

Timescape 391

Chapter 391: The Great Bird Qingqin

Earlier on the trip, Master Fifth had told Xu Qing a few things about the county capital. However, Chen Tinghao knew about all of these things first-hand, so his description was much more detailed. Thanks to Chen Tinghao, Xu Qing was getting a much better understanding of the major forces operating in the capital.

Groups like the Eight Sect Coalition all had subsidiary sects there. In their respective prefectures, they were the dominant force. But in the capital, they had to bow their heads in subservience. That was because, above them all, there were three even more powerful sects. It could well be said that those three sects were the most powerful in the entire county, which was why their headquarters could be found in the capital itself.

“Those three sects have a lot of disciples who are members of the Swordsage Palace,” Chen Tinghao went on to explain. “In some respects, you could say that those three sects are part of the Swordsage Palace, and will stand by any decisions made by the palace. That relationship is one of the main reasons those three sects have survived for so long in Sea-Sealing County. The two of us are actually disciples of the Supreme Ancient Lightning Order.”

Chen Tinghao then went on to explain more about Yao Mansion. As an aristocratic clan of chosen cultivators, they truly were like high-class nobles.

“Although Heavenly Marquis Yao perished years ago, the reserve powers he had gathered ensured that the Yao Clan was able to survive long after being sent out of the imperial capital. As a result, that clan has long stood tall and proud in Sea-Sealing County alongside the three great sects. However, considering the capital as a whole, the three great sects and the Yao Clan only count as fourth-tier. Above them are two nonhuman species that count as the third tier.”

Chen Tinghao was clearly a straightforward person. And once he found out that Xu Qing and the Captain were fellow swordsages, he let his guard down a bit toward them. It was very different from what Xu Qing was used to dealing with in the sect.

“Those two nonhuman species are the Saintfiends and the Demi-Immortals!” [1]

Upon mentioning those two species, Chen Tinghao’s expression turned slightly grim.

Xu Qing and the Captain both had serious expressions on their faces. As for Master Fifth, who stood off to the side, it was obvious that she was aware of most of these things. That said, none of the other coalition disciples onboard were privy to such details, as none of them had any way of getting information like this.

Sun Liying tucked a stray hair behind her ear and softly said, “Fellow Daoists, once the two of you are in the capital city, you need to be very wary of those two species. The Saintfiends have two faces, one in front and one behind. They look bizarre, but beyond that, are known for their deep thinking abilities.

“As for the Demi-Immortals, they look very similar to humans, except that their hair, eyebrows, and eyes are pure white. They’re extremely arrogant and have astonishing battle prowess.”

Xu Qing nodded and took note of the features of the two nonhuman species.

Chen Tinghao sighed. “Those two species are the strongest in Sea-Sealing County next to humans. They coexist with us thanks to the treaties and agreements brokered by our governor. That said, things can be tense between species, and the conflicts only seem to grow more dramatic over time.

“Regardless, the situation with them is still under control. After all, though Sea-Sealing County is part of the Holytide region, it’s still completely autonomous. Unfortunately, the Holytide species has long been eying us like tigers eying prey.”

“So we’re dealing with internal strife and external aggression!” the Captain exclaimed.

“That’s right,” Chen Tinghao replied, thumping his thigh with his fist. “Internal strife and external aggression. That’s the perfect idiom to describe it.

“Inside Sea-Sealing County, we have two nonhuman species with wild ambitions. Outside the county, we have the Holytide species wanting to either annex or destroy us. If it weren’t for the fact that the afterglow of glory still lingers on humankind, we would long since have been swallowed up. For now, we humans have one region and seven counties, and we can’t afford to lose any of them.”

It had been some time since Xu Qing learned that humankind was in a state of decline. However, this was his first time hearing firsthand what that meant.

“But let’s not dwell on that,” Chen Tinghao said. “Once you’re in the capital, you’ll be able to see the situation with your own eyes.

“Let me keep explaining the power structure of the capital. Next up are the second-tier powers, which are the three palaces. They are the Swordsage Palace, the Administration Palace, and the Justice Palace.

“Our Swordsage Palace is in charge of everything related to battle. Whether it’s war with nonhumans to the arresting of dangerous criminals, it’s all the responsibility of the Swordsage Palace.

“The Administration Palace is in charge of overseeing rites, ceremonies, education, the reading of imperial edicts, and audits. It’s also responsible for keeping a record of the history of humankind.

“Then there’s the Justice Palace, which is responsible for enforcing the law locally and trying criminals. They have their own law enforcement cultivators who have broad investigatory authority.

“We humans have the Five Greater Celestial Divisions and the Nine Minor Terrestrial Divisions. Considering that Sea-Sealing County is only a county-level area, for years now, we’ve only worked with three of the Greater Celestial Divisions. Those three palaces are associated with those specific divisions.”

Xu Qing had known all along that the Swordsage Palace was important in the capital city. However, now that he was hearing they only counted as a second-tier power in the capital, and there was another tier above the three palaces, he had an idea who that first-tier power was.

“The first-tier power is the governor!” said Chen Tinghao solemnly. “Outside the capital, you might hear people claiming that the governor is indecisive and weak. That he’s always compromising. But the truth of the matter is that... we swordsages respect the governor more than anyone other than our palace lord.”

“The governor has led Sea-Sealing County for eight hundred years. Though he hasn’t expanded our borders, he has maintained stability. He’s cautious and conscientious, and has thus ensured that we humans continued to hold thirteen prefectures. That’s a rare thing considering that in the other six counties, they’re constantly dealing with the loss of prefectural territory.” Chen Tinghao took a deep breath, lowered his voice, then continued, “Over the past eight hundred years, the governor has survived forty-seven assassination attempts...”

Xu Qing reacted with visible surprise, and the Captain gasped.

Chen Tinghao let loose a soft sigh and went on to say that Xu Qing and the Captain would have plenty of time to learn more once they were in the capital.

Time continued to pass. The half-month went by quickly. The desert gradually gave way to greener lands. Below the flying ship they saw rolling plains without many mountains. What was more, the mutagen was faint and the spirit energy seemed much stronger than other areas they’d passed through.

The sky was bright blue, without a cloud in sight. Xu Qing stood at the prow looking out at heaven and earth. Everything seemed clear from up here, especially given the view of all the cities below.

For example, the city they were just passing over was filled with smiling people who seemed full of hope regarding life. In other prefectures, where mortals faced a daily struggle just to survive, you rarely saw smiles like that.

“We’re approaching the border of the county capital,” Chen Tinghao said. “Soon we’ll be able to take any of the teleportation portals directly into the city. There’s a public portal complex just up ahead.”

Chen Tinghao pointed, and Xu Qing looked in that direction. A moment later, his eyes shone brightly.

The Captain’s eyebrows rose, and the other disciples suddenly had very serious looks on their faces.

In the direction Chen Tinghao had pointed, there were gray clouds that spread out wide enough to cover an entire city. As the clouds rippled, it was possible to see a huge bird within them.

It was very strange-looking. It had three heads, each of which looked incredibly vicious. Its abdomen was large while its wings were small. Its feathers were in a complete mess, and yet, astonishing godly fluctuations rolled out from it in all directions. The bird held something in its claws, though it was hard to see clearly what it was. It was flying right toward the flying ship, kicking up intense whirlwinds around it along the way.

“It’s Senior Qingqin!” Chen Tinghao said, looking surprised. “Senior Qingqin was a friend of the previous governor. Eight hundred years ago, when that governor returned to the imperial capital, he invited Senior Qingqin to go along. He didn’t, and instead stayed behind in Sea-Sealing County. You’ll occasionally see him flying around. He’s an ancient mutant beast with a bloodline that traces back to the era of the Ancient Emperors. In fact, some people say that one of his ancestors was actually a follower of one of the Ancient Emperors.” [2]

As Chen Tinghao offered this explanation, the great bird got closer and closer, whereupon screaming could be heard coming from the direction of its claws.

“Help! Help me! I’m a swordsage! The Grand Emperor gave me a 180-meter beam of light!”

The shrill, terrified voice actually sounded familiar to Xu Qing.

Similarly, the Captain’s eyes glittered. “Is that Ning Yan? Is that bird trying to eat him?” [3]

Given that Ning Yan had previously attacked Xu Qing, Xu Qing wasn’t inclined to pay much attention to him.

However, when Chen Tinghao heard Ning Yan’s words, he clasped hands toward the great bird Qingqin. “Exalted Qingqin, please, quell your anger! Would it be possible to check if this person is really a swordsage? If he is, then I would like to humbly request that you spare him...”

Xu Qing looked oddly at Chen Tinghao, as did the Captain. Then the Captain gave Xu Qing a look that said, “He doesn’t know him at all, but once he hears he’s a swordsage, he offers to help him?”

Xu Qing suddenly looked thoughtful.

Sun Liying could guess what the two of them were thinking and softly said, “You’ll be treated the same way.”

Then she hurried over to Chen Tinghao’s side and also offered greetings to the bird.

The Captain was on guard. Perhaps all swordsages acted like this. But considering he only received a one-meter light, he was skeptical that anyone would save him like this. That was why he hadn’t said much on the journey, as he was worried it might somehow cause the topic of conversation to shift to that light of his.

Arch-Immortal Plumdark stepped out onto the main deck and walked over to Xu Qing’s side, where she looked out vigilantly.

After Chen Tinghao and Sun Liying offered greetings, the great bird soared in a circle, looking down at the flying ship with its three heads and six eyes. It seemed to be looking at something in particular. Then it opened its claws.

Ning Yan screamed shrilly as he fell. Chen Tinghao flew out and caught him, then brought him back onto the flying ship. Meanwhile, the great bird let loose an unpleasant squawk, then flapped its little wings and headed back into the clouds.

Why did I get the sensation it was looking at me? the Captain thought.

Off to the side, Wu Jianwu nodded vigorously, and he seemed somewhat dazzled. It was looking at me! Could it be... that it recognized the aura of Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity?

Xu Qing stood there without saying a word.

Chen Tinghao kept a firm grip on Ning Yan as he prepared to ask him about his identity. The terrified Ning Yan, meanwhile, had noticed Xu Qing and the Captain. Instantly, his eyes went wide, and a tremor passed through them. Then he dramatically struggled briefly as if he thought he might somehow free himself.

Surprised, Chen Tinghao looked at Xu Qing and the Captain. "You know him?"

"Yeah," the Captain replied. "This fellow is from Emperor-Receiving Prefecture as well. He's our adjunct swordsage." The Captain managed to put special emphasis on the word 'adjunct.'

With a smile, Chen Tinghao released Ning Yan onto the deck of the ship.

Xu Qing looked at him coldly.

Ning Yan started shivering even more dramatically. Inside, he was full of grief and indignation. It hadn't been easy making the journey to this place. Then, immediately upon arriving, he was suddenly snatched up by that unreasonable bird. Now he was free, yet somehow things had become infinitely worse as he was now face-to-face with someone who would seek revenge over the smallest grievance. Xu Qing.

As profound anxiety gripped his heart, he looked over and saw Arch-Immortal Plumdark. Eyes suddenly lighting up, he ran over and flopped to the ground in front of her.

"Matriarch! Ma'am, I've finally found you!"

Chapter 392: Jailers

It was quite unexpected for Ning Yan to rush over and drop to his knees.

However, Arch-Immortal Plumdark looked at him coolly, as though she were accustomed to his actions. "Dark Serenity Sect?"

"Brilliant, Matriarch! I am indeed a disciple from a Dark Serenity Sect. And back when I was in my sect, I always admired the matriarch who presides over all 3,700 of Emperor-Receiving Prefecture's Dark Serenity Sects!"

The Captain had an odd expression on his face, and Xu Qing's brow was furrowed. Both of them were thinking of the unique characteristics of the Dark Serenity Sects. Because of Ancient Emperor

Dark Serenity himself, there were many versions of the Dark Serenity Sect. Some were big, some were small. But as long as they had some connection to the Ancient Emperor, they would call themselves Dark Serenity Sect. Back in the Supreme Arbiter Salvation Mountains, the Captain and Xu Qing had run into one such sect. [1]

Obviously, Ning Yan was from a sect like that. All it would take was a glance from Arch-Immortal Plumdark to know that he cultivated Dark Serenity Sect techniques. As a result, he was essentially a fellow adherent.

Arch-Immortal Plumdark nodded. "You'll come with us the rest of the way."

Ning Yan suddenly looked a lot more flustered. He didn't want to come along, but at the same time, couldn't refuse. All he could do was shrink off to the side and avert his gaze from Xu Qing. He was so nervous he looked like a frightened bird.

Xu Qing looked him up and down and decided to find a time when the two of them were alone to settle accounts.

However, the Captain's eyes glittered excitedly as he slowly circled Ning Yan. "Something's off about you, ya little punk. You got snatched up by that big bird, yet didn't die. What's more, you're not even wounded."

"Elder Brother Chen," Ning Yan quickly explained, "I achieved ancestral awakening when I was much younger, so my bloodline provides automatic defenses in situations like that."

When the Captain heard that, he licked his lips, then threw his head back and laughed heartily. Throwing his arm around Ning Yan's neck, he lowered his voice.

"You don't need to be scared of Xu Qing. I'm his Eldest Brother. Back at the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar, you probably heard the rumors about how much Xu Qing respects me. Well, guess what? Those rumors couldn't be more true. Going forward, you just do what I say and you'll be fine. If you're my bro, then that means Xu Qing is your bro too! And what's the most important thing between bros? Camaraderie! Am I right? Am I?"

Not daring to disagree, Ning Yan nodded.

Xu Qing watched what was going on and got a sudden sense of *déjà vu*, as if he had witnessed this very scene play out before in the past. He looked over at Wu Jianwu.

Wu Jianwu was visibly stunned, and seemed to be recalling his own past misfortunes. He also seemed to feel bad for Ning Yan.

The Captain continued to work his magic on Ning Yan as the flying ship got closer and closer to the teleportation complex Chen Tinghao had mentioned earlier.

As it turned out, that specific location was the final point on the Eight Sect Coalition's itinerary.

“After this teleportation we’ll be in the county capital,” Chen Tinghao said. “Xu Qing, I just got some details from a friend of mine in the palace.... And thanks to that, I just found out... that you got a 30,000-meter pillar of light!”

Chen Tinghao looked visibly taken aback. He had been out on a mission for so long, and had been so far away from the capital, that his transmission jade slip didn’t connect. Because of that, he wasn’t up-to-date on the latest news.

“There are still a lot of things about the capital I don’t understand,” Xu Qing said sincerely. “If I mess up in any way, I hope that you can give me some tips, Big Bro Chen.” He clasped hands respectfully.

“That goes without saying! Xu Qing, that 30,000-meter pillar of light is unprecedented in Sea-Sealing County. Do you know what that means?” Chen Tinghao’s eyes shone with a healthy envy.

Xu Qing shook his head.

