

Timescape 381

Chapter 381: The Living Must Move On

The first light of dawn hit the black Forbidden Sea, creating a black halo in the mists on the surface. Up above was a deep blue sky, and a dharmaship flying off into it.

Xu Qing watched the dharmaship until it disappeared over the horizon. Huang Yan had never acclimated to Emperor-Receiving Prefecture, so it made sense that he was leaving. Xu Qing would respect his decision, and hope that both he and Second Elder Sister would find happiness in South Phoenix.

“I wish you well in everything,” he murmured. Turning, he left the port and went back to the Seven Blood Eyes headquarters.

It was time to pay respects to Master Sixth.

He'd intended to go the day before, only to be taken by Arch-Immortal Plumdark to the demon snake skeleton in the land of good fortune. As he ascended the stairs leading up the mountain headquarters of the sect, the wind blew through the trees, causing the leaves to rustle. Xu Qing felt very calm at heart.

Even at dawn, there were a lot of disciples out working on early morning cultivation. It was possible to hear the sound of chanting; that was something that Seven Blood Eyes had adopted only after joining the coalition. The disciples were cultivating their hearts. Xu Qing had been informed about this new custom at the banquet the previous night. Cultivation of the heart was something Master Seventh had suggested, as a way to begin transforming the sect as a whole. At first, many disciples found it strange. After all, the sect had previously focused on magical techniques, and had not bothered with any sort of spiritual cultivation.

Upon pondering the matter, Xu Qing got the feeling that the timing of his Master making this suggestion seemed to line up with the study of the experimental god body. Wrapped up in such thoughts, Xu Qing followed the winding staircase to the back of the mountain. Any disciples he encountered along the way were extremely respectful, and would clasp hands and bow, even from a great distance away.

On the rear of the mountain was a bamboo forest, and a grave, in front of which was a random assortment of objects. Smoke spiraled up from incense sticks that had been placed there.

Two middle-aged cultivators stood there silently.

Xu Qing recognized them; they were apprentices of Master Sixth.

When they noticed Xu Qing approaching, they turned and clasped hands. It wasn't possible for them to hide the emotion in their eyes.

“Congratulations on becoming a swordsage, Junior Brother Xu.”

Xu Qing quietly returned their salute.

“The two of us have been assigned a mission outside. Before leaving, we wanted to pay respects to Master. Ai. There’s nothing stable in this world. It’s hard to believe it’s already been a year.”

“We’ll leave you alone, Junior Brother Xu. Farewell.”

Bowing again, Xu Qing said, “Please, Elder Brothers, have a safe journey.”

Looking somewhat melancholy, the two of them flew up into the air and left.

According to the old saying the dead are dead, the living must move on. Unfortunately, there are always times when the heart has trouble finding calm.

As Xu Qing sat down in front of Master Sixth’s grave, he took out two jars of alcohol. After putting one down in front of the grave, he took a drink from the other. He didn’t talk. He just drank. The wind blew through the trees. There were no clouds in the sky, just light. It grew brighter and brighter, filling the world. Two hours later, Xu Qing stood up.

“Master Sixth, the next time I come back, I’ll bring some Torchlight heads along with the alcohol.”

With that, Xu Qing bowed deeply to the grave, and prayed that all would be well going forward. Turning, he left the rear part of the mountain. However, he didn’t leave the headquarters. His plan was to go see his Master.

It had been a long time since he had a good talk, and there were things to discuss. For instance, the changes to the Ghost Emperor mountain in his sea of consciousness, or the things he had learned from the sword sage grand elder about plants and vegetation being the path to godhood.

As he walked the mountain path, he sent a voice message to Master Seventh asking if he could come pay a visit. Master Seventh replied that he was in the building at the mountain summit. Xu Qing knew the place. As he started walking faster, his expression flickered and he looked toward one of the side paths on the mountain.

A familiar voice had caught his ear. “You’re lucky to have run into me, kiddo. Your Sect Uncle Ding Xiaohai has a bad temper. You really think you can argue with him and come out on top? If I hadn’t come along, he probably would have beaten you silly. From now on, you stick close to me, okay?”

In response to Ding Xue, a somewhat bashful voice responded, “Sure, I’ll do everything you say, Sect Aunt Ding.”

A moment later, Xu Qing caught sight of Ding Xue. Her hair was in a ponytail and she seemed quite heroic with her ancient sword strapped to her back. She looked like someone from the Senior generation as she walked along with a boy of about ten years of age.

The boy was very clean and tidy, especially his face. He was nodding politely in response to Ding Xue. However, as soon as he noticed Xu Qing, his expression flickered. He looked afraid. Even terrified. He suddenly stopped in place, instinctively shrank back, and half hid behind Ding Xue.

Ding Xue looked surprised, but then she noticed Xu Qing. Eyes lighting up, she gently pushed the boy away from her and hurried over to Xu Qing. What had been an air of heroism that surrounded her was now just pure joy.

Eyes glittering, she said, "Big Bro Xu Qing, I was just planning to go looking for you. When you got back yesterday I was in seclusion. Look! I'm about to open my 60th dharma aperture! Soon I'll have two life flames! And I haven't forgotten about studying plants and vegetation. In fact, I'm working even harder at that. What are you doing here on the mountain, Big Bro Xu Qing?"

Xu Qing smiled. He was actually surprised at her fast progress. After all, only a year before on the trip to the Ghost Emperor mountain, Ding Xue had just ignited her first life flame. That said, given how Master Seventh doted on her, it made sense.

"You've done well," Xu Qing said sincerely. "I'm going to pay a visit to my Master."

Ding Xue's heart raced in response to Xu Qing's praise, and she blushed slightly.

Xu Qing looked at the boy behind her, who still looked nervous.

He stood in place, neither walking forward nor fleeing. He looked nervous. The truth was that he was really scared of Xu Qing. Though he had come to the sect with the identity medallion Master Seventh had provided, it was actually Xu Qing who had given it to him. And the words Xu Qing had spoken to him revealed that Xu Qing knew the truth about him.

He could still feel the pressure of Xu Qing's strength, and could also tell that it was much stronger than the last time they'd met. Most people wouldn't be able to sense that, but this boy was different. He knew full well that the pressure came from the Ghost Emperor mountain. This was the same boy that Master Seventh had identified when they traveled to the Ghost Emperor mountain. He was actually a grue in human form. [1]

Seeing Xu Qing looking at the boy, Ding Xue said, "Do you remember him, Big Bro Xu Qing? He's that boy from the village." Turning to glare at the boy, Ding Xue said, "Wang Ling, hurry up and offer greetings to your Sect Uncle Xu!" [2]

The boy stifled his terror, took a few steps forward, and bowed to Xu Qing with clasped hands. Voice trembling a bit, he said, "Hello, Sect Uncle Xu."

After that, Ding Xue explained the circumstances. Wang Ling had arrived in the sect a few months ago, but had spent all that time in the Offpeak environment. He had come to the mountain peak to purchase a dharmaboat. Then he had somehow attracted the ire of Ding Xiaohai. Ding Xue had happened across them at that moment and had stepped in.

Keeping the smile on her face, Ding Xue secretly projected a message to Xu Qing. "I noticed a while back that Ding Xiaohai was watching him. There was a weird look in his eye, like he wanted to devour the boy. I'm not really sure what's going on, but I had to help."

Although Ding Xue always acted cute and virtuous in front of Xu Qing, the truth was that she was very spirited and had a strong heart. What was more, she was an adept schemer and had sharp eyes. "You go on ahead and pay respects to your Master, Big Bro Xu Qing. I'll come visit you later. For now I need to take little Wang Ling down the mountain."

Xu Qing nodded and continued on his way.

Meanwhile, Wang Ling looked over at Xu Qing, and his eyes glittered with admiration. Thinking back to what Xu Qing had said to him that day, he suddenly said, “Big Bro... er, Sect Uncle Xu. About what you told me that day....”

Xu Qing turned, looked at him, and nodded. “Work hard, and it’ll happen.”

Wang Ling took a deep breath, then nodded back.

Smiling, Ding Xue led him away.

He wanted to become human. A real human. That was the main reason he’d come to Seven Blood Eyes.

After enough time had passed for an incense stick to burn, Xu Qing reached the building at the summit of the headquarters. There he saw his Master, looking very somber as he played a game of Go with his servant.

In contrast to Master Seventh’s grave demeanor, the middle-aged servant seemed very relaxed.

Upon seeing Xu Qing, the servant was about to get to his feet and clasp hands in greeting. Before he could, Xu Qing hurried forward, ducked his head, and bowed with clasped hands.

The servant smiled, stood, and returned the greeting. [3]

Meanwhile, Master Seventh flicked his sleeve, scattering the pieces on the Go board.

“You’re a horrible Go player. I gave up a lot of pieces, yet you still lost. Fourth Sib, you come play with me.”

Smiling wryly, the servant stepped off to the side.

Xu Qing’s expression was the same as ever as he sat down on the other side of the board, cleaned up the scattered pieces, and then made his first move. That said, Xu Qing wasn’t actually very good at playing Go, so as they went back and forth placing pieces, Master Seventh eventually started smiling.

“Fourth Sib, your heart isn’t calm. You see, Go is affected by your thoughts. From the way you’re playing, I can tell you have something you want to talk about.”

“I can’t hide anything from you, Master,” Xu Qing said, looking Master Seventh straight in the eyes. Naturally, he didn’t mention the voice message he’d just sent in which he directly stated that he needed some advice.

Upon hearing the conversation, the servant backed up a few steps and then waved his hand to seal the area. Then he sat down cross-legged and closed his eyes to meditate.

“What is it?” Master Seventh said, picking up a game piece and fiddling with it.

Taking a deep breath, Xu Qing somberly said, “Master, the Ghost Emperor mountain inside of me has changed.”

“What kind of change?” Master Seventh replied casually, extending his hand to place the piece on the board.

“It looks like me now.”

The Go piece Master Seventh had been about to place slipped out of his fingers and clattered across the board. He looked up blankly at Xu Qing. “What’d you just say?”

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Xu Qing quietly picked up the Go piece his Master had dropped and put back into the correct place on the board. He looked up.

“The Ghost Emperor mountain looks like me now.”

Master Seventh closed his eyes and muttered to himself for a short time. Truth be told, he was completely astonished. He knew his apprentice had shocking powers of understanding. That much had been evident to him when they were at the Ghost Emperor mountain. He had also heard about everything that happened with Xu Qing in Netherflight City, for instance, him gaining enlightenment of nearly 300 battle spirit symbols. Despite that, he was still completely shaken by what Xu Qing just said.

He had originally wanted Xu Qing to just have a god in his sea of consciousness to control the random bits of will that would result from using the Gruegloom Daoseizing Art to seize gold cores. But this result was akin to him expecting Xu Qing to build a log cabin, only to have him end up building an entire city.

And then he comes and asks me what’s going on??

Master Seventh suddenly felt very tired. After a long moment in quiet contemplation, he cleared his throat.

“It comes down to your heart and mind,” he said casually. “They’re very strong, and thus, that exerts an influence on what is essentially an addition to yourself. Because of that, you have increased control. That’s why it’s changed. You don’t need to worry about it.

“Think of it in terms of levels. The first level is just getting that thing inside of you. The next level is building it up and turning it into your own personal object. That said, you still have to work hard. You can’t get complacent! After all, this first step is the simplest.

“From ancient times until now there have been a lot of almighty individuals who did similar things. They also were able to visualize but not personalize. Thus, they got possessed. Their dao was taken away. This whole thing is a very difficult process, and for you, it might be a fantasy to think it would actually happen.

“And that’s because the Ghost Emperor actually isn’t complete. His dao was never fully realized. Therefore, you would actually have to give the Ghost Emperor mountain another external item to make it complete. Only in that manner—”

“Master,” Xu Qing interrupted, “the mountain has a staff now. That’s an external item, right? It looks like the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar.”

Master Seventh’s jaw dropped as he was assailed by massive waves of astonishment.

Xu Qing suddenly felt nervous. A long moment passed.

“Fourth Sib,” Master Seventh said in a hoarse voice, “you have a very bad habit. Next time, explain the whole situation up front!”

Xu Qing blinked a few times and then nodded.

“Are there any other changes?” Master Seventh asked impatiently.

“No...” Xu Qing replied. He hesitated. “Oh, by the way, Master, I get the feeling that under the right circumstances I could get the Ghost Emperor mountain to do something. I’m not at that point yet, though. Master, what should I do?”

Master Seventh stood, his eyes glittering as he closely examined Xu Qing. At this point, he wasn’t just astonished. He was absolutely flabbergasted.

Could this kid possibly be the reincarnation of the Ghost Emperor? There’s no way. He’s not from Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. He was born in South Phoenix, so he doesn’t have any Ghost Emperor blood in him. I confirmed that already. Can a person’s powers of understanding really be pushed to this extent? What kind of an apprentice did I take in? Or is it that he has an innate human ability related to enlightenment?

Noting Xu Qing’s hesitant expression, Master Seventh cleared his throat again. Trying to look extremely casual and relaxed, he walked to the window and looked out at the clouds.

