it was, but the scythe could.

What Qing Qiu saw was a vast starry sky stretching out in front of her. Up above her was a dazzling sea of light. It was so eye-catching to her that she didn't even bother looking down. Within that majestic light, she could just barely make out a holy figure. Compared to that figure, she felt minuscule. Confusion flickered in her eyes, but then a staunch faith replaced it.

A voice spoke to her, soft and languid. "Don't be nervous, little girl. Let's talk about the broken face of the god. Tell me. What is that god?" [1]

Qing Qiu was visibly surprised at the kindness she heard in the voice. That wasn't what she had been expecting. Given how grand and magnificent the Grand Emperor's divine likeness was, she had assumed the voice would boom with godly might. Instead, it sounded intimate.

She hesitated for a moment. Then her mind cleared, and she saw an image. Looking at that image caused her eyes to glaze a bit. But then, the answer to the question appeared, and she felt compelled to speak it out. There was nothing that could stop it. The kind voice which had spoken to her made her realize that there was no reason for her not to answer.

"I don't know what that god is," she said softly. "And it doesn't matter. If I have the chance, I'll end things in mutual destruction with it!"

The response to her words was a benevolent chuckle. "You deserve praise for your courage."

As the chuckle echoed in her ears, the starry sky faded away, and she found herself back in reality. As she stood in front of the divine likeness of the Grand Emperor, the statue suddenly erupted with bright light.

In the shortest of moments, it climbed to 1,500 meters. Then it reached 3,000 meters. Finally, it stopped at 3,300 meters.

A 3,300-meter pillar of light illuminated the dome of heaven, plain for everyone to see.

The swordsmen above all exchanged glances. As for the middle-aged man who was officiating, his eyes glittered with praise. The nine elders were all looking closely at Qing Qiu. She was the first to

be assessed, and her light rose past 3,000 meters. That was not a record in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture, but it was also not commonly seen. It showed that she had answered the question correctly!

“The lass is incredible!”

“She obviously has lots of potential. We shouldn’t hold back Emperor-Receiving Prefecture’s resources to help her grow. Given how high that light is, she has a high likelihood of standing out in the county above us.”

Xu Qing also took note of Qing Qiu.

Next to him, the Captain seemed shaken. But then he thought about the answers he had memorized, and he forced himself to calm down.

Next, the second assessment began. The seven-colored light coming from the statue’s forehead shifted, moving away from Qing Qiu and landed on Ning Yan. Apparently, the order of assessments was random.

The same starry sky appeared to Ning Yan. Though he was nervous, he was also excited as he looked up into the bright light.

“Okay, kiddo,” the gentle voice said. “Let’s talk about the broken face of the god. How would you describe that god?”

Unlike Qing Qiu who had murmured her answer, Ning Yan didn’t hesitate at all. Eyes burning with passion, he opened his mouth and loudly said, “That god is the greatest enemy of humankind, and is reviled by all species. That god is the source of all misery, suffering, and hatred.”

His succinct answer reflected what he had been taught growing up. Though there was nothing wrong about it, it also couldn’t be considered amazing. What was more, they weren’t really original thoughts.

As he returned to reality, the divine likeness shone with light that rose to 180 meters. He didn’t even come close to comparing to Qing Qiu.

Ning Yan was stunned, and had no idea what was wrong with his answer. He was sure that he had answered properly and yet the light obviously didn’t go very high. He couldn’t help but look over at Qing Qiu and wonder how she had answered her question.

Up above, the swordsages didn’t look very surprised. Truth be told, 180 meters was average, and was considered a passing score.

In contrast to the swordsages, the Captain was chuckling sarcastically in his heart. 180 meters? I’m definitely going to get at least a few thousand meters.

With that he looked up at the statue with keen anticipation.

Next, the light landed on the Captain. He shivered, and his eyes glittered with excitement. The process didn’t last very long. After only two breaths of time passed, the seven-colored light faded away. There he stood in front of the statue, unmoving. No light emerged from the divine likeness.

The Captain was visibly stunned.

Xu Qing blinked a few times and looked over in surprise at the Captain. Qing Qiu glanced at him suspiciously, and Ning Yan seemed taken aback. It wasn't just them. The swordsages above were all stunned. And as for the nine elders, their expressions suddenly turned aggressive.

"No light?" said the grand elder, looking down. "That means he's not human!"

Suddenly, massive killing intent erupted everywhere, and yet, none of the swordsages took action. That was because, in the past, there had been situations in which somehow a nonhuman managed to reach this point without being detected. However, in all previous instances when no light appeared, the divine likeness would immediately wipe that person out of existence.

And yet, Chen Erniu stood there just as before. "No way! I'm human! I gave a really good answer! The Grand Emperor liked me and even called me a little rascal!" The Captain was clearly very nervous as he looked up at the divine likeness.

Xu Qing was also starting to feel nervous.

But then, as the tension mounted, a bit of light appeared from the statue. It went up a single meter.

One meter....

The Captain stared blankly.

Xu Qing almost couldn't believe it. It was as if the statue wasn't pleased at all with the Captain's answer, but reluctantly emitted some light just to confirm that he was human.

The killing intent faded away, and all the swordsages looked down with odd expressions on their faces. It was the same with the nine elders. None of them had ever seen a mere one-meter-high pillar of light.

"Just what did the little punk say in response to the question?"

"If word of this spreads, it's going to be completely humiliating. I can't believe that we Emperor-Receiving Prefecture swordsages have someone who only got one meter of light."

"Can we come up with a reason to strip him of his qualifications...?"

The Captain wasn't sure how to react. Looking at that one-meter light, he felt very embarrassed, but at the same time, extremely relieved. The killing intent which had appeared moments before had convinced him he was about to die. As more time passed, though, he started to feel that it was all very unfair. It was even worse when the seven-colored light reached Zhang Siyun, who took several dozen breaths of time to give his answer. Afterwards, the statue emitted a 1,500-meter pillar of light.

That was impressive, though not as impressive as Qing Qiu.

Unnoticed by anyone present was the fact that, when Zhang Siyun was being questioned, the grand elder was touched by divine will from the statue. When it happened, his eyes narrowed, and then glowed with cold light. After closely examining Zhang Siyun briefly, his expression returned to normal, and the coldness faded.

Zhang Siyun stood there, also unaware of what had just happened. He was simply glaring at Xu Qing.

Of the group of five, Xu Qing was now the only one who hadn't been questioned.

Xu Qing took a deep breath and calmly looked away from the Captain. He faced the statue as the seven-colored light enveloped him.

A starry sky appeared in front of him. As he hovered there, he noticed the brilliant sea of light overhead, and yet instead of looking up, he looked down. That was his habit, as he liked to be aware of his surroundings. When he did that, his pupils constricted. What he saw was a huge continent. It was a gigantic land mass that seemed about half as large as the starry sky itself. Above that land mass, he saw the broken face of the god.

The god's hair flowed free, drooping down, hanging over half of the continent. Behind the broken face, there was a golden spine. It was very long, stretching past the borders of the continent, almost wrapping around it. At the same time, it seemed to be shrinking.... It had no arms and no body. No legs. Just that spine made of seemingly innumerable vertebrae. Every bone seemed incredibly majestic, and radiated with boundless godliness. And half of the head formed the broken face of the god, which existed on the most paramount of life levels.

Just looking at it, Xu Qing felt like he might collapse. His mind trembled violently. However, he could also sense that he was in a state of protection. What was more, this was illusory. Otherwise he wouldn't be able to endure, and would be destroyed in body and soul.

Then a gentle voice spoke to him.

"All the others looked at me. None of the others looked down like you. I feel like you wanted to see the world below, so I let you. None of the others saw that. And now, I'd like to ask you a question. How would you describe that god?"

Chapter 374: You Never Change

How would you describe that god?

Xu Qing wasn't sure if this was the same question the others had been asked. Even if it was, he had no idea how they answered. As he hovered there in the starry sky, he looked down at the terrifying broken face of the god. He saw the golden spine wrapping around the continent, almost as if the continent were food to it.

He felt blank.

He suddenly envisioned himself, much younger, staring up into the sky as the eyes of that unsurpassable god opened. After that, his family was gone. Everything good in his life vanished. He was left alone in the blood rain, scared, hesitant, weeping, and powerless.

Xu Qing didn't say anything.

He thought of his years as a kid on the streets. Back then, he would eat anything, whether it was food or not. Just to survive. There had only been one line he wouldn't cross, and that was cannibalism. He'd smelled the aroma of human flesh being cooked. He had also watched people being eaten alive, or boiled into stew. There had been times when he was starving. But when he looked at the cannibalistic scavengers, and then the broken face of the god in the sky, he'd decided that it would be better to die than live like that.

There were two things he feared the most: being hungry and being cold. That was why winters had always been life-or-death struggles. He had seen a lot of people freeze to death. He had stripped dead people of their clothes to stay warm. In fact, back then, all of his clothes had been taken from dead bodies. That was one reason he had always prized new clothing.

And then there was mutagen. It was a slow torment that slowly burned away your bones down to the marrow, filling you with extreme agony. Back when he had been the lowest of the low, he had seen endless misery. And he had seen the most dismal aspects of humanity.

There were many people like that, people who lived in torment without any hope for the future. When he had hovered on the brink of death, he would look up at that broken face of the god, which seemed both majestic and cruel. Its face was clean, and its expression placid.

Xu Qing maintained silence.

He thought back to the time when he'd finally settled down in the slums of that small city. When the god's eyes opened that second time, it was different. The city didn't vanish. He saw numerous greenish-black corpses. He saw people mutated into vicious fiends. He saw people ripped to shreds. He saw rotting, stinking flesh.

He thought about the red moon, and that breathing entity atop it. He thought about how vicious that entity was.

Finally, he thought about the golden eye in the ghastr hollow, and the young woman in red, seated in the log cabin and singing placatingly.

He thought about all of those things.