“It means that you’re completely trustworthy and have a righteous heart. That’s going to have a big effect on your post assignment.” Chen Tinghao sighed.

“Post assignment?” Xu Qing said. He was aware that he would be assigned to hold a post when he arrived, but he wasn’t sure about the details.

“The rules state that all new swordsages must hold a post for three years before they can go on important missions. After you arrive, all of you will swear oaths of office and then be assigned posts. All assignments are different, and the military credits you can earn with them varies widely. That’s why your post assignment is so important.

“When all is said and done, we swordsages are inextricably tied to military credit! There are some departments such as Patrol or Inspection where it’s really easy to earn military credits. Intelligence and Law Enforcement are also great places. But there are some departments focused on internal affairs where there aren’t many chances for military credits.

“There’s one specific post where the military credits are even easier to earn. Usually they don’t assign new recruits to that post, only old-timers. And the post is only given out by official dharmic decree from the palace lord.” Chen Tinghao’s eyes gleamed with fascination. “That assignment required an absolutely clean background as well as a pure heart.”

Xu Qing looked curiously at Chen Tinghao.

“I’m talking about the jailers!” Chen Tinghao said.

“Jailers?” Xu Qing asked, not sure what he meant.

“Yeah, jailers. The jailers of the Corrections Division. Once you’re at the capital, you’ll understand. One of the biggest unique features of the capital is the Corrections Division’s massive prison!” Chen Tinghao smiled proudly. “The people the Corrections Division have locked up include the vilest fiends from all species imaginable. They also have grues in there. It’s Sea-Sealing County’s largest prison, and all the inmates are cruel, murderous villains. Yet the mere mention of the jailers will make their faces fall.

“You see, the people from the Corrections Division have a saying. ‘We’re only jailers.’ That’s why people took to calling them that. Their name strikes fear into the hearts of all villains.” At this point, the look in Chen Tinghao’s eyes became one of pure anticipation. “One of the patriarchs from my sect was once appointed by the palace lord to be a jailer. Sadly, a number of years ago the old man died in the line of duty.” [2]

Chen Tinghao shook his head. “There’s no way you’ll be assigned to the Corrections Division, Xu Qing. Though the jailers are special, you’re even more special than that. As a swordsage who provoked a 30,000-meter pillar of light, people are going to have high expectations for you. When I see you in the future, I’ll definitely have to hold my sword up in salute.”

Xu Qing looked off into the distance. He didn’t care much about posts and assignments. Now that he was on the verge of entering the capital, complex emotions tugged at his heart.

“Big Bro Chen,” he asked, “where is Mount Daybreak?”

“Mount Daybreak?” Chen Tinghao looked at Xu Qing. “It’s in Daybreak Prefecture, which is only one prefecture away from the county capital. That mountain has long been one of the Swordsage Palace’s training grounds, a place outsiders aren’t allowed to enter. And even swordsages who want to go there have to pay a good amount of military credit.

“The reason is that it’s also the location of a palace belonging to one of the ancient suns. That sun also perished there. As a result, streams of light from the final moments before the sun perished will occasionally emerge there from the River of Ancient Time. [3]

“Those streams of light contain dao resonances, and are inherently high-level ingredients for equipment forging and pill concocting. They’re not very common, and each time they do emerge, the information about them is recorded.”

Xu Qing’s eyes narrowed slightly. Though he maintained a calm exterior, his heart was racing as he got the first concrete information about Mount Daybreak.

Chen Tinghao didn’t ask Xu Qing why he was interested in Mount Daybreak. However, he did offer a reminder. “If you want to visit Mount Daybreak, you need to build up a lot of military credit.”

Xu Qing nodded.

As they continued to chat, the flying ship reached the teleportation portal. Arch-Immortal Plumdark emerged again. Putting away the flying ship, she led the group of over a hundred cultivators down to the ground. There, they found an ancient teleportation portal that was shaped like an altar. It was huge, colored dark gray, and covered with a mesh of designs that glowed brightly.

The swordsages on duty were familiar with Chen Tinghao, and called out cheerful greetings when they saw him. A few of them even stepped over to embrace him. This display of affection gave Xu Qing a deeper understanding of what the swordsages were about.

Before long, all the arrangements were made and the coalition delegation stepped onto the portal. Bright light shone up, and the final teleportation of the journey began.

When they materialized, they were right outside of the capital itself!

The first thing they saw was a heaven-shaking, earth-shattering statue. It depicted Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity, boundlessly spectacular, and large enough to prop up heaven and earth. In fact, the statue was so massive that they seemed like specks of dust in front of it. And any mortal who tried to take in the statue as a whole wouldn't be able to; they wouldn't be able to see to the top. Its feet were planted firmly on the ground and its head was in the dome of heaven. The clouds floated around its waist, requiring the eyes of cultivators to take in its full glory. The statue's arms were outstretched as if to embrace heaven and earth. Astonishingly, between the two hands floated a massive city. It was the county capital. The city was so large that it could fit the entire Eight Sect Coalition within it several times over. And it glowed so brightly that it created a sea of light around it.

Floating in positions around the city were three palaces. Though they weren't as large as the capital city itself, if they were placed anywhere else, they would be considered monumentally colossal.

When Xu Qing saw the city and the three palaces, he was shaken deeply.

What was even more shocking, though, were the lands below. Beneath the floating city, surrounding the feet of the statue, the land itself was smooth and reflective, almost like a mirror. And beneath that mirror... was a gargantuan subterranean prison. The prison was beneath the partially transparent mirror, so that anyone floating above would be able to see the prison, which had multiple levels, and sank down into the earth like a chasm.

That was the very same Corrections Division Chen Tinghao had just mentioned, which served as the number one prison in Sea-Sealing County!

Floating in between the prison and the city was an enormous bronze sword. It was majestic and world-shaking, with dazzling sword light that shone in all directions.

Carved on the sword was the character 'yuan.' Astonishingly, this was a swordsage sword. As the massive sword rotated in the air above the prison and below the city, it emanated terrifying pressure.

[4]

There was more. There were also buildings on the ground which were equally eye-catching. They were pentagonal sword pavilions which were set up around the prison! The sword pavilions were arranged in concentric circles, in a very precise fashion. As for their height, they varied greatly. The

tallest of the sword pavilions came close to touching the city itself, while the smallest were only a few dozen meters in height.

There were hundreds of thousands of them, each a few thousand meters away from the next, creating several dozen rings around the prison.

“Those are sword pavilions,” Chen Tinghao explained. “When new swordsages from various places in Sea-Sealing County come here to check in, they usually stab their command sword into the ground there to create a sword pavilion. That’s also where we swordsages usually reside!

“As long as a swordsage lives, their sword pavilion will stand. But if a swordsage dies in battle, then a special ceremony is carried out, and an honor guard will give a special speech. After that, the sword pavilion will fade away.

“Welcome, all of you, to the capital city of Sea-Sealing County, and the headquarters of the swordsages!”

Chen Tinghao laughed heartily, offered a salute, and was about to leave when he realized that the Eight Sect Coalition seemed to be waiting for someone. Specifically, they were waiting for people from the subsidiary sect to come receive them. For one thing, Arch-Immortal Plumdark was present, and decorum required an escort for her. But beyond that, it wasn’t permitted to simply come and go in the capital. New arrivals needed to be escorted in.

Based on the earlier arrangements that had been made, the subsidiary sect should have sent someone in advance to meet them. But even after they waited for a time, they didn’t see anyone.

Arch-Immortal Plumdark’s eyes shone with a mysterious light. Not even sending a message via transmission jade slip got any response.

“Something must have gone wrong,” Master Fifth said grimly.

The current leader of the subsidiary sect wasn’t at the patriarch level, and thus wouldn’t possibly dare to slight Arch-Immortal Plumdark. There was only one explanation. Something had indeed gone wrong in the subsidiary sect.

Xu Qing’s eyes narrowed. He had only just arrived, and things were already going wrong. It couldn’t be a coincidence.

Is someone targeting us?

A cold, grim look appeared in the Captain’s eyes as he looked over at Xu Qing. Xu Qing looked back, his eyes narrowing further.

Chapter 393: Showing Off Meager Skill to an Expert

To be certain about something requires more than just speculation and intuition. It was technically possible there was some other reason the subsidiary sect hadn’t sent people to receive the delegation. There was one simple way to find out the truth, and that would be to go check in person.

Arch-Immortal Plumdark looked up at the floating capital city. Because the subsidiary sect was nowhere to be seen, they had no escort, and thus couldn't go up to the city. That said, such a matter could be easily resolved by someone like Arch-Immortal Plumdark.

Off to the side, Master Fifth's eyes glittered with grim light. The other disciples present also had similar looks, and many of them were glancing out of the corners of their eyes at Xu Qing and the Captain.

When Chen Tinghao and Sun Liying realized something unusual was going on, they inquired about the details. After hearing about the situation, Chen Tinghao said, "Senior Plumdark, Fellow Daoist Xu Qing, Fellow Daoist Erniu, I can make some inquiries and find out if something happened in your subsidiary sect. In the meantime, if all you need is an escort, we can help."

He quickly took out a transmission jade slip.

As he did, Xu Qing and the Captain clasped hands and bowed thankfully.

Arch-Immortal Plumdark nodded. She would rather not call on her contacts in the city on the very first day, especially not for the sake of merely entering. Most importantly, the county capital was home to countless powerful experts. That meant that she couldn't be as casual as she was back in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture.

In this place, caution had to be maintained at all times. That was especially true when having just arrived. Therefore, the first order of business was to find out what exactly was going on with the Eight Sect Coalition's subsidiary sect.

Thanks to Chen Tinghao, it didn't take long before three beams of light shot down from the city above.

They resolved into three people, all wearing dark brown uniforms, with lightning circling around them. They didn't seem like swordsages, and were clearly fellow members of Chen Tinghao's sect. Chen Tinghao helped with the introductions, confirming that they were from the Supreme Ancient Lightning Order, and explaining that they were on patrol duty at the moment.

When the three newcomers learned that Xu Qing and the Captain were new swordsages, they became even more polite. Looking very respectful, they led the coalition delegation up into the city.

To the always-observant Xu Qing, this interaction gave him yet further understanding of the status of swordsages.

At the same time, he kept his eyes on the city, which drew closer and closer. It was roughly circular in layout, with huge walls around the edges, all of which glittered with countless magical symbols. As they got closer, the pressure radiating from the wall weighed down on them as their identities were confirmed.

With Chen Tinghao and the three Patrol cultivators there to vouch for them, there were no problems. In no time, they were inside the city.

Although the city was massive, everything was orderly. The streets and buildings alike were generally constructed from green jade bricks. Magenta rooftops were the most common. Every single building was impressive, from the big ones with huge outer courtyards, to the small ones that looked like single-room residences. Whether it was in terms of the size or style of the city, it was something the Eight Sect Coalition couldn't compare to. There was just something fundamentally

different about them. The place seemed magnificent, but at the same time, naturally solemn and serene. At the same time, thanks to the spirit trees that decorated the streets, the atmosphere was also elegant and refined. Every brick, tile, leaf, and plant emanated strong spirit energy that filled the city. There were both mortals and cultivators present, and the streets were bubbling and full of life.

There were two things about the city that Xu Qing found particularly surprising.

The first was that, because the city floated roughly at the level of the statue of Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity's chest, when he looked up, he didn't see the broken face of the god. Nor did he see the sun or moon. Instead, he saw the statue's face. The statue seemed holy, with eyes that took in all living things. His expression seemed to be one of pity, as if he could look into the hearts of all the people in the city.

The second thing Xu Qing found surprising was that as soon as he was in the city, he could sense that he was at the apex of Sea-Sealing County. His body, his soul, and everything else about him seemed somehow connected to Sea-Sealing County. It was an inimitably strange feeling that was different from anything he had felt in any other city. What was more, he wasn't even at the highest spot in the county.

"It's the power of destiny aura," Arch-Immortal Plumdark said quietly. "As a capital city, and the core of Sea-Sealing County, this place is a convergence spot for the destiny aura of the county. Some people think 'destiny aura' isn't real, the fact of the matter is that it really exists. That said, it usually converges only for the most orthodox representations of a species. Normally speaking, ordinary sects can't use it."

Xu Qing listened thoughtfully.

As they proceeded on their way, Chen Tinghao explained a few more things. "The capital is divided into nine rings and seventy-seven districts. You'll figure it all out pretty quickly, so I won't go into detail."

As they hurried on their way to the subsidiary sect, Chen Tinghao refrained from any further explanations. After confirming the location of the subsidiary sect, he led them in that direction as quickly as possible.

The Eight Sect Coalition's subsidiary sect was located in the southwestern part of the county capital, in District 59. It was a somewhat remote location relatively far away from the city center. From the outside, it looked impressive, with a large courtyard filled with decorative rocks and flowing streams. That said, there were no disciples present, and the front gate was sealed with sealing strips of black paper. [1]

When the coalition disciples saw the sealing strips, their expressions turned unsightly. Arch-Immortal Plumdark looked at them, and without any change to her facial expression took out a jade slip to contact people she knew in the city.

Those sealing strips explained everything. Something had indeed gone wrong with the subsidiary sect.

Zhang Siyun? thought Xu Qing. He looked at the Captain, and the Captain looked back at him. Their eyes continued to narrow.

Both he and Xu Qing had started out in the Violent Crimes Division, and they had seen and used sealing strips on many occasions. Generally speaking, when a place was sealed by the authorities, it indicated that there was an ongoing investigation and no one was allowed inside. To encounter such a situation on their first day in the capital made it seem highly likely someone was targeting them. As for who it was... after some thought, Xu Qing came to the conclusion that Zhang Siyun definitely had the motive and power.

After all, the unusual way in which Zhang Siyun had been recruited went to show that he had powerful connections in the capital city.

Upon seeing the sealing strip, Chen Tinghao frowned and started sending messages with his jade slip. His three fellow disciples did the same.

The county capital was a massive place, such that most people only knew what was happening in their own administrative district. That said, big cities always had underworld figures who brokered information. Therefore, it didn't take long for the details to come to light.

Eyebrows shooting up, Chen Tinghao said, "Seven days ago, the Justice Palace accused your subsidiary sect of the crime of 'overstepping authority.' They were all taken in for interrogation."

A moment later, Arch-Immortal Plumdark got even more detailed information from her contacts. "The orders came down from Yao Yunhui, director of the Justice Palace's Division 3. The charge of 'overstepping authority' is vague and can be applied in many situations. Obviously, they're doing this for a reason. Xu Qing, what's the surname of the new swordsage from the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society?" [2]

"Zhang," Xu Qing growled. "Zhang Siyun!"

"Is there friction between the two of you?" she asked.

He nodded. "Yes."

"He's likely behind this. A good friend of mine looked into it and confirmed that Yao Yunhui is from the Yao Clan. The fact that she married someone from the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society caused a big stir a while back. Her daoist partner was named Zhang, and not too long ago the two of them had a son." Arch-Immortal Plumdark's eyes glittered with cold light.