“Fourth Sib, look at the clouds in the dome of heaven.”

Xu Qing looked over at them.

“You can see the shape of each cloud, right? Except the reality is that clouds don’t really look like that. They’re made of water vapor. In other words, they’re countless droplets of water stuck together. Their external appearance is more related to dust in the air, which causes the droplets to stick together.

“The same principle applies to the Ghost Emperor mountain in your sea of consciousness. Don’t try to complete it in one big rush. And don’t pay too much attention to the shape and appearance of the mountain. That’s the wrong way to go about things.

“You actually need to open up the Ghost Emperor mountain. Release the energy within it. Just like you would with a cloud. Release the water droplets. Then you can observe them and figure out a way to bring them to life.

“Later, you can use mutagen to complete the job. Find a place where both spirit energy and mutagen are strong, and then form the image of the Ghost Emperor.

Also, I suggest you try to change what that image looks like. Anything will do, as long as it's not you. That way people won't recognize it, and will assume it's just some sort of divine ability."

Xu Qing was already reeling. His Master's words had made everything very clear. Looking out at the clouds, he realized that he understood it all. He had achieved sudden understanding. His thoughts were clear. His eyes suddenly glittered with enlightenment and admiration. It was like the ringing of a bell. He stood and bowed at the waist with clasped hands. His attitude and expression caused Master Seventh to suddenly feel a lot better. Laughing heartily, he sat back down and picked up another game piece.

Xu Qing happily sat back down as well, and they started playing again. Then Xu Qing asked his second question, which was about how godliness related to plants and vegetation.

The question caused Master Seventh's eyes to gleam. After thinking for a moment, he gave his answer.

"Spirit plants adapted quickly to the arrival of the broken face of the god. They adjust much faster than flesh and blood creatures.... As for that experimental god body, my research corresponds perfectly to your supposition. Godly plants are definitely something worth studying further. Studying gods, or rather, godly plants, is definitely a key."

Both Master and apprentice benefited greatly by the conversation. Xu Qing felt very happy, and Master Seventh was also in a great mood. Eventually, they started talking about the swordmage recruitment event. Master Seventh was obviously very curious about the answer Xu Qing gave to get a 30,000-meter-tall pillar of light.

"A son of a bitch!" Master Seventh roared with laughter, and his eyes overflowed with admiration when he looked at Xu Qing.

"I just wonder what Eldest Brother said to get only one meter," Xu Qing said, sounding puzzled.

"You don't need to guess about that," Master Seventh said. "He definitely did some reckless boot-licking. Except, even ordinary boot-licking shouldn't have resulted in a one-meter light." His lip curled up in disgust. "Based on how well I know him, I bet he called the Grand Emperor a god. Taking your 30,000-meter beam of light into consideration, that means your Eldest Brother essentially insulted the Grand Emperor."

Xu Qing blinked a few times. It seemed highly likely that Master Seventh was correct.

"In three months, you'll head to Sea-Sealing County, where the coalition has a subsidiary sect. The capital city there is the core of the entire county. The Eight Sect Coalition is an apex power in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture, but considering the

county as a whole, it doesn't count for much. As usual, you'll need to rely on your own talent to make a name for yourself there.

"Though the subsidiary sect there doesn't have a very high standing, they'll be able to take care of you. Because of that, the patriarch and I have come up with a plan. You'll be heading to the county capital with a delegation. You'll be temporarily assigned to the subsidiary sect there, with a patriarch-level figure overseeing everything. As for which one it will be, that hasn't been decided yet.

"The peaklord of the Fifth Peak will be going as well. Both coalition swordsages are from Seven Blood Eyes this time, and we need to handle the details of getting our level of control over the spell formations and teleportation portals there."

Xu Qing nodded. The Captain had talked a bit about what was to come, but hadn't been privy to many details. Now Xu Qing had a better understanding of what would happen.

"Also..." Master Seventh said, picking up a Go piece. After thinking for a moment, he continued, "I got some information. The capital city of Sea-Sealing County is actually the manifestation of a high-tier taboo treasure."

"High tier?" Xu Qing asked, his eyes narrowing.

"Taboo treasures are divided into levels," Master Seventh said coolly. "In Emperor-Receiving Prefecture, all taboo treasures are low-tier. As you can imagine, low-tier treasures are far less dangerous than the high-tier variety. That said, their function and operation are basically the same. If you go to the capital without an understanding of the principles governing the operation of taboo treasures, you'll have an automatic weakness.

"Remember this, Fourth Sib. Even the smallest details can have a dramatic effect on your future. Don't be careless. You must plan carefully in advance to prevent others from seeing your most powerful hidden assets. Preparation is the key to being truly, truly deceptive. And that's also how you can launch fatal blows when it really counts.

"Don't ever forget the true spirit of the Seventh Peak."

Xu Qing nodded gravely.

"Considering you have three months before you leave, don't spend time dawdling in the sect. I want you to go to the Seven Blood Eyes taboo treasure and serve as the treasure custodian there. That'll give you a good chance to see how the taboo treasure works. That way, when you get to the county capital, understanding of taboo treasures won't be a weakness for you. By the way, given how close you are to your Eldest Brother, I don't think I need to remind you to keep an eye on him."

"Yes, sir," Xu Qing said respectfully. He stood.

“I also need to offer you a warning. During your time as the treasure custodian, do not use the taboo treasure to look at the broken face of the god. Similarly, do not use it to look at the sun or moon. No one in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture is powerful enough to do that. Also, do not look into the depths of any of the forbidden grounds. That said, feel free to look at the Forbidden Sea or any of the forbidden regions, though don’t let your gaze linger too long.”

Xu Qing was slightly confused about those instructions, and figured they must have something to do with the structure of the taboo treasure.

“Don’t overthink it,” Master Seventh said. “You’ll understand in due time.” With that, he placed a piece on the board and smiled. “You’ve improved at Go, Fourth Sib. But you’re still not as good as your Master.”

Xu Qing looked at the board and plastered a look of admiration onto his face. “You’re as formidable as ever, Master.”

Master Seventh laughed heartily.

Far away from Emperor-Receiving Prefecture, somewhere on the Forbidden Sea, a green-skinned, long-fanged ghost soared through the clouds. It was 3,000 meters tall, with red eyes and scales covering its body. It was also wrapped up in chains, and it howled as it sped along. Wherever it passed, massive waves rolled out on the water below.

Two people stood atop the ghost’s head.

One was an old man wearing a gray robe. His back was a bit hunched, and he had age spots on his face. His skin was sallow, and he looked sickly and weak.

Next to him was a young woman in a white gown. She looked to be about sixteen or seventeen, and was flawlessly beautiful in a simple and pure way. She was as fair as fine jade, and glowed like a fine pearl. At the same time, there was something childish about her. There was innocence in her eyes, and a complete lack of impurity. They were like clear waters that would cause anyone who looked into them to feel tender affection.

The old man was currently giving some hard advice to the young woman, who looked impatient and didn’t want to listen.

“Papa, I still want to go to Emperor-Receiving Prefecture!”

The innkeeper from Plankspring Way cleared his throat and decided to change tactics. “I never said we couldn’t go there, silly girl. But we need to go to the county capital first. You have to accept the legacy there. After that we can go to Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. That way Xu... er, your Big Bro Xu Qing will like you even more when he sees you. After all, once you accept that legacy, you’ll become very powerful.”

“Really?” Ling’er said, looking stunned. The idea of Big Bro Xu Qing liking her even more got her heart racing.

“Of course!” the innkeeper said, thumping his chest. “Papa would never trick you!”

Ling'er looked at him suspiciously. Then she turned and looked in the direction of Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. A moment later, she nodded.

The innkeeper breathed a secret sigh of relief. Silly girl! Papa has severed all outside connections for your sake. All because I'm worried about people tracking you down. I absolutely, positively cannot allow you to go to Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. And I have to keep you away from that little bastard!

I broke my own heart for your sake, little girl. Later on, you'll understand that I'm doing this for your own good.

As for that little bastard, I'll make sure to never go to the same place as him. There's no way that punk will ever make it to the county capital. Hmph! Since I can't afford to provoke him, I'll just hide from him!

Chapter 383: Treasure Custodian

It was evening by the time Xu Qing left the summit. He had stayed the whole day, playing a few games of Go with his Master. Every time he lost, Master Seventh laughed heartily. Xu Qing would always spend time thoughtfully looking at the board. Occasionally he would instinctively reach out and grab one of the nearby pastries to eat. As he chewed, he would stare intently at the board.

The pastries were delicious. Xu Qing had never had anything like them. What was especially noteworthy was that, after eating them, they would stir his dharma force. There were clearly some extraordinary medicinal ingredients in them.

Master Seventh really seemed to enjoy Xu Qing's thoughtful expression.

For the entire day, no one disturbed them. When the servant came for the ninth time with more pastries, Xu Qing ate one and then sighed.

“Master, I forfeit.” He stood, a look of admiration on his face as he clasped hands and bowed to Master Seventh. Master Seventh looked very pleased. Looking outside at how dark it was getting, Xu Qing bid farewell and left.

Master Seventh watched him go, then looked at the tray of pastries off to the side.

“He ate nine trays...” the servant said.

Master Seventh sighed. “Ai. The older I get, the more I enjoy spending time with the young ones. Sadly, if you directly invite them, they don't want to come.... The pastries were a good idea. Going forward, let's make sure to have lots of them on hand. I bet that'll get them coming around all the time.”

Chuckling, Master Seventh looked in the direction of South Phoenix. He sighed. “Second Sib and... Huang Yan went back to South Phoenix. I could hardly bear to see her go. But I suppose it's a good thing. Nothing bad will happen to her there. Besides, with her in South Phoenix, her Elder and Junior Brothers will have a safe haven if they run into trouble in that area.

“Given Big Sib’s personality, you never know when he’ll gnaw his way into a big catastrophe. And you always have to worry about the consequences of Third Sib’s love affairs.”

The servant had an odd expression on his face as he quietly said, “Third Highness has been missing for a while now. Quite a few people have asked about him. The Zhao Clan from the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society. The Spirityear Sect. The Manyeyes people. The Scaled Ones.”

Master Seventh flicked his sleeve in irritation. “He fooled around too much, and everyone was trying to force him into a marriage. Who knows where he ran off to. Fourth Sib is the one who puts my heart at ease. He’s the kind of person that, if he provokes someone, he always kills them. He never leaves behind potential calamities. That said, he’s sometimes too quick to resort to lethal force. Now that he’s going to Sea-Sealing County... I have to wonder whether things will get better or worse in that regard.”

Master Seventh suddenly looked a bit hesitant.

The servant nodded. “The county capital seems like a thriving place, but the reality is it’s a den of vipers. Everyone there has secret motives of some sort. Furthermore, I heard the governor is hesitant and indecisive....”

“No. He just likes to keep the status quo. He knows that he can’t possibly be like the glorious generals of old, when humans were in their heyday. Besides, maintaining the status quo requires a lot of compromising.” Master Seventh shook his head.

As Xu Qing headed down the mountain, he kept burping and licking his lips. “Master’s pastries are amazing!”

With the flavor still in his mouth, he went back to his berth in the port.

A few days passed. During that time, he went to see Zhang San to get some work done on his dharmaship. After all, he was going to do some extensive traveling going forward.

Ding Xue came to visit.

As for Yanyan, after returning to the coalition, Guru Eastnether forced her to go into seclusion as punishment, and said she couldn’t come out until she achieved a breakthrough.

Gu Muqing never showed up. She had been given a permanent assignment in South Phoenix.

Xu Qing waited until Zhang San was finished working on the dharmaship. It was on the sixth day after returning that he made preparations to head to Seazombie territory to serve as a treasure custodian for the rest of the three months.

Something of concern to Xu Qing was the fact that, in recent days, a number of coalition disciples had gone missing while on missions. Specifically, they were disciples who had been out on the Forbidden Sea near Forbidden by the Zombie. Based on the clues available, it seemed that, for unknown reasons, they had actually entered the forbidden ground. Because a forbidden ground was involved, coalition protocol was followed, and a group of disciples from various factions was sent to investigate.

The matter didn't cause huge waves in the coalition. After all, it wasn't unheard of for people to go missing in forbidden grounds. It happened on a yearly basis. And it wasn't just something that happened with coalition disciples. Cultivators from all sects and species, especially those who operated on the Forbidden Sea, would experience the same thing.

Xu Qing heard about the matter, but it didn't affect his plans to go to the Seazombie lands. At the very most, he would be extra cautious. Besides, he wasn't planning to make the trip via dharmaship. Instead, he would use the coalition's teleportation portals.

At the moment, he stood atop just such a portal, glittering light swirling around him. He disappeared, and then reappeared a moment later in Seazombie territory.

Cultivators who teleported such a great distance without taking special precautionary measures would often feel their soul and fleshly body being tugged away from each other. But Xu Qing's fleshly body was so powerful that all he experienced was a bit of a shiver. Then everything was back to normal.

When he appeared on the Seven Blood Eyes portal, there were over a thousand disciples waiting to meet him. They were all disciples who had been assigned to duty here. Clapping hands, they bowed in greeting.

