

Timescape 401

Chapter 401: The Emperors of Humankind!

The old man's voice was cold, and contained something grave and desolate in it. He pulsed with a baleful aura that, combined with his grave facial expression, made him look fierce and malevolent. Xu Qing could sense that this man also had a Nascent Soul cultivation base. However, his aura was stronger than Ailing Ghost's.

Xu Qing nodded in response to the man's questions.

"Very good," the old man said, chuckling coldly. "Ailing Ghost has a sort of symbiotic relationship with the poison the Holytides hit him with. Because of that, it's a simple thing for him to utilize poison. However, his understanding of the dao of poison is minimal. This group of swordsages isn't bad at all! You're Xu Qing, right? Step forward. As a reward for poisoning Ailing Ghost, I'll have you assist me in my lecture about nonhuman species."

Xu Qing stepped over and stood somberly next to the old man.

At this point, the old man looked at the other swordsages in the study hall. "You can call me Ghost Hand. Today I'll be teaching you about some of the defining characteristics of the most common nonhuman species. Also, their fatal weaknesses."

Qing Qiu instinctively glanced at Xu Qing. [1]

Being so close to Ghost Hand, Xu Qing could sense a strong odor of blood on him. He also noticed that Kong Xianglong seemed to revere Ghost Hand even more than he did Ailing Ghost.

As he pondered that, Kong Xianglong projected a message to him.

"Jailer."

Xu Qing's eyes narrowed in focus. He knew what 'jailers' were. And that indicated this man came from the Corrections Division. That made Xu Qing all the more interested in the contents of the lecture.

Back when he worked in the Violent Crimes Division in Seven Blood Eyes, he'd had dealings with some of the nonhumans who lived on the Forbidden Sea, and thus knew that many of them had different body structures than humans. Because of that, their fatal weaknesses were different. Grueglooms and Seastars were good examples.

"Smokewights are born in direct sunlight, and exist in a state of energy. It might seem like they have no weaknesses, but the truth is that their fatal weakness is right in front of you. All you need is a wind-based magical technique to take advantage of it.... Take this, Xu Qing."

Ghost Hand thrust his hand out, causing a lump of ice to appear, which then floated over to Xu Qing.

Xu Qing extended his hand to catch it. Being closer than the others, he had a much better view of the ice. It was transparent, and inside of it was a clump of smoke.

“Dealing with Smokewights is actually quite simple. You can simply freeze them, like I’ve done here.”

Ghost Hand flicked his sleeve, causing the ice to fly back to him. Then he went on to talk about other species.

“The Clothmakers are a species with the innate ability to turn enemies into cloth dolls. Their weakness is that within the third finger of each hand, they have a vital meridian.”

Ghost Hand waved his hand, causing an emaciated corpse to fly over and hover in front of Xu Qing. Xu Qing took control of it. The unclothed corpse had wrinkled green skin and a horn growing out of its forehead.

“Xu Qing, find the third finger.”

As instructed, Xu Qing rotated the corpse and then found the right hand, the third finger of which was clearly broken. He pulled the hand out so the other swordsages could see it.

“Next we have the Dualfaces, who are close relatives of the Saintfiends. Because we’re allies with the Saintfiends, killing them is prohibited. But it’s not the same with the Dualfaces. Similar to the Saintfiends, they have incredibly strong fleshly bodies. Their fatal weakness can be found when their two faces rotate. In that moment, you can strike a fatal blow in the spot between their eyebrows.”

Ghost Hand waved his hand again, causing a 6-meter-tall Dualface corpse to appear, with a bloody wound visible between its eyebrows.

Being close up, Xu Qing was able to see the wound clearly. Also, he could see that it was a sword wound that pierced to the same spot on the opposite face.

The other swordsages in the class were paying very close attention to everything.

Ghost Hand’s lecture included details of over a hundred nonhumans. Each time, he would bring out a specimen, none of which seemed to have been dead for very long. Some were still alive, which gave Ghost Hand the opportunity to teach about their fatal weaknesses by killing them. Before long, the study hall filled with the smell of blood.