Master Fifth spoke, her voice hoarse. "This accusation of overstepping authority isn't about the subsidiary sect. It's about Xu Qing!"

"It seems to me this whole thing was arranged in a rush," the Captain said. "Seven days isn't enough time for a thorough interrogation. Little Ah Qing, back when we were in Violent Crimes, how would we handle a situation like this?"

"Plan everything out in secret. Then attack with deadly force."

"Exactly. With strength on our side, we didn't need to make complicated schemes. We would just go in and arrest the culprit. The only reason someone would play things like this would be that they're scared. Otherwise, it would make more sense to take

things slow. Make more preparations and contingencies. Don't beat the grass to startle the snake. Wait for the perfect moment to strike a mortal blow. Don't give your opponent the chance to fight back. Rip them up by the roots." The Captain licked his lips. "Given how anxious they seem, I bet their true purpose is good old mud-slinging. They arrest the first group and wait for the true target to arrive. Then they tell the true target that if they don't submit to questioning they'll be interfering with the investigation. They'll act very domineering in the hopes that the target will get angry and resist arrest. Back in the Violent Crimes Division, we rarely resorted to such crude tactics."

"Why go to all that trouble?" Wu Jianwu asked, looking confused.

Off to the side, Ning Yan rolled his eyes contemptuously.

"To get the target close and hopefully turn a minor matter into a big deal," the Captain said. "By embellishing a bit, they can justify arresting the target. The only alternative is to take things slowly." Voice turning cold, he looked at Xu Qing and said, "Little Ah Qing, how do you plan to handle this?"

"It'll be simple," Xu Qing said calmly.

"Right. Handling it won't be complicated. The question is how to strike back."

"How about a modified version of the Pilot Assistance Division event?" [3]

The Captain grinned. "Interesting. I can't believe anyone would dare to plot against Violent Crimes veterans like you and me!"

Upon hearing their words, the surrounding disciples inhaled sharply. Chen Tinghao did the same, then cast a deep look at Xu Qing and the Captain. Meanwhile, Arch-Immortal Plumdark's eyes shone with praise, and Master Fifth smiled.

"Zhang Siyun's mother should be sending people here at any moment," Xu Qing said. He looked off into the distance.

Sure enough, two people were rushing toward them from the nearby intersection. Before they even arrived, their somber aura settled over the area.

"Here they are," the Captain said, his eyes shining.

The two new arrivals wore blue uniforms with black capes. They were obviously the uniforms of the Swordsage Palace, but were designed to make those wearing them look like officers of the law. Their expressions were grim as they completely ignored Arch-Immortal Plumdark and focused solely on Xu Qing.

"You're Xu Qing?" said one.

"We're officers from the Justice Palace," the other continued, "in charge of interrogating the subsidiary sect of the Eight Sect Coalition. Xu Qing, you are

suspected of being involved in the overstepping of authority, and we hereby serve you with a subpoena. You will come to the Justice Palace for questioning.”

“If you resist,” the first one went on, “we have the authority to use lethal force. If you refuse to answer our questions, we will bring the full weight of Justice Palace law against you. If anyone interferes with his matter, they will be crushed according to the law.”

Both of these people were in the Gold Core level with six heavenly palaces. And they were intentionally projecting their voices so all the passersby could hear.

However, after speaking, they didn’t immediately try to lay hands on Xu Qing. Instead, they looked around at the other coalition disciples, and especially Arch-Immortal Plumdark, as if waiting for them to react in some way.

Chen Tinghao and all the coalition disciples, meanwhile, were looking at Xu Qing and the Captain. As it turned out... things were playing out exactly as they had predicted.

Xu Qing had served in the Violent Crimes for three years. He had started out as an ordinary constable, then ended up as the director of the Seventh Peak’s Violent Crimes Division. He was therefore familiar with all the complicated formalities involved in a situation like this. The Captain had been in Violent Crimes for even longer.

Xu Qing turned to Arch-Immortal Plumdark and clasped hands. “Senior, I can handle this matter. Don’t worry.”

After then clasping hands to Master Fifth and Chen Tinghao, and casting a glance in the Captain’s direction, he walked toward the Justice Palace officers.

Chapter 394: Xu Qing Strikes Back

“Lead the way,” Xu Qing said calmly.

His actions caused the Justice Palace officers’ eyes to narrow. They looked him up and down suspiciously, then looked around with gritted teeth. Finally, they produced a set of vicious-looking restraints and walked toward Xu Qing.

Xu Qing simply stood there thoughtfully.

Meanwhile, the Captain observed with raised eyebrows. Based on how unreasonable these two officers were being, it was obvious to Xu Qing and the Captain what they were trying to do. The Captain smiled faintly.

Xu Qing didn’t resist in any way. He let the officers place the restraints on him, and then he started walking. Because he wasn’t walking fast enough, one of the officers yelled at him to speed up. Xu Qing turned, looked him deeply in the eyes, but didn’t say anything. Then he left with them.

Arch-Immortal Plumdark watched all this happening, and chose to trust that Xu Qing could handle the situation. However, she also sent messages to some friends of hers, and used her own methods to provide an added measure of protection.

Chen Tinghao did the same. Though he wasn't a very warm-hearted person in general, he was warm-hearted toward other swordsages. And because this matter now involved the Swordsage Palace, he needed to report it.

"Everybody stay calm," the Captain said. "They're obviously trying to smear little Ah Qing. The evidence is too obvious, and their methods are simply clumsy. If their crude tactics actually work on little Junior Brother, then our years in Violent Crimes will have been a total waste. I'd say things will be cleared up in three to five days. When the time comes, just trust me and follow my lead."

The Captain watched Xu Qing go, and a fire burned in his heart. This was the first time he had ever been forced to watch his own Junior Brother being arrested and taken away in front of his own eyes.

Outside the county capital, in one of the three floating palaces that was the Justice Palace, Zhang Siyun nervously waited in the side chamber of a palace hall in Division 3. He was standing off to the side looking visibly anxious. It was a side of him that no outsider had ever seen. Normally he was grim, cold, and calculating. There was only one person who could get him to act this way, and that was his mother, Yao Yunhui.

She currently sat at a table leafing through some of the Justice Palace's files. [1]

Though she was obviously a human woman, her long black hair, skin as fair as snow, and beautiful face made her seem like an immortal fairy from a painting. She was so stunningly attractive that she didn't seem to have any traces of mortality on her. In fact, she didn't look so much like Zhang Siyun's mother as his sister. She sat with her waist slightly bent, accentuating her ample bosom and stunning curves.

Zhang Siyun hardly dared to breathe as he stood there waiting.

Some time passed. Eventually, someone knocked at the door.

"Enter," said Yao Yunhui.

The two cultivators who had left to get Xu Qing respectfully entered and dropped to their knees in front of her.

"Our respects, exalted one."

"Exalted one, we brought Xu Qing and locked him up. Unfortunately, no one from his sect interfered. Nor did Xu Qing resist arrest.... As of now we're not really sure what to do next."

Putting down the file she had been reading, she looked up and said, "This little sect isn't brainless after all. Well, there's nothing to do for now. Just keep him locked up."

When she looked at them, the two cultivators felt their hearts pounding. Though they often had a chance to see their superior, every time they did, they couldn't help but react this way. Her fatal beauty was just too enticing. That said, they were fully aware of how ruthless she was. Shivering, they voiced their consent and quickly left.

When Zhang Siyun saw his mother's subordinates leave, he couldn't control his emotions and looked at her with eager expectation. Everything that was happening resulted from his explanation to his mother about why he had failed so spectacularly in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. That was why the Eight Sect Coalition's subsidiary sect had been brought in. His mother had made all the arrangements. The plan had been to first seize everyone from the subsidiary sect on trumped up charges, all with the goal of getting to Xu Qing.

Now that Xu Qing had been brought in, Zhang Siyun's mind was racing. "Mother, don't forget that Xu Qing has two life lamps. He—"

"Shut up!" she said coolly.

Zhang Siyun was stricken to the core and didn't dare speak any further.

"Your father was pathetic, and I'd hoped you would be better than him. Come to find, you're just as pathetic. You couldn't even take a swordsage command sword? You just had to rely on special help from your Sect Grandfather?"

Zhang Siyun bowed his head bitterly.

Yao Yunhui looked at her son and sighed. She truly was disappointed with him. "Yun'er, you need to do things one step at a time. That Xu Qing got a 30,000-meter pillar of light. He earned the veneration of the Grand Emperor, and the Swordsage Palace's Dao Bell tolled for him. Everyone saw it. His actions earned face for all of Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. Do you really think you can just casually make a move on him?"

"You're on a fishing expedition?" Zhang Siyun asked thoughtfully.

"So, you're not a complete idiot. Yes. The first purpose of locking him up is to see who interferes to help him, and who just looks on coldly. After all, I refuse to believe that everyone was happy about that 30,000-meter pillar of light.

"This Xu Qing is the type of person you need to take care of right away, when he first starts out. Once he officially joins the swordsages, he'll be difficult to deal with.

"Matters like these can't be handled with undue haste. Furthermore, in circumstances like these, you can't just accuse him of a crime. The second reason why I had him locked up has nothing to do with crimes. No more than three days from now, I'll let him go, stating that the matter needs to be investigated further. I'll also release everyone from the subsidiary sect.

"However, because the investigation is 'ongoing,' his permanent record will have a blemish. People will be suspicious of him. It will cast a shadow on that 30,000-meter pillar of light. Of course, that won't be enough. Going forward, we'll continue to besmirch him, creating so many blemishes on his record that the 30,000-meter light will become less and less important. And then, we can finally make arrangements for him to experience a little accident.

“By then, no one will say a thing about it. As for his life lamps, there’s no way you can just directly take them. Figure out another way. After they’ve been handed over officially, you can use military credits to get them. That’s the most aboveboard way to handle it. Success isn’t about going around fighting and killing all the time. You have a lot to learn in this regard.”

Yao Yunhui's soft voice sounded like water from a deep, clear spring. However, it was a pitch-black spring full of poison.

Hearing her words, Zhang Siyun inhaled deeply, then clasped hands and bowed.

Somewhere in the Justice Palace’s prison, Xu Qing sat cross-legged in a cell, looking around calmly. This place was nothing like the Corrections Division. In fact, this prison was a lot more like the cell blocks back in the Violent Crimes Division. There weren’t many prisoners, but because of the lack of air circulation, the place stank. It was also cold and humid.

Because of Xu Qing’s cultivation base, the restraints that had been placed upon him didn’t completely suppress him. What was more, he had plenty of ways to completely restore his cultivation base if he wanted. Among them were his shadow, his taboo poison, or the power of the violet moon.

But he wasn’t in a hurry. Having seen how everything was playing out, he was absolutely convinced that this matter was targeting him specifically. It also went to show how important the 30,000-meter pillar of light was. All he had to do was put himself in his enemy’s shoes, and everything made sense.

They’re trying to smear me. And they’re doing it in a way that doesn’t seem obvious. But in the end, they’re trying to erode the protection I have from that 30,000-meter pillar of light. It’s not a bad plan. It’s just being badly executed.

Xu Qing shook his head. If he was right, then it would only be a few more days until he was released as part of an ‘ongoing investigation.’ However, because the matter wasn’t fully resolved, it would leave a blemish on his official record. In an orthodox organization that represented all of humanity, one’s background needed to be spotless. But now, he would have two things on his record: a 30,000-meter pillar of light, and a tiny blemish.

Though some people might not think a blemish like that mattered, it would definitely have repercussions later. And that was what his enemy was trying to do. Although it seemed like an ingenious plan, the person perpetrating it lacked true finesse.

Xu Qing’s eyes shone with cold light. It wouldn’t be hard to deal with the situation. But he wasn’t the type of person who just ‘dealt’ with things. He was the kind who struck back. Even back in the slums, if someone was openly hostile, then he would either kill them immediately, or figure out a way to make them hurt.

One good example was when Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior had been chasing him. He could have simply fled. Instead, he razed the Golden Vajra Warrior Sect to the ground. That was how Xu Qing operated. [2]

Of course, different circumstances warranted different ways of striking back.

Having reached this point in his train of thought, Xu Qing closed his eyes. He had already decided how he would strike back.

Three days passed by in a flash.

The subsidiary sect disciples who had been locked up for ten days were in foul moods as they were released. During that time, they had been interrogated. However, the questions had all been very vague. In fact, even now, they didn't have any idea why they had really been brought in for questioning. Upon emerging from the Justice Palace, they found that Arch-Immortal Plumdark was waiting for them, along with a small retinue of others.

“Greetings, Arch-Immortal!” said the subsidiary sect leader, who was originally from the coalition's eighth sect. Feeling profoundly embarrassed, he hurried forward, clasped hands and bowed.

Arch-Immortal Plumdark nodded in response, and took note of the fact that Xu Qing was not in the group that had been released. It was the same with Master Fifth.

Only the Captain seemed extremely nervous, although he managed to secretly wink at Wu Jianwu. Wu Jianwu quickly took out a jade slip to record images.

Chen Tinghao was also present, but he wasn't alone. He had brought nearly a dozen swordsages with whom he was friendly.

“Where's Xu Qing?”

That was what everyone was wondering. However, they didn't have to wait long. A moment later, the two Justice Palace officers who had arrested him appeared, shoving Xu Qing between the two of them as they emerged.

“A 30,000-meter pillar of light, yet you're still suspected of overstepping authority?” one of them said coldly. “I'd say you got off lucky this time.”

“Going forward,” the other said, his voice equally cold, “I really hope you think things through. This matter is over for now, but the case isn't closed.”

With that, they prepared to remove Xu Qing's restraints.

However, before they could, Xu Qing shivered, his eyes went slack, and he coughed up a massive mouthful of blood. As the blood splashed onto the ground in shocking fashion, a cloud of blood erupted from Xu Qing as countless wounds opened up all over him. Every single wound was absolutely horrific, and cut all the way down to the bone. It looked like someone had tried to cover them up with a magical technique. But now they were visible for everyone to see. There were wounds all over his face, his neck, and every visible patch of skin. It was only possible to imagine how many more wounds were underneath his clothes. In fact, there was so much blood that his clothing was instantly soaked.

The obvious impression that anyone would get was that Xu Qing had been sadistically tortured during his three days in confinement. Whoever had done the torturing was obviously completely devoid of conscience, and had nearly skinned him alive.

What was worse, he clearly had injuries to his internal organs. Many of his bones were broken, so much so that he couldn't stand, and immediately fell to the ground. He was obviously gasping for breath, and very close to being dead!

This was Xu Qing's method of striking back. It was just like the saying when striking a snake, hit it in a vital spot. When he struck back, he wanted his enemy to suffer so badly they wouldn't ever consider trying to turn a small matter into a big one. It was similar to the Pilot Assistance Division incident, back when he had secretly helped Huang Yan by using a pebble to deflect a dagger. Back then, Huang Yan's melodrama, and willingness to take a beating, had brought a lot of attention to the situation. That was what Xu Qing was doing here. Of course, he needed help from the Captain. But Xu Qing had no worries at all about whether or not the Captain would come through.