And they superimposed with the broken face of the god outside the Revered Ancient mainland. Then he thought back to the things he would say when he was younger.

How would he describe that god?

"A son of a bitch!" he said, looking up at the bright light and the figure just barely visible within it.

His words caused the light to tremble slightly.

"What did you just say?" asked the gentle voice.

"I said. That god is a son of a bitch!" He spoke the word earnestly. And then he followed them up with more words. "When I was young, I called that god a rat bastard!" Xu Qing pointed at the broken face of the god below. "And a damned asshat!" Xu Qing thought for another moment, then continued, "And a dog-fucker!"

With that, Xu Qing looked down at the god below and spat.

When he was young, he would usually curse the god and then spit to emphasize his words. Usually, his spit would land on the ground, so the idea that the spit might actually land on the god's face made him happy.

As the spit dropped down, down, down, the light above pulsed dramatically, and then the gentle voice laughed uproariously.

“A god that’s a son of a bitch. And a dog-fucker!”

The laughter sounded profoundly carefree, and it grew louder and louder until the entire starry sky shook. As everything turned blurry to Xu Qing, he heard words of praise amidst the laughter.

“A lot of people curse that god. But not many people will do it like that in front of me. Little does anyone know that, back in the day, I uttered similar curses. But not even I can match up to you. Because I didn’t spit! Kid, you’ve got some flaws, but your pros outweigh your cons. I’m blessing you with a 30,000-meter pillar of light. I hope that no matter what happens... you never change!”

As the laughter boomed, Xu Qing’s vision swam. Then he found himself atop the staircase again, in front of the Grand Emperor’s divine likeness. The moment he looked up, the statue erupted with a huge pillar of light.

In the blink of an eye, it shot past 6,000 meters. Then it hit 12,000 meters, but it didn’t stop there. It went to 18,000 meters. 24,000 meters. Finally, it reached the ultimate height of 30,000 meters!

Brightly colored light flashed in heaven and earth and winds screamed. The dome of heaven was illuminated with incredible brightness that was visible even from a great distance.

This was absolutely unprecedented!

Everyone in Netherflight City was so shocked that, despite it being such a solemn occasion, they couldn’t hold back from shouting out exclamations of surprise.

“30,000.... 30,000 meters??”

Everyone was absolutely astonished and incredulous. Countless people gasped and cheered. Meanwhile, the swordsages up above were shaken to the core. First they looked at the Grand Emperor statue, and then at Xu Qing. They actually didn’t know if a 30,000-meter light had ever appeared in any of the other counties. But they did know that it was a first for Sea-Sealing County. It went beyond what any of them could possibly have anticipated.

Down below, Sir Bloodsmelter was stunned. “Seventh Sib... got an apprentice this ferocious?”

They weren’t the only ones to react in that way. The swordsage elders up above were deeply moved, and were looking at Xu Qing as if he were a precious treasure. That was especially true of the grand elder, who had noticed Xu Qing much earlier. His eyes were glittering brightly.

The swordsages all knew that this heart assessment and swearing-in had come to be called a ‘blessing’ by people who participated in the event. But the reality was that it was really just a test that would have an effect on later promotions. It was only if the light reached a certain height that it could be considered a true blessing. For instance, Qing Qiu had immediately become important to the Swordsage Court thanks to her result.

But... for a light to reach the unprecedented height of 30,000 meters was something that the word ‘blessing’ couldn’t even cover. That was more like veneration from the Grand Emperor! Nothing like this had ever happened.

For a person like this to appear was a big win for the Swordsage Court of Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. Everyone above and below was shaken to the core.

Qing Qiu was stunned, and her feelings were impossible to describe as she stared at Xu Qing, her eyes shining.

In her mind, the evil ghost scythe said, "No. Let's not end in mutual destruction with him.... He scares me."

Off to the side, Ning Yan trembled, and his eyes shone with deep fear. After all, he had previously attacked Xu Qing, and that made him so nervous he was sweating.

The Captain was also dumbstruck. All he could do was stare at that 30,000-meter light and wonder what was going on.

But why? Why did I only get one meter? I gave a good answer. I wonder what answer little Ah Qing gave?

The Captain looked at Xu Qing and felt incredibly curious. Of course, he wasn't the only one. Everyone wanted to know how Xu Qing had answered his question.

Furthest off to the side was Zhang Siyun, whose head was bowed as he clenched his hands tightly into fists inside the sleeves of his robe.

As for Xu Qing, he stood there quietly, the center of all attention. He looked at the 30,000-meter light shining from the statue, and noted the commotion it caused among the onlookers. As far as he was concerned, his answer hadn't been anything special. He'd just uttered some curse words that he'd heard people use even when he was young. When life got hard, even people who feared that god would vehemently utter curses. It was the courage of a nobody, and also, the sorrow of a nobody.

Then Xu Qing thought about what the Grand Emperor's divine likeness had said. It made him think of his time in the slums, and how people who were about to die would become fearless enough to sarcastically mock the city magistrate. Of course, when they had enough to eat, then they would act just like the rich people, and would be polite and respectful to the magistrate.

In the heat of the moment, Xu Qing hadn't been sure if his answer was correct. Until the divine likeness responded to him.

I hope that no matter what happens... you never change!

Xu Qing nodded.

Meanwhile, outside of Emperor-Receiving Prefecture, in the distant capital of Sea-Sealing County, in the Swordsage Palace, the Dao Bell tolled.

The Dao Bell of the Swordsage Palace was a gift from the imperial capital, and it would only toll when something momentous happened.

Today, it unexpectedly rang.

Although it only tolled once, it provoked a visible reaction of surprise from everyone in the Swordsage Palace. All were shocked. And soon, people found out why.

“In Emperor-Receiving Prefecture, a new swordsage by the name of Xu Qing was blessed with a 30,000-meter pillar of light by the Grand Emperor. As a result, our Dao Bell tolled a single time!”

That information was a big shock to all the swordsages in the palace, and it fixed one name in their minds.

Xu Qing!

At the same time, numerous irritated auras flared within the Swordsage Palace. They came from the current generation of chosen there. They were people who came from prefectures all over Sea-Sealing County, and who had come to report for duty after becoming swordsages. Emperor-Receiving Prefecture was far away, near the sea, and was thus the final location to host a swordsage recruitment event. Since the new swordsages from there had just been selected, it would be some time before they checked in at the Swordsage Palace. Now, before Xu Qing even arrived, people there knew his name.

In a mountain behind the Swordsage Palace, a woman in white strolled through a sword forest. She was gorgeous, with cinnabar lips, an alluring body, and a stylish demeanor. Especially noteworthy was that, just beneath her right eye she had a tear-shaped birthmark. However, her expression was as cold as autumn frost. She was the devastating type of beauty who could lead to the downfall of an entire city or state.

As she strolled through the sword forest, she turned to look in the direction of Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. When she spoke, her voice was as crisp as the flowing waters of a spring.

“Emperor-Receiving Prefecture.... Yun'er should be coming back soon. Mom's waiting for you.” [1]

Chapter 375: The Emperor's Sword

As the toll of the Dao Bell continued to echo in Sea-Sealing County's Swordsage Palace, back in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture, Zhang Siyun stood atop the staircase over Netherflight City, his face grim and his heart filled with indescribable, fiery emotions.

He had been widely known as the top figure among the younger generation in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. He had grown used to being the center of attention. And yet on this day, he experienced the rare sensation of being an actor playing a supporting role, with no choice but to watch someone else shine brilliantly. His heart filled with even more complex emotions when he thought about how his mother and Sect Grandfather were waiting for news in Sea-Sealing County. Xu Qing had ruined everything for him, and as a result, hatred took root in his very bones.

If Xu Qing hadn't pulled a fast one on him, he would have achieved his goal. After all, he hadn't been after the life lamp in that log cabin, but rather, something else inside. But his hopes had gone up in smoke. He would just have to wait until the next time the Swordsage Court lifted the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar, and there was no telling how many years would have to pass before that happened.

Mother is going to be so disappointed.

The truth was that he didn't care much about his Sect Grandfather. But he did care a lot about his mother. His father had passed away when he was young, and his mother had always been very strict with him, instilling within him a fear of her. As a result, he had worked hard on his cultivation in order to avoid disappointing her. In his heart, he longed for his mother to say she was proud of him. Such thoughts caused his insides to burn as if with fire as he glared at Xu Qing.

Xu Qing ignored Zhang Siyun's gaze. Focusing on the divine likeness of the Grand Emperor, he clasped hands and bowed deeply.

The swordsages above and the cultivators below all looked on.

Though everyone was shaken, they were also curious. Everyone wanted to know what the Grand Emperor had asked, and how Xu Qing had answered.

That was especially true of the Captain, who was so curious he felt like an infinitude of cats were clawing around inside of him. On the one hand, he felt embarrassed. But also, he really couldn't think of what Xu Qing might have said.

It was in that manner that the swordsage recruitment event ended. The Grand Emperor's divine likeness disappeared, and the seven-colored staircase vanished into the light. Everything went back to normal.

Xu Qing and the others were notified that they had one year to report to the Swordsage Palace in Sea-Sealing County. There, they would receive their swordsage legacies and assignments, as well as boundless destined opportunities. Such things were very important to new swordsages. The former represented the chance to boost their battle prowess, while the latter represented the traditions of humankind.

What was more, the county capital of Sea-Sealing County was in the middle of the county, and was a place where human chosen from all over would gather. There were chosen from other species there as well. Someone who could rise to prominence in the capital city would truly make a name, and would truly stand at the ultimate peak.

Many chosen from various sects thought in that way, and believed that if they wanted to become like the Ancient Emperors and Imperial Sovereigns, then they needed to crush all the competition starting from when they were young. By getting more destined opportunities, and more good fortune, they could lead the pack and eventually crush everyone. After all, that was what all of the Ancient Emperors and Imperial Sovereigns had done in the past.