Xu Qing benefited greatly. He could see everything very clearly, and sense things that the others couldn’t. He was also privy to many small details the others weren’t.

“Last we have a Demi-Immortal.” Grinning as if pleased from all the killing he’d done, Ghost Hand pulled out a gourd of alcohol and took a long drink. “All of the previous specimens were personally gathered by me, just for this lecture. Each and every one had engaged in ruthless slaughter of human cultivators. Some were even guilty of killing swordsages, and were on the Swordsage Palace’s wanted list. I’m pleased that not a single one of you is the pedantic type who felt compassion for them. Believe it or not, we have had some idiots like that throughout the years.

“Demi-Immortals are easy to deal with. I dragged this one out of the Corrections Division. Unfortunately, just like the Saintfiends, we can’t kill them.” With that, he waved his hand, causing a Demi-Immortal to appear in front of everyone, hovering there unconscious.

“Take a close look. Demi-Immortals are very similar to humans in appearance. However, they have five hearts. That’s one of the reasons they’re so strong. They also have incredible powers of regeneration, and few fatal weaknesses. In my opinion, if you want to kill them, it’s much better to aim for their kidneys than their hearts. What’s more, if you encounter them in the future, you should make sure to dismember their bodies to ensure they don’t regenerate.

“Keep in mind, this lecture relates only to the physical weaknesses of these species. Obviously, cultivators from these species will have all sorts of different magical techniques. When you end up fighting them, you’ll have to be flexible and make adjustments accordingly.

“As for Demi-Immortals, there’s one more thing I need to remind you about. The Demi-Immortals’ immortal puppets are comparatively stronger than we humans. They are vile killing machines designed specifically for combat. Even the weakest immortal puppet is at the Nascent Soul level. We don’t know exactly how they make them, but we do know that they’re made from living Demi-Immortals. You can imagine how brutal the process must be. The purpose of the procedure is to unlock resentment and madness, then use a special mutagen infusion to tap into immense power.”

With that, Ghost Hand put away the Demi-Immortal cultivator and then took another drink of alcohol before standing up.

“Unfortunately, I can’t dismember a Demi-Immortal in front of you. The three-species peace treaty specifies that if one species arrests another, the worst punishment that can be given is ten years in prison. After that, they have to be returned to their species. That applies to Saintfiends, Demi-Immortals, and humans.”

Shaking his head, Ghost Hand walked out.

Xu Qing went back to his desk and sat down.

It was late in the afternoon and evening was approaching. As the sunset clouds gathered, a figure entered the Swordsage Palace. It was an old man wearing a green robe, with long white hair and sparkling eyes. He looked scholarly and refined.

All swordsages who saw him clasped hands and bowed respectfully.

“Well met, Lieutenant Governor!”

The three palaces in the county capital were second only to the office of the governor. And just beneath the palaces in the hierarchy was the office of the lieutenant governor.

The lieutenant governor smiled as he walked in the direction of the study hall. Along the way, he glanced at the various palaces and halls as he conversed with the sword sage who accompanied him.

“I think the last time I was here was ten years ago,” he said. “Yesterday, the governor mentioned that this group of new sword sages is particularly outstanding. I suppose teaching this class will be a good chance to see what talented individuals will be representing humankind going forward.”

Accompanying the lieutenant governor was the highest ranking honor guard from the Sword Sage Palace. “The little punks still need a lot of training,” he said. “Given how well-studied you are, Lieutenant Governor, any tips you can give them would be considered good fortune.”

The lieutenant governor nodded as he and the honor guard entered the study hall.

All the sword sages inside stood and offered greetings with clasped hands, including Xu Qing.

“This is the exalted lieutenant governor of our Sea-Sealing County,” said the honor guard. “In a moment, the lieutenant governor will teach you about the history of humankind, as well as a special method he developed for dealing with impasses when working with plants and vegetation.”

“The lieutenant governor is the epitome of benevolence and morality, and there is no end to his virtuous achievements. Six years ago, he improved the white bolus formula and invented the pallid bolus. Pallid boluses are doubly effective at purging mutagen, and thus, this virtuous achievement by the lieutenant governor ensures that the commoners in our county do not suffer as greatly from the effects of mutagen.”