"Xu Qing!!" the Captain howled. Rushing forward, he dropped to his knees and scooped Xu Qing up into his arms.

Xu Qing looked faint as he again coughed up blood. More blood oozed out of his wounds. He looked completely listless, as though he were barely hanging onto consciousness.

Those wounds were all real. There was nothing fake about them. Whether the wounds to his flesh, or those to his organs, they were completely authentic. What was more, there were cracks in his heavenly palaces. Even worse, the restraints that had been placed on him sealed the power of his cultivation base. With those restraints on him, there was no way he could have inflicted these wounds on himself. And that meant there was only one explanation....

Tugging his hair into disarray in a show of anguish, the Captain howled, "Justice Palace! What horrific crime did my Junior Brother Xu Qing commit for you to punish him so cruelly, for you to discipline him so maliciously, for you to commit such atrocities?"

"Justice Palace! Tell me! What crime did my Junior Brother commit?"

"He's nothing but a new swordsage, here to report for duty. It was his first day here, and you took him away, right in front of us. You even used your vicious restraints to seal his cultivation base. Three days! Three days!!! That was all it took for you to disfigure him until he doesn't look human!!!"

The Captain was obviously furious, but so was Arch-Immortal Plumdark. It was the same with all the other disciples from the Eight Sect Coalition. Chen Tinghao and the other swordsages were glaring furiously.

The scene caused an instant commotion in the Justice Palace. The two officers who had brought Xu Qing out were completely flabbergasted, and had no idea what was going on. Neither of them had even touched Xu Qing during the past three days, nor had anyone else. And yet all of the wounds were absolutely, positively real.

As everyone reacted with open fury and rage, Xu Qing's shadow twitched a bit....

Meanwhile, veins bulged on the Captain's neck as he held Xu Qing, and his eyes were crimson. Laughing bitterly, he cried, "Little Junior Brother, you're barely breathing! We were supposed to defend humanity together! We were supposed to be swordsages of humankind. Our light was to shine in heaven and earth!"

“Oh, little Junior Brother, who exactly was it that viciously tortured you? And what did they want? Don’t tell me they were jealous of your 30,000-meter pillar of light! Or was it that you offended Zhang Siyun?”

“How could you have been so foolish? Zhang Siyun’s mother actually works for the Justice Palace! I told you not to come here! But you said that you trust in the justice and fairness of humankind! You said you trusted the light of the swordsages!”

“It took us eight months to get here, only to fall to the old trick of planted evidence! What use is that 30,000-meter light now, little Junior Brother? Can it protect you against vicious schemes hatched by small-minded people? What use is the Grand Emperor’s veneration? Can that protect you against the machinations of villains?? Is this how people bully swordsages?”

“Oh, little Junior Brother, I, your Eldest Brother, might just have to risk giving up my status as a swordsage if that’s what it takes to get true justice for you!”

“Justice Palace, if my little Junior Brother really committed a crime, then bring out the evidence. That’s fine with me. But if my little Junior Brother is actually innocent, yet you still cruelly mistreated him, then... I won’t let this matter drop!”

“Heaven’s law won’t permit it!”

“30,000 meters of light won’t permit it!”

“The Grand Emperor won’t permit it!”

The Captain’s eyes were completely bloodshot as his voice got louder and louder until it was a howl that filled the Justice Palace.

Furthermore, someone somehow tapped into a technique that caused thunder to rumble in the sky, shaking everything. Lightning crashed, illuminating the face of the statue of Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity. The dome of heaven was furious, and the Ancient Emperor was enraged.

Chapter 395: Seven Words from the Swordsage Palace

The two Justice Palace officers who had brought Xu Qing out were absolutely stunned. At the same time, they were furious, as they hadn’t tortured Xu Qing at all. Nor had anyone else in Division 3. In fact, no one had even so much as looked at Xu Qing during the three days he was locked up.

“This is impossible!” one of them shouted furiously. “We never tortured him!”

“You’re obviously making all of this up!” the other yelled. “Do you know what kind of place the Justice Palace is? How dare you try to defraud this place!”

Seeing how worked up the Captain was, Arch-Immortal Plumdark knew that it was time for her to step in. She strode forward, her Void Returning cultivation base flaring to life. A thousand dao lineaments swirled in her eyes as terrifying fluctuations rolled out in all directions, causing wild colors to flash in heaven and earth. This was the county capital, but Void Returning was Void

Returning. Her facial expression was grim and full of anger as she ignored the blabbering footsoldiers and instead looked into the depths of the Justice Palace itself.

“I am Arch-Immortal Plumdark, a human cultivator from Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. I came here to escort the new swordsage Xu Qing to the capital, the same one who earned the veneration of the Grand Emperor and was given a 30,000-meter pillar of light. I hereby request that the Justice Palace provide an explanation of what happened to our dao child, Xu Qing. Are the charges true, or was he framed?”

The Justice Palace was a huge organization, and Division 3 was only a small cog in the larger wheel. And yet, both the Captain and Arch-Immortal Plumdark had spoken loudly enough that everyone could hear them. Quite a few Justice Palace cultivators were now looking outside.

At first, the Captain’s yelling had made enough people displeased that they had been considering going out and shutting him up. After all, for a scene like this to play out could really harm the reputation of the Justice Palace. But when they heard him mention that the incident was because of jealousy, they hesitated. The word jealousy inherently related to private, selfish affairs, not the public interest. And it naturally didn’t make sense that members of the Justice Palace should meddle in the affairs of others because of personal interest. Despite that, some people in the Justice Palace were still inclined to shut the Captain up.

Then they heard him mention the 30,000-meter pillar of light and the veneration of the Grand Emperor. At that point, they decided not to get involved. After all, people who had what it took to work in the Justice Palace weren’t idiots. Although they considered Yao Yunhui, the director of Division 3, to be a colleague, when they saw Arch-Immortal Plumdark they couldn’t help but hesitate.

But there was more.

They were also hesitant when they saw the righteous indignation on the faces of the dozens of swordsages who had come along. At that point, no one from the Justice Palace stepped in. In fact, the matter had escalated to the point where the swordsages were preparing to call for backup.

Finally, seeing all that, Zhang Siyun’s mother Yao Yunhui couldn’t hold back any longer.

Having already experienced how difficult it was to deal with Xu Qing, she knew that she couldn’t let the matter drag out any longer. She had to resolve it immediately, lest it lead to further trouble. All in all, she knew full well that she was in the wrong. If things had gone according to her previous plan, it wouldn’t have mattered. But Xu Qing had struck back quickly and efficiently, and with ruthless accuracy.

Looking very grim, she emerged from her office, walked to the gate outside the Division 3 prison, and stepped out into the open.

The two Justice Palace officers breathed sighs of relief and rushed over to offer greetings.

Meanwhile, all of the coalition disciples and swordsages turned their attention to her. Arch-Immortal Plumdark’s energy fluctuations still caused the area to tremble, and her phoenix-like eyes were cold as she looked at this other woman whose beauty was on the same level as her own.

Yao Yunhui stood there silently for a moment. She wasn't in Void Returning. She was only in Spirit Trove. If she had been facing Arch-Immortal Plumdark alone, she would have been terrified, but considering this was the Justice Palace, she wasn't afraid. That said, she had come here to smooth things over, so she took a deep breath and bowed to Arch-Immortal Plumdark with clasped hands.

Then she turned to Xu Qing. Looking very apologetic, she said, "Xu Qing, this was a big mistake on the part of my Division 3. As the director, I'll look into the matter, figure out what happened, and give an explanation. Right now, I can confirm that Xu Qing, as well as all of your people from the Eight Sect Coalition's subsidiary sect, only came here to cooperate with an investigation. As of now, the investigation is over, and a determination has been made. You are not guilty of overstepping authority.

"That's why I issued the orders to release you. However, something unusual has clearly occurred. As for what exactly it was, that isn't important. This matter won't be recorded in the official prison records, and I take full responsibility for the mistake."

With that, she took out a jade slip which she examined, as if to confirm certain details of the investigation. There were deep layers of meaning to her words. On the surface, they seemed like an apology. Yet she made that apology as the director of Division 3. In other words, she was implying that everything that happened was the result of bad behavior on the part of her subordinates. As a result, she didn't implicate herself personally. What was more, she said that everything was related to an investigation, and that Xu Qing and the others had been freed because of that. That made it seem like it wasn't a personal issue. That was another way she distanced herself from it personally. Finally, there was the hint of a threat in her words.

Xu Qing's eyes narrowed. As for the Captain, he looked closely at Yao Yunhui. Though the initial scenario had been handled clumsily, the resolution wasn't that bad.

"I've already started looking into the reason why this all happened," she continued, "and I'll have an answer soon. In the meantime, I can see that Xu Qing's injuries are serious. Please take this spirit-gathering pill to help with the healing." Looking very apologetic, Yao Yunhui took out a medicinal pill that shone with dazzling light, making it obvious it was extraordinary. "Rest at ease, all of you. Forget about the 30,000-meter light and the veneration of the Grand Emperor. Even ordinary mortal citizens are treated the same in the Justice Palace. We enforce the law in a fair and impartial manner. That's our duty."

With that, she placed the pill off to the side. Around then, her jade slip flared with light. After looking at it, her expression turned grave and she looked at the two officers. "As it turns out, it was you two! You took it upon yourselves to torture him!"

Before the two officers could open their mouths, Yao Yunhui suddenly waved her hand. The two of them screamed, then tumbled backward, blood spraying out of their mouths. When they flopped to the ground some distance away, it was impossible to tell if they were dead or alive.

"Lock them up."

Some other Division 3 officers flew out and took away the two officers.

Yao Yunhui had handled the matter quickly and efficiently. Little did anyone know that the message she had received confirmed that the surveillance jade slips in the prison had been disabled, meaning that there was no evidence of what had really happened.

Having handled the two subordinates, she looked at Xu Qing and Arch-Immortal Plumdark. Clasp hands in embarrassment, she said, "I was negligent in my management, and as a result, Xu Qing endured humiliation. Considering how hurt you are, Xu Qing, I suggest you go back and get some rest. Now that I understand the details of what happened, I'll prepare a report and send it to you right away. Later I'll come pay you a visit in person."

Xu Qing's eyes glittered coldly. It was impressive that Yao Yunhui could resolve matters so quickly. He could tell that if he kept pressing the issue of being wounded, the situation could change, and he would come across as overbearing.

On the one hand, it was good to know that this incident wasn't going to harm his record. That said, he didn't think he had struck back viciously enough. Therefore, he opened his mouth as if to say something.

Unfortunately, his wounds were so severe, and he was so weak, that he couldn't speak or send out divine will. The Captain quickly leaned over and put his ear to Xu Qing's mouth. A moment later, his anger turned to outright disbelief.

"WHAT?" he shouted. "Little Junior Brother, are you telling me that the two swine who nearly killed you also stole 30,000,000 spirit stones from you?"

Yao Yunhui's eyes narrowed and her heart started to race a bit. Yet again she was coming to understand how difficult it was to deal with Xu Qing. Although she thought she had already negated his ability to strike back at her, all it took was a fraction of a moment for him to shift tactics and once again start causing problems.

30,000,000 spirit stones was no small amount even to her. To be extorted in such a manner made her feel like she was being forced to swallow a big pile of dog excrement. Yet she couldn't reveal anger publicly. All she could do was inhale deeply, force herself to calm down, then smile and nod.

"I'll look into the matter. If I find—"

Before she could finish speaking, Xu Qing coughed up another huge mouthful of blood, and his aura became even weaker than before. Rage filled the Captain's face as he fed medicine to Xu Qing and laughed bitterly.

"Is this really the Justice Palace?" he mused in a very loud voice. "They beat people up at random and even steal from them! Oh, little Junior Brother, did we really end up at the county capital of humankind? The dao of heaven won't permit this! The—"

When Yao Yunhui saw that the same routine was starting again, veins bulged on her forehead, and her fury spiked. However, she knew that she couldn't let things continue to play out. Gritting her teeth, she interrupted the Captain.

"It will take time to investigate, but in the meantime, Division 3 will make an advance payment of 30,000,000 spirit stones!"

As she spoke the words, she felt like her heart was bleeding.

When the Captain heard her words, his heart started beating faster. Licking his lips, he leaned closer to Xu Qing again, but this time, Xu Qing didn't say anything.

However, the Captain then clenched his right hand into a fist and slammed it onto the floor tile next to him. The floor tile shattered. Eyes bloodshot, he howled, "WHAT? You mean that they also took away the seventeen deadly spell formations and fifty-seven magical devices I gave you as a gift?"

The Captain looked so full of grief he might have a heart attack.

Xu Qing looked at him and could tell how passionate the Captain was at the moment, so he nodded.

Yao Yunhui was panting for breath at this point, and her emotions were almost out of control. As she glared at the Captain, she started to realize that he was actually a lot more annoying than Xu Qing. She was just about to say something when a stream of terrifying divine will emerged from the Justice Palace and scanned the area. When she felt that divine will, Yao Yunhui shivered as she realized that her actions had attracted the displeasure of her superiors. Gritting her teeth, she forced a calm look onto her face.

And yet, she had underestimated the Captain. When he saw the calm look on her face, the Captain howled in grief.

"The three magical treasure fragments that Master gave you were also taken? And they didn't even let you keep the more than 10,000 spirit stones our swordsmen friends gave us to purchase local specialty products for them from Seven Blood Eyes? Those swordsmen worked hard for that money!

"Huh? Are you telling me that the three heavenly palace pills Arch-Immortal Plumdark gave you were also seized?"

Arch-Immortal Plumdark's face darkened as she looked coldly at Yao Yunhui. As for all the swordsmen, including Chen Tinghao, they had odd looks on their faces as they looked at the Captain. But they also nodded.

Seeing all that, Yao Yunhui could hardly suppress her fury. Her eyes pulsed with rage. This wasn't just extortion, it was group extortion, and she almost couldn't maintain control.

Seeing that, Xu Qing's fingers twitched as if to say "alright, good enough, quit while you're ahead." He had the feeling that if they pushed things any further, they would make fools of themselves in trying to be clever.

The Captain wasn't quite ready to give up, though, and was about to continue when Xu Qing coughed up yet another mouthful of blood.

Finally, the Captain closed his mouth. Looking furious, he put Xu Qing onto his back and walked over to Arch-Immortal Plumdark. As Yao Yunhui glowered at them, they left.

After they were gone, the area was silent for a moment. Then a voice spoke from the divine will that had come from the Justice Palace.

“Director Yao, this is the Justice Palace, the judicial center of humankind. You have the right to seek justice for humankind, not resolve personal vendettas. You have overstepped your authority here.”

Yao Yunhui shivered and bowed her head.