Compared to the county capital, Emperor-Receiving Prefecture was considered remote. It was many prefectures away from the capital, and though it was possible to teleport there, the Swordsage Court wouldn't throw away money on new recruits just for that.

It didn't matter how important a new recruit was, unless they somehow surpassed the Swordsage Court, then they would make their own way to the capital city. The Swordsage Court wasn't in the practice of 'growing greenhouse flowers,' and thus, the recruits would make the long journey as a form of training.

With the recruitment event over, Sir Bloodsmelter had called for a celebratory banquet for Xu Qing and the Captain in the Eight Sect Coalition garrison.

As the festivities played out, the Captain pulled Xu Qing outside and said, “We need to plan ahead wisely. As your Eldest Brother, I’ve done all the thinking. By using public teleportation portals in various prefectures, we can make the trip in about eight months. Assuming we hurry.

“In terms of the exact route, we don’t need to worry about it too much. There have been other swordsages from the Eight Sect Coalition in years past, so there have long since been subsidiary sects set up along the path to Sea-Sealing County. We can rest in those places on the way.

“Besides, once we’re back in the coalition, someone will be assigned to help us. After all, our status will be very different then.”

The Captain cleared his throat. “Look, little Ah Qing, you’re only on this amazing path because your Eldest Brother brought you along. Therefore, it’s appropriate for you to offer some thanks, don’t you think? Bros like us don’t need to quibble about spirit stones. Why not just tell me what your answer was to the statue?”

Xu Qing had been drinking during the banquet, and was currently looking up into the night sky. As the cold wind blew snowflakes past him, he felt unusually comfortable. Turning to the Captain, he said, “Eldest Brother, look. Your eye and ears grew back.”

The Captain looked very pleased with himself. “Well, that’s a given. If I want them to grow back, they grow back. Amazing, huh? By the way, little Ah Qing, you—”

Xu Qing took out an apple and handed it to the Captain. “Captain, congratulations on becoming a swordsage.”

The Captain reflexively accepted it, took a bite, and was about to ask another question. But then, Xu Qing dropped down onto a snowbank and looked up into the starry sky, where it was just possible to see the broken face of the god. He took a drink from the flagon of alcohol he had in his hand.

“Eldest Brother, what exactly is a god?”

The Captain also looked up into the sky. After thinking for a moment, he sat down next to Xu Qing on the pile of snow and took another bite from his apple.

“Gods. Heh. Do you think they taste good?”

Xu Qing laughed softly. There was no way the Captain had answered in that way to the Grand Emperor. Otherwise, his pillar of light wouldn’t have been only one meter.

More snow blew in the wind. Xu Qing didn’t say anything further. He just lay there letting the snowflakes gather on his face while he thought back to what the Grand Emperor’s divine likeness had said. Laughing, he got up from the snow, walked over to the side, and spat onto the ground a few times.

The Captain was completely taken aback, but joined Xu Qing in spitting a few times. Although Xu Qing wasn’t offering any explanation, the Captain was planning to be patient. Suppressing his curiosity, he finished the apple, then took out an ice pear that was native to Netherflight City. He started eating.

It was quiet outside, and as snowflakes drifted through the sky, it seemed very peaceful. They could hear the sound of the bonfires and the laughter coming from the tents a short distance away.

At some point, Yanyan showed up. Seeing Xu Qing and the Captain sitting in the snow, she scooted over to sit next to Xu Qing, then lay down at his side.

High in the sky were Sir Bloodsmelter and Guru Eastnether. As they hovered there, they looked down on Xu Qing, the Captain, and Yanyan.

“How nice to be young,” Sir Bloodsmelter said with a sigh. Looking curiously at Guru Eastnether, he continued, “How do you think that little punk answered the question? Some people from the Swordsage Court came today and hinted that they wanted to know.”

Guru Eastnether looked back at him coldly.

Sir Bloodsmelter blinked a few times, then cleared his throat and used a different word to describe Xu Qing. “How do you think that grandson-in-law of yours answered the question?”

A smile broke out on Guru Eastnether’s wrinkled face. She nodded. “When we get back to the coalition, you can have your son-in-law ask his apprentice for the details. There’s still plenty of time. The Swordsage Court asked us to stay for a few more days. For one thing, Xu Qing and Chen Erniu still need to seek enlightenment of that imperial-class technique. Also, the court has a matter they want the two of us to help out with.”

Time passed.

Most of the cultivators who had previously gathered in Netherflight City were now gone. What had once been a bustling city was now mostly empty. There were only some rogue cultivators left behind who were still hoping to gain enlightenment of the battle spirit symbols from the pillar.

The people from the Eight Sect Coalition had not yet left. Nor had those from the Church of Departure or the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society. That was because the first place prize for climbing the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar was just now being given out. Enlightenment of an imperial-class technique meant for humans was not easy to get. The spot where they were to seek enlightenment was at the top of the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar, past the clouds, and inside the Swordsage Court.

It was Xu Qing’s first time going there. Upon arriving, he caught sight of Qing Qiu. However, she wasn’t going to be seeking enlightenment at his side. She was seated in a grand hall, apparently waiting for something. When she saw him and the Captain, she looked away with a harrumph.

Xu Qing showed no reaction, but the Captain responded with a similar harrumph. Then the two of them were being led away by swordsages into a large open square.

Red liquid ran along the ground to form a large spell formation that glowed with a blood-colored light. In the middle of the formation was a huge black boulder wrapped up in gray iron chains. Through all the chains, it was possible to see a sword carved onto the boulder. It looked like any ordinary sword.

And yet, when Xu Qing and the Captain looked at it, their minds spun. Both could sense a heaven-shaking, earth-shattering pressure emanating out from that sword. They exchanged a glance, and both could see the surprise and anticipation in each other's eyes.

This had to be the place where they would seek enlightenment of the imperial-class technique.

The golden crow on Xu Qing's back shivered, and for the first time, it didn't manifest in response to encountering another imperial-class technique. Instead, it seemed afraid.

Around this time, Xu Qing saw Zhang Siyun. He had arrived before them, and was sitting near the boulder with his eyes closed.

The person that had led them here was the same middle-aged swordsage who had officiated earlier. Along the way, he had glanced at Xu Qing a few times. "Go ahead and start," he said, "You have six hours to seek enlightenment. After that, the spell formation will automatically remove you.

"Treat this opportunity as something precious. Normally speaking, only swordsages with a lot of military credits are able to seek enlightenment here. That's because the name of this imperial-class technique is... The Emperor's Sword!

"The Emperor's Sword, also called Sword of the Swordsage, was created by the Grand Emperor. It's a rare technique that can be comprehended by many people at the same time. It belongs solely to humankind, and is in the care of us swordsages.

"You could say that the reason why the swordsages of the past were able to dominate countless other species, and also why we manage to hold on to the afterglow of that glory now, is largely because of The Emperor's Sword.

"After you gain some enlightenment, you'll understand why."

With that, the middle-aged swordsage turned and left.

Without any hesitation, Xu Qing and the Captain rushed forward, picked spots in which to sit down cross-legged, and began seeking enlightenment.

All of a sudden, Xu Qing realized that the Captain was actually sitting a bit closer to the boulder than he was. Feeling suddenly alarmed, he sent a message via divine will.

"Eldest Brother, if you take a bite, then I have the feeling... I'll be going to Sea-Sealing County alone."

The Captain turned and looked begrudgingly at Xu Qing.

Chapter 376: Erniu's Answer

Xu Qing closed his eyes and cast his senses into the black boulder. The moment he made contact, something like a fog appeared in his mind. Faintly discernible murmuring came from within the fog, seemingly near, seemingly distant.

"The sword of an emperor... should not be casually unsheathed.... But once unsheathed, it can destroy the heavens and crush the earth."

Shaken, Xu Qing listened carefully. Gradually, the murmuring turned into streams of information within his very soul.

Each bit of information told him something about The Emperor's Sword. The Emperor's Sword, also known as Sword of the Swordsage, was one of the orthodox imperial-class techniques of humankind, and was the creation of Yuan Zaiji, Grand Emperor of Immortal Ultrabrilliance. It was designed to kill, was filled with formidable power, and could slaughter endlessly. In the past, it had been used to cut down countless species, and in the ancient past, had even been used by the Grand Emperor to fell gods.

Years ago, even Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity had once sighed in admiration for the Grand Emperor's sword technique. Later, when the members of the Sword Palace turned into the swordsages, the Grand Emperor took all of his imperial-class techniques and imparted them to the Swordsage Division, breaking them up into smaller sections that the swordsages could seek enlightenment of. As for The Emperor's Sword, the Grand Emperor generously made it possible for even brand new swordsages to learn. That said, it was only the first instance that was free. Later on, military credits were required to seek enlightenment.

The Emperor's Sword was difficult to gain enlightenment of. From ancient times until modern, no one had ever succeeded fully in one session. Instead, it required multiple sessions of enlightenment to brand the technique onto the soul in the form of a sword seed.

The sword could be both powerful and flexible. The cultivation base of the cultivator was one factor that determined how mighty the sword was. But even more relevant was the factor of time. The Emperor's Sword needed time to gather power, and wasn't to be casually unsheathed. What was more, the more time it was given to gather power, the more terrifying it would be when unsheathed. After being unsheathed, the sword would return to its ordinary state. However, the power that could be unleashed was shocking.

In the past, there was a swordsage who didn't unsheathe his sword for 2,000 years. Then, when he did unsheathe it, his peak Nascent Soul cultivation base actually surpassed the power of the Spirit Trove realm, allowing him to easily slaughter a Void Returning opponent.

Of course, that happened before the arrival of the broken face of the god, back when the spirit energy of heaven and earth was abundant, and living beings had shocking longevity.

The modern world couldn't compare to the ancient world. And yet, The Emperor's Sword was still something that caused countless species to deeply fear the Swordsage Division. After all, it was impossible to know how many old-timers in the division had lived for many years without unsheathing their swords.