"Well met, Dao Child."

Xu Qing returned the salute, then bowed to Master Third. Then he went to the taboo treasure and sat down cross-legged atop the huge bronze mirror. The mirror was high in the sky, so seated atop it, he felt like he was atop a massive, wind-swept plate. Looking down, he saw the Forbidden Sea, like ink beneath him. It stretched as far as the eye could see.

Taking a deep breath, he closed his eyes and sent his divine will into the taboo treasure. Almost instantly, a shocking divine will responded, sweeping over him, completely lacking any emotion. After confirming his identity, the divine will created a defensive shield around him. Then a cold voice spoke into his mind.

"Spirit Automaton Blood Eyes, awaiting your command."

Xu Qing's eyes glittered.

With the mirror's divine will covering him, it almost felt like his body didn't exist. His senses were gone. By sending divine will out, it was almost like he had become a soul body.

"What are my options?" Xu Qing transmitted.

"First, you can choose soul fusion. You can combine with me, in which state you will be indestructible as long as I exist.

"Second, you can observe anything that exists within range.

"Third, you can create a treasure custodian projection in any location that you can see. It will last for one hour, and will have the same capabilities as your true form.

“Fourth, you can target any individual living being with the power of capital punishment. However, you’ll need approval from a total of three treasure custodians to do so.”

Now Xu Qing understood why his Master had prohibited him from looking at certain areas. After some thought, he chose to start with the soul fusion option. He sent out his divine will, and his soul seemed to scatter. Then it felt like he had a new body. Specifically... it was the bronze mirror. He had completely fused with it, making the two of them one. He suddenly felt like his field of view had expanded in an unprecedented way.

It was now possible to see much farther than he could with his own eyes. From where he was located, he could see north to Emperor-Receiving Prefecture, south to South Phoenix, east to the deep sea, and west to Forbidden by the Zombie. It was possible to see anything within those bounds.

It was unsettling at first, but Xu Qing quickly settled his thoughts. The first place he chose to focus his gaze was the scavenger basecamp. Specifically, he looked at the adjoining forbidden region, where Sergeant Thunder’s grave was located.

The huge mirror thrummed as it shifted to face South Phoenix.

A moment later, the familiar scavenger basecamp became clear in front of him. It was just as dirty and dilapidated as before. Xu Qing even saw his house, which had long since been taken over by someone else. Given how much time had passed, the slaughter Xu Qing had carried out there had long since become little more than an old story that many people didn’t even believe.

Xu Qing shifted his gaze to the forbidden region. There he found Sergeant Thunder’s grave, which was still in good condition. There weren’t many rules that scavengers followed. But one thing they all did was respect the graves of other scavengers. They wouldn’t touch them, much less deface or destroy them. After all, every scavenger hoped that they might one day have someone to bury them. [1]

Eventually, Xu Qing sighed and was about to retract his gaze. But then something occurred to him.

Master said not to look at forbidden grounds. But forbidden regions aren’t forbidden grounds. His divine will stirred, and then his gaze shifted again, passing the temple complex and heading into the depths of the forbidden region.

What he saw was a big shock.

In the deepest part of the forbidden region there was a huge chasm. And at the bottom of the chasm was the indistinct figure of a woman, bowing in front of a large zither. [2]

Xu Qing had never seen this woman before. However, he had seen the boots she wore. They were the same boots worn by Sergeant Thunder’s beloved partner when they heard the Singing. [3]

The zither was mottled with age and half decayed. The strings were playing of their own accord, and singing also echoed out from it. The music filled the chasm, covering the countless corpses there that also prostrated to the zither. Mutagen poured out of the corpses, but if you looked closely, it was obvious that its real source was the zither.

After looking at the scene briefly, Xu Qing retracted his gaze.

Shortly after, he looked in the direction of the Violet Lands.

His vision swam, and then he was looking at the graveyard, and one specific grave with fresh flowers gathered in front of it.

It was Grandmaster Bai's grave. The flowers looked like they must have been placed there just the day before, as they weren't wilting at all. All of a sudden, Xu Qing felt like he could see Grandmaster Bai himself, surrounded by flowers. Xu Qing looked at the grave for a long time. Eventually, two familiar people appeared. It was a young man and woman, and they were none other than Chen Feiyuan and Tingyu. They approached the grave, replaced the flowers with fresher flowers, and then left the graveyard.

Xu Qing watched them go. One thing of note was that inside of Chen Feiyuan was a ghost-faced gyroscope, spinning endlessly and drawing his energy and blood into a whirlpool that emanated terrifying pressure. Seeing that, Xu Qing thought back to what Chen Feiyuan had told him about the blood of the Sovereign Kingdom of Violet and Cyan, and the innate abilities it contained. He now had a magical treasure that was part of him. [4]

Xu Qing retracted his gaze and looked in another direction. This time, he looked toward the Forbidden Sea. Master Seventh had warned him not to focus his gaze there for too long, so he merely took a short look.

As he did, he spotted Huang Yan and Second Elder Sister, who had only just left the coalition. They both rested on the deck of the dharmaship, where Huang Yan looked excited as he gave her a leg massage.

Xu Qing smiled. He was just about to look away, when Huang Yan suddenly looked suspiciously up into the sky.

Xu Qing's smile froze in place, and his eyes widened in shock. He can sense me?

Chapter 384: No Staring

Something unusual was happening as far as Xu Qing could tell. Everywhere else he had focused his gaze, even the depths of the forbidden region, he had been completely undetectable. Not even the entity in the forbidden region noticed him. After all, he was currently fused with the taboo treasure. Put precisely, he wasn't looking at things, rather, the mirror was.

Taboo treasures were reserve powers for great sects, and were terrifyingly powerful. That was why not even grues in forbidden regions could sense them, much less ordinary people. During the time he had spent looking around, he hadn't encountered any anomalies.

Except for Huang Yan.

Huang Yan was there on the dharmaship, looking up into the sky. He blinked a few times, then cleared his throat and suddenly appeared to be checking out the scenery. Then, behaving just as naturally as before, he continued with Second Elder Sister's leg massage.

His behavior seemed very suspicious to Xu Qing, so he retracted his gaze. Huang Yan obviously had some big secrets, and Xu Qing wasn't interested in prying into them. Everyone in the world had their secrets, whether it was Huang Yan, the Captain, or Master Seventh. As long as such secrets weren't dangerous, there was no reason to try to unearth them.

Calming himself, Xu Qing shifted his gaze again. This time, he looked in the direction of Forbidden by the Zombie. It was a unique place, and it was different from Forbidden by the Phoenix. Both were forbidden grounds. But one was above the surface, the other was beneath it.

As for Forbidden by the Zombie, the water above it was covered with black mist that made it impossible to see if there were islands on the water. Regardless, the mutagen was incomparably strong. Because of Forbidden by the Zombie, the surrounding seawater was often plagued with spirits of the dead and corpses. Gruish phenomena were common there. For the most part, no seagoing vessels would get anywhere close to Forbidden by the Zombie. At the most, they might come to the Seazombie ancestral land.

Xu Qing didn't look into the depths of Forbidden by the Zombie, but he did scan the borders. Then he looked in the direction of the Revered Ancient mainland. Following the same rules as before, he didn't focus his gaze on any of the major powers. If he did look at them, and was noticed, it would lead to misgivings and possible catastrophe.

He now realized more than ever why his Master had warned him to be careful in how he used the taboo treasure. If he looked at something he wasn't supposed to see... he could very well end up dying a violent death. For example, when scanning the Forbidden Sea, he had sensed terrifying fluctuations coming from certain underwater areas. He had kept a tight rein on his curiosity, and refrained from looking up at the sun or the broken face of the god.

Retracting his gaze from the mainland, he thought about the situation.

I wonder what would happen if someone used the taboo treasure to look at me.

Once the thought occurred to him, he decided to do a test.

Shifting his gaze, he saw the Seazombie ancestral lands, and the huge mirror floating there. He also saw himself sitting there cross-legged. Whenever the mirror shifted positions, he would remain exactly in the same spot on its surface.

It was a strange feeling to be looking at himself in this way. It wasn't like looking in an ordinary mirror. It was more like his soul had flown out of his body and was looking back at itself from above.

With that, he focused closely on his body. At first glance, he saw his own bewitchingly attractive face. Ignoring that, he looked more closely until his fleshly body turned transparent.

He could see his meridians, as well as shimmering dharma apertures. Even his sea of consciousness. He saw his three heavenly palaces in the sea of consciousness, even the two hidden in the life mist. The Ghost Emperor mountain was also there. The violet moon wasn't visible, but the spot where it rested was obviously occupied. The sea of consciousness beneath it had the very faint outline of a moon. Anyone who looked closely at that spot would probably be able to guess there was something there. Within his third heavenly palace was his taboo poison core, which was currently blurred. It wasn't possible to see it clearly, but it was possible to see that something was there.

Only his shadow and the violet crystal remained completely undetectable, as if they didn't exist at all.

Xu Qing thought about it for a moment, then continued his observation.

Also present was the golden crow, swirling around him invisibly. What was more, his sea of consciousness had the incomplete image of a sword in it. That was obviously the portion of the Emperor's Sword that he had gained enlightenment of.

Having seen all that, Xu Qing mulled the situation over and then tried to use his shadow to cover up some of those things.

He didn't feel comfortable revealing so much about himself. With the view he had via the bronze mirror, it was the perfect time to make some adjustments. Using the powers of his shadow, he started by covering up the heavenly palaces in the life mist. After concealing them, not even the powers of the bronze mirror enabled him to see them.

Next, he used the shadow to create a screen to cover the Ghost Emperor mountain. A moment later, it vanished from view.

Though the violet moon and the taboo poison core weren't clearly visible, it was possible to deduce that they existed. After more consideration, he used the shadow to completely cover them.

Having accomplished these things, he checked himself again and confirmed that all of those things were no longer visible. A moment later, the Xu Qing who sat atop the mirror opened his eyes.

"So that's what a taboo treasure can do," he murmured.

He could tell that his Master was right. He needed some time to get used to how taboo treasures worked. If he didn't, or just came to an understanding based on secondhand information, it would be difficult to truly understand what taboo treasures were capable of.

Although I can't be certain of exactly what the taboo treasure in Sea-Sealing County can do, and whether or not it can see things as clearly as this mirror, I do know that deceiving its divine will would be very difficult.

After pondering the matter further, he closed his eyes and once again tapped into the taboo treasure.

Before long, a month had passed. During that time, Xu Qing spent time every day working with the taboo treasure. On many occasions, he examined himself and made various adjustments until he was completely happy with what he saw.

At this point, he was confident that when he went to the county capital, the divine will of the taboo treasure's spirit automaton there would not be able to reveal any of his secrets. It would only see what he wanted it to see.

Another benefit was that, given his familiarity with the taboo treasure's divine will, he could now easily tell if he was being scanned with divine will from a person or a magical treasure.

Furthermore, he now realized why taboo treasures would form mutagen. The truth was that taboo treasures were so powerful that they would automatically gather massive amounts of spirit power from their surroundings. Spirit power contained mutagen, and therefore, it was only natural that taboo treasures would accumulate mutagen. It was difficult to extrude, and once it passed a certain limit, the taboo treasure would become a crippled treasure.

That was why the great sects and species wouldn't use taboo treasures very often, or for sustained periods of time.

That was also why taboo treasures generally had two states. One was the fully powered-up state, and the other was the state designed for general daily use. The first was the most dangerous of the two. In most situations, even just the latter could be used to fend off ordinary enemy invasions or attacks. That said, the weaker of the two states also came with a period of instability on the part of the treasure. Each treasure was different, and one had to be familiar with it to use it properly.

After coming to understand those things, Xu Qing became more familiar with the work of a treasure custodian. He focused his gaze on more and more locations, always making sure to avoid the areas he'd been told to avoid.

Despite his caution, it was impossible to avoid some dangerous situations.

On one occasion when observing the deep sea, he spotted a massive ghost city full of grues. It was almost like a world unto itself. [1]

He once saw a six-legged giant wielding a massive trident on the seafloor, pulsing with shocking godliness. The giant seemed almost like it was on patrol, and caused huge waves to roll out on the surface of the water above.

He saw the sealizard patriarch, and realized how every scale on his massive frame radiated shocking might. The patriarch swam through the water like an enormous dragon, boundlessly mighty. [2]

He also saw eyes growing on the seafloor. Many of them. On most occasions, those eyes were closed, but sometimes they opened. When they did, they created huge whirlpools on the surface, and massive waves.

The Forbidden Sea was a place full of danger and the unknown.

In addition to living entities, Xu Qing also saw incredibly deep chasms. Some existed on the seafloor, others were in the forbidden regions in South Phoenix. Such chasms exuded black mist, and seemed bottomless. What was more, they emanated strange howls like those from the ghastr hollow Xu Qing had visited.

Late one night, Xu Qing saw a group of countless souls drifting up from South Phoenix and into the dome of heaven. Leading them was a horned figure holding a whip. The figure used that whip to drive the souls into a huge door up above. After they entered, disgusting chewing sounds rang out. When Xu Qing looked at the door, his mind spun and he felt like he was about to be destroyed in body and soul. His connection with the bronze mirror was instantly severed, and he coughed up a huge mouthful of blood.