“We just received an official inquiry from the Swordsage Palace. That inquiry contains one sentence with seven words.

“Do you have a death wish, Yao Yunhui?”

Yao Yunhui inhaled deeply. A moment passed, and then she quietly said, “Palace Lord, your humble servant admits her error.”

“Shape up.” Having said that, the divine will from inside the Justice Palace vanished.

Yao Yunhui stood there for a long moment, then turned expressionlessly and walked back to her office.

Upon entering, she saw Zhang Siyun waiting for her, concern on his face. “Mother—”

“Yun’er,” she interrupted, “those two colleagues of yours are no simpletons.”

Zhang Siyun shivered and wasn’t sure what to say. Before he could do anything, Yao Yunhui pulled her hand back and slapped him hard. Blood sprayed out of his mouth as he was thrown off his feet to slam into the wall. His internal organs trembled, and more blood sprayed out of his mouth as half his face swelled up.

“Pathetic!” she growled through gritted teeth. “Your father was pathetic, the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society is pathetic, and you’re just as pathetic!”

Only now was she able to vent her fury by means of that slap.

Zhang Siyun didn’t dare to offer a single retort to his mother. He didn’t even dare to wipe the blood off his face. He just kept his head bowed. He had experienced this kind of thing many times growing up.

After cursing Zhang Siyun, Yao Yunhui walked around and sat behind her desk. Taking a deep breath to settle her emotions, she took a bowl of silver fungus soup from off to the side and took a sip. [1]

Her face was absolutely flawless, and her eyes were like jewels as she looked in the direction of the Eight Sect Coalition’s subsidiary sect. Then she smiled faintly.

“Warning? Me? I guess that just makes things more interesting.”

Chapter 396: Violet Moon Heavenly Palace

The Eight Sect Coalition’s situation was resolved successfully.

In the main courtyard of the garrison, the subsidiary sect held a welcoming banquet for Xu Qing and everyone else. The Captain looked immeasurably pleased with himself. He went around exchanging toasts with everyone, and already seemed to be friends with all the swordsages. [1]

Just about all of them had heard that, among the group of newcomers from Emperor-Receiving Prefecture, there was one who had provoked a mere one-meter light. Based on the Captain's performance today, they could already guess the identity of that individual. But they were all worldly-wise individuals. Given the spirit stones involved, and Chen Tinghao's enthusiastic introduction, no one embarrassingly called the Captain out. In fact, they were getting along great.

Arch-Immortal Plumdark didn't participate in the banquet. But she did have some medicinal pills sent to Xu Qing. They were pills that personally belonged to her, which made them particularly valuable.

Xu Qing accepted the pills. He wasn't sure what to say in response, but felt very moved. Not having a way with words, he simply sent her a voice message saying thanks.

"Since when did you start worrying so much about etiquette, child?" she replied, sounding as seductive as always. "I'm in Suite A-1. If you have any cultivation issues, you can just sneak over here and I'll help you."

Her closing remark caused Xu Qing's heart to start racing. Putting the jade slip away, he took a moment to calm himself.

Though the injuries he had inflicted on himself with his shadow were serious, they healed quickly. After all, he had inflicted them with care. What was more, he had been in many deadly situations before, and compared to some of the wounds he had sustained in the past, these could be considered minor.

It was only natural that he would attend the banquet. As he watched the Captain going around toasting everyone, he turned to Chen Tinghao and asked about Yao Yunhui. Chen Tinghao was happy to provide a detailed explanation.

"In the past, human nobility would inherit their titles. But when the current emperor ascended the throne, inherited titles were done away with. That's why the clan lord of Yao Mansion isn't an actual heavenly marquis.

"But because his ancestor did so much for humankind, both the governor and the palace lords still refer to the clan lord as the Noble Marquis. The Noble Marquis had three children, two sons and a daughter. Yao Yunhui is the Noble Marquis's daughter.

"She used to be a very influential figure here in the capital. Years ago, she married someone from the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society in your Emperor-Receiving Prefecture, which caused a big stir. As far as Yao Mansion was concerned, they were too far apart in status. Later, her daoist partner died, so she left her son in the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society and came back here to Yao Mansion.

"She has a huge network of connections in the capital, an extraordinary background, and incredible good looks. Furthermore, I heard that she's close with Honor Guard Sima from the Swordsage Palace, who originated in the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society. And beyond all that, she's now the director of Division 3 in the Justice Palace.

“That said, the Swordsage Palace doesn’t fear the Justice Palace. Also, Honor Guard Sima isn’t the kind of person who practices favoritism and engages in cronyism. So you don’t need to worry. Furthermore... nobody really likes Yao Mansion.”

Chen Tinghao was about to raise his cup to toast Xu Qing when Sun Liying cast him a meaningful glance. He suddenly looked embarrassed, as if he wanted to drink, yet didn’t dare to. Clearing his throat, he continued, “The Swordsage Palace and Yao Mansion don’t see eye to eye.

“The Swordsage Palace has always advocated for a stronger stance against the two nonhuman species in our county, plus the Holytide species as well. We’d fight them if we had to. The palace lord has suggested multiple times that we purge the county and crush the Saintfiends and Demi-Immortals.

“The Yao Clan is staunchly opposed to that. They think that using lethal force will just cause more problems, and advocate for a closer relationship with the nonhumans. So in the county as a whole, it’s the Yao Clan who have the most dealings with the Saintfiends and Demi-Immortals. In fact, they even intermarry. They also cozy up with the Holytides, like flunkies.” Chen Tinghao looked visibly disdainful. “If the old heavenly marquis knew what they were up to, he’d probably crawl out of his coffin and slap those spineless descendants of his to death.”

At this point, Chen Tinghao couldn’t hold back from raising his alcohol flagon and taking a big drink. Sun Liying helplessly shook her head, yet the warmth remained in her eyes.[2]

The banquet didn’t last for very long. By the time the moon hung high in the sky, it was over. Xu Qing and the Captain escorted the guests out of the subsidiary sect, then returned to the main courtyard. Bright moonlight lit the path in front of them, and a faint breeze blew, stirring their hair and spreading the aroma of alcohol in all directions.

“We’re finally in the county capital, little Ah Qing!” The Captain was obviously in a very good mood. Producing an apple, he took a big bite.

Xu Qing looked up into the sky at the statue of Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity. He nodded.

“Remember what I said to you back in the day?” the Captain continued. “Let’s travel the world together! The county capital isn’t our final destination. No, it’s our starting point. Next, we need to solidify our place in the Swordsage Palace. And then, little Junior Brother, after I’ve familiarized myself with this place, I’ll take you with me to accomplish some really big things! [3]

“We’re really going to shake things up in Sea-Sealing County. Because of us, maybe they’ll have to change the county’s name. It’ll be the Crazytide County!” As the Captain uncharacteristically talked about such lofty aspirations, he wolfed down the rest of the apple in a single bite and then took out a tangerine.

Xu Qing suddenly went on guard as he looked at the Captain, who was acting a bit different compared to normal.

“We’re going to make sure everyone knows that the two of us can shine brighter than 30,000 meters! We’re going to make sure everyone understands that the two of us are bros, through and through. In fact, we’re the type of steadfast bros who would give our lives for each other!” As the Captain said these things, he surreptitiously glanced at Xu Qing.

Without batting an eyelid, Xu Qing nodded.

“And that is why the moment we report for duty in half a month is so important. It relates to our post! Different posts come with different military credits, and of course, different responsibilities. If we’re going to change the Holytide Region one day, and if we’re going to make sure humankind rises to prominence, then we have to hit the ground running.”

The more the Captain talked, the more hyperbolic it got. He was making it sound like their post assignment would affect the fate of all humanity.

“Then what?” Xu Qing asked calmly.

“Then what? Well, then there are a lot of things to do, little Junior Brother. Of course, it’s going to take money. What’s more, if we want to accomplish something really big, then we need to buy intelligence reports. That also costs money. Therefore... whenever the old shrew finally doles out the compensation, ahem, we should definitely split it 50/50.”

“That’s what this is about?” Xu Qing said, surprised. He had assumed it was something more important. “No problem.”

When the Captain saw Xu Qing agree so quickly, almost as if it was the smallest of concerns, his guard went up. For some reason, it now seemed that Xu Qing was a bit higher than him on the social ladder, which was worrisome.

He waved his hand. “Little Junior Brother, how about I give you a 10% discount on the 8,000,000 spirit stones you owe me?”

Ignoring him, Xu Qing walked to his residence.

The Captain laughed happily as he bid farewell and went to his own residence. It was a unique location that he had picked with careful consideration. Thanks to the decorative rocks, a tree cover, it was a place that the sunlight didn’t reach very often. The Captain felt that only a location that the sun couldn’t peer at was fitting of his status as a swordsage.

Xu Qing didn’t care about that sort of thing. After entering his residence, he went through his normal routine of scattering poison and setting up defenses. Then he sat down cross-legged and mentally reviewed everything that had happened over the past few days.

Next he took out his bamboo slip and carved Yao Yunhui’s name right next to Zhang Siyun’s name. Then he spent some time trying to think of some ways to quietly get rid of them.

I can't forget about Girl in Red and Ning Yan, he thought, studying the bamboo slip. I have too many names on here that aren't crossed out.

That thought left him feeling unsettled. Looking out into the night, he mulled the matter over.

I need to improve my cultivation base right away. Then I can start getting rid of them, one by one.

Closing his eyes, he started working on his cultivation.

Time passed. Four days later, the Justice Palace sent the spirit stones, medicinal pills, three magical treasures, as well as some spell formations and magical devices. With that, the matter was officially concluded.

Xu Qing wasn't stingy. He split everything with the Captain as well as the disciples who had come to get him at the Justice Palace. He also sent some to Master Fifth and Arch-Immortal Plumdark.

The rest he kept. The only thing he didn't split with others were the heavenly palace pills. They were extraordinary pills; if he consumed all three, he should be able to complete his fourth heavenly palace.

Upon consuming them, rumbling sounds filled him. Then, brilliant light erupted from the fourth heavenly palace in his sea of consciousness.

Should I go with the bluegreen dragon... or the violet moon? After some thought, his eyes shone with determination. I think I'll push the bluegreen dragon back in line again.

Having made up his mind, he focused completely on the violet moon in his sea of consciousness. Slowly but surely, he pulled it into place in the heavenly palace. When that happened, he suddenly felt immeasurably close to the violet moon, in a way he hadn't before. Previously, he had only had a limited bit of control over it. After all, it was simply too mighty, making it as easy for him to control as it was for a child to push a massive war chariot. But now that it was fused with his fourth heavenly palace, that control came much easier. He didn't attempt to do so immediately. Instead, he closed his eyes to gather strength.

Ten days later, when his fourth heavenly palace was completely stable, he opened his eyes. The moment he did, violet light erupted from them, creating a violet sea around him. His fourth heavenly palace now glittered with dazzling violet light. The violet moon therein flickered constantly. Xu Qing got the feeling that if he fully unleashed its power, then he would instantly erupt with the aura of a god.

In other words... mutagen!

Of course, that mutagen would instantly start invading other cultivators.

If you added in the bolstering effect of his taboo poison core, then it would make him an even more powerful source of mutagen. And its ability to invade other living things would be even more astonishing.

Right now, do I cultivate the dao, or do I cultivate godliness...? After studying his third and fourth heavenly palaces, he glanced at his life essence bluegreen dragon.

With my imperial-class technique, I currently have five-palace battle prowess. With Shadow Fusion Secret Magic, I can unleash the pure six-palace fleshly body power! If you add in the taboo poison

core and the violet moon, then I can stand toe-to-toe with seven-palace power, and might even come out on top!

Right now, his battle prowess was equivalent to what was normally considered the absolute peak of Gold Core.

It doesn't matter what you cultivate. Battle prowess is the most important thing to consider!

After calculating the date, he realized that it was the night before he needed to report for duty with the swordsages.

I wonder what post I'll be assigned to.

Then he thought about Mount Daybreak, and what Chen Tinghao had said about how it required military credits to visit.

"Military credits!" he murmured, his eyes shining brightly. Then he settled down to wait.

The night passed quickly.

At dawn, as the sun was just climbing over the horizon, he stood and changed into his white swordmage uniform, complete with the cape. Standing in front of the door of his residence, he took a deep breath. Then he pushed the door open. The light from outside shone down, surrounding him, filtering through his hair, making it seem like he was fused with the light. From a distance, he looked like a living flame as he stood there.

Quite a few passing disciples looked over at him.

Arch-Immortal Plumdark could see him from the balcony of her second-floor residence, and was looking at him closely.

In another corner of the subsidiary sect's main courtyard, not far from Xu Qing, in a spot that was blocked from the sun by decorative rocks and trees, the Captain opened the door of his residence. As he stretched lazily, he was about to step out into the open when he spotted Xu Qing.

"I didn't realize you could do that!" He looked at his own residence, then at Xu Qing, and suddenly realized that he hadn't picked a spot befitting a swordmage.

Chapter 397: The Strongest Battle Prowess in the Current Generation

At dawn, the county capital was covered with the warmth of sunlight. It was different from Seven Blood Eyes in that people smiled a lot more. It was different from the Eight Sect Coalition in that mutagen was very scarce. There was no cool humidity in the air, and it wasn't possible to smell the Forbidden Sea.

People dressed accordingly. Even the commoners and shopkeepers wore fine clothing. The most outstanding feature was that the garments were colorful. In the cities of South Phoenix, the garments mortals wore were usually simple. It was the same in the Eight Sect Coalition, though the clothing tended to be slightly higher quality. But here in the county capital, you could find every color imaginable, and it made the entire city lively and full of life.

Because it was still not yet time to report for duty, Xu Qing and the Captain didn't fly to their destination. Instead, they strolled through the city.

Xu Qing hadn't been out of seclusion for the entire half-month that had passed, so this was really his first chance to get familiar with their new surroundings. He looked around at the crowds on the streets, and occasionally glanced up into the air.

There were quite a few swordsmen out and about. They all wore the same uniform, making it impossible to tell who was a new recruit. That said, all of them emitted extraordinary fluctuations. It wasn't a surprise to Xu Qing. After all, this was the county capital, where the best of the best from all the provinces would end up.

"Master said a great era is coming," the Captain said as he munched an apple and looked up into the sky. "That's why there are so many chosen nowadays. There are a lot more swordsman recruits this time around than there usually are."

"However, little Ah Qing, you don't need to worry about sticking out as a newbie. Your Eldest Brother doesn't go into new places unprepared, and therefore, I spent a huge amount of money on some intelligence reports. As a result, I know the chosen from the various prefectures like the back of my hand. In fact, I also know a lot about the three big sects here, as well as the two nonhuman species."

The Captain looked very smug, as if he had spent his spirit stones in a very clever way.

Xu Qing nodded. While Xu Qing preferred to take time observing new surroundings, the Captain liked to spend money buying intelligence reports.