Anyone could imagine how a group with a technique like that could assign certain members to stay in seclusion for a long time without fighting, just to power up their swords. If those swords were used in the right moment, they would be virtually unstoppable.

The Emperor's Sword was one of the Swordsage Division's main reserve powers, and its deadly nature was one of the reasons why the Grand Emperor had made it available for all swordsages to learn. He wanted to give the Swordsage Division a solid foundation that would last through the ages.

That said, it wasn't easy to gain enlightenment of the technique, so not every swordsmaster was able to use it. Furthermore, multiple sessions of enlightenment were usually required. And Xu Qing, the Captain, and Zhang Siyun had all been rewarded with a single session.

Xu Qing had no idea how much time was passing. He simply tried as hard as possible to clear the fog. Unfortunately, as he sought enlightenment, the fog just seemed to get thicker, and no matter what he did, he couldn't drive it away. All he could do was try to push through the fog to see what was beyond it.

In that matter, time slipped by slowly but surely.

Eventually, the fog in front of Xu Qing started to clear, and he saw a sword. The moment he laid eyes on it, it became the only thing in existence from his perspective. Heaven-shaking, earth-toppling rumbling sounds filled his mind. Although the sword seemed completely ordinary in appearance, it contained pure slaughter. The baleful aura within the sword was difficult to put into words, and it could cause the mind to tremble. It seemed like it wanted to burst up into the sky and cut down anything and everything. It was as if the black boulder couldn't constrain the sword, and it was only the chains that managed to keep it in place.

Xu Qing struggled to control his breathing. His mind was a blank, except for the image of the sword beyond the fog, which grew clearer and clearer as the moments passed. He was almost in a daze as the outline of a sword developed in his sea of consciousness.

Xu Qing's powers of understanding had shocked even Master Seventh, and they were no less amazing right now. Suddenly, a deep desire rose within Xu Qing, and he prepared to completely drive away the fog and imprint the image of the sword into his heart and mind.

However, right then...

A terrifying gravitational force erupted behind him, dragging him away. Everything spun, and he shivered. Looking up, he realized he wasn't in the hall anymore.

He was outside.

Zhang Siyun was also there, his eyes bloodshot as he struggled to control the desire within himself.

Qing Qiu was off in the distance, looking at them coldly. She was aware that the others had been seeking enlightenment of an imperial-class technique. Though she hadn't qualified, the Swordsmaster Court had arranged for her to wait here.

Wait, wait, wait! What exactly am I waiting for? she thought impatiently.

Xu Qing wasn't paying attention to Zhang Siyun or Qing Qiu. Looking back into the hall where he had been seeking enlightenment, he wrestled with the intense desire within himself. Especially noteworthy was the outline that had appeared in his sea of consciousness. It wasn't very clear, but it was obviously the incomplete image of a sword. And it was fading, although it seemed like it would take at least two years to vanish completely. Xu Qing had the feeling that he had come very close to seeing the true image of the sword. The feeling of being interrupted and dragged away left him deeply disappointed.

Meanwhile, the Captain appeared out of nowhere, looking similarly disappointed. Getting to his feet, he looked back into the hall.

What the hell? I was just about to succeed! I even had my mouth open!

“Calm down, all of you!” a voice said. The same middle-aged swordsage appeared in front of them. The pressure radiating off of him caused Xu Qing to inhale sharply and suppress any feelings of disappointment. “I bet you feel like you were just about to succeed, right? Like you just needed one more moment. That’s what everyone feels. But the truth is... that you weren’t anywhere close to gaining enlightenment.

“What’s more, there’s a reason you were limited to six hours. From ancient times until now, all swordsages who sought enlightenment for more than six hours would instantly experience mutation and die. Not a single one survived.”

The man’s words caused Xu Qing’s heart to sink a bit.

“The reason is that the Grand Emperor once killed a god. However, that god also cursed the sword. As a result, anyone who seeks enlightenment for more than six hours will mutate and die. There’s no need to feel anxious. You’re all very fortunate, as your reward actually includes one additional session of enlightenment. Once you reach the county capital, you’ll be able to take advantage of that opportunity. And now it’s time to handle another matter. The exalted ones have been waiting long enough.”

Zhang Siyun looked suspicious about what was to come.

However, before anything else could happen, the middle-aged swordsage waved his hand, and Zhang Siyun disappeared.

“This doesn’t have anything to do with him. Just you three.”

Surprised, Xu Qing looked at the Captain, then Qing Qiu. Then something occurred to him.

Qing Qiu frowned as she also realized what seemed to be going on. That said, it only irritated her more.

The Captain came to his own conclusion, and it caused his eyes to shine with excitement. “Exalted one, does this have something to do with the Three-Spirits Dao-Suppressing Mountain?”

The middle-aged swordsage ignored him. As far as he was concerned, Chen Erniu, who had only received one meter of light from the Grand Emperor’s divine likeness, was an embarrassment to all swordsages. He wasn’t the only one. Quite a few other swordsages felt the same. After all... his result seemed to indicate that he was mentally unfit.

Not feeling inclined to answer the Captain, the middle-aged swordsage looked at Xu Qing and Qing Qiu.

“The three of you were present to see what our Swordsage Court did to August Spirit Nethersprite from the Three-Spirits Dao-Suppressing Mountain.

“August Spirit Nethersprite is currently imprisoned in the Swordsage Court and undergoing interrogation. The exalted ones want the three of you to provoke her. At

the moment she's impervious to any form of instigation. That needs to change. If you can rile her up, then the exalted ones will have an easier time getting secrets out of her."

With that, the swordsage turned and started walking off.

Xu Qing, the Captain, and Qing Qiu followed. Along the way, the Captain assessed the situation.

It seems they aren't very happy with my one-meter light. This isn't going to work. I definitely need to be on my best behavior. I need the old fogey swordsages to actually like me. Otherwise, I'm going to have a hard time getting promoted.

The Captain was both vigilant and depressed as he thought about that one-meter light.

My answer was great! Although the question the Grand Emperor asked wasn't among the thousand I was ready for, there were 47 that were similar.

By reciting all of those answers together, I definitely exceeded the standard for success. Each answer should have gotten me a few hundred meters, and when you add them all together, it should have easily reached 30,000 meters! There's no way all those spirit stones I spent were a complete and utter waste.

Besides, I even threw in some brown-nosing by repeating each answer! And to top it all off, I finished with, "Grand Emperor, YOU are a god!" What's wrong with that? Given how violently the Grand Emperor's light trembled when I said that, you could tell that he was very pleased.

The more the Captain thought about his performance, the more frustrated he got.

I just don't get why I only got one meter!

The Captain glanced at Xu Qing and felt even more pressure than ever. As he stewed in such thoughts, the middle-aged swordsage led them to the Swordsage Court's prison. It was a dark and gloomy place filled with countless warding spells. Every person who entered the prison was closely tracked by divine will.

After they were scanned, they entered the prison and walked down a narrow, torch-lit staircase. As they reached the bottom, they heard August Spirit Nethersprite's graceful voice.

"Footsteps? So you're bringing more people? It won't do any good. I know you want to soulsearch me. I know you want to rile me up. It won't happen. I'm the manifestation of the Ghost Emperor's soul. My emotions can't be stirred. And even if they could, it wouldn't be possible for Void Returning cultivators like you to do it. My true form is a Smoldering God. You people... don't even count as bugs."

Chapter 377: Visiting Nethersprite

Nethersprite's voice made her seem elegant, like a rich, upper-class woman sitting properly in a chair. Her every word was spoken properly and with icy arrogance, making her come across as profoundly aristocratic.

Xu Qing didn't react visibly.

As for Qing Qiu, she clearly wasn't very happy. This entire situation made her think back to her bitter experience that day, and how she'd come away completely empty-handed. Yet despite that, she was being lumped in with the Captain and Xu Qing.0

Only the Captain seemed visibly excited. Thanks to that one-meter light, every time he went out, he felt like people were looking at him strangely. He also got the feeling the swordsages were watching him. It was very humiliating, and also had him feeling very anxious. He was a swordsage now, yet everyone was looking at him like he was some sort of spy.1

The Captain took a deep breath as he walked along with firm, measured steps.0

In the lead was the middle-aged swordsage. He glanced back at the Captain, pursed his lips, and maintained silence.0

Seeing that, the Captain felt even more strongly about his assessment.0

Thus, the three of them were led down the stairs and to a large, red prison cell. The bars were the color of blood, and stretched between them was a thin, crimson membrane upon which flowed countless magical symbols. It was only possible to imagine the terrifying level of power in those flickering symbols.0

Inside the red prison cell, a woman sat cross-legged. She wore a qipao and had a phoenix crown on her head. Her skin was fair, and her facial features were immaculately beautiful. A single look at her would cause just about anyone to palpitate with desire. She held a bowl of lotus seed soup in her hands, from which she occasionally sipped. She was, of course, August Spirit Nethersprite.0

Because of being suppressed by the cage, she wasn't enormous like before. Instead, she was the size of an average person. Her flawless good looks made it hard to imagine her on the Three-Spirits Dao-Suppressing Mountain, casually devouring mortals for pleasure, with seas of blood filling her mouth.0

When Xu Qing, the Captain, and Qing Qiu arrived, she looked over at them. She didn't react in any way, and just kept casually drinking her lotus seed soup.2

"I brought some people to see you, Nethersprite." the middle-aged swordsage said.0

August Spirit Nethersprite laughed softly as she looked at Xu Qing and the others. "Oh, so you brought these three bugs here to try to rile me up. It won't work. Sooner or later I'll get out of here and kill all three of them. In fact, I should thank you. Now I know what they look like."2

August Spirit Nethersprite smiled as she looked over them carefully, as if committing their features to memory.0