After that happened, he needed to rest for nearly a week, and afterward, still felt lingering fear whenever he fused with the mirror.

Despite being more careful than ever, about half a month later he saw a temple complex on a remote, foggy island. It wasn't a Supreme Vastness daoist temple complex. Instead, it was a temple of worship devoted to some god. Just looking at it, Xu Qing's eyes started to sting painfully. He looked away.

All of these things gave him a much deeper understanding of the world, and also reinforced the gravity of his Master's warnings regarding the usage of the taboo treasure. Becoming the treasure custodian of this taboo treasure could be very dangerous if you weren't extremely careful.

In the following days, Xu Qing avoided looking at any dangerous areas. He spent most of his time researching the behavior and functionality of the taboo treasure itself, and kept his observations to the immediate area. About half a month before it was time to leave for Sea-Sealing County, he was observing things as normal when he noticed something at the border of Forbidden by the Zombie.

Specifically it was Zhao Zhongheng and Ding Xiaohai. [3]

They were very close to Forbidden by the Zombie, atop a dharmaskiff, moving at top speed through the black mists as they tried to make their way to freedom. The mist behind them roiled, and from within a whirlpool on the water stretched countless withered hands. There was also a host of black hair stretching out to entangle them. They were clearly heading right for a major crisis.

Chapter 385: Emperor Zombie is Dead

Xu Qing carefully ensured that his vision wasn't focused on Forbidden by the Zombie itself, but kept observing the situation. At the border of the forbidden ground, he saw a dozen or so disciples from the Eight Sect Coalition, all fleeing in different directions. They were clearly terrified as the countless corpse-like arms reached out to grab them.

It made Xu Qing think about the news he had heard on the eve of coming to the Seazombie ancestral land. Some disciples had gone missing near the borders of Forbidden by the Zombie, whereupon a team had been dispatched to investigate. The people Xu Qing was looking at now... was that very team.

The first thing Xu Qing did was use the taboo treasure to notify the sect of what was happening. As he did, something happened with Zhao Zhongheng and Ding Xiaohai. The masses of hair behind them surged, growing more numerous as they closed in on the two disciples.

As they were just about to be overwhelmed, a vicious gleam appeared in Ding Xiaohai's eyes, and he suddenly launched a palm strike at Zhao Zhongheng.

Both disciples were in Foundation Establishment, but Ding Xiaohai was at the impressive two-flame level. Zhao Zhongheng was still a few dharma apertures away from the two-flame level, so despite the fact that he had been fully on guard, there was no way he could evade the attack. When it hit him, blood sprayed out of his mouth. His ostentatious dharmaskiff The Phoenix trembled, and cracks appeared all over its surface as it lurched to a halt. In the blink of an eye, the pursuing hairs wrapped around it.

"Ding Xiaohai!" shrieked Zhao Zhongheng furiously as he glared at Ding Xiaohai fleeing madly without even looking over his shoulder.

Given that his dharmaskiff was completely entangled by the hair, Zhao Zhongheng had no choice but to jump off of it. Unfortunately, once he was off his dharmaskiff, he was a lot slower. More hair shot up from the water toward him, along with a host of corpse-like arms.

In that moment of deadly crisis and despair, Zhao Zhongheng howled and whipped out a life-saving item his grandfather had given him. Unfortunately, it wasn't very effective given the surroundings. Though it cut open a path to freedom, he didn't get very far before the hair and arms were closing in again on him.

Off in the distance, Ding Xiaohai was barely visible. Zhao Zhongheng had attracted all the grues, thus giving Ding Xiaohai his opportunity to escape. Though he heard Zhao Zhongheng's screams,

he completely ignored them. This wasn't the first time he had left a fellow disciple to die for his own benefit. As long as he came out on top, he didn't care about anyone.

Sheltered idiots like you always boss me around in the sect. Who do you think Ding Xiaohai is, huh? So what if you have an impressive grandpa? That won't do you any good here! Morons like you never live long in this world. You're destined to be killed. At least this way you'll have accomplished something valuable in life! Me staying alive is the most important thing!

Ding Xiaohai accelerated through the mists. Sadly for him, there were many things Ding Xiaohai didn't know. For example, he had no idea what the Seven Blood Eyes taboo treasure was capable of. Furthermore, he had no clue that Xu Qing was using that taboo treasure to watch what was happening.

Truth be told, Xu Qing didn't have a strong opinion about what was happening. If he was in Ding Xiaohai's position, he might do something similar if it meant saving his own life. That said, if he was in Zhao Zhongheng's position, he would react similarly. But when it came down to these two specific people, the one he liked the least was Ding Xiaohai. Furthermore, he could clearly see the despair on Zhao Zhongheng's face.

After a moment of thought, Xu Qing communicated to the spirit automaton with divine will.

“Create a projected body for me. Put it there.”

The moment his divine will sent the message, the bronze mirror thrummed. Bright light flickered, and one of the taboo treasure's eyes opened. A blinding beam of light shot out from the mirror, piercing all the way to the border of Forbidden by the Zombie, through the mists, right to Zhao Zhongheng. To Zhao Zhongheng's utter incredulity, countless light motes appeared in front of him, quickly converging into Xu Qing.

“Xu Qing!” he said, his eyes growing wide with delight. “Help me, Xu Qing. Help me!!”

A host of hands had already grabbed onto Zhao Zhongheng, and black hair was wrapping around him. He'd already been dragged halfway down to the water.

This was Xu Qing's first time appearing as a clone projected by the mirror. However, he could sense that, though he was only illusory, the clone was roughly as strong as his true form, at least fundamentally speaking. He didn't have his shadow, the Ghost Emperor mountain, taboo poison core, violet moon, or his bag of holding. But he did have three illusory heavenly palaces, making him as strong as an ordinary three-palace cultivator.

Seems the clone projection isn't a perfect copy. With that, he pushed out with his right hand.

The black seawater rose up, creating huge waves that rolled toward Zhao Zhongheng. Wherever they passed, the corpse-like hands collapsed, and the hair shattered. Although this level of battle prowess was not the same as his true form, the cultivation base of a three-palace cultivator was nothing to scoff at. As long as he didn't enter Forbidden by the Zombie, then he wouldn't have any trouble dealing with grues like this.

As the tsunami power rolled out, Zhao Zhongheng was freed. Then Xu Qing made a grasping gesture toward his dharmaskiff.

The hair wrapped around it snapped.

Seeing all this, Zhao Zhongheng felt like he had just barely survived a huge catastrophe. He was deeply shocked. Although he had known that Xu Qing was strong, he simply couldn't wrap his mind around the fact that Xu Qing had shown up today to save him. Given how close he had come to dying, his emotions were anything but settled.

"Xu—"

"Get out of here," Xu Qing interrupted. "I'm going to go check on the other coalition disciples."

Zhao Zhongheng's dharmaskiff landed in the water below.

Zhao Zhongheng nodded, his eyes full of gratitude. Stepping onto his dharmaskiff, he prepared to leave. That was when Xu Qing flicked his sleeve, causing a burst of power to land on Zhao Zhongheng's dharmaskiff. It trembled and, bolstered by Xu Qing's blessing, sped away from Forbidden by the Zombie.

Xu Qing prepared to check on some of the other disciples when his expression flickered, and he turned to look in a different direction.

He instantly shot backward.

As he did, the spot upon which he looked trembled with wild fluctuations. A terrifying aura swept out, accompanied by a piercing howl that caused the surrounding seawater to seethe. At the same time, piercing streams of light shot through the mists. That light contained a dao resonance, which made Xu Qing think of the dao lineaments he'd seen in the eyes of Void Returning cultivators!

"Void Returning!" he murmured. That said, he remained calm. After all, he was here as a projected clone.

Even as he watched, a miserable laughter echoed out from within the mist.

"Dead. All dead. Every single one eaten up.... Hahaha! All eaten! All chewed to bits!"

The voice contained mania and madness, as if the speaker had seen something so horrific it destabilized his mind. A figure appeared in the mist, rushing, fleeing, and at the same time howling with laughter. He was definitely not human; he was a nonhuman covered with rotting scales and half his head missing. His body seemed on the verge of collapse, and he pulsed with astonishing mutagen. As he moved, waves surged beneath him. Eventually, he slammed into one of the waves, and when he came out the other side, he seemed unable to keep his internal injuries stable. A great spray of blood emerged from his mouth, and then he threw his head back and wailed in grief.

The mere sight caused Xu Qing's pupils to constrict. What was more, just the pressure radiating off of this nonhuman cultivator was so intense that his clone was about to collapse.

Right then, though, the wailing nonhuman cultivator turned and looked right at him. Then it reached out and made a grasping gesture.

Xu Qing's collapsing clone shot through the air toward the nonhuman, who then grabbed him.

"A clone!? They're dead. All dead...." The nonhuman devolved into laughter.

Xu Qing remained calm as his clone crumbled. He knew it wouldn't take long for the clone to be completely destroyed. The entire time, he just quietly studied this mutagen-wracked nonhuman.

The raving nonhuman suddenly pulled Xu Qing right up to him, until their faces were almost touching. "Did you see?"

Xu Qing shook his head.

"In that case, I'll show you. Then you can go tell everyone that hē's awake... and the emperor of Forbidden by the Zombie is dead!"

His words caused Xu Qing's expression to flicker. Before he could say anything, the nonhuman smashed his forehead into Xu Qing's face.

When they made contact, memories flooded into Xu Qing's mind. He saw the central region of Forbidden by the Zombie, deep on the seafloor. Normally it would be completely dark, but apparently the nonhuman was able to see in that environment, as the seafloor was very clear.

Further down, he could see a huge bronze door. It was impossible to say how long it had existed, but it was covered with the vestiges of time. It was plain and ancient in appearance.

In front of the door knelt a massive figure. It appeared to be made of countless zombies formed together into a huge composite zombie. Each of those zombies emanated a terrifying aura, and they combined in this giant to make something even more terrifying. What was more, the giant had a crown made of violet bones, which emanated terrifying fluctuations. It was obviously a precious treasure of some sort.

Xu Qing could barely look at the giant zombie, and that was the sensation he got from the Void Returning nonhuman, not his own eyes.

The bronze door slowly opened, and a massive golden arm reached out from inside. It had a golden hand, golden bones, and apparently, even golden blood. And it also had seven fingers, as well as curved bony spikes sticking out like claws. The hand stretched toward the giant.

The giant trembled, but didn't dare to move out of the way or even look up. The huge hand stabbed into the giant, wrenching this way and that, causing the smaller zombies to shift and fall. Finally, the huge hand pulled a lump of black flesh out from within, which emanated intensely powerful fluctuations of godliness.

The hand held the flesh as it pulled back inside the ancient door. Then chewing sounds echoed out from inside.

The giant formed from countless zombies seemed to have lost its soul. It fell, and its body collapsed. Zombies drifted left and right, rotting as they formed a pile of corpses.

The vision stopped there.

Xu Qing's clone crumbled, transforming into countless motes of light that disappeared into the seething mist.

The nonhuman remained behind, laughing bitterly as the mist surrounded him. Then chewing sounds echoed out for a time before silence once again filled the area.

Chapter 386: The Eagle Spreads His Wings

In the Seazombie lands, on the bronze mirror, Xu Qing opened his eyes. Power surged through him that could dry up rivers and drain seas, and his organs twinged with intense pain. Sweet blood sprayed out of his mouth, splashing onto the mirror and turning into rivulets that ran down its surface.

Xu Qing looked up and was visibly shaken.

That giant composite zombie... was the emperor of Forbidden by the Zombie? And it was devoured by the entity in that bronze door!

Xu Qing thought back to that golden arm stretching out of the door, and the godly sensation that surrounded it, making it seem to him like he couldn't even look at it. Even now, his heart raced with astonishment. What was more, he knew that the vision came from the memories of the nonhuman cultivator. He hadn't even seen it directly. That meant that whatever he had seen had already occurred. Despite that, his clone had literally exploded, and even his true form ended up injured.

It went without saying that whoever that arm belonged to was an extremely high-level entity.

He didn't have to sit around guessing what he had witnessed. It was another god....

He couldn't help but wonder exactly how many gods there were in existence.

It took a long moment before Xu Qing calmed himself. Then he used the taboo treasure to contact his Master and explain everything that just happened. After he submitted the report, bells tolled in the Eight Sect Coalition, urgently calling the patriarch-level figures to a senate meeting to discuss the matter.

Xu Qing had no idea what the coalition would do about the situation. However, he did receive orders from Master Seventh not to cast his vision any deeper into the forbidden ground, but at the same time, to keep a close eye on its periphery. He also said that if Xu Qing noticed anything particularly unusual, he should retract his vision immediately.

Xu Qing could tell from his Master's tone of voice how serious the situation was, so he immediately voiced his acceptance of the orders.