"Sadly, the Swordsman Palace doesn't sell information about the post assignments." The Captain sighed in discouragement.

Xu Qing looked at him and didn't say anything in response.

Seemingly depressed, the Captain took a vicious bite out of his apple. "This Swordsman Palace is really full of goody-two-shoes. If only they could be a bit more reasonable."

Considering that the Captain only got a one-meter light, he was really feeling down about his post assignment. While Xu Qing had been working on his cultivation, the Captain had repeatedly gone to Chen Tinghao and others to ask for help. His hope had been that by giving gifts to the right people, he might secure a good post. However, all of that asking around just confirmed that it was impossible to pay for an assignment. The Swordsman Palace wasn't like other places. They were very strict, and only filled posts based on decisions made by the leadership. What was more, they had strict assessments to govern post assignments.

Seeing how depressed the Captain was, Xu Qing was planning to change the subject when something in the distance caught his attention. His expression flickered.

The Captain also looked over.

Some distance away in the sky was a group of cultivators flying in their direction. They wore a very different type of outfit compared to what most humans wore. Although they were daoist robes, they were form-fitting instead of loose. They featured an outer garment of woven gold thread, and an inner garment of silver.

Though their outfits seemed strange, the fluctuations they emitted were astonishing and also unique. They included both men and women, yet all of them had skin as fair as snow. Their hair and eyebrows were just as white, as were their eyes. It made them look very holy. As they flew through midair, the sunlight hit their golden daoist robes and created light refractions that made them seem even more dazzling and proud.

“Are they Demi-Immortals?” the Captain murmured curiously. Despite how many times he had gone out in the last half-month, this was his first time seeing cultivators from this species.

Xu Qing studied them intently.

These cultivators definitely were not human. In addition to the white hair and eyes, they also had white wings. And they conformed perfectly to Chen Tinghao’s description of one of the two most powerful nonhuman species in Sea-Sealing County, the Demi-Immortals.

What was even more noteworthy to Xu Qing was that the Demi-Immortal cultivators had another very unique entity with them. It was a figure clad in a black suit of armor. This figure had black wings and wore a black mask that obscured its facial features. Its unbound hair was equally as black. Its aura clearly surpassed that of the surrounding Demi-Immortals. And what was of even greater significance was that it emanated mutagen. Its eyes seemed to completely lack life, as if it were a puppet.

“That black thing is probably one of the immortal puppets that the Demi-Immortals are famous for,” the Captain said. Apparently the intelligence reports he’d purchased were actually useful.

“Immortal puppets?” Xu Qing asked.

“That’s right. The Demi-Immortals are very skilled in the puppetry arts. That’s especially true of the pitch-black ones. Those are their battle puppets. Nobody knows exactly how they make them, but they’re supposedly very difficult to deal with.”

Xu Qing looked on thoughtfully as the group of Demi-Immortals flew toward the city center and gradually disappeared.

He got a similar sensation from the immortal puppet as he had from the ghosts he’d seen, though not exactly the same. As for the specifics, he was too far away to make any determination.

With that, the two of them continued on their way, keeping an eye on their surroundings. As they walked, they saw disciples from the three great sects, as well as occasional Saintfiends.

The Saintfiends were very different from the Demi-Immortals. The Demi-Immortals preferred to stay in the county capital, and rarely traveled outside to have dealings with other species. But the Saintfiends were merchants. They had shops just about everywhere in the city.

The Saintfiends were tall and burly. They were generally about 6 meters tall or more, making them look almost like giants. They had faces in the normal spot, but also faces on the backs of their heads. When talking, they would occasionally swivel their heads and start speaking out of the other face. To people unfamiliar with them, it could be somewhat unsettling. What was more, Saintfiends

always had two male heads. However, sometimes their bodies might not seem obviously male or female, making it very difficult to determine their gender. They were such an unusual species that Xu Qing couldn't help but stare a bit when he saw them.

Soon it was approaching the time to report for duty, so Xu Qing and the Captain flew the rest of the way to the Swordsage Palace.

When they arrived, there were already people lined up and waiting. They were new swordsage recruits from various prefectures. There were men and women, but all were young. Apparently, most had been in the county capital for some time.

In the various prefectures of Sea-Sealing County, the number of new recruits that came out of a recruiting event varied, but not by much. At the most, there might be seven or eight recruits. On the lower end, for places like Emperor-Receiving Prefecture, there might only be three.

There were already about thirty people gathered. Some stood alone, others in groups of between three to five.

Xu Qing spotted Qing Qiu in the crowd. She wasn't alone. Standing next to her was a seemingly ordinary, but simultaneously strange-looking young woman.

"She's not wearing red," the Captain said. "I almost didn't recognize her. But that's Qing Qiu, alright. She might as well just wear her red clothes underneath her main outfit. That would befit that big scythe of hers."

Grinning, the Captain called out a greeting. He also sized up Qing Qiu's female companion, glancing more than a few times at the item she held in her hands.

Qing Qiu had obviously arrived in the county capital much earlier than the delegation from the Eight Sect Coalition. With a few months' lead time, she had gotten to know some people. The young woman standing next to her was one of them. They seemed to match each other well. One of them emanated an aura that warned other living things to stay away, and beneath her mask, her eyes were cold. The other held some melon seeds in her hands that emanated godly fluctuations. If you looked closely, it looked like they were actually formed from flesh. As she ate from her stockpile, her mouth filled with blood, and she looked around coldly.

Upon noticing the Captain looking their way, she studied him for a moment. "Big Sis Qing Qiu, do you know them? Isn't that one Xu Qing?"

"That's right. Two fools." Meanwhile, the evil ghost scythe she had slung over her shoulder was talking to her via divine will.

"Mad Dog is here. He's talking like normal this time, but I still feel like smacking him. Everyone else is a swordsage, but he's a swordslut! We can definitely find an opportunity to end things with him in mutual destruction. Get rid of him for the swordsages! End in mutual destruction!"

"As for Ghost Hand, we should leave him alone. He's not going to be easy to deal with. Trying to end things in mutual destruction with him wouldn't be a good idea... You absolutely, positively must not make a move on him!"

Qing Qiu seemed used to the chattering of the evil ghost, as she kept her face expressionless and just let him talk.

Meanwhile, the Captain was talking to Xu Qing via divine will.

“See that person next to Qing Qiu? She’s no simple individual. She has no name, so everyone just calls her Duskspirit. Those melon seeds in her hand are supposedly made from all kinds of godly flesh. Not only are they very good for the fleshly body, but also, they never run out! Some people suspect that they’re actually a part of her body!

“I got a lot of information about her in my intelligence reports. She grew up in an abyss in a forbidden region somewhere. Years ago, a patriarch from the Supreme Void Demonization Sect ran across her and brought her back to the sect. She has a cold personality, and according to the rumors, can actually demonize herself into a greater demon!”

As Xu Qing listened to the Captain, he looked at the young woman with the melon seeds of flesh. Then he shifted his attention to a young man sitting off to the side meditating. Upon arriving he had noticed the young man sitting there. Other than Duskspirit with her extremely gruish aura, this young man was the one who seemed the most dangerous.

Noticing Xu Qing’s gaze, the Captain said, “That’s Sir Mountain-River. He’s also a very impressive chosen. He’s from one of the three great sects, the Blood Chill Society. And his clan is a major force within that sect. In other words, he has an amazing background. He had a very unusual birth. Supposedly, he has a birthmark that looks like a painting of mountains and rivers. That’s why Patriarch Blood Chill gave him the daoist name Mountain-River. He has shocking natural talent, and two imperial-class techniques!” [1]

As the Captain made this explanation, Sir Mountain-River’s eyes opened, and he looked coldly at Xu Qing.

Obviously, all of the people that Xu Qing studied could sense the pressure of his gaze on them.

A moment later, their gazes separated as something flew toward them from above.

It was a black coffin made of wood. Lounging atop it was a young man wearing a swordmage uniform. Somehow his swordmage uniform was very wrinkled. The young man also kept yawning as though he had just woken up. His arrival caused all of the swordmages present to suddenly go on guard. Xu Qing knew why; he immediately got a sense of profound danger from this person.

“That’s most likely Wang Chen from the Supreme Ancient Lightning Order, who’s come closer than anyone else from this generation in attaining the Supreme Ancient Lightning Body. Interesting. I can sense the aura of some sealing marks on him. Little Ah Qing, I bet that what you see on the outside isn’t his true form. His true form is inside the coffin.” [2]

Xu Qing nodded. From inside the coffin, he could sense the fluctuations of a life lamp. He had started on the continent of South Phoenix, then gone to Emperor-Receiving Prefecture, and was

now in the county capital. Along the way, he had learned and experienced a lot. And he had seen life lamps. Life lamps might not be common, but that was only relatively speaking. When you brushed shoulders with powerful experts and top organizations, it was impossible to not encounter life lamps.

“So many experts,” Xu Qing murmured. Whether it was Duskspirit, Sir Mountain-River, or Wang Chen, they all gave Xu Qing the impression that they were incredibly strong.

As for the other new recruits, none had auras as impressive as those three, but they were still extraordinary.

Xu Qing knew that even though their auras seemed weak in comparison to his own, he couldn't afford to underestimate them. After all, he wasn't the only person in the world who knew how to keep trump cards hidden to use in a key moment to strike a fatal blow. Any person who had experienced as many life-or-death situations as he had would have trump cards. And they wouldn't reveal them unless necessary.

“Those three are strong, little Ah Qing. But in this group of new recruits, there's someone I'd consider a true monster.” The Captain sighed.

Xu Qing looked at him in surprise. For the Captain to call someone a monster indicated... that the person in question was no one to take lightly. He was just about to inquire further when a terrifying aura suddenly weighed down on the area.

It was such a powerful aura that everyone present reacted with visible surprise. Duskspirit stopped eating melon seeds. Wiping blood from her lips, her expression turned from cold to pleasant. Even adoring. Sir Mountain-River stood up, a reverent expression on his face. Wang Chen climbed to his feet, arranged his clothes, and suddenly looked ingratiating.

As the aura filled the area, a booming voice echoed from above.

“Which one of you is Xu Qing?”

Chapter 398: Supremely Honorable and Righteous

As the voice echoed through the air, a young man descended from the dome of heaven, laughing heartily. He looked to be about twenty-four or twenty-five years old. Instead of being burly and tall, he had an average physique. His facial features were not delicate and attractive. Rather, he had thick eyebrows and big eyes. His arms seemed longer than a normal person's, and his eyes sparkled brightly, as if they were filled with stars. Because of all this, he came across as being extremely heroic. He seemed almost like a dragon or tiger descending into the realm of humankind.

He did not intentionally release the power of his cultivation base. However the pressure he naturally exuded seemed capable of crushing anything and everything. Even Xu Qing was shaken to the core, and his golden crow tattoo emanated intense heat.

Upon encountering Sir Mountain-River, Duskspirit, and Wang Chen, the golden crow had heated up. But that was nothing compared to this.

This young man also had an imperial-class technique, and as he neared, the air behind him split apart; a golden dragon emerged, roaring as it swirled around in circles. Every scale on the dragon shone with bright light, and even its draconic whiskers seemed divine. What was more, the dragon's

eyes were incredibly fierce, as if it were a monarch looking down on everything under heaven. Additionally, the golden dragon had a sword in its mouth.

It was... The Emperor's Sword!

Astonishingly, this young man had successfully gained enlightenment of The Emperor's Sword!

If that were all there was to it, it might not be so impressive. But to Xu Qing's astonishment, he could sense life lamps on this young man. Not one life lamp, or two. No, he had three! The young man's three dazzling life lamps might not be easily noticed by others. But considering that Xu Qing himself had life lamps, he could sense them clearly.

This young man was strong. Very strong! That was what Xu Qing sensed just looking at him. He had sensed danger from Sir Mountain-River, Duskspirit, and Wang Chen. But he still felt confident he could fight them. In contrast, this young man who had just arrived made Xu Qing feel like he was staring up at an immovable mountain. His aura was profoundly shocking and beyond comparison.

As he arrived, all the other swordsages in the area clasped hands respectfully. And yet, all of them were smiling.

"Big Bro Kong!"

"Well met, Big Bro Kong!"

"Long time no see, Big Bro Kong. Your cultivation base has advanced yet again!"

The young man laughed heartily as he saluted everyone in return. Duskspirit, who had previously been devouring blood, now seemed like a charming 'girl next door.' Apparently summoning her courage, she hurried over to the newly arrived young man and opened her mouth to speak.

Before she could, he reached out and gently pinched her cheek. "It's been a year, little Duskspirit! You've grown taller!"

Sir Mountain-River and Wang Chen also hurried over and offered greetings with clasped hands.

'Big Bro Kong' chuckled. "You shouldn't go around looking so gloomy all the time, little River. Come on, smile a bit! As for you, mister 'sleeps in a coffin,' why don't you come out drinking with me more often?"

As the young man loudly reunited with his friends, the Captain sent Xu Qing an explanation via divine will.

"See that? That's the very same monster I mentioned earlier. Kong Xianglong. He was the number one figure in his generation among all of the sects in Sea-Sealing County. He reached the ten-palace level by age twenty-four, which hasn't been done in the past thousand years! [1]

"There are lots of details about this guy in the intelligence reports I got. He has three life lamps and two imperial-class techniques. One is the Emperor's Sword, and the other is called the Golden-Dragon Heaven-Patrolling Scripture. What's more, one of

the intelligence reports said that he has a taboo treasure fragment with a fivefold ensorcelling. Last year, he used his nine-palace battle prowess to kill a Nascent Soul Holytide cultivator!”

Xu Qing could pick up on the faint hints of admiration in the Captain’s explanation, and he felt similarly.

“Kong Xianglong has a bold and heroic personality. He’s straightforward, upright, and makes friends easily. In fact, most of the human enemies he makes end up becoming his friends. But he’s brutal when dealing with nonhumans. Supposedly, it’s not uncommon for him to literally rip them to shreds! However, none of that is what I really wanted to emphasize.”

As the Captain watched Kong Xianglong chatting with the others, his eyes glittered with open admiration. “Little Ah Qing, some people seem nice, but are really stuck-up. Other people practice what they preach. Based on Kong Xianglong’s intelligence reports, I had a hard time believing that he’s really that straightforward and upright. Therefore, I tapped into my skills to dig deeper. And guess what? As it turns out, he really is one of those people who practices what they preach!

“His life lamps weren’t gifts from members of the Senior generation. He got them all on his own. And though he’s a brand new swordsage, I heard that he lived his whole life in the Swordsage Palace. Supposedly, he was born a servant. Later on, he risked his life and almost died to earn some military credits. After being allowed to use those military credits to practice cultivation, he slaughtered his way to the top. He crushed countless nonhumans along the way, winning every fight, and braving death to rise to prominence.