The middle-aged man said nothing. He just backed up and looked at Xu Qing, the Captain, and Qing Qiu. His job was simply to bring them here and then wait to see if they could successfully provoke August Spirit Nethersprite.0

Xu Qing's expression was the same as ever. He had no interest in provoking Nethersprite, and truth be told, he had no idea how to do it. Qing Qiu seemed to be in the same position. As far as she was

concerned, this matter didn't have anything to do with her, so she felt no need to expend any effort on it.0

In contrast, the Captain approached the cage and looked at Nethersprite as she sipped her soup. Smiling, he said, "Hey, Granny Nethersprite. Is the soup good?"1

"Screw off," she replied coolly.0

Eyebrows shooting up, he sat down in front of the cage and studied August Spirit Nethersprite's clothing. He frowned. "Granny, how come I didn't see this outfit when I was in your mansion grotto? How long have you been wearing it?"0

August Spirit Nethersprite finished her soup and then closed her eyes to meditate.0

Seeing that, the middle-aged swordsage shook his head. He was already convinced that nothing was going to happen.0

The Captain cleared his throat and smacked his bag of holding. Instantly, a tattered garment appeared which he waved in front of him.0

"Take a look at this, Granny!"0

Nethersprite's eyes remained closed.0

The Captain didn't seem daunted by her icy silence, and continued to produce tattered garments from his bag of holding, until they were piled up off to the side like a little mountain.0

"I have lots of them here. I even have this big bodice...."0

The middle-aged swordsage looked on, somewhat shocked as he looked at the pile of clothes, and then the Captain. Qing Qiu, meanwhile, felt disgusted, and Xu Qing had an odd expression on his face. Xu Qing could guess why the Captain seemed to be working so hard.0

When Nethersprite heard the Captain mention 'bodice' her eyes opened and she glanced at the pile of familiar clothing. Noting the bad condition of the garments, she looked at the Captain.0

Chuckling darkly, the Captain said, "My plan is to rip these garments into strips, one at a time. I'm not exactly sure what I'll do with them after that. But at the moment, Granny, I have a big problem. You see, my bag of holding is too small to hold so many garments, and I need a place to store them. Besides, they actually smell bad. Say, Big Sis, are you really Nethersprite? Or should we call you Netherskunk?0

"I mean, that smell is horrendous! That's why I asked how long you've been wearing that outfit. I figured you might want to change."0

August Spirit Nethersprite inhaled deeply. The bug's words were causing her heart to pound, especially considering that she was actually a very clean person. Normally speaking, she would use a special magical technique every day to keep clean. Given the level of her cultivation base, it was impossible for her to actually get dirty, but that was the routine she was used to. After being locked up and having her cultivation base suppressed, she hadn't been able to clean herself like usual. Though her cultivation level ensured that she wasn't dirty, she still felt out of sorts.0

However, nothing the Captain had said so far was enough to truly stir her emotions. As she steadied her breathing, she regained her sense of calm, all the while maintaining the same cold facial expression.0

Chuckling, he said, “Granny, I know of a sound that you’ll really like. Take a listen!”0

With that he took out the demon snake’s tooth and looked at Xu Qing.0

Xu Qing knew exactly what the Captain was up to. Quietly walking forward, he started laying out the various garments neatly on the ground.0

“Let’s start with that big bodice!” the Captain said, looking down his nose.0

Xu Qing flicked his sleeve, sending the bodice flying over.0

The Captain then slowly ran the tooth down the bodice, causing a loud ripping sound to echo out. The bodice was already in bad shape, but after being sliced by the tooth, it looked even worse. The Captain then moved on to the next garment.0

“This is exactly how I tore up all the clothes back in your mansion grotto. Isn’t the sound just lovely?”0

Nethersprite forced herself to remain calm, but the sound was so upsetting that she struggled to breathe steadily. She could only glare at the Captain as he destroyed her beloved clothing. It was almost like he was slashing her very heart with that snake tooth.4

As the middle-aged swordsage watched all of this, his eyes began to shine with surprise.0

The Captain was feeling very pleased with himself, but at the same time, could tell he needed to work harder. After ripping up a few more garments, he took out a jade slip used to store images.0

Walking up to Nethersprite, he turned the slip on, causing an image to appear. It showed a massive body, with three people madly absorbing energy from its face. Xu Qing and the Captain were focused on the nose while Qing Qiu was focused on the forehead.1

“Look at that snow-white nose. It’s so prominent! Whoa! Why is it turning black? Whoops! Look, it’s vanishing!”1

“You!” snapped Nethersprite. Panting, she stared at the image, and as she saw her nose turning black, her eyes became bloodshot, and she started trembling.0

The Captain was provoking her on multiple fronts. First he talked about her smelling bad, then he loudly sliced up her clothing, and then showed her that image.0

It was a provocation of both smell, sound, and sight. As she watched her nose disappearing, it all became a wave of fury and frustration that battered her from the inside. That said, she was still in full possession of all her faculties, and was able to stay in control. Taking in deep breaths, she suppressed the rage in her heart.0

Seeing all this, Xu Qing had to admire the Captain's ability to provoke hostility.0

Qing Qiu was fully on guard as she came to realize that Mad Dog was obviously a much bigger threat than Ghost Hand.1

As for the middle-aged swordsage, as he watched the giggling Chen Erniu, he had to admit that he was a genius. That was especially true of the last thing he said, which was just profoundly low-down.0

August Spirit Nethersprite gritted her teeth and glared at the Captain. Then she spoke, and this time she didn't sound elegant at all. Voice hoarse, she said, "You want to piss me off? Impossible! A bug like you couldn't dream of making me mad."1

The Captain looked back at her, flabbergasted. "That's not what I'm doing! I just want to give you a little gift!"0

With that, the Captain slowly pulled out a very thick hair from his bag of holding, which he placed in front of the cage.0

Both Xu Qing and Qing Qiu were shocked to see that hair, as was the middle-aged swordsage. Nethersprite was similarly astonished, and without even thinking about it, looked closely at it.0

When the Captain saw everyone so focused on the hair, he flashed an exultant smile and then cleared his throat.0

"Come on. Don't tell me you don't recognize your own nose hair? It's so big. And thick too. So very, very long. Back when we broke into your house and ripped up all your clothes and took your treasures and absorbed your nose and ruined your dao blood and threw you into a mindless rage... well, that was wrong of us. Given that you don't have that nose anymore, this nose hair can serve as a keepsake. In the future, whenever you think about your nose, you can take it out and have a look. 3

"There's no need to thank me! There's honor even among thieves!" 0

The Captain finished his speech sounding like he was the absolute paragon of holy generosity.1

The prison was silent but for the echo of the Captain's words.1

Xu Qing's eyes were wide. Qing Qiu's jaw had dropped. The swordsage looked absolutely stunned.2

And Nethersprite... shot to her feet and howled, "I'll kill you!! Swordsages, if you kill him, I'll agree to be soulsearched. Soulsearch me any time! Search whatever you want. Just kill him and let me eat him!!"

Chapter 378: Heavenfate Reduced by Half

The emotions raging in Nethersprite caused the entire prison to tremble, and the cell to shine with blinding light. Inside the cell, Nethersprite's eyes were bloodshot as she shouted and howled madly.

Never before had she hated humans so much. All of the anger and frustration she had been keeping pent up was now exploding out.

“I’ll kill you!!”

The Captain sighed, then sneered. “Turns out you can’t curse. I mean, you’re just repeating the same thing over and over. Do you need me to help you out?”

Nethersprite had devolved into complete madness.

Seeing that, the Captain cleared his throat complacently. He obviously wasn’t worried that the swordsages might kill him to appease Nethersprite. If they were the kind of people who did that, they couldn’t possibly represent the most orthodox side of humanity. To the Swordsage Court, rules were rules, and they had to be respected. What made him even more pleased was the open astonishment on the face of the middle-aged swordsage. Even his little Junior Brother was visibly surprised, which was rare.

The Captain was feeling incomparably happy at this win-win situation.

I’ll be able to brag about this to little Ah Qing for the next decade. And now the old swordsage fogies know what Chen Erniu is really capable of. This will definitely change how they treat me.

With such thoughts on his mind, he collected all the clothing back up. Of course, he was the kind of person who stuck to his word, so... he left the nose hair in front of the cage.

After organizing everything, he walked back to Xu Qing. Eyebrows dancing up and down, he said, “What do you think of your Elder Brother now?”

“Incredible!” Xu Qing replied sincerely. In fact, after a moment of thought, he gave the Captain a big thumbs-up.

The Captain laughed heartily. Then, feeling absolutely wonderful, he looked at Qing Qiu.

She rolled her eyes, all the while keeping fully on guard.

Meanwhile, the middle-aged swordsage looked at him with mixed emotions. He had to admit that this Chen Erniu had some skills, but at the same time, was worried that he might harm the reputation of Emperor-Receiving Prefecture’s Swordsage Court. After all, he was profoundly underhanded and sleazy. And when the swordsage thought about the look on Chen Erniu’s face moments ago, he had to hold back from walking over and slapping him.

Meanwhile, in a grand hall elsewhere in the Swordsage Court, several of the elders had strange expressions on their faces as they looked at an image of the prison on a screen of light. They had been watching everything play out with the Captain, including everything he said. For a short time, they were all struck speechless.

Eventually, one of the elders shook his head and said, “So sleazy.”

At the same time, Nethersprite’s distraught state was just the opening the Swordsage Court had been looking for to start a soulsearch. Xu Qing, the Captain, and Qing Qiu weren’t needed for that, so the middle-aged swordsage ushered them out. In terms of the reward for their service, the Captain got the majority.

After they were gone, the middle-aged swordsage sighed. “The disciples this time from the Eight Sect Coalition. They’re....”

He shook his head, not really sure of what word to use.

Once outside the Swordsage Court, Qing Qiu was the first to leave. She headed for the Church of Departure, clearly not interested in staying behind for a moment longer than necessary.