As his wounds healed, he used Seven Blood Eyes' taboo treasure to keep close watch on the border of Forbidden by the Zombie. The coalition's response came quickly. Two days later, all of the sects activated their taboo treasures. What was more, they notified the other powers in the Eight Sect Coalition that something might be happening with Forbidden by the Zombie.

A flurry of activity hit the prefecture.

Something like this had once occurred in the Spiritsound forbidden ground, and it had led to a great catastrophe. Though that event happened long in the past, information about it could still be found in various ancient records. That event had been intense, shocking, and ghastly. [1]

The Eight Sect Coalition dispatched a team of top experts to carry out a final investigation of Forbidden by the Zombie, including the patriarchs from the first and third sects.

The coalition also sent a message to the Swordsage Court asking for them to bear witness to the investigation. The situation was too big to involve only the Eight Sect Coalition. The Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society and the Church of Departure also got involved. The fact that something

strange was going on with Forbidden by the Zombie ensured that none of the major prefectural powers could stand idly by.

The Swordsage Court ended up sending one of their elders to help.

Xu Qing was able to watch with the taboo treasure as they entered Forbidden by the Zombie. Shortly thereafter, shockwaves started rolling out from the forbidden ground.

The operation didn't last very long. Only half a month. After that, the coalition-led team emerged. All of them had serious expressions on their faces, even the swordsage elder.

Before long, the results of the operation were announced publicly in the prefecture. There had been a great change to the forbidden ground. The Zombie Door had been opened, and Emperor Zombie had perished. That said, the ramifications wouldn't be too dramatic, as they had quickly sealed the door. All of the smaller sects and organizations in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture breathed sighs of relief. But that wasn't the case with the big sects. Instead, they were more on guard than ever, and restricted sect operations for the sake of safety.

Although the announcement was in no way fake, there was one bit of evidence unearthed in the operation that wasn't made public. The Zombie Door hadn't opened by itself. And it hadn't been opened from inside. It had been opened from outside. Because of that, sealing the door could only be considered a nominally effective solution. [2]

Further calamity was going to strike Forbidden by the Zombie. That said, it wouldn't be anytime in the near future. And thanks to the quick action taken by the Eight Sect Coalition, Emperor-Receiving Prefecture was now prepared.

As for who exactly opened the door, that was the question that all the big organizations in the prefecture were pondering. Obviously, only some extremely powerful entity could do such a thing. Some people suspected Torchlight. However, various clues seemed to indicate they weren't involved. Instead, it was some other terrifying organization.

All of these things happened in half a month.

As the figurative storm clouds gathered, Xu Qing finished his three-month stint as a treasure custodian.

Thanks to what happened with Forbidden by the Zombie, the Eight Sect Coalition was more ready for action than ever. However, they maintained a calm face, and kept their anxiety hidden. After all, there was other important business to handle. For instance, it was time for a changing of the guard in the subsidiary sect in the county capital.

By the time Xu Qing returned to the coalition, the final roster for the trip had already been compiled.

Arch-Immortal Plumdark would be leading the delegation to the capital. She would be overseeing the subsidiary sect for the next ten years. Meanwhile, the peaklord of Seven Blood Eyes' Fifth Peak would be the new sect leader of the subsidiary sect. Her term would also last for ten years. [3]

In addition to that, chosen from all of the sects were being sent along for training purposes. That included Huang Yikun and Huang Lingfei from the Dark Serenity Sect, as well as Sima Ru from the House of Grue Hunters, who had failed to become a swordsage in the recruitment event. [4]

At the request of the peaklord of Seven Blood Eyes' First Peak, Wu Jianwu's name was added to the list. Apparently, he wasn't very pleased with that particular apprentice of his, and wanted him far, far away where he would be 'out of sight, out of mind.'

In addition to them, there were a few dozen disciples from various sects, some in Foundation Establishment but most in Gold Core. Many were people Xu Qing had never seen before.

After the roster was finalized, on the third day after Xu Qing returned, a huge flying ship rose up into the air over the Eight Sect Coalition. It didn't immediately take flight. It just hovered in the air as disciples from the various sects flew up and boarded.

Arch-Immortal Plumdark was leading the expedition, yet she wasn't anywhere to be seen.

Xu Qing stood on the deck looking out at heaven and earth. In his hand was a sealing stamp. That was the treasure the patriarch had promised to give him before he left. [5]

As he fiddled with the stamp, he heard someone sighing. "Do you know how rough it's been not being able to eat for three months, little Ah Qing? Going forward I don't even want to think about anything from the Dark Serenity Sect. That was rough. Too rough. Thank goodness my cultivation base is as high as it is!"

The Captain trudged up, followed by Wu Jianwu, whose facial expression made it seem like he had just barely survived a huge disaster. Xu Qing hadn't seen either of them in three months. Both seemed to have lost a lot of weight.

That said, Wu Jianwu's cultivation base has progressed. He was now close to the four-flame level, a cultivation speed that was surprising to Xu Qing. Considering what he had gone through in the demon snake pocket realm, it made sense. After all, that place was generally used by the sect to help disciples open dharma apertures. It seemed that Wu Jianwu had actually turned misfortune into a blessing.

A thought suddenly occurred to Xu Qing. Did Arch-Immortal Plumdark do this on purpose?

"Three months without being able to speak a line of poetry. A hundred days of unspeakable torment!" Wu Jianwu clasped his hands behind his back, looked out at heaven and earth, and let loose a rueful sigh. "One day my sovereignty will be undisputed; then those who insult me will be executed!"

The moment the words left his mouth, a cold snort echoed out, and Wu Jianwu's face fell. Trembling, he plastered a fawning expression on his face.

The Captain did the same thing, and also instinctually edged closer to Xu Qing.

Arch-Immortal Plumdark had arrived. She was joined by Master Fifth from Seven Blood Eyes, who respectfully floated a pace behind. Arch-Immortal Plumdark's plum colored gown made her seem like a blooming bauhinia flower. Touching down onto the deck of the ship, she smiled at Xu Qing but didn't say anything. Together with Master Fifth, she walked toward the cabin.

Master Fifth was not a male cultivator. She was an old woman. However, the peaklords in Seven Blood Eyes had always addressed her as 'master.' [6]

On the way into the cabin, she flashed a smile at Xu Qing and the Captain.

Wu Jianwu shrank in on himself and breathed a sigh of relief.

Meanwhile, the Captain looked contemptuously at Wu Jianwu and said, “Look at you. Shaking in your boots. What are you scared of?”

Glaring at the Captain, Wu Jianwu said, “Thou feareth her so much you near fell apart; with every scrub I howled in my heart!”

Wu Jianwu’s poetry was not exactly up to snuff. Apparently the three months without practice had resulted in him getting a bit rusty.

Xu Qing eyed the two of them and sidled away to keep some distance.

More and more people were arriving to board the ship. They looked excited, but at the same time, very wary. For most of the disciples, this would be the longest journey of their life. They had no idea what would happen on the way, and even less idea what the county capital would be like.

Hearts filled with uncertainty, they couldn’t help but eye Xu Qing and the Captain respectfully. Xu Qing and the Captain were going to be in a very different position than them. Most of the disciples were going to the subsidiary sect, while those two were going to accept an amazing new assignment. In reality, the disciples’ main responsibility was to serve the sect’s swordsages. And if they got into any trouble in the county capital, it would require swordsage intervention. Because of that, Xu Qing and the Captain already had very different roles than before.

There were always idiots in the world, but not so much in this group. Everyone knew what role they would have to play going forward.

Before long, everyone was gathered. As all the cultivators below watched, the flying ship took over a hundred people flying over the horizon.

Down below, Master Seventh watched them go. “I hope everything goes well.”

“What, can’t stand to see them leave?” asked Sir Bloodsmelter, who was standing next to Master Seventh.

Master Seventh smiled. “It’s a long journey. That said, it’s good for young people to get experience. Besides, Emperor-Receiving Prefecture isn’t exactly going to be calm going forward. It’ll be good for them to be away for a time.”

“Forbidden by the Zombie...” Sir Bloodsmelter murmured. His expression turned serious. “Did the investigation turn up a name?”

“There are quite a few clues pointing to... the Holytide people from the Holytide region! The betrayers of humankind who left to form a ‘new’ species and even started working for the Nightshades. The conquerors of the Holytide region, a people far more vicious than humans.”

Chapter 387: Lady Fivefingers

The Supreme Arbiter Salvation Mountains stretched through Emperor-Receiving Prefecture far into the north, where dark clouds covered the sky. As lightning crackled in the clouds, it made heaven

and earth seem the same color. The atmosphere was oppressive, like a prison cell. All living beings were trapped in that prison cell, unable to escape, forced to simply sit in place and endure. Great fat drops of rain pounded the lands, creating water vapor that turned into mist, which spread out to envelop everything.

A 9,000-meter flying ship flew through the storm at top speed. It moved at such great speed that it left behind sonic booms and thick contrails. From a distance, it looked almost like a mighty azure dragon flying through heaven. In fact, the flying ship was actually crafted to look like a dragon. It had two long whiskers coming out of the prow which rippled as the ship flew. Glittering light spread out in all directions, scanning the area constantly.

Inside the ship, Xu Qing stood wearing a violet daoist robe embroidered with gold. His hair was tied back with a white band trimmed in red. Gripping the rail with both hands, he looked out into the endless rain. Everything was hazy, almost like the formless mass that was said to exist before the creation of all things. It was a never-ending vast expanse.

It was the type of scene that would cause one's heart to connect to the grandeur of heaven and earth. It made him think back to the bronze door he'd seen in Forbidden by the Zombie by means of the taboo treasure. Back then, he had glimpsed one of those entities that normally could not be looked upon. They were apparently born in another world, and viewed all other living beings as little more than food or nutrients. Any person would find them detestable.

Xu Qing sighed and settled his thoughts.

Half a month had passed since they left the Eight Sect Coalition.

During that time, Xu Qing spent most of his time working on cultivation. When he wasn't doing that, he took in the view like he was doing right now. He felt strangely emotional being on such a long journey.

He felt anticipation, melancholy, and a mix of confusion.

The anticipation came because he would soon be able to see new lands and new people. It was a new phase of life. He had started in the continent of South Phoenix and then ended up in Seven Blood Eyes. From there he went to Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. And now he was going to a place where most mortals would never be able to go. The county capital.

The melancholy came because of... Mount Daybreak. He wanted to go there, but at the same time, was nervous about the idea of seeing the graves there.

The confusion came because of the mixture of the previous two emotions.

Xu Qing stood there in silence.

After a while, he looked down at the sealing stamp, which was only the size of a fingernail. Pitch black, it was finely carved with totemic beast designs. He had spent time over the past half month studying the stamp. It was actually a weapon designed to unleash slaughter. Once activated, there was no obstacle that could block its power. That said, it wasn't easy to use with only a Gold Core cultivation base. And it needed time to power up in order to release its full potential.

Xu Qing had powered it up as much as he could over the past half month. After fiddling with it a bit, he put it away. Around then, someone emerged from the cabin and approached him.

“Well met, Master Fifth,” he said, clasping hands in greeting.

The peaklord of Seven Blood Eyes’ Fifth Peak wore a green robe, and though she had a face wrinkled with age and grayish-white hair, her eyes sparkled. As she stood near the prow with him, she smiled.

She knew that this was a disciple who would bring much glory to Seven Blood Eyes. In fact, when looking at him, she felt like she was looking at the future of the sect. Because of that, she was trying hard to seem gentle and kind. However, the fact was that she had spent many years studying all sorts of vicious and grim spell formations. Because of that, a sinister coldness had seeped deep into her bones, and that meant that her smiles also seemed cold and grim.

“Something’s bothering you,” she said. She could tell that he was wrestling with some issues.

Xu Qing nodded.

“Life is full of goodbyes and long journeys,” she said, and her grimness seemed more intense than ever. “It’s also full of emotion. No one can help you control those emotions. You just have to think things through. You’re still young, though, so just consider this journey a chance to see things you’ve never seen before.

“Sea-Sealing County has thirteen prefectures. Emperor-Receiving Prefecture is the furthest to the south. We’ll be going through four more prefectures on the way to the county capital. Each prefecture is different. Though humans make up the majority of the population everywhere, there are still a lot of nonhumans here and there.”

“Thank you, Master Fifth,” he said, clasping his hands in thanks. Then he quietly asked, “Master Fifth, is the trip really going to take eight months?”

“Yes. In fact, I came here to explain a bit about that. Along the way, we’ll use seven public teleportation portals. We’ll pass along three strange highways and spend three months flying through desert terrain. Only then will we arrive at our destination. All told, it should take almost exactly eight months. For safety purposes, the specific route is being kept secret, but it’s fine for you to know some of the details.”

She clasped his shoulder. “Xu Qing, before we left, the patriarch and your Master told me to take good care of you. Once we get to the county capital, if there’s anything you need, just say the word. Just remember that I’m not necessarily a good fighter, but I’m great with deadly formations.”

The grimness in her smile became even more readily apparent, and her voice seemed to drip with blood.

Xu Qing wasn’t surprised by that. That was just how things were in Seven Blood Eyes. Spell formations could be helpful or harmful, and obviously Master Fifth specialized in the vicious and deadly type.