“He has one life lamp and one imperial-class technique that he purchased with military credits. As for The Emperor’s Sword, he succeeded after seeking enlightenment only twice! His second life lamp was given to him by his best friend, who had been dealt a mortal blow and couldn’t survive. In front of countless witnesses, his best friend handed over the life lamp and made Kong Xianglong promise to represent him on his journey to the top. He took his third life lamp from the Holytides!

“Even I, your Eldest Brother, have no choice but to greatly respect someone like that!”

The Captain rarely talked like this. Given that, Xu Qing felt deeply moved as he studied Kong Xianglong.

As he was looking in that direction, Kong Xianglong finished catching up with his friends. Looking in Xu Qing’s direction, he laughed heartily and walked over.

“Don’t tell me, little brother, you must be Xu Qing from Emperor-Receiving Prefecture, who got the 30,000-meter pillar of light!”

“Well met, Elder Brother Kong,” Xu Qing said, clasping hands respectfully.

“Xu Qing, I heard about what happened between you and the Justice Palace. I’ve never much liked that shrew from the Yao Clan. I just know she’s always lurking around scheming this and that, trying to use rules and regulations like a command sword to do all the low-down, scum-sucking shit she wouldn’t dare do out in the open. You handled everything beautifully! Let’s find some time to have a few drinks together. My treat!”

As Kong Xianglong laughed heartily again, someone else arrived.

It was none other than Zhang Siyun. His expression was grim. Having heard what Kong Xianglong just said, he glared at him coldly.

However, exactly at the same time, Duskspirit’s expression turned hostile. Sir Mountain-River narrowed his eyes, and Wang Chen, despite smiling, seemed to thrum with killing intent. And all of them were glaring at Zhang Siyun.

Stunned, Zhang Siyun quickly looked away and walked off to the side.

Kong Xianglong turned and looked at him briefly, his eyes flickering with displeasure. Obviously, he was fully aware that Zhang Siyun’s mother was Yao Yunhui from the Justice Palace. He also knew that Zhang Siyun’s mother had done what she did for her son’s sake. But Kong Xianglong couldn’t bear it, nonetheless. He had grown up in the Swordsage Palace, working as a servant, and had thus been deeply influenced by their stated mission to defend humanity. He didn’t mind a bit of stiff competition between swordsages. But he absolutely hated underhanded infighting. And what he abhorred more than anything were tactics the likes of which Zhang Siyun employed.

On the other hand, he already had a good opinion of Xu Qing. That said, he also knew that considering they weren’t friends, saying too much could create a misunderstanding. Therefore, after flashing another smile to Xu Qing, he walked away.

During the entire time, he didn’t spare a single glance for the Captain. As far as Kong Xianglong was concerned, a one-meter pillar of light was a good indication that the Captain wasn’t a good person.

As he walked away, his friends clustered around him. Qing Qiu wasn’t comfortable being with a lot of strangers, so she declined Duskspirit’s invitation to join them, and walked off to stand by herself.

After she was gone, Sir Mountain-River curiously asked, “Big Bro Kong, why are you being so friendly with that Xu Qing?”

Wang Chen and Duskspirit looked similarly curious. Although none of them had any reason to dislike Xu Qing, none of them necessarily got a good feeling from him. That was especially true considering that he had supposedly earned the veneration of the Grand Emperor. None of them were very happy about that.

Grinning, Kong Xianglong said, “You listen to me. If you want to be hostile to other people, that’s fine. But don’t dare be hostile toward Xu Qing. The thing about the veneration of the Grand Emperor is a sham. Forget about that. But what is important is that his answer to the Grand

Emperor's question got him a 30,000-meter pillar of light. And that means you couldn't find a more trustworthy fighting partner than him."

"But Big Bro Kong," Duskspirit said softly, her eyes shining with clear admiration, "you got 26,100 meters! You're equally trustworthy!"

"That's exactly my point. I know more than anyone what a 30,000-meter pillar of light indicates regarding one's inner qualities. Trust me, all of you, I'm a good judge of character. If you make friends with him, you'll have a friend for life! That said, I do need to find an opportunity to tell Xu Qing to be careful about that Eldest Brother of his with the one-meter light. All it took was one glance at him to know that he's an unsavory character."

While Kong Xianglong was conferring with his friends, the Captain was giving advice to Xu Qing.

"Little Ah Qing, I take back what I said. I get the feeling that although Kong Xianglong looks nice, we probably shouldn't get very close with him."

Surprised, Xu Qing looked at the Captain.

The Captain cleared his throat. "Just remember who your Eldest Brother is. Me!"

The Captain had noticed how friendly Kong Xianglong was with Xu Qing. People as friendly as that were easy to start treating as an Eldest Brother, and therefore, the Captain was now on guard.

Xu Qing grinned, took an apple out of his bag of holding, and handed it to the Captain. "Have an apple, Eldest Brother."

The Captain immediately brightened up. After taking a big bite and realizing how sweet the apple was, he waved his hand magnanimously. "Ah, whatever. You still owe me all those spirit stones, but... uh, I'll give thirty percent off!"

Xu Qing's smile faded and he turned to look in the direction of Kong Xianglong.

The Captain sighed.

"Fine. 70% off!"

Xu Qing was about to reply when his face suddenly turned somber. The Captain stood straighter. All the surrounding swordsages reacted similarly. Everyone looked in the direction of the Swordsage Palace.

The massive palace looked like one huge building, but the reality was that it contained a maze of smaller palaces. As for the new swordsages, they were outside, directly in front of the palace and in front of its External Hall. The hall had a gold-plated roof, green tiles, and red columns. It was grand and magnificent, with dramatically sloping eaves. It had another name, and that was Oath Hall.

As the crowd went silent, footsteps rang out from inside the palace. Then, five figures appeared, walking out into the brilliant sunlight.

One person led, four followed behind. The one in front was middle-aged. He stood tall and straight in his government uniform, looking threatening without being angry. There seemed to be numerous

versions of himself superimposed over each other, as if he contained 10,000 daos. He even seemed to thrum with the sensation that he might soon reach the level of 100,000,000.

The four people behind him were all elderly. All of them also had countless superimposed versions of themselves. They were some distance away from 100,000,000 but they still emanated heaven-shaking, earth-shattering auras.

“I am Master Fullspirit,” said the middle-aged man, “a deputy palace lord of the Swordsage Palace here in Sea-Sealing County. Behind me are the four honor guards of the Swordsage Palace here. We will preside over the oaths and ceremonies today. We will bear witness to your vows and announce your posts. Now, read the decree.”

One of the honor guards stepped forward and spoke in a loud voice. “Title 1 of swordsage law is....”

The ceremony actually wasn’t very complex. As the honor guard explained the rules, all the swordsages present listened intently.

Xu Qing’s expression was somber. It was the same with everyone else, including Kong Xianglong and his friends. Before long, the rules had been read.

“Swordsage law is divided into three titles, seven subtitles, and sixty-nine chapters. You must commit all of that to memory. You swordsages are all from different prefectures. Each prefecture has its own laws based on the local character and customs.

“As new arrivals, it’s normal for you to come in with lofty ambitions and proud attitudes. That’s fine. But that’s only acceptable at first. And there’s something you need to keep in mind. Swordsages are fellow combatants who must be able to fully trust each other!

“In that respect, we’re different from the sects you come from. Sects prioritize profit above all else. But the Swordsage Palace prioritizes responsibility. We prioritize humankind. And we prioritize trust in each other. That is the first thing about yourself that you must change after becoming a swordsage!

“Starting today you’ll undergo seven days of special training. Afterward, you should be able to master some special secret magics available only to swordsages. You’ll also learn about various histories and traditions of humankind, as well as the customs and characteristics of other species.

“If you pass the test at the end of the training, you’ll be assigned a post. If any of you fail to pass the test, then you won’t be given a post.

“Xu Qing. Take nine steps forward!”

Xu Qing took a deep breath. As all of the surrounding swordsages looked on, he walked forward.

Chapter 399: A Legacy from Ancient Time

Noon had passed, and the sun had shifted. Sunlight no longer streamed down onto the Oath Hall. Instead, it was focused directly on Xu Qing. As he stepped out from the group of swordsages, he looked particularly eye-catching.

The Captain looked at him, sighing inwardly and feeling very pleased that this was his little Junior Brother.

Qing Qiu was in the crowd, and though she betrayed no reaction even underneath her mask, in her heart she felt a swell of dislike. Turning, she looked off in the direction of South Phoenix. She didn't like sunny days; she preferred when it was snowing. That was because every time it snowed, she would look off into the distance and think back to a scrawny figure who would approach her in the shadows of the buildings and nod in greeting.

Big Bro Kid... It won't be long before I can go back to South Phoenix and find you. None of these chosen can compare to you. If you could be here, you would be stronger than any of them!

As for all of Kong Xianglong's friends, they looked at Xu Qing begrudgingly, as if they weren't convinced he was worth any attention at all. Kong Xianglong was different, though. He smiled in approval and support. That wasn't just his attitude toward Xu Qing. That was his attitude toward all his friends.

As everyone watched, Xu Qing walked forward nine steps. Then he clasped hands and bowed respectfully to the five people in front of him.

"Greetings, exalted ones."

The deputy palace lord and the four honor guards were all looking at Xu Qing. Before he had stepped forward, they knew him by name only. After all, when the Dao Bell rang, it shocked the entire Swordsage Palace, and had prompted the governor himself to inquire about the situation. Now, seeing him standing there in the sunlight, clad in his white uniform with the red flame design, they all inwardly nodded in approval.

The deputy palace lord's eyes glimmered with approval, and his facial expression softened.

"Xu Qing, during the assessment of the heart, you received a 30,000-meter pillar of light and the veneration of the Grand Emperor. That's a first here in Sea-Sealing County. By the order of the palace lord, you are hereby appointed as the palace lord's secretary-general! You will closely accompany the palace lord as he carries out his duties. This will be good training for you. Please do not fail to live up to the Grand Emperor's praise, or the tolling of the Dao Bell!" [1]

"Yes, sir!" Xu Qing said somberly, once again clasping hands and bowing. This turn of events wasn't a big surprise, but at the same time, it was somewhat disappointing. He didn't really want to be a secretary-general. He would much rather be assigned to a department similar to the Violent Crimes Division.

However, the deputy palace lord's words left many of the other new swordsages feeling very surprised, and they looked at Xu Qing with deep envy.

A secretary-general was essentially an administrative position attached directly to the palace lord. Occupying a post like that didn't come with any direct authority. However, a secretary-general was a representative of the palace lord, and would be treated with utmost respect by everyone. What was more, there had never been a secretary-general in the Swordsage Palace before. Xu Qing was the first. This went to show how much the palace lord valued Xu Qing. Beyond that, it was a public announcement showing how significant it was to receive a 30,000-meter light in the assessment of the heart, and also the veneration of the Grand Emperor. Going forward, it was a given that all new swordsages would place much more importance on the assessment of the heart.

Although Xu Qing's post came with a lot of glory, there were still swordsages who weren't convinced he was deserving.

For example, Zhang Siyun. He glared at Xu Qing, revulsion filling his heart. The left side of his face was no longer swollen, but he could still feel the pain of his mother's palm slapping him.

I'm not pathetic! he howled inwardly, grinding his teeth.

The deputy palace lord and the honor guards weren't even paying attention to the reaction of the others outside the Oath Hall. Zhang Siyun's Sect Grandfather was one of them, and not even he had spared a glance for Zhang Siyun.

"Xu Qing," continued the deputy palace lord, "though you were given a post by the palace lord, and thus don't need to take the test, you still need to attend all seven days of training."

"Yes, sir," Xu Qing said. He stepped back into the assembled swordsages. His professional manner earned him even more approval from the deputy palace lord and honor guards.

"Listen up, everyone," the deputy palace lord said, looking over the group of new swordsages. "The command swords you received back in your respective Swordsage Courts are also communication devices. They keep track of your battle credits, and will also serve as the foundation of your sword pavilion. In a moment, you can go below the city and erect a sword pavilion. That pavilion will be with you for your entire life, even when you receive your outside assignment.

"The higher a sword pavilion is, the greater glory it represents. I truly hope that one day, one of you will have a 30,000-meter-tall sword pavilion. It will only disappear if you end up sacrificing your life in the line of duty. But even if that happens, your name will remain in the Oath Hall for future generations of swordsages to see when they swear their oaths."

With that, the deputy palace lord flicked his sleeve, and the hall behind him glowed with brilliant light as the door opened.

The hall had a dimensional space inside that was much larger than the exterior. Inside of it were innumerable command swords. Some were intact. Others were severely damaged. Some were only fragments. Apparently some of the command swords had been completely destroyed when their

wielders died, and were represented by memorial tablets. A brave and heroic aura surged out from inside the hall. There were simply too many memorial tablets and command swords to take in. They were everywhere. They represented all of the swordsmen who had fallen in battle throughout the countless years that had passed in Sea-Sealing County. All of them had been top chosen among humankind, and each one had their own soul-stirring story to tell. [2]

When Xu Qing looked at the command swords and memorial tablets, his heart swelled. All of a sudden, astonishing soul fluctuations surged out of the hall, sweeping over Xu Qing.

He could hear countless swordsmen crying out in the moment before their death, and he could see innumerable white-clad figures. They stood in front of humankind, prepared to die in battle rather than fall into retreat. It was absolutely stunning. Even as they died, they smiled and shouted at their enemies, reciting their oath without any regrets.

“I am willing to become a swordsman, loyal to my post, not afraid to sacrifice my life.

“I am willing to become a swordsman, never to betray humankind, always ready to fight.

“I am willing to become a swordsman, to fight for humanity, to defend my people.

“I am willing to become a swordsman, to sever the doom of dawn, to cause the light of heaven and earth to blossom.”

As the swordsmen spoke, their words grew louder and clearer, like a natural music that could shake the universe. At the same time, the new swordsmen standing outside of the hall began instinctively reciting the same words. Gradually, all of the voices combined until they were one united voice. It almost seemed like whatever lofty ambitions and heroic goals these fallen swordsmen had left behind in death were now being transmitted through time and space in the form of a legacy. This was the oath sworn by new swordsmen.

At some point, Xu Qing left the Swordsman Palace, hardly aware of what he was doing, considering the words and images that continued to fill his mind. This was completely different than when he had joined Seven Blood Eyes.

Xu Qing wasn't the only one having his experience. It was the same with the Captain and all the other new swordsmen. Even Zhang Siyun. Everyone looked like they were in a daze.

Xu Qing returned to the subsidiary sect and entered his residence. Only then did he start to recover. Looking out into the night sky in the direction of the Swordsman Palace, he took a deep breath.

He knew why he was reacting in this way. The Oath Hall had been emanating astonishing soul fluctuations. There were too many heroic souls inside, and they didn't bear even a scrap of ill will toward the new swordsmen. Some had given voice to their regrets, or goals they had never accomplished. By doing so, they were telling the new swordsmen... what it meant to be a swordsman!

Xu Qing's heart was pounding. On the journey here, Chen Tinghao had already given him a taste of how different the swordsmen were from sect cultivators.