The next day, the Eight Sect Coalition packed up to leave. Before the huge flying ship left, though, something happened.

The Captain went missing. He just didn’t have the guts to go home. Obviously, he was worried about Arch-Immortal Plumdark’s fury and his Master’s rage. What was more, he never found out what Arch-Immortal Plumdark had written in her response.

However, there was a patriarch present, so the Captain’s escape attempt failed. About an hour before the flying ship was set to leave, Sir Bloodsmelter left and came back dragging the Captain with him.

The Captain looked very bored, and was sighing endlessly. After Sir Bloodsmelter threw him onto the ship, he gave the orders and the ship shot through the air back toward the Eight Sect Coalition.

The Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar grew smaller and smaller in Xu Qing’s eyes, until it eventually disappeared. He could only stare at the spot where he knew it existed, and think back to all the momentous events that had played out.

He had come as a simple disciple from the Eight Sect Coalition. Although he essentially counted as a dao child, he wasn’t necessarily very well known... But now he was a swordsage for whom an unprecedented 30,000-meter beam of light appeared. He reached the highest heights possible during the recruitment event. His status and reputation were now completely different than before. It wasn’t lost on him that all of the other coalition disciples had taken to looking at him out of the corners of their eyes.

Before, most coalition disciples had been envious of him. But now they revered him. Their gazes were different. Some of it was because of how strong he was, but more of it was because of his new status.

He was now a cultivator from one of the Five Greater Celestial Divisions, who represented the orthodoxy of humankind. He had a command sword, which proved that, as long as he was strong enough, he had the right to execute anyone but the emperor. That identity was also a protection for him. If anyone tried to kill him, they would be making themselves the enemy of the Swordsage Division.

Along with those benefits came responsibilities. Now Xu Qing wielded a sword for the sake of humankind, and was tasked with protecting all life.

Xu Qing couldn’t help but muse that the swordsage mission was so monumental that he wasn’t even sure what to do going forward.

I guess I’ll just follow my heart. Settling his thoughts, he turned to see the Captain hobbling over to him.

“Hey, little Junior Brother. You know, there’s something I really regret.”

“Running away too late?” Xu Qing asked, looking at the Captain’s legs.

Full of grief and indignation, the Captain continued, “Not that. I regret waiting so long to join the swordsages. Otherwise I would have gained enlightenment of The Emperor’s Sword a lot sooner. If I’d been powering it up this entire time, then even a Void Returning cultivator would have to treat me very politely.”

“Except,” Xu Qing reminded him, “you’d have to be at the peak of Nascent Soul and also live for 2,000 years.”

“Well I...” The Captain trailed off. He sighed. “In the Revered Ancient mainland, the peak of Nascent Soul is the end of the line for most cultivators. Most people get stuck there, unable to break through, until eventually their longevity runs out....

“In minor worlds, that level is actually considered the ultimate peak. When cultivators in minor worlds reach that level, their next step is to break out into the void to start searching for their secret troves. That wouldn’t be the issue. But living for 2,000 years. Yeesh.

“Things nowadays can’t compare to before the arrival of the god. Back then there was no mutagen, and here on the Revered Ancient mainland, they also called the Nascent Soul level the Heavenfate level. One palace created one nascent soul. One nascent soul provided six sixty-year-cycles of longevity. But now, all longevity has been cut in half. Unless you have some precious materials to work with, there’s no way someone in the peak of Nascent Soul could ever power up a sword to kill someone in Void Returning.”

Xu Qing took all the information in. This was his first time gaining a bit of understanding about the Nascent Soul level.

“Forget about all that, little Junior Brother. Say, after we’re back, why don’t you just give in to Arch-Immortal Plumdark? Close your eyes and it’ll be over before you know it. I mean, if you don’t, your Eldest Brother won’t be going to Sea-Sealing County with you. Arch-Immortal Plumdark will almost certainly slap me to death.”

Xu Qing thought about it and then took out a pouch which he handed to the Captain. “Inside that pouch is something that should help you survive the coming tribulation.”

“What’s inside?” the Captain asked, his eyes glittered as he prepared to open the pouch.

“Healing medicine,” Xu Qing replied.

The Captain glared back at him.

Xu Qing figured that since the Captain was the kind of person who liked extreme danger and was used to risking his life, he was obviously used to suffering a bit. Therefore, adding a bit more suffering on top wouldn't do much harm. Besides, if the Captain lost body parts, he could grow them back in a matter of days. Even when he lost everything but his head, he would be back to normal within a month. Worst case scenario, he could always just take the Captain's head with him to Sea-Sealing County. Before they even arrived, the Captain would be hale and hearty again.

The Captain sighed. Putting away the medicine, he took out an apple to eat. At least he could sell the medicine, and he was definitely running very low on funds lately. He had spent almost everything he had on getting the answers to the Grand Emperor's questions. The mere thought that he had spent so many spirit stones to get a one-meter pillar of light was almost too much to take.

"If you don't want to help me work things out with Arch-Immortal Plumdark, fine. But can you at least tell me how you answered the Grand Emperor's question? I've thought about it a lot. Constantly, actually. Look. My hair is even starting to fall out because of it."

The Captain blinked a few times as he looked at Xu Qing. The truth was that everything he had said before was all a smokescreen to deflect from his real question, which he had just asked. He had come to a realization recently. Back when he lay in the snow with Xu Qing, he shouldn't have directly asked about what he wanted to know. He should have said some other random things first, for example about Heavenfate Nascent Soul, to distract Xu Qing. Only then, when the moment was right, could he ask his question and have a good chance of getting an answer.

As soon as he asked the question, something happened in a secret room in the flying ship. The ears of Sir Bloodsmelter, who was seated cross-legged in meditation, suddenly twitched. Next to him was Guru Eastnether. Both of them opened their eyes and looked in Xu Qing's direction.

At the same time, back on the distant Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar, the swordsage grand elder also looked in the direction of the Eight Sect Coalition's flying ship.

As all of those old-timers paid very close attention to what was happening, Xu Qing looked at the Captain's hair.

The Captain looked back pleadingly at Xu Qing.

"I already told you, Eldest Brother," Xu Qing replied quietly. "Back when we were laying in the snow together."

The Captain looked stunned, and immediately thought back to that night. Sir Bloodsmelter frowned as he did the same thing, and the swordsage grand elder also looked surprised.

All of a sudden, the Captain realized something. Xu Qing hadn't said a word. He'd just spit a few times.

"You... you spat?" the Captain asked hesitantly.

Xu Qing nodded. "I spat on the god."

The Captain stood there in a daze. "That's all? The mere act of spitting got you 30,000 meters?"

“I also called him a son of a bitch,” Xu Qing said, pointing up at the broken face of the god.

Sir Bloodsmelter was visibly stunned, and the swordsage grand elder had a very unusual look on his face.

Meanwhile, the Captain said, “You... you called the broken face of the god a son of a bitch?”

“There was more,” Xu Qing said, sounding very serious. “I cursed him a few different ways. Other than calling him a son of a bitch, I said that he was a rat bastard and a damned asshat. And finally, I called him a dog-fucker.”

Then Xu Qing spat over the edge of the rail.

The Captain looked at Xu Qing, his eyes glittering.

Meanwhile, back in the Swordsage Court, the swordsage grand elder thought for a moment. Then he smiled. And then that smile grew wider and wider until he started laughing. It was a carefree laughter that echoed through the Swordsage Court, causing all of the swordsages to turn their heads in surprise. As far as they could remember, the grand elder always acted very seriously. Whether it was in the court or when he lectured on plants and vegetation, he was always like that. Very rarely did he ever laugh.

As he laughed, the grand elder even used some obscene language. “A son of a bitch!”

Back on the flying ship, Sir Bloodsmelter was laughing so hard his eyes were bloodshot. He could remember days past when he would cuss. However, it had been quite some time since he stopped.

On the deck of the ship, the Captain inhaled deeply. Looking up at the broken face of the god, he yelled, “You dog-fucker!”

Then he hawked a loogie and spat over the railing. Finally he burst out laughing. Xu Qing joined him.

But high above in the dome of heaven, the broken face of the god seemed as imposing as ever, as if the people below didn't even count as bugs.

Time passed. The flying ship left the northern tundra, crossed the Everlasting Immortal Profundity River, and followed the Supreme Arbiter Salvation Mountains south. One afternoon about half a month later, as the bright sun shone down, the majestic walls of the Eight Sect Coalition became visible on the southern horizon.

As they neared, the sound of bells filled the coalition.

They were welcoming bells.

Bells welcoming the arrival of swordsages!

Chapter 379: There's No Escape from Fate

The bells tolled three times.

“Only three times?” the Captain said haughtily as he stood on the deck of the flying ship, clad in his swordmage government uniform. He had his hands clasped behind his back and he looked immeasurably pleased with himself. That said, there was a bit of guilt and anxiety lurking deep within his eyes.

Xu Qing had also been asked to wear his swordmage uniform. At the moment, he wasn't paying attention to the bells. Rather, he was looking down at his clothing.

The government uniform worn by swordmages was different from a daoist robe. It had a high collar that went up to the ears and wide sleeves gathered at the wrist. It was white, with a fiery red design. The red design was not very prominent, and in fact, was only visible when the sun shone on it. It went from the end of the sleeves all the way to the collar, and resembled fire. When the wind hit the uniform, the various layers would ripple, making it look like a living flame. It had a cape, affixed to the collar with a crimson string, which would flutter in the wind.

At first glance, the uniform seemed simple and plain. However, the truth was that it contained a raging fire. It was an elegant uniform that also looked quite heroic, especially when worn by Xu Qing. In fact, the female disciples on the flying ship couldn't seem to keep their eyes off him.

Yanyan stood proudly next to him, smiling so broadly her eyes were like crescent moons.

“What do you mean ‘only three times?’” Sir Bloodsmelter said from behind them. “Those bells don't even ring for me. Sounds to me like you could use a good thrashing.”