“Many thanks, Master Fifth,” he said, clasping hands respectfully.

As the storm pounded the world, a person in a woven rush raincoat stood next to a grave somewhere in the Supreme Arbiter Salvation Mountains. It was as if he didn't even notice the raindrops splashing down around him. As the rain seemingly connected heaven with earth, he looked up and saw the flying ship streaking through the dome of heaven.

Beneath his wide, conical hat, his eyes glittered with a bit of gold. That was a sign of godliness.

Killing intent bubbled in his heart, yet like his aura, it didn't spread out around him. Not one single fluctuation of any type emanated from him. He seemed like a part of the environment, so much so that no one could possibly sense his presence.

Looking down at the gravestone, he quietly said, "Yun'er, my son, it won't be long before I can kill the person you most wanted to kill when you were alive. I'll fulfill that wish of yours." [1]

Though the rain flowed down the gravestone, making it difficult to read, the characters carved into it were still clear.

Here lies my beloved son Shengyun.

There was no body in this grave. It was a cenotaph. [2]

Eventually, the man in the woven rush raincoat started walking in the same direction as the flying ship....

Time passed, slowly but surely.

The flying ship flew over the Everlasting Immortal Profundity River, crossed the northern tundra, and beyond the borders of Emperor-Receiving Prefecture into Injustice Prefecture.

Unlike Emperor-Receiving Prefecture, Injustice Prefecture was landlocked and had no access to the sea. Because of that, it was hotter and less humid. In fact, cultivators from Emperor-Receiving Prefecture who went there would often feel dehydrated. That said, after a period of acclimation, such feelings would go away. Injustice Prefecture was mountainous, and also was the home to more nonhumans than Emperor-Receiving Prefecture.

Just as Master Fifth had said, Xu Qing saw a lot of things he'd never seen before. There were all sorts of strange nonhumans, the sight of whom alone gave Xu Qing a much better understanding of how many species existed in the world.

At the moment, the ship was flying over endless, multicolored fields. The fields were very unique, as each one seemed to be a different color. Looking down, it almost resembled a huge puzzle. It was a very strange sight. Then one massive section, which was the color green... suddenly blurred.

Xu Qing peered down, his eyes narrowing. Only a moment later, his expression became one of surprise.

That blurred section of green rose into a sitting position!

It wasn't a field at all. Shockingly, it was an enormous, green robe that had been laid onto the ground. Any passerby who didn't know what it was would look down and think it was a field. But the reality was that it was an enormous piece of clothing.

The moment it sat up, it seemed to attract the attention of the other colorful 'fields.' One by one, they all sat up. Some flew off the ground and neared the flying ship.

Each 'field' was actually some item of clothing. There were shirts, pants, hats, and even gloves.

Looking at the scene as a whole, it was possible to see that there were clothing items of all sizes, and in terms of numbers, there had to be no fewer than a million of them. Only a small portion flew up into the air, but they gathered around the ship and flew along with it.

The items of clothing seemed to be organized by rank. Some were luxurious and stern. Others seemed more like commoners serving as guards. The strangest thing was that none of these pieces of clothing were being worn by anyone. It was just clothing, by itself.

As they circled the ship, Xu Qing looked around with a serious expression. At the same time, the Captain rushed out of the lower deck, an expression of surprise on his face.

“Don't tell me there's another Nethersprite around here!”

At this point, others were rushing to the rails to look out at the scene, though all remained vigilant and on guard.

Arch-Immortal Plumdark made an uncharacteristic public appearance. Walking out from the lower deck, she looked at the clothing, smiled, then waved cheerily to a princess garment flying directly in front of the ship. The princess garment swished both sleeves as if it was curtsying, then completely ignored the ship's defenses and floated right onto the deck. Approaching Arch-Immortal Plumdark, it reached out and embraced her.

Then they began communicating via divine will. Apparently, they were acquainted.

Xu Qing found the entire thing very strange, and couldn't help but wonder what the two of them were talking about. At one point, the princess garment turned in his direction as if to look at him.

Xu Qing clasped hands respectfully.

Soon enough, more items of clothing flew up from the ground. Some were handmaiden garments who bypassed the flying ship's defenses and then began serving spirit fruit to everyone.

Given their actions and the atmosphere they brought with them, they didn't seem to have any ill intentions.

A host of fine-looking women's gloves swirled around Xu Qing, but when he didn't pay them much attention, they flew over to the Captain. The Captain looked at them curiously and even extended his hand to poke at one experimentally.

Before long, Arch-Immortal Plumdark and the princess garment finished their conversation. The princess garment flicked its sleeves, and all the garments flew off the ship and took positions outside. They seemed like they were offering an escort. Eventually, when the ship was about to leave the 'fields' behind, the various garments made gestures of farewell.

When the ship left them behind, all the disciples aboard breathed sighs of relief.

Master Fifth sighed. “The Garmentfolk are one of the great powers in Injustice Prefecture. I never could have imagined that you would be acquainted with them, Arch-Immortal.”

Arch-Immortal Plumdark smiled faintly. "I'm acquainted with their senior princess. We once went traveling together for training purposes. She kept trying to get me to wear her, but I always refused."

Heart pounding, the Captain placed his hand behind his back and asked, "Senior, w-what... what would happen if you wore it?"

Xu Qing blinked a few times. Moments ago he had noticed a very fine black glove on the Captain's hand. It was one of the gloves that had been swirling around him moments ago.

Arch-Immortal Plumdark looked deeply at the Captain.

"Once worn, an ancient covenant is enforced. That garment will be attached to whatever flesh it covers, and will own it for all time."

The Captain breathed a sigh of relief as he pulled his hand out from behind his back and looked at the glove. "That's it? Well that's not a big deal. Since this is a good friend of yours, Arch-Immortal Plumdark ma'am, I suppose I'll just let it free." With that, he dug his teeth into his wrist.

As everyone on the ship watched with strange expressions, the Captain ripped his hand off at the wrist. His expression didn't so much as flicker, as if this were something he did all the time. He then threw the severed hand over the railing and waved to it with his remaining hand.

"Bye-bye! If you have time, come find me and we can hang out!"

The glove, with hand inside, waved goodbye, looking a bit sad as the ship left it behind.

"Did you ever think you would see my own right hand waving goodbye to me?" the Captain said, sighing.

Xu Qing didn't say anything in response. Neither did anyone else present. No one knew what to say. Except for Wu Jianwu. Eyes shining, he spoke some poetry.

"An ancient snake bit its own tail off, it swallowed it down then took the day off;

"Erniu bit off his hand for a dame, Lady Fivefingers is her fair name."

Chapter 388: Netherworld Harbor

Three days later, the Captain's hand had already grown back, and it looked as good as new. Xu Qing took note of that. It gave him a much better idea of how quickly the Captain could grow back his body parts.

Severed limbs seem to take a few days. If he loses everything from the waist down, it takes half a month. And if he loses everything beneath his head, it's a full month.

That information would make it a lot easier to plan battle strategies when he and the Captain went on big escapades in the future.

The incident got the Captain a lot more interested in nonhumans. In fact, he took to joining Xu Qing in looking over the railing at the lands they passed. As for Wu Jianwu, it was hard to say exactly what he was thinking. Perhaps he wanted to improve his poetry. Either way, he joined them.

Time passed. After two teleportations, they left Injustice Prefecture.

Xu Qing had already seen many things he'd never seen before. The Captain learned a lot about various nonhumans.

Wu Jianwu had also benefited a lot. His poetry was just as good as it had been before, and had even improved a bit.

“In my eyes life evolves endlessly; grasp the world and cultivate the heart of the sword!”

As the wind blew past Wu Jianwu, he threw his head back and laughed heartily.

“Moron,” the Captain muttered disdainfully.

Xu Qing wasn't paying attention to the deranged Wu Jianwu. Instead, he was looking down at a raging tempest below. Great trees bent under the force of the wind, so dramatically it looked like they might snap in half.

That was the unique climate of Cloudywind Prefecture.

It was different from both Emperor-Receiving Prefecture and Injustice Prefecture. There were almost always strong winds in Cloudywind Prefecture. Because of that, the sects and clans here were generally known for speed, and usually favored body cultivation.

In addition to the wind, the prefecture was known for its dramatic difference between day and night. During the daytime, the winds were explosive. At nighttime, they turned cold and sinister. What was more, grues came out in large numbers.

Though there were nonhumans present, they were outnumbered by the mutant beasts. For example, as Xu Qing looked down at the windswept landscape, he saw a few hundred giants, all of whom were several hundred meters tall. They wore no clothing, and emanated a stench that not even the wind could dissipate. Their skin was gray, their eyes red, and their teeth blackish yellow. They didn't seem to be very intelligent. Some moved about, others sat in place. Still others fought amongst each other like wild animals.

Many of the giants had baskets on their backs woven from tree bark. Within those baskets were countless living beings from a variety of species, all gasping for breath. They were food for the giants. In fact, some of the giants sat in front of huge stone bowls, into which they would toss their victims, then crush them into a paste with giant stone pestles. Afterwards, they would drink the sludge.

All of a sudden, Xu Qing realized Arch-Immortal Plumdark was standing next to him.

“Those,” she said, “are the cloud trolls of Cloudywind Prefecture. They're not very intelligent. In fact, they're almost like animals. No matter how many of them you kill, you can never rid the world of them. They just pop back into being. They eat anything alive.”

As the familiar aroma of her perfume surrounded him, he didn't flinch or move away from her. He was used to her presence.

She had spent most of the journey belowdecks, and rarely came out. At the moment, she wasn't acting the way she acted when they were in private. She stood off to the side in a very proper fashion.

Xu Qing quickly clasped hands in greeting.

The Captain and Wu Jianwu ducked their heads. That said, the two of them had very different reasons for doing so.

Wu Jianwu bowed his head out of reverence.

The Captain was thinking something else entirely. You're such a player, Arch-Immortal Plumdark! Sometimes flirtatious, sometimes tantalizing, sometimes dignified. Who could possibly deal with this? Okay, little Ah Qing. You've got this! Keep up the good work!

With such thoughts on his mind, he gave Xu Qing an encouraging look.

Xu Qing ignored him. He wasn't putting as much thought into the situation as the Captain was.

"The cloud trolls' flesh has unique properties," Arch-Immortal Plumdark said. "For one thing, we'll need their flesh to serve as a ticket later. Why don't the two of you go down and kill one or two?"

Hearing that, Xu Qing immediately jumped over the rail and flew downward.

The Captain blinked a few times, then followed. As he caught up to Xu Qing, he projected a message. "Little Ah Qing, I really think you need to reconsider my original suggestion!"

Xu Qing looked at him suspiciously.

"You know. Give in to Arch-Immortal Plumdark."

The Captain zoomed past Xu Qing.

Xu Qing watched him go without saying a word.

The two of them dropped down to the ground.

The cloud trolls weren't exactly very strong. They relied only on fleshly body power, and most were roughly comparable to a Foundation Establishment cultivator with one or two life flames. Only four or five had energy and blood fluctuations comparable to the Gold Core level. To Xu Qing and the Captain, hunting and killing beasts like that was a simple thing. With a burst of astonishing speed, Xu Qing appeared in front of one of the cloud trolls that had Gold Core battle prowess.

The troll was viciously pounding at his mortar when he noticed Xu Qing. Opening his mouth, he let loose a roar that came with a noxious stench. Then he reached out to grab Xu Qing.

Compared to the gigantic troll, Xu Qing was the size of a bug.

However, in Xu Qing's eyes, the gigantic troll was actually the bug. He didn't even dodge out of the way. As soon as the troll's hand landed, it screamed as its hand exploded.

Xu Qing emerged from the gore, shooting straight up toward the troll's forehead. He shoved his right hand out, and terrifying power smashed into the troll, spreading from its forehead to the rest of

its body. It collapsed, its life force having been exterminated. The cloud troll thumped to the ground. A short distance away, the Captain had just killed another Gold Core troll.

However, before they could collect the corpses, both of them turned to look in the same direction, their eyes shining.

Off in the distance, two swords screamed through the wind.

Their target wasn't Xu Qing and the Captain, but rather, the other cloud trolls. In the blink of an eye, three trolls screamed as flying swords pierced through their chests, killing them instantly.

At the same time, two figures flew through the wind.

One was a man, the other was a woman, but both were clad in white garments, with capes fluttering behind them. Beneath the overcast sky, those white robes seemed to have hidden flames within them.

Xu Qing instantly recognized them by their outfits. They were swordsages. What was more, Xu Qing had previously encountered the man. The Captain also recognized him. He was the same swordsage the two of them had encountered on their river patrol, the one who had chased an old devil in the Gold Core level. After fighting that old devil, he'd left him wounded for Xu Qing and the Captain to handle. [1]

The two swordsages shot through the wind toward the cloud trolls. After collecting up the corpses, they turned to look at Xu Qing and the Captain.

There were no words exchanged. The swordsages just nodded, then turned and flew back into the storm.

Xu Qing had never seen the female swordsage before. However, as she left, he noticed that she was carrying a little girl of seven or eight years old on her back.