Having said that, the honor guard clasped hands and bowed deeply to the lieutenant governor.

The lieutenant governor returned the bow, then sighed. “I think it’s a bit of an exaggeration to say that there’s ‘no end to my virtuous achievements.’ As for the pallid bolus, the medicinal plants required to concoct them take a long time to grow. Because of that, we can only provide them to the commoners in the county capital. If we could distribute them to all the humans in the thirteen prefectures, that would be a truly virtuous achievement.”

“You’re too humble, exalted one,” the honor guard said. With that, he said his farewells and left the study hall.

The lieutenant governor walked to the front of the class and sat down. “Sit, everyone. Your honor guard went a bit overboard with his praise. The truth is that I’m just a student myself.”

Everyone clasped hands respectfully and then sat down and waited for the lieutenant governor to begin his lecture.

Being toward the front of the class, Xu Qing could sense that the lieutenant governor was similar to Grandmaster Bai and the grand elder from the Sword Sage Court. He instinctively liked the man.

That was especially true when it came to that pallid bolus. The mere mention of that pill sparked his interest, and he had already decided to purchase one and study it.

The lieutenant governor's lecture was very interesting. He talked about the history of humankind, starting with the glory days of Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity, when he conquered Revered Ancient and was venerated by all species. Eventually, he reached the point when the broken face of the god arrived, and Revered Ancient was struck by catastrophe. Then he spoke about the emperors that had led humanity in the years after the broken face of the god arrived. [2]

Some had been like enlightened sages. Some had tried to lead humankind back into glory. Some had been happy to keep things as they were.

“In the year 37,938 of the Eastglory calendar, Emperor Eastglory sought to accomplish extraordinary things. Ignoring the advice of his counselors, he marshaled all humans to wage war against the Firemoon Darkheaven species. The war ended in a resounding defeat. The resources we humans had stockpiled for tens of thousands of years were lost forever. Countless brave young men died and were buried in foreign lands. It was such a blow to our imperial might that we never recovered. In fact, that war was a turning point that led to the decline of humanity. That event was later called the Darkheaven Rebellion.

“In the year 21,435 of the Sageheaven calendar, the consequences of the Darkheaven Rebellion became fully manifest. Over a period of ten thousand years, humans lost a total of thirty-nine regions. Billions upon billions of commoners were displaced and left homeless, and were ultimately either enslaved by nonhumans or forced to scatter to various parts of Revered Ancient. As the generations passed, many of those commoners didn't even know what species they belonged to, and died not knowing where to truly call home. Sometimes they would band together to form small nations, but such places were almost always enslaved or destroyed.

“Many years into the Mirrorcloud calendar, we humans finally had a chance to rise to new heights. Emperor Mirrorcloud was wise and capable. Furthermore, a small kingdom in the Violet and Cyan Region rose to prominence, eventually taking over the entire region. That kingdom was named Violet and Cyan. Its king was exceptional, but its crown prince was outstanding beyond belief, and eventually came to be known as the most prominent human to rise up since the arrival of the broken face of the god. He was conceived at the behest of the destiny aura of humankind. When he was born, a howl of grief echoed out of all the forbidden grounds in Revered Ancient, and mutated blood flowed from within them. [3]

“Later generations believed that he was sent by this great world of Revered Ancient to save itself. They believed that he was a convergence of the power of the world, and that he was sent down with the mission of uniting Revered Ancient.

“This Crown Prince of Violet and Cyan, who crushed an entire generation, saw eye to eye with Emperor Mirrorcloud, so the two of them agreed to join forces. They were the ones who turned things around for humankind. After endless failures, they brought stability. At that time, humans controlled three regions and twenty-seven counties. Among them was the Violet and Cyan Region, upon which we stand right now! It is now called the Holytide Region!

“Eventually, that most consummate of chosen humans perished. He fell in the Sovereign Kingdom of Violet and Cyan. The nonhumans who attacked him were astonishing individuals. Even gods sleeping in the earth joined in the effort. Emperor Mirrorcloud wasn’t in time to save him. And thus... there is no Violet and Cyan in the world anymore. That most incredible of chosen finally died overseas on a distant continent.