Shivering, the Captain turned around, a fawning expression on his face as he rushed over to Sir Bloodsmelter. “Greetings, oh wise Patriarch!”

Sir Bloodsmelter snorted coldly and walked past the Captain. He stopped next to Xu Qing, his eyes full of praise.

Xu Qing respectfully clasped hands and bowed at the waist.

“Ignore your Eldest Brother's nonsense, Ah Qing,” Sir Bloodsmelter said. “Human etiquette dictates that the ringing of bells comes with a variety of meanings. Don't put too much thought into it. And by the way, the sect's bells will never toll more than twenty-one times.”

“Why's that?” the Captain asked curiously.

Ignoring him, Sir Bloodsmelter said, “Ah Qing, once we're back in the sect, you'll have three months to rest and recuperate. After that, you'll be going on a very long trip. Before you leave, I'll give you a precious gift.”

Before the Captain could say anything else, Sir Bloodsmelter glared at him and barked, “As for you, you're not a kid anymore. You'd do well to learn a thing or two from your Junior Brother. Enough with the melodrama all the time! The trouble you get into in the sect is bad enough. If you go to Sea-Sealing County and get beaten up so bad all your seals open, then if they don't kill you, you can just go ahead and kill yourself!”

Sighing, the Captain looked pleadingly at the patriarch. "Patriarch, forget about Sea-Sealing County. I have a tribulation coming right here and now! I don't know how I'll survive it...."

Sir Bloodsmelter snorted coldly and was about to say something further when a host of figures flew out from the Eight Sect Coalition and toward the ship.

They included people from Seven Blood Eyes as well as the other sects in the coalition. After all, the delegation had included disciples from all of the sects. Though none of the others had become swordsages, they had still gone through serious training and had learned a lot about the world. The journey had been anything but ordinary.

Master Seventh was the highest-ranking person who had come, as the representatives from all the other sects were merely elders.

Even still, it was a solemn occasion.

A banquet had been prepared in Seven Blood Eyes to congratulate Xu Qing and the Captain, and thus, as the sound of the bells still lingered in the coalition, they headed to Seven Blood Eyes. Virtually all of the Seven Blood Eyes disciples in the sect were already gathered. Clasp hands to the sky, they offered respectful greetings.

The Captain glanced around warily, and seeing that Arch-Immortal Plumdark wasn't present, breathed a sigh of relief.

The president of the coalition appeared up above, a kind smile on his face. "Xu Qing, Chen Erniu, the two of you are hereby named dao children of the Eight Sect Coalition!"

That was no surprise. They were swordsages now, and would now be watched closely by the coalition. After all, of the three swordsage appointments, two were in the coalition. Something like this had never happened before in the coalition. It went without saying that the president would appoint them as dao children.

It was important for Seven Blood Eyes, the Swordsage Court, and all future swordsages who would rise up in the coalition. It had nothing to do with playing favorite or anything like that. As the president of the coalition, few people could ever tell what he was thinking, but he always acted in the most reasonable way possible.

After the dao child announcement was made, the festivities in Seven Blood Eyes really took off. Disciples from other sects were coming to offer gifts, and the event lasted the entire day.

During that time, the Captain circulated in the crowd and chatted glibly with everyone. "You listen to me, people. Back in Netherflight City, both Ah Qing and I responded in the most unprecedented way you can imagine. The two of us combined created a light that surpassed 30,000 meters!"

Xu Qing heard that but didn't mind. At the moment, he was talking to Huang Yan.

"Xu Qing, time really has flown by. I can't believe you're a swordsage now! Ai, I really just can't get used to Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. I've already talked things out with my Elder Sister, and we're going back to South Phoenix. Thankfully, she was just assigned to head back there for official duties. Next time we meet again, it'll be in South Phoenix!"

It wasn't the first time Xu Qing had heard Huang Yan talk about how he didn't like Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. Knowing that he couldn't convince him otherwise, Xu Qing just nodded. Then he told him about what happened in the Three-Spirits Dao-Suppressing Mountain.

Huang Yan seemed very interested in the story.

Time passed. Eventually, evening fell, and the banquet came to an end. Xu Qing was just getting ready to return to the back of the mountain to pay his respects to Master Sixth when something unusual happened.

Plum-colored light glittered in the sky, creating an interesting contrast with the evening afterglow. Xu Qing looked up. At the same time, the Captain, who had been bragging to Zhang San, also looked up, and his face fell. The plum-colored light up above converged into a single spot, revealing a woman.

She had extremely fair skin, a slender physique, and beauty like that of an immortal from heaven. She was elegant, but also had a terrifying cultivation base. Altogether, she seemed like a peerless beauty from a painting. She was none other than Arch-Immortal Plumdark. She had chosen to come after the official celebration was over. That timing might seem trivial, but it was a show of respect.

Xu Qing immediately got nervous. And then he thought about the letter she'd sent him, and he suddenly felt the urge to get away as quickly as possible. He started quietly backing up.

The Captain reacted similarly. In fact, the moment that plum-colored light appeared, he was fleeing. Unfortunately, little did he know that Master Seventh had been keeping an eye on him the entire time.

The moment the Captain tried to get away, Master Seventh reached out and grabbed him.

The Captain flailed his arms and legs, but it didn't do the least bit good. Finally, he just looked haplessly at Master Seventh.

"Master..."

Ignoring his highest-ranking apprentice, Master Seventh plastered a smile onto his face as he looked at the descending Arch-Immortal Plumdark.

"Fellow Daoist Plumdark, this disaster of an apprentice caused you a lot of trouble. I think the punishment you suggested a while back would be perfectly appropriate."

Chen Erniu let loose a yelp as Master Seventh threw him up into the air toward Arch-Immortal Plumdark. His limbs were immobilized, but his neck wasn't. As he looked down, he could see Xu Qing slipping away in the crowd.

"Help me, little Junior Brother! Explain everything to Arch-Immortal Plumdark! Hurry! Or at least stick by my side...."

Xu Qing looked up furiously. Great, Chen Erniu. You just had to drag me into this, didn't you??"

At that point, he sped up, except sadly, it was too late.

The Captain's words caused Arch-Immortal Plumdark to look down. As her beautiful eyes locked onto Xu Qing, she smiled enigmatically.

“Come with me, child. There’s something I need to talk to you about.”

Xu Qing’s heart was already pounding. Unfortunately, there was no way for him to refuse her.

Meanwhile, the Captain’s eyes glittered, and he was about to say something, except Arch-Immortal Plumdark waved her hand and sealed his mouth shut. All he could do was madly blink his eyes at Xu Qing to try to get a message across.

Xu Qing ignored him and was about to say something when Master Seventh cleared his throat.

“Go along, Fourth Sib.”

Xu Qing shot a meaningful look to his Master. However, Master Seventh pretended not to notice.

Arch-Immortal Plumdark smiled, and Xu Qing felt himself rising up into the air. The moment he got close to her, he smelled that familiar perfume. And then she spoke, her voice like a trickling stream that could pierce all the way to his soul.

“Did you get my message, child?”

Xu Qing immediately shook his head.

She chuckled, then flicked her sleeve. She, Xu Qing, and the Captain all disappeared. When they reappeared, they were in the Dark Serenity Sect’s demon snake pocket realm.

Right in front of Xu Qing was that massive coiled snake skeleton.

There was also a person present.

It was Wu Jianwu. He had a scrubbing brush in his hand, and his mouth was taped shut. Looking bored, he used the brush to clean the skeleton. When he noticed the three people up above, his eyes lit up. [1]

When the Captain saw that, his heart sank.

“Chen Erniu, you stole that snake’s tooth,” Arch-Immortal Plumdark said. “If anyone else had done that, I’d rip their tendons out and break all their bones. But after talking the matter over with your Master, and also taking into consideration your Junior Brother, I decided not to bicker with you over the situation.

“If you wanted to use that tooth, you could have just come to me and asked to borrow it. Why did you feel the need to steal it? I guess it doesn’t matter. Feel free to keep the tooth if you need it. But your punishment is that you’ll spend the next three months in here making sure that snake skeleton is absolutely spotless.

“Go ahead.”

She waved her hand, and the Captain fell down to the skeleton, right next to Wu Jianwu.

Wu Jianwu looked very pleased. Excitedly giving the Captain a scrubber brush, he then pointed at a spot off in the distance. Some of the skeleton was already clean, but the majority of it wasn’t. Clearly, Wu Jianwu had left some of it untouched on purpose. Now his companion had arrived.

The Captain sighed. However, he was secretly relieved. He had been ready to beg and plead to reduce his punishment, but as it turned out, the punishment wasn't really that bad.

Looks like that letter I wrote worked after all! I should write more letters in the future!

The Captain blinked a few times and then tried to make himself look as despondent as possible as he started scrubbing the snake skeleton. It didn't take long before his face fell as he realized that the skeleton was very unique, and definitely not easy to clean. In fact, tapping into the cultivation base didn't even seem to help. Looking up at the mountainous snake skeleton, he suddenly seemed very bleak.

Xu Qing looked on feeling wonderful.

Having tossed Chen Erniu down, Arch-Immortal Plumdark led Xu Qing to the highest point in the pocket realm. It was the snake's skull, which seemed to be howling to the dome of heaven.

Settling down, she smiled at Xu Qing.

"Sit."

Bracing himself, he sat next to her. From here, he had a good view of the Captain hard at work. Normally speaking, he would have enjoyed that view a lot, but with Arch-Immortal Plumdark looking at him, he felt nothing but anxiety. And it got worse when she spoke.

"Child, in the letter you wrote me, you promised me three things. Today, I want you to keep that first promise."

Xu Qing immediately felt panic set in.

Chapter 380: Xu Qing's Fairy Tale

"What's with the look on your face, child? Does that mean you didn't get my letter? Or does it mean... that the letter I received wasn't written by you?" Arch-Immortal Plumdark looked at him, her face flawlessly beautiful, her eyebrows arched gracefully. She was smiling as if she found the situation humorous.