The girl wasn't human. She had two wriggling antennae on her forehead and a single large eye that was covered with a thick black band of cloth. The girl looked to be asleep.

As they watched the two swordsages leaving, the Captain said, "They're not from Emperor-Receiving Prefecture."

Xu Qing had also come to the same conclusion. Back during the recruitment event, all of the swordsages from Emperor-Receiving Prefecture had been in attendance, and these two had not been among them.

"I guess they must be out on a mission," Xu Qing said, collecting up the cloud troll he'd killed. The other cloud trolls had already fled.

With that, the two of them flew back up to the ship. After they were back on board, the ship started moving through the storm again.

One evening half a month later, they reached the first major travel hub on their trip through Cloudywind Prefecture.

Xu Qing knew the general overview of their itinerary, but not the fine details. Only Arch-Immortal Plumdark and Master Fifth were privy to the entire plan. For safety's sake, the detailed itinerary was being kept secret.

From up above, the travel hub looked like a big, chaotic city. There were many buildings of clay brick designed to provide shelter from the wind, as well as numerous cultivators from a variety of species.

Prominent in the city were black-garbed figures with many earrings, and evil ghosts tattooed on their faces. Visiting cultivators were always leery of them, and avoided them as much as possible.

“This place is controlled by the Ghost Tattoo Sect, which is one of the major powers in Cloudywind Prefecture. They raise evil ghosts and have vile magical techniques.”

The information came from Arch-Immortal Plumdark, who projected her words solely into Xu Qing’s mind.

Upon hearing that, Xu Qing studied the black-garbed figures more closely. He could see faint fluctuations coming off of their facial tattoos which reminded him of the ghosts he had seen in the ghost hollow.

Their arrival attracted the attention of cultivators below.

However, when Arch-Immortal Plumdark disembarked, the city went silent. Her Void Returning pressure caused the black-garbed cultivators to react with surprise. A few of the black-garbed cultivators approached to receive her formally, then led them to a tavern in the city.

Once inside the tavern, Arch-Immortal Plumdark said, “Rest for the night. Tomorrow morning when the darkness of night transforms into the light of dawn, a ghost galleon will come here to Netherworld Harbor. The next leg of our trip will be taken on the ghost galleon. At nighttime this city becomes a ghost ward, so unless you really know what you’re doing, don’t go wandering around.”

With that, she entered her room. The other disciples went into their own respective rooms, wondering about what she’d said about ghost wards and ghost galleons.

“Netherworld Harbor?” the Captain said curiously. “Ghost galleon? What are they?”

Xu Qing shook his head. He wasn’t as curious as the Captain. That said, he was interested in the ghost ward Arch-Immortal Plumdark had mentioned. It made him think of the place he’d visited back in Forbidden by the Phoenix. [2]

When night fell, as the wind whimpered outside, Xu Qing, who was seated cross-legged in meditation inside the tavern, opened his eyes. He could sense the aura changing outside. Yin and yang were switching. Life and death were transposing. He wasn’t unfamiliar with this sensation.

Standing, he walked to the window. Cracking it open, he looked outside.

The city looked completely different. Innumerable ghosts drifted in the street, vicious in appearance. It reminded him of ‘countless ghosts haunting the night.’ There were all sorts of vendor stalls visible now, all of them containing items belonging to the dead. Off in the distance, in the very middle of the city, he saw a gigantic foot hovering in the air, bound with seemingly endless chains.

The foot was green and seemed very sinister. When Xu Qing saw it, his eyes narrowed. He was getting the sensation that this green foot had the same origin as that monk’s head he’d seen in the Forbidden by the Phoenix ghost ward. [3]

That thing was cut into pieces and sent out to different ghost wards? After some thought, Xu Qing pushed the window fully open and slipped out into the night.

He had seen a lot of interesting things for sale on his last visit to a ghost ward, except he hadn't been able to afford them. But during his time in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture, he had done a lot of killing. Though he hadn't been meticulously collecting heart-blood, he did have quite a few souls, which could also be used as currency in places like this.

In order to avoid the same annoying situation as last time, he didn't disguise himself with his shadow. Instead, he let the aura of his three heavenly palaces and his taboo poison core seep out around him. In that manner, he started making his way through the crowds of ghosts.

Time passed. Things went well for Xu Qing, and he bought a lot of ghost poison items.

As dawn was approaching, he prepared to head back to the tavern. Before he could go far, though, he passed a vendor stall from which opera singing emerged. The ghost ward was completely silent, but this singing could be heard very clearly. It didn't seem out of place at all, and in fact, seemed to perfectly suit the atmosphere.

“In past lives forlorn, always reborn, sever lovesickness and endlessly mourn....” [4]

The moment Xu Qing heard the song, he stopped in place and looked over.

Chapter 389: Hitching a Ride Through the Netherworld

The opera singing drifted out from a shadowy vendor stall. The proprietor was a floating ghost made up entirely of eyes. When the many-eyed ghost noticed Xu Qing looking over, about half of its eyes shifted to look at him.

Xu Qing didn't care. Walking over, he noticed a small bronze bottle among the items for sale.

He immediately recognized what it was.

It's a recording bottle.

He had once acquired a recording bottle that he used to capture the sound of countless ghosts haunting the night, which he used when summoning the giant and the sun's imperial carriage. That was how he had acquired Golden Crow Assimilates Myriad Spirits. Unfortunately, because of the immense pressure exuded by the giant, that bottle was destroyed. [1]

The opera singing was coming from this bottle. After mulling the matter over, Xu Qing pointed at the bottle, then tossed a bag of discarnate souls to the many-eyed ghost.

The many-eyed ghost took the bag and examined it. Then all of its eyes closed as if in thought. A moment later, it shook its head.

Xu Qing looked at the ghost. He knew that the inhabitants of ghost wards were greedy, therefore, he handed over yet another bag. At the same time, his eyes flashed with a grim coldness that the many-eyed ghost couldn't miss. Whether it was because there were now enough souls, or whether it was because of Xu Qing's grim expression, this time the many-eyed ghost nodded.

Xu Qing took the bottle and closed it, causing the singing to stop. Then he turned and left. Back at the tavern, as he waited for dawn to arrive, Xu Qing looked suspiciously at the little bronze bottle.

The voice is definitely the same as that woman in the pentagonal log cabin in the ghaſt hollow. Someone obviously collected that ſound in this recording bottle. [2]

Xu Qing thought back to that incident in the ghaſt hollow. He remembered the woman's ſinging, as well as the eye of the god in the depths of the chasm, ſlowly opening. He wasn't ſure if the ſong was ſpecifically being ſung for that god, or if it juſt contained ſome unknown power to keep the god's eye closed. Regardless, Xu Qing was convinced it was a good decision to buy the bottle.

Not long thereafter, he heard the ſound of footsteps outside. Putting the bottle away and ſtraightening his clothes, he opened the door and walked out.

The diſciples of the Eight Sect Coalition had gathered in the main room of the tavern, except that the Captain was nowhere to be ſeen.

Xu Qing wasn't ſurprised. The other diſciples might have been hesitant to explore a ghooſt ward, there was no way the Captain would be able to reſiſt the chance. However, the Captain was apparently ſtill focused on getting to the county capital; juſt when it ſeemed like he would run out of time, he daſhed in from outside.

Ruſhing over to Xu Qing, he excitedly ſaid, "Did you explore the ghooſt ward, little Ah Qing? Let me tell you, there was ſome great ſtuff for ſale."

Xu Qing was about to reſpond when his expreſſion ſuddenly flickered. The ſame thing happened to the other diſciples preſent. An aſtoniſhing preſſure had ſuddenly weighed down on the tavern from outside. It was indreſcribably grim and fierce, making it feel like the inn was ſuddenly ſubmerged in an ancient, icy river. At the ſame time, a ſudden feeling of incredible terror roſe unbidden in the hearts and minds of all the diſciples.

Xu Qing wasn't unfamiliar with the ſenſation. It was juſt like the firſt time he had ever run into a grue. What was more, he had experienced that ſame feeling when looking into the depths of various forbidden regions during his time working as a treasure cuſtodian for three months.

As everyone ſhivered, Arch-Immortal Plumdark emerged from her room, walked to the front door of the tavern, and gently pushed it open.

When the outside was revealed... it looked completely different than when Xu Qing had been out earlier. The ghooſt ward was ſtill there, but ſo was the regular city. It was as if light and darkness, yin and yang, both existed at the ſame time. They were tranſpoſed over each other, creating ſomething indreſtinct and blurry.

And in that indreſtinct blurryneſſ, high in the dome of heaven... was a black ſhip ſome 3,000 meters long, floating ſilently. It was pitch black and very dilapidated. The ſails were ripped and torn, as though they had existed for countless years. And the entire thing pulſed with a ſtrong death aura. That ſhip was the ſource of the frigid preſſure which was weighing down on the tavern. It was a ghooſt galleon.

As it hovered there in the ſky, it made it ſeem like the city below was a harbor, and it was waiting for people to get on board....

"Board the ſhip!" Arch-Immortal Plumdark ſaid calmly. Stepping forward, ſhe floated up toward the extremely ſiniſter ghooſt galleon.

Xu Qing and the Captain exchanged a glance, then simultaneously flew up into the sky. The other disciples braced themselves and also followed. Just like that, the Eight Sect Coalition delegation boarded the ghost galleon.

Once aboard, the grim coldness seemed even more apparent. To Xu Qing, the ghost galleon's dilapidated state was even more obvious when close up. The deck was half rotted away, and there were holes in many other locations. The stern was so decayed it looked like it might collapse at any moment. That said, there didn't seem to be any ghosts on the ship.

Xu Qing soon noticed that there were others boarding the ship besides coalition cultivators. There were a few dozen people from the city who also chose to get on the ship. Among them were the two swordsages they had encountered on the road. They noticed Xu Qing and the Captain, and didn't seem surprised at all. They nodded in greeting, then went belowdecks.

Down below, it was just as dilapidated as above. Xu Qing found that there were seats for everyone. Arch-Immortal Plumdark and Master Fifth sat alone some distance away.

Finding an appropriate corner, he sat down. The Captain looked around for a bit before sitting next to Xu Qing.

"Where there are ghost wards, there are ghost galleons." Arch-Immortal Plumdark didn't just project her words to Xu Qing, but also to the Captain and all the other coalition disciples. "Ghost galleons are one of the most common supernatural phenomena in the Revered Ancient mainland. They can take you great distances, and move much more quickly than ordinary flying ships. After all, flying ships move through space, but ghost galleons slip through the netherworld.

"In any place where death exists, ghost galleons can lock onto the threads of death and travel there. For the next month, we will travel across the lands on this ghost galleon. During that time, as long as the ghost galleon is moving, you must not open your eyes under any circumstances.

"That is forbidden on ghost galleons."

Everyone nodded in response

"Xu Qing, Chen Erniu, bring out the flesh of the cloud trolls you killed and place it on the deck above. That flesh serves as our ticket."

Xu Qing nodded. Together with the Captain, they went up to the main deck, took out the corpses of the cloud trolls they'd killed, and placed them down. The two swordsages did the same. So did the other passengers.

Xu Qing went back inside, which was when he noticed the Captain wasn't with him.

"Go drag him back down here, Xu Qing," Arch-Immortal Plumdark said coolly. During the entire journey, this was how she had spoken to him. Only when they were alone would her eyes glitter when she looked at him.

He was used to it. Turning, he went back up to the main deck. After looking around a bit, he found the captain at the entrance to one of the ship's holds.

The Captain squatted there with a curious look on his face. It seemed like he was planning to go in and look around. Noticing Xu Qing, he whispered, "Little Ah Qing, this ghost galleon definitely has some treasure in it we can use to speed up our cultivation. I just heard a voice calling to me! It said it wanted to trade!"

Xu Qing stopped in place for a moment, then squatted down next to the Captain and cocked his ear. A moment passed. "Probably a scam."

"I'd say there's an eighty to ninety percent chance that it wants to lure me down there. I'm just trying to decide if I should take a chance and find out." The Captain grinned. This was one reason why he liked Xu Qing so much. He didn't need to offer lengthy explanations about things. Xu Qing always understood what he meant immediately.

"Not now," Xu Qing said. "Maybe you can try when we get to our destination."

The Captain nodded. "Alright. I guess if something went wrong right now, the ghost galleon might not let us stay on board. And that would be problematic."

With that, the two of them went back belowdecks.

Upon seeing them, Arch-Immortal Plumdark cast a vicious glare in the Captain's direction. "Ghost galleons have Void Returning ghosts sealed in them. Are you looking to get yourself killed?"

Looking hurt, the Captain glanced begrudgingly at Xu Qing, as if the whole thing had been his idea....

Xu Qing sat down cross-legged and pretended not to notice.

Before long, the sun appeared on the horizon, and the ghost galleon vibrated and started to fade from view.

The last thing the disciples heard was Arch-Immortal Plumdark's voice in their minds.

"Close your eyes!"

Everyone complied.

Xu Qing felt the ghost galleon vibrating beneath him. It seemed to be on the move.