“The day he died, the mountain ranges in Revered Ancient all howled in anguish. The rivers flowed backwards as they wept, and the eyes of the broken face of the god opened.

“Years after Violet and Cyan vanished for good, in the year 12,578 of the Dao Life calendar, Grand Duke Holytide was named chancellor of the region. During that time, Emperor Dao Life was enlightened and benevolent, yet things changed again. That was when the Nightshades rose to prominence and launched their attack against humankind!

“Emperor Dao Life personally led the troops into battle. All humans fought back, and eventually drove away the Nightshades. Except, in a critical moment, Grand Duke Holytide betrayed us, handing over the entire region to the Nightshades. He even mixed his own blood with that of the Nightshades, thus turning completely against humankind!

“After that war, humans lost two regions and twenty counties.... The event came to be known as the Holytide Betrayal. That was also when the name of the Violet and Cyan Region was changed. From then on, it was the Holytide Region.”

The lieutenant governor's voice seemed to carry everyone through the River of Time to see all of those events from the history of humankind. As it echoed out, it contained both pride and grief.

“And that is how humans went from controlling all of Revered Ancient to the current state of having one region and seven counties. We are now in the year 2,931 of the Dark War calendar, and we can only hope that Emperor Dark War once again brings light and holiness to humankind.”

Having finished his lecture, the lieutenant governor sighed. “Much of it will be up to all of you. I hope that you can bring back some of that ancient glory. I hope that you become true protectors of humanity, and not just swordsages out for personal gain!”

The study hall went completely silent.

As for Xu Qing, his head was bowed. At some point, his hands had clenched so tightly into fists that they had gone numb and turned pure white.

Chapter 402: Living Things Adapt to Their Environment

Unexpected things can inherently catch a person by surprise and throw their emotions into chaos. Xu Qing had been engrossed in the lieutenant governor’s lecture about the history of humankind. It was his first time hearing about such things, so it was only natural that he was deeply interested. Perhaps because of that, he was caught completely off guard when that one particular name came up.

Based on what the lieutenant governor was saying, that person... had once done amazing things for humankind. But Xu Qing was not so great of a person that he could just forget about the past. His way of thinking was simple: he still wanted to find the crow and kill it. [1]

It didn’t matter to Xu Qing if that person’s past accomplishments were truly as the lieutenant governor had recounted. And Xu Qing didn’t think he needed to sit around wondering about the truth.

Maybe it was true that the world could be described in terms as simple as good and evil. But Xu Qing knew that things between people were never simple. No, they were deeply complex. Very rarely were things simply ‘good’ or ‘evil.’ Virtually everything came down to one’s perspective.

Perhaps one person, in order to keep living, would steal another person’s final white bolus, thus causing that other person to experience mutation and die. Maybe that thief would go on to do the same thing over and over again, just to keep living. Every person who died because of that thief would call him ‘evil.’ But perhaps that thief would use the life he had earned to help people, perhaps even save the lives of others. In that case, all those other people would call him ‘good.’

In the end, was he evil, or good? Such matters are complicated, as there was a bad side to either decision. Any judgment about a situation like that would be informed by one’s personal situation. The ‘correct’ answer would differ from person to person.

Xu Qing had learned that truth from a young age, and had seen it play out in front of him many times. Now, though he still didn’t completely understand it, he felt like he was close. Sticking to one’s heart was the best option.

If I want to kill you, I kill you.

If I want to rob you, I kill you.

If you hurt me, I kill you.

If you kill my parents, then I’ll definitely kill you!

Xu Qing looked up at the lieutenant governor. By chance, it was the exact moment when the lieutenant governor finished his history lecture, and he happened to be looking at Xu Qing. They shared a glance. The lieutenant governor nodded.

“Next, I’m going to explain how to deal with an impasse when dealing with plants and vegetation. Truth be told, that kind of situation isn’t rare. There are plants everywhere in Revered Ancient. In fact, there are far more varieties than there are intelligent species. If you could observe Revered Ancient as a whole, and then remove all intelligent species, nothing much would change. But if you took away all the plants and vegetation, it would change very dramatically.”