"Senior, I...." Xu Qing steeled himself and prepared to offer a full explanation.

"If you didn't write the letter, then that means someone's toying with you. You should look into that. Find out who in the Eight Sect Coalition would dare to deceive me. After you find out who it was, I'll bury them here. Not even that person's Master would speak up for someone so outrageously disrespectful."

Her smile was as beautiful as a flower, but from the look in her eyes, she was very serious. Xu Qing got the feeling she wasn't joking at all.

He glanced down at the Captain.

The Captain had heard Arch-Immortal Plumdark's words, and it caused him to shiver. Looking very embarrassed, he glanced up at Xu Qing. He had also been able to tell how serious she was, and wanted to offer a warning to Xu Qing. Unfortunately, his mouth was still sealed, as was his divine sense. All he could do to communicate was blink.

Xu Qing looked down at him and sighed inwardly. He was absolutely unconvinced that Arch-Immortal Plumdark didn't know what was going on. And there was no way she didn't know who really wrote that letter. After all, she was a Void Returning expert, on the same level as the patriarch. People like that, with all they had experienced in life, were skilled schemers. In fact, if Xu Qing was right, she probably knew from the moment she laid eyes on the letter that it wasn't from him.

All he could do was turn and look calmly at her.

Her smile was so beautiful it would entrance most people. "Anyway, in your letter you promised that, after you got back from traveling, you would tell me about your past."

From the look in her eyes, she seemed very serious.

Down below, the Captain was blinking like mad as he tried to pass a message to Xu Qing. He was worried that the blunt and forthright Xu Qing would reveal the truth of the matter. After all, if Arch-Immortal Plumdark knew the truth, but was pretending she didn't, then Xu Qing could ruin everything.

Xu Qing didn't say anything.

As the Captain waited anxiously, seven or eight breaths of time passed.

Meanwhile, Xu Qing noted how serious Arch-Immortal Plumdark looked.

"My past? I was just an ordinary mortal, born in a little place in the continent of South Phoenix. It was called Peerless City. My family ran a postal station. Most of the time we sent messages with birds. Because of that, we raised lots and lots of them. We had a crow. A sparrow. Also a pigeon. They were nice-looking birds, and they were nice to me. One day the crow attracted the attention of an eagle. When the eagle came, the birds scattered. Having no idea where they went, I left Peerless City to look for them."

"Did you find them?" she asked softly.

"I found out where the sparrow and the pigeon are. Later on, I'll go get them and take them home."

"I hope that works out for you. What else happened after you left the city?"

"Not much," Xu Qing said calmly. "I saw some vultures. They were very fierce. I also saw some turtledoves, which were equally fierce and nearly impossible to communicate with. Oh, right. I saw some cuckoo birds, which were very crafty, but they ended up being eaten by the vultures."

Arch-Immortal Plumdark looked at him without saying a word.

Down below, the Captain was standing there quietly.

Xu Qing kept talking, his voice calm.

“I kept going until I saw a tree with a woodpecker in it. I rested there for a bit. That was when the storm started. Lightning hit the tree and killed the woodpecker. That was also where I saw a white egret for the first time in my life.”

Arch-Immortal Plumdark nodded. “They’re beautiful. Pure and holy.”

“Except it also died. Its partner had been eaten by a falcon some years back. It lingered for a long time there until it grew old. I buried it there. Next I ended up in a forest the color of blood, the kind of place where the weak are the prey of the strong. It was a very dangerous place. That was where I saw the third white egret, plus a skylark, a parrot, and a yellow oriole. Lots and lots of birds. Oh, there was also a wild dog in that forest. And that’s my story.” Smiling, he looked at Arch-Immortal Plumdark.

“What about the second white egret?” she asked.

A flash of reminiscence appeared in his eyes.

“The second white egret,” he said softly, “also died. It was killed by a bat. After that happened, I put the bat to death.”

The pocket realm went completely silent. The Captain looked down, making it impossible to see his facial expression. Wu Jianwu looked confused. Clearly, he didn’t understand the story. As far as he was concerned, it sounded like Xu Qing came from a very interesting family that raised a lot of birds.

Arch-Immortal Plumdark looked at him, her eyes were full of concern and pity. “What about your future?”

“I really wanted to find that crow,” Xu Qing said. He smiled. “And kill it. After I kill it, I want to find a way to kill that eagle too.” As he told his story, his previous nervousness at being in the presence of Arch-Immortal Plumdark faded away. He even looked relaxed, and smiled through most of the story. “Senior, what’s your story?”

“Mine?” Her long legs were crossed, and she had her hands on her knees, making her curves even more prominent. She glanced at Xu Qing, and her eyes flickered with memories.

“I have a simple past. I don’t remember much about my father and mother. The person I remember the most is my Master. He raised me. He taught me my magical techniques. Back then, our Dark Serenity Sect wasn’t part of the coalition, and it wasn’t very big.

“A lot of things happened. Eventually, the sect grew to the size it is today. It joined the coalition. Much of that was thanks to the work done by me and my Elder Brother,

who... I hate. But let's not get into all that. Your question actually made me think of something that I wanted to tell you."

As she smiled, her cheeks were a bit flush, and her eyes were like crescent moons.

"There's a dream I have occasionally. Years ago, I used to have it every night. Then it was every year. Nowadays, it's every ten years...."

"In the dream, the world is pitch dark. I can't see anything except for a lamp, which is right in front of me. I think the lamp is violet, but honestly that's just a guess. The lamp is extinguished. It has no light. That makes it almost impossible to see. Nor can I touch it. It's as if it's too far away, but at the same time, incredibly close to me.

"In my imagination, it looks like a blooming bauhinia flower. And living on it is a little violet phoenix with its wings spread. [1]

"That lamp has always appeared in my dreams, and it's always extinguished. And there is never any light in that world. Perhaps that's why I've always been looking for light." Her voice got softer and softer as she spoke, until she was whispering. "I'm not sure why, but the dream is very realistic. So is the lamp."

Xu Qing was taken aback, and didn't know what to say.

Time passed in which neither Xu Qing nor Arch-Immortal Plumdark said anything. They just sat there quietly.

Finally, Arch-Immortal Plumdark smiled. "Xu Qing, do you mind lending me that piece of the Darkspirit Everwill Door you have?"

He took the black chunk of wood out of his bag of holding and put it down between them.

She picked it up and waved it through the air. Instantly, black light erupted from the wood, spreading out and turning into an ancient wooden door. It pulsed with a cold, sinister aura that filled the area. And it seemed to be filled with a sensation of ancient time.

As Xu Qing watched, she reached out with her delicate hand and touched the door.

It slowly opened in her direction. It contained nothing but darkness. Like that of a bottomless chasm. That was the world that existed in her heart. Perhaps it wasn't that it contained nothing. Instead, it contained infinite black. There was no light inside, and no light could shine into it. It needed light. It needed something shining.

Xu Qing suddenly came to an understanding. After all, when he opened that door, it erupted with light.

The door faded away and turned back into a piece of wood, which dropped onto Arch-Immortal Plumdark's palm. She rolled it between her fingers briefly, then handed it back to Xu Qing and stood up. Her hair cascaded down like a dazzling waterfall, and the elegant way she stood made Xu Qing think about the story she had just told. He sighed inwardly.

"Xu Qing, do you remember Parting with Sorrow?"

He nodded. Taking out the willow flute she'd given him, he put it to his mouth and started to play.

The flute music drifted about like the wind.

At some point, the music stopped. At some point, Arch-Immortal Plumdark vanished.

Apparently, she'd brought him here to listen to a story of his past, and also to hear Parting with Sorrow. Before leaving, she offered an assessment of the music.

"Not very good."

Her words echoed in his ears.

After thinking a bit, he looked at the Captain and Wu Jianwu.

Both were shaking their heads. Apparently, the music really didn't sound very good.

Face completely expressionless, Xu Qing stood and left the pocket realm.

It was early morning outside. Unbeknownst to him, he had spent an entire night with that snake skeleton. As light spread, Xu Qing headed to pay respects to Master Sixth.

Along the way, his transmission jade slip vibrated as he received a voice message from Huang Yan.

"Xu Qing, like I told you yesterday, Elder Sister and I are going back to South Phoenix. We're leaving now, and we just wanted to say goodbye."

Xu Qing responded, "You're leaving now? Are you at the teleportation portal? Or the port?"

"No, we're not teleporting. We want to take an ocean voyage, just the two of us. We're about to board the ship."

Xu Qing could hear the smile in Huang Yan's voice. He was obviously very happy about going back to South Phoenix. Xu Qing hurried to the port, and before long, he caught sight of Second Elder Sister's dharmaship. Huang Yan was there.

Upon seeing Xu Qing, Huang Yan's face lit up with a smile. Rushing forward, he gave him a big hug.

Second Elder Sister walked out of the cabin and also smiled at Xu Qing. "Little Junior Brother, I just got back from a mission last night, that's why I wasn't at the banquet. Congratulations on becoming a swordmage!"

Xu Qing politely clasped his hands. He wasn't very familiar with Second Elder Sister, but he would never forget what she'd done for him back in that Sixth Peak shop back in Seven Blood Eyes. Granted, she'd done it for Huang Yan, but even still, she'd saved him a lot of trouble. [2]

With another smile, Second Elder Sister started her dharmaship.

As they sailed toward the open sea, Huang Yan waved and shouted, "Xu Qing, I have a good friend in the county capital. I mentioned you to him and asked him to watch out for you. Remember, if you find things dull out there, you can always come back to South Phoenix! It doesn't matter what trouble you get into, as long as you're in South Phoenix, you'll be safe!"

Huang Yan emphasized his words by thumping his chest proudly.

Xu Qing grinned and nodded. As the sea breeze drifted past, he clasped hands and bowed.