Xu Qing sat there quietly, thinking about it. He wasn't inclined to instantly feel connected to any organization, whether it was his sect or the Swordsage Palace. Wherever he went, he always kept his guard up. He needed time to observe things before making a decision about anything.

Eventually, Xu Qing took a deep breath and collected his thoughts. Then he took out his swordsage command sword.

After reporting for duty and swearing his oath, the command sword was different. Its internal functions had been activated. After inspecting it, he sent divine will into it, which was when he saw all the details about military credit.

Military credits were very important to swordsages. Anything they wanted to get from the Swordsage Palace had to be purchased with military credits. Xu Qing even saw life lamps and imperial-class technique legacies. However, the military credit cost for those things was immense. What was more, some of them required battle credits.

Military credits and battle credits were different.

The former could be earned through all sorts of missions, whereas the latter... could only be awarded. What was more, there were five grades of battle credits.

Grade one battle credits were the rarest. Grade fives were the most common.

Xu Qing scanned the basic information, then looked at the legacies that were available. Eventually, he found Mount Daybreak.

To get into Mount Daybreak I'll need 3,000,000 military credits and a grade three battle credit.

Seeing that, his eyes filled with determination.

I have to think of a way to start building up a lot of military credits.

A similar scene was playing out with the Captain, who was currently in his own residence. As he studied the information in the command sword, his eyes started to shine.

So much good stuff!

Breathing unsteadily, he looked through all of the imperial-class techniques and similar things, until eventually he saw something that caused his eyes to light up with intense desire.

A fragment of the Ancient Dao Righteous Bestowal Edict! I looked around forever for this technique. I can't believe it's here in Sea-Sealing County!

As his eyes glittered, faces appeared in his pupils, their eyes just as wild as his. Eventually, he composed himself, took a deep breath, and looked in the direction of Xu Qing's residence.

Little Ah Qing, your Eldest Brother said he would travel the world with you, and I'm going to do everything I can to make it happen. As long as I can get this Righteous Bestowal, then I really can... travel the world with you.

Three days after the swearing of the oath, the seven-day period of training began. It was held in the Swordsage Palace in a study hall and started at dawn. All fifty-one of the new swordsages were there waiting. No one was late.

The study hall was different from an ordinary hall. It was filled with tables and looked like a classroom.

Xu Qing sat on the right-hand side, behind the Captain. To his left was Qing Qiu, and to his right was Kong Xianglong.

As always, Qing Qiu pretended Xu Qing didn't exist, while Kong Xianglong chatted with him amiably.

"Back when I was a servant," he said, "I studied a lot of the things that they'll talk about in this training. They've come in handy on many of my missions throughout the years. If there's anything you don't understand, Xu Qing, just ask me and I can help."

Xu Qing clasped hands gratefully.

The Captain turned around and eyed Xu Qing. "You can ask me, too, little Junior Brother."

Kong Xianglong chuckled but didn't say anything.

Xu Qing looked at the Captain and nodded.

The Captain seemed pleased and was about to say more. Instead, he quickly swiveled and faced the front, as did all the other swordsages. Someone had entered the study hall.

It was a middle-aged man in a black daoist robe. He was thin, with sallow skin that made him almost seem sickly. Though he had a Nascent Soul cultivation base, he coughed as he trudged along. Walking through the desks, he reached the front where he sat down and looked out at the assembled swordsages.

"I don't like being interrupted when I lecture," he said. "So if there's something you don't understand... it means your powers of understanding are weak. Anyone who interrupts me will be asked to leave. Oh, right. You can call me Ailing Ghost. I'm responsible for teaching you a swordsage secret magic used for storing items."

Ailing Ghost coughed again, and this time, his blood sprayed out. There was a poison hidden in the blood... that surreptitiously spread through the hall.

Xu Qing's pupils constricted.

Chapter 400: Poison Fiend in Action

The poison was colorless and odorless, making it very difficult to detect. Even someone with a bit of knowledge about plants and vegetation wouldn't easily notice it. Only someone who had specifically studied the dao of poison would have the instincts necessary to detect it.

For example, Xu Qing. He noticed the poison instantly, and frowned imperceptibly. It was a type of poison he'd never seen before, and he couldn't deduce the ingredients from the aroma alone. However, he could tell that the poison was contained in tiny globules, and that it was a complex mixture that wouldn't do much on its own.

It needs to be combined with another poison to be effective.

Xu Qing's expression was the same as ever, but inside, his guard was up. Though he didn't fear poisons, and also had plenty of his own poisons on hand, he was a cautious person in general. Therefore, he flicked his finger casually to scatter some of his own poison around him. It was just a precaution. Just in case this poison had some unusual properties, Xu Qing needed to be ready. With that done, he focused on the teacher.

The other swordsages exchanged awkward glances in response to Ailing Ghost coughing up blood. However, Kong Xianglong sat up straight in his chair, a respectful look on his face. Being familiar with Ailing Ghost, he secretly circulated his energy and blood in a way that activated certain internal defenses.

There were a few others who reacted similarly, but not many.

Meanwhile, Ailing Ghost coughed over and over again. Looking very weak, he wiped the blood from his mouth.

"It's nothing," he said. "Years ago I was on an undercover mission in Holytide territory when my cover was blown. Those bastards left me with a recurring injury, but that's all. It won't kill me.

"Now, about that swordsage secret storage magic I mentioned. It has many uses. Later on, you'll be going on missions, fighting battles, and participating in other activities that will require intelligence gathering and the transportation of important items.

"Whether you're undercover in an enemy camp or killed in action, you need a way to make sure that whatever items you're carrying don't get discovered. This secret magic will enable you to create a small dimensional space that belongs solely to you."

Though Ailing Ghost's voice seemed weak, he spoke in such a way that everyone could hear him very clearly.

"The dimensional space will require a secret key to open. Every person's secret key will be different and unique. You'll be the one to decide what it is. By the way, remember to make a backup key. Don't worry, in all of the Swordsage Palace, only the palace lord is qualified to know the details about each swordsage's secret key. Others will only be given that information if it's relevant to a particular mission."

Xu Qing was intrigued by what he was hearing. This way of secretly storing items was different than anything he was used to.

Sitting in front of him was the Captain, whose eyes were shining. Only the palace lord will know my secret key? Hm. What if I make the key a catchphrase like 'defend humankind!' That might be a quick way to make a good impression!

As the Captain pondered such matters, Ailing Ghost continued speaking.

“The backup key is to be used in case you die in the line of duty. That way, other swordsages will have a way to open your dimensional space and access your final will and testament, as well as anything else you have stored there.”

The Captain blinked a few times. Having come to the conclusion his previous idea wasn't a very good one, he cast it aside.

The general description was now done, so Ailing Ghost went on to explain the details of the technique. Though he didn't permit anyone to ask questions, his explanation was extremely detailed. He meticulously went through every step. Throughout his lecture, he continued to occasionally cough up blood, and even sway back and forth in his chair. By the time the class was over, it was already late in the morning. Some of the new swordsages were already testing out the technique.

“You're dismissed,” Ailing Ghost said. “You can go back and work on your cultivation now.” With that, he stood. However, he had apparently stood too quickly, as blood oozed out of the corners of his mouth. Wiping it off casually, he walked to the door. Just before he was about to leave, he suddenly turned and looked back at the class. He smiled.

“Oh, right. This class wasn't just about teaching you that secret magic. I also wanted to teach you an object lesson. You need to learn quickly that, as swordsages, you always have to keep your guard up. Didn't any of you notice that I'm not wearing a swordsage uniform? Have you noticed anyone walking around the Swordsage Palace without swordsage uniforms on? Given that, wouldn't you expect this class to be taught by a swordsage? Were you on guard? Were you ready? Have you forgotten three titles, six subtitles, and sixty-nine chapters of swordsage law you learned about before swearing your oath?

“Whenever you encounter plainclothes swordsages, the standard procedure is for that swordsage to state their identity. It was a simple test. And that simple test has proven... that some of you are still very inexperienced.”

With that, Ailing Ghost waved his hand.

Instantly, about a dozen of the fifty-one swordsages flopped to the ground unconscious. The rest of them remained in place, looking at Ailing Ghost. The Captain, Qing Qiu, and Kong Xianglong were among them.

Ailing Ghost looked at those who had not fallen. He smiled. “If I really was an enemy infiltrator, then those people would be dead. This round of swordsage training really is different from usual. That said, none of you seemed to notice my unusual clothing, and therefore, none of you are up to standard either.

“Those who fell unconscious earn a score of 'substandard.' The rest of you earn a score of 'average.' Those are your test results.”

Ailing Ghost flicked his sleeve, and his clothing changed, transforming into a swordmage uniform. Then he took out some medicinal pills which he distributed to the unconscious swordmages. Finally he looked at Xu Qing and the others with an enigmatic smile.

“Hmm. Apparently a few of you do meet the standard. Whose eye is this?” Ailing Ghost reached behind his back and pulled his hand back out with an eyeball in it.

The Captain cleared his throat.

“And whose melon seed is this?”

“And who does this strand of evil ghost will come from?”

“And where did this hair suddenly appear from?”

“And what about this strand of smoke? Did one of you little punks actually enslave a Smokewight?”

Ailing Ghost looked at the Captain, Duskspirit, Qing Qiu, Sir Mountain-River, and Wang Chen one after another.

“All five of you earn a score of ‘above average!’”

Around that time, footsteps echoed into the study hall from outside, and four individuals appeared, pulsing with somber, killing auras. Their swordmage uniforms were slightly different from the normal type, as they had black swords embroidered on their collars. They were obviously from the Law Enforcement Department.

One of them, a middle-aged man, coolly said, “Ailing Ghost, someone saw through your ruse. They contacted Law Enforcement and called us here to arrest you!”

“Oh? Who was it?”

As Ailing Ghost looked over the swordmages with a smile, Kong Xianglong stood and clasped hands.

“Well done, boy. Despite being familiar with me, you cast aside personal feelings to determine what was really going on. The test was harder for you considering you knew me. Your score is ‘excellent!’”

Ailing Ghost nodded approvingly at Kong Xianglong, then turned to leave.

Before he could, the Captain cleared his throat apologetically. “Exalted one, I still have one more eye left....”

Stunned, Ailing Ghost looked over at the Captain.

“In your bag of holding.” The Captain blinked a few times.

Ailing Ghost looked down, checked his bag of holding, and then pulled out an eyeball. He examined it with glittering eyes, then sized up the Captain.

“Very well done. The fact that you got that in there without me noticing is impressive. It’s a somewhat cheap trick, but still effective. You also earn a score of ‘excellent’. By the way, what’s your name?”

“Chen Erniu...” the Captain replied cautiously.

Ailing Ghost looked at him deeply but didn’t say anything further. He had obviously heard the name. Shaking his head, he turned again to leave.

Xu Qing hesitated as he looked at the feeble Ailing Ghost, surrounded by poison. It seemed obvious that Ailing Ghost was skilled in the dao of poison. Presumably, his internal injury produced a poisonous energy that he had turned into a weapon of sorts. Back when he had been coughing up blood, Xu Qing had taken precautions by scattering his own poison. However, he wasn’t sure if there might be any unexpected reactions between his poison and that created by Ailing Ghost’s injury.

Not wanting to take any chances, Xu Qing stood. “Exalted one.”

Ailing Ghost yet again stopped in place and turned to look at Xu Qing. He had been paying attention to Xu Qing the entire time, assuming that someone with a 30,000-meter pillar of light would be impressive. In the end, he had been a bit disappointed. Although it was good that Xu Qing didn’t fall for the poison trick, it was a big negative that he didn’t notice the situation with the incorrect clothing, and also didn’t unleash any secret moves. That indicated to him that Xu Qing wasn’t adaptable and quick-witted.

However, now that Xu Qing had called out to him, he suddenly felt anticipation. “Did you manage to secretly put something on me, Xu Qing?”

Xu Qing nodded.

“What exactly is it?” Ailing Ghost asked, curiously checking himself up and down, even his bag of holding.

“Poison...” Xu Qing said apologetically.

Ailing Ghost’s jaw nearly dropped.

“A lot of poison. All mixed together. I’m not sure if it will cause a problem for your injury, exalted one. What’s more, I don’t know what interactions could result from those poisons mixing with yours.”

Ailing Ghost was visibly stunned.

“Exalted one, I think... you should go find someone to purge the poison. Also, I should probably mention to my fellow colleagues that they’ve also been poisoned. I apologize. That said, none of them have internal injuries, and since the poison hasn’t been activated, it can be removed easily.”

With that, he took out a large number of antidote pills and handed them out to the shocked swordsmen. Then he clasped hands and bowed in apology to the astonished Ailing Ghost.

“Exalted one, my poisons have already been activated in your body by your own poisons, so I have no antidote that can treat them. You should really hurry up and find someone skilled in the dao of alchemy to help you....”

Silence reigned. Everyone was looking at Xu Qing, astonished. That included Sir Mountain-River, Wang Chen, and even Kong Xianglong. Everyone. Only the Captain didn't look the least bit surprised, and simply popped antidote pills into his mouth one after another.

Then Ailing Ghost opened his mouth to speak, only to vomit up a huge glob of black blood. Then his face started turning greenish-black. The four law enforcement swordsages rushed over to support him as he left to find one of the Swordsage Palace's alchemists.

The hall went silent again.

Then the sound of people swallowing pills could be heard. Slowly but surely, the swordsages who had passed out regained consciousness. When they were told the situation, they quickly began consuming antidote pills. Next, scraping sounds could be heard as everyone near Xu Qing dragged their desk away from him. Even Kong Xianglong did so, although not as quickly as Qing Qiu did.

Xu Qing sat there quietly. He was used to being alone. Besides, at least he still had his Eldest Brother.

The Captain seemed to be taking it all in stride. Ever since getting to know Xu Qing, he had made it a practice of keeping a lot of antidote pills in his bag of holding. Popping them like candy, he glanced over at Kong Xianglong.

What's the big deal? These people clearly need a few lessons on strategy.

When Kong Xianglong saw the Captain looking at him, he grinned wryly. Bracing himself, he dragged his table back to its previous spot. Laughing heartily for Xu Qing's benefit, he took out some antidote pills and started consuming them.

Xu Qing didn't say anything.

The atmosphere in the study hall was quiet but also strange. Many of the swordsages were glancing at Xu Qing out of the corners of their eyes. It was easy to imagine how quickly rumors about this event would spread in the Swordsage Palace....

Before long, they heard more footsteps outside the study hall. Then another swordsage entered.

He was an old man, but not Ailing Ghost. He gave off an impression of immense strength, but at the same time, seemed grim and sinister. As he walked, his loud footsteps made it obvious how explosively powerful his energy and blood was.

Upon entering, he turned and looked coldly at everyone seated at the desks. Finally, his gaze came to rest on Xu Qing.

“Are you the one who poisoned Ailing Ghost?”