As the sun rose, the ghost galleon vanished from view in the dome of heaven. The ghost ward below faded away completely, leaving behind only the ordinary city. Meanwhile, a grim and sinister will swept back and forth on the ghost galleon. Everything was quiet except for the creaking of the ship.

Xu Qing had his eyes closed, but thanks to his shadow, he could see everything around him.

They were in the passenger hold of the ship. Everyone had their eyes closed, except for the Captain.... Underneath his clothes on his chest was an open eye. It was a very gruish eye, bright blue and extremely fierce and sinister-looking. In fact, it perfectly matched the atmosphere, as if it were some sort of ghost eye.

Xu Qing wasn't surprised by that. Sending his shadow above deck to the troll flesh, he saw a host of shadowy figures, all of them with bright red eyes, ravenously devouring the corpses. Occasionally they would snap at each other, or look greedily at the people in the passenger hold. They were clearly brutal and vicious fiends, yet there was something restricting them from entering the passenger hold.

A few of them, after finishing their meal, seemed like they couldn't restrain themselves, and rushed toward the passengers.

Upon passing Arch-Immortal Plumdark, one of them vanished. Upon reaching Master Fifth, another vanished.

One appeared near Xu Qing. It looked at him sitting there with his eyes closed, and it opened its mouth. But then Xu Qing inhaled, and the shadowy ghost shivered and was absorbed into one of his heavenly palaces.

Another ghostly shadow appeared in front of the Captain and was looking at his ghost eye. But then it noticed its companions disappearing, and in its alarm, turned to leave. However, that was when the ghost eye on the Captain turned into a gaping mouth. It devoured the shadowy ghost, then transformed back into an eye. The eye looked at Xu Qing and blinked.

Out on the main deck, none of the other ghostly shadows noticed their companions were dead. Eventually, when the last of the flesh was eaten, the ghosts drifted to various parts of the ghost galleon, and took up various positions like sailors. Before long, the ship was picking up speed.

Surrounding it was a pitch dark netherworld, through which it flew.

Chapter 390: Eyes of the Lightborn

Everything outside the ghost galleon was pitch black. There was no light, only unending cold and grim darkness.

By means of his shadow, Xu Qing kept an eye on the netherworld void that existed outside of the galleon. It made him think about the terrifying entities that countless cultivators feared when entering Foundation Establishment. When a cultivator ignited their life lamp for the first time, it would attract entities from another world. The Mute had failed during that part of his breakthrough, and had been partially possessed. If it hadn't been for Xu Qing, the Mute would already have ceased to exist.

From what Xu Qing could sense, the netherworld void outside the ghost galleon was that world.

It wasn't easy for him to track the passage of time. It was as if each moment lasted for a very long time. Then, out of nowhere, light appeared in the darkness. It was scorching hot, and stretched for 30,000 meters from one end to another, ripping apart the darkness. There in the netherworld was a huge, blindingly bright desert.

The ghost galleon shot into that desert and... disappeared.

Everyone aboard the ship suddenly felt their stomachs lurch as if they were falling.

"You can open your eyes," Arch-Immortal Plumdark said. The coalition disciples did so. Astonishingly, they were now in a scorching desert.

Heatwaves shimmered everywhere, and the sky itself rippled and distorted. The desert was an endless sea of fire, with stupefying heat radiating down from a red sun in the sky. That sun was much clearer than the sun in the sky over Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. And it was larger. It was almost as if the sun hung directly above the desert they were in. Either that, or the desert... existed very close to the sun itself.

The ghost galleon couldn't survive in this place, so it faded away, allowing the passengers to drop down.

Arch-Immortal Plumdark waved her hand, and her dragon-shaped flying ship appeared beneath them. They landed on the ship, which then shot through the heat of that sun off into the distance.

The other passengers who had been on the ghost galleon went their separate ways. As for the two swordsages, they produced magical devices which resembled hats, and used them, not to fly off into the distance, but to burrow into the ground. A moment later, they were gone.

"This is the last leg of the journey," Arch-Immortal Plumdark said. "After traveling for three months through this desert, we'll reach the borders of the county capital."

Within that burning heat, Arch-Immortal Plumdark's voice was like clear water that eased the hearts of the disciples.

Xu Qing took a deep breath, and his eyes glittered. Though this journey was turning out to be relatively short, he had still seen many fantastic things. His eyes had been opened in a way that would never have been possible in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. And it seemed like he still had only seen a tiny fraction of what the world had to offer.

Half a month later the flying ship reached a place where the fires below started to go out. Soon, they saw patches of hazy smoke. Before long, it was possible to see that the smoke resembled humanoid forms. Though they couldn't be seen clearly, it was obvious that there were men and women, old and young. It looked like some unique nonhuman species that lived here permanently. The place where the smoke was thickest seemed to be a city of some sort.

Xu Qing almost couldn't believe his eyes, and most of the other disciples reacted similarly. The Captain was the only one who didn't seem surprised.

As they passed over the smoky nonhumans, many of them looked up into the sky at the flying ship.

A very serious expression could be seen on Arch-Immortal Plumdark's face. Then, for the first time on the journey, she floated up off the ship and bowed with clasped hands toward the city of smoke.

"We are human cultivators from Emperor-Receiving Prefecture, escorting swordsages from our sect to the county capital. We're only passing through, and hope that you Fellow Daoists of the Smokewight people don't take any offense."

Xu Qing and the other disciples all followed suit, bowing with hands clasped.

The countless smoky figures below looked at the ship thoughtfully, then returned the salute. Obviously they didn't plan to cause any problems.

Arch-Immortal Plumdark breathed a sigh of relief. "The Smokewights are the most complex of the species we've run into so far," she explained. "They couldn't care less about most human sects."

However, they do fear the swordsages. Living as they do underneath this burning sun, they're natural-born assassins. They can merge with any type of energy and are incomparably gruish. If you ever run into them again, be very careful. Avoid doing business with them and getting wrapped up in their karma."

Xu Qing nodded. Looking down at the city of smoke below, he committed all the details to memory. As the journey continued, they ran into more unusual species.

About a month later, the color of the surrounding desert terrain changed. Instead of being dominated by yellow and red, it slowly turned crystalline....

Because of that, it both reflected and refracted light, creating a dazzlingly beautiful scene. In fact, anyone whose cultivation base wasn't high enough would eventually be blinded by it.

Now it seemed like the flying boat was flying through a sea of light.

Around this time, Xu Qing yet again caught sight of those two swordsages.

Apparently, this was their main destination. The two of them were on the crystallized land below, within the sea of light, fighting fiercely with invisible foes that surrounded them. Astonishing sword light spread in all directions around them, along with the fluctuations of magical techniques. Standing next to them was the nonhuman girl who had previously been on the back of the female swordsage. The black band covering the girl's solitary eye had been removed, and she was staring up at the burning sun.

Her eye shone brightly, and she seemed curious. It almost seemed like she was absorbing the sunlight, and as a result, her eye was getting brighter. The two antennae coming off her forehead swayed back and forth creating magical symbols that flowed into her eye. Obviously it was important that the process not be interrupted, as the two swordsages were vigilantly guarding over her.

There were unseen entities that were trying to stop the girl from absorbing sunlight. They seemed to be part of the light, and the only evidence of their presence was the way other streams of light bent and rippled around them.

"They're lightscrag!" Arch-Immortal Plumdark explained. "Light itself is intelligent, and can manifest as lightscrag. They usually appear in extremely hot environments, and leave almost no trace of their existence. In reality, they're made from light, which makes them difficult to fight and kill. And they only fade from existence when night falls."

Down below, the two swordsages were clearly having trouble holding the line. Both of them were wounded.

Xu Qing looked at the Captain.

The Captain looked at Xu Qing.

"Senior," Xu Qing said, clasping his hands, "one of those swordsages helped the two of us in the past. Can we go down to assist?"

"Do you need any help from me?" she asked softly.

“Eldest Brother and I will be fine. If it turns out we’re not a match for them, then perhaps we can trouble you for assistance?”

Arch-Immortal Plumdark nodded. Xu Qing immediately flew off the ship.

The Captain cleared his throat. “Actually, Senior, it would be fine if you interfered....”

Arch-Immortal Plumdark glared at him. Shrinking back, he quickly flew after Xu Qing.

When the two swordsages saw Xu Qing and the Captain flying down, looks of gratitude appeared in their eyes. That was especially true of the male swordsage who had helped them back in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture.

“Many thanks, Fellow Daoists,” he said. “There are a lot more lightscraggs this time than in the past. Thank you for helping us to protect this Lightborn girl.”

Xu Qing nodded. The moment he landed next to the swordsages, he could sense a strong killing intent rushing toward him from within the surrounding sea of light. Eyes glittering, he tapped into the poison core in this third heavenly palace, causing taboo poison to spread out. A moment later, a bloodcurdling scream rang out from the sea of light. Then it was possible to see a shaft of light suddenly turn dark, then disappear.

The two swordsages’ eyes lit up. Meanwhile, the Captain arrived, glowing blue as he sent a boundless frigid will out in all directions. That frigid coldness was terrifying; wherever it went, it brought lightlessness with it, as if it were freezing the light itself. After the light was frozen, it couldn’t move, and therefore, everything around it would turn dark.

It went without saying that the Captain’s terrifying powers of coldness allowed him to surpass Xu Qing in these circumstances.

Their arrival instantly eased the two swordsage’s burden. Before long, the danger had passed. The lightscraggs could sense that this fight was too much for them, and they scattered.

“Many thanks to you, Fellow Daoists!”

The two swordsages both seemed to be Gold Core cultivators with three heavenly palaces. Of course, though they were obviously thankful, they were also remaining on guard. That came as pure instinct. In the world in which they lived, people without such an instinct would quickly end up dead.

As for the swordsage who had previously run into them in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture, he was deeply shaken. He had seen many chosen cultivators throughout the years, but he clearly remembered that these two were in Foundation Establishment the last time he saw them. But now they were on the same level as he was. What was more, having seen them fight just now, he knew that they had incredible battle prowess.

Clasping hands formally, Xu Qing said, “We never had the chance to thank you for gifting us that treasure. It was a simple thing for us to help out today.”

The Captain laughed heartily. “That’s right. And considering me and my Junior Brother are also swordsages, how could we not help you?” The Captain was obviously highlighting his and Xu Qing’s status.

Hearing that, the two swordsages were visibly surprised. Both of them produced their command swords, which Xu Qing and the Captain also did. The four command swords glittered with dazzling light. Upon seeing that, the two swordsages relaxed a bit.

“I’m Chen Tinghao,” the male swordsage said. “This is my wife Sun Liying. We really owe you thanks for this. It was obviously careless of us to accept a mission like this.”

[1]

Chen Tinghao produced a jade slip which he handed to Xu Qing. “Please take half of the military credits for this mission. Don’t refuse! This is customary among swordsages. We’re all fellow warriors, so consider this a sincere expression of friendship!”

Given his wording, Xu Qing and the Captain couldn’t refuse. After exchanging the jade slip, the four of them chatted a bit while they waited for the Lightborn girl to finish absorbing the sunlight.

Xu Qing and the Captain explained that they were on the way to the county capital to report for duty, while Chen Tinghao and Sun Liying explained some of the information about their mission.

The Lightborn were one of the rare benevolent species that were allies of humankind. They had the innate ability to absorb sunlight with their eyes. Once their eyes were full, they would go to areas with no sun, where they would sell their eyes. Chen Tinghao and Sun Liying had accepted a mission to escort this girl somewhere to absorb sunlight, and had chosen this location as the most suitable.

Eventually, the girl finished with her task, closed her eye, and wrapped the black band back around her head. She seemed to be in a very weak state as she climbed onto Sun Liying’s back.

Because the two swordsages also needed to go to the county capital, Xu Qing and the Captain invited them to board the flying ship.

Once aboard, they offered respectful greetings to Arch-Immortal Plumdark.

She was very welcoming. After all, she would much rather Xu Qing get to the county capital with friends already. Of course, her cultivation base was so high that it wasn’t appropriate for her to entertain Chen Tinghao and Sun Liying. Therefore, she told Xu Qing to take charge, then went below deck.

As the flying ship proceeded on its way, Chen Tinghao continued to show favor by explaining some things about the city to Xu Qing and the Captain.

“The capital is in the very middle of Sea-Sealing County. All the big powers from the various prefectures have subsidiary sects there. However, in the overall structure of the city, they aren’t very important. In fact, you could think of them as being sixth-tier. The tier above them, the fifth, are the various yamens that govern daily affairs in the city. [2]

“Above the yamens are the three great sects and one great clan of Sea-Sealing County. They are the Supreme Void Demonization Sect, the Supreme Ancient Lightning Order, the Blood Chill Society and the Daoist Mansion of Marquis Yao!

“The Daoist Mansion of Marquis Yao, sometimes called Yao Mansion, is the most unique of the group. The patriarch of the founding clan was once one of the thirty-six heavenly marquises, who were blessed with the ‘dao’ character on their uniform by Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity. That’s why, over the years, that clan has always been described using the term ‘dao mansion.’” [3]

As Chen Tinghao went on with his explanation, the flying ship got closer and closer to the county capital.