The lieutenant governor’s hoarse voice matched his physical appearance, making it seem like his words echoed out from the ancient past into the minds of those attending the class.

“I’m not going to teach you a specific method or technique. Instead, I’m going to give you a pattern to follow, something that you can build on in the years to come.

“After you leave this class, I want you to take time thinking about... how to change the fundamental characteristics of a plant. For example, how to change an ordinary plant into a medicinal plant. Or how to take a spirit plant and turn it into a poisonous plant. Or, conversely, how to change a poisonous plant into a spirit plant. In a potentially deadly situation, that ability could be your means of salvation.”

Xu Qing had previously pondered this very subject. Based on what Grandmaster Bai had taught him, it was possible to use yin-yang polarity techniques along with various medicinal theories to combine different medicinal plants to effect transformations. However, it wasn’t a perfect method, as not all plants could be changed by alterations to yin-yang polarity.

Xu Qing and all the other swordsages were already pondering the lieutenant governor’s words. Although most people in attendance only had average skill when it came to plants and vegetation, all of them were at least partially educated. After all, it wasn’t possible to get through life without at least some knowledge of medicinal pills.

Smiling, the lieutenant governor waved his hand to produce a flower pot, within which was growing a small flower. The flower’s stalk was green, and it had three red petals that looked almost like fish scales. Altogether, there was something very strange about the plant.

Redscale lily. Xu Qing recognized it immediately. It was a type of rare poisonous flower that couldn’t be transformed with yin-yang polarity techniques.

“Watch carefully.” The lieutenant governor took out a small bottle. Opening it, he poured the liquid from inside onto the soil in the pot. After observing what was happening to the redscale lily, he added a different medicinal liquid. Having done that, he threw both of his hands out to each side and released the power of his cultivation base. Sending it into the pot, he made sure the redscale lily absorbed all of the liquid.

Gradually, something marvelous happened. The redscale lily’s petals turned white. Moments later, a fragrant aroma filled the air.

Everyone watching was amazed, especially Xu Qing.

Although it might not have seemed impressive, the more someone understood about plants and vegetation, the more shocking it would be. Xu Qing knew yin-yang polarity couldn't be used on redscale lilies, yet the lieutenant governor was able to effect such a change. It caused Xu Qing's eyes to glitter.

"Do you understand?" the lieutenant governor asked. "If you want to affect a medicinal plant, you can't be bold and decisive. You don't need to make yin-yang adjustments to transform it. You just water it quietly.

"If you gradually change its environment, as well as its diet, you can exert a huge influence on the plant without it even realizing it. To put it plainly, you're not actually transforming the plant. The plant is using its own power to transform itself. All you're doing is giving it the proper environment in which to change."

The lieutenant governor smiled encouragingly as he looked at the thoughtful swordsages in the study hall.

"And that is the pattern I wanted to impart to you. With that foundation, you can now look at plants and vegetation in a different way. Perhaps it can help you to do half the work, with twice the effect. Over the course of the rest of your seven-day training, I'll explain more about this subject on a daily basis. If you can't master it by the seventh day, you can always spend military credits to come to the Lieutenant Governor's Mansion to study further."

With that, the lieutenant governor left. Everyone bid him farewell with respectful bows. Xu Qing did the same. This particular class had been very enlightening to him.

That marked the end of the training for the day, and everyone went their separate ways.

It was already evening, and the moon had risen. There were no clouds, so the beautiful moonlight spilled down like a silver river.

Xu Qing and the Captain were getting ready to head back to the subsidiary sect when Kong Xianglong called out to them from behind.

"Xu Qing!"

Xu Qing stopped and looked back. Kong Xianglong had a sincere smile on his face, as he hurried over, followed by Sir Mountain-River, Wang Chen, and Duskspirit.

"We're all going to be comrades-in-arms soon," Kong Xianglong said. "Let me buy you a drink! I don't want to beat around the bush, so I'll just say it plain and simple. I want to be friends with you! Besides, my other friends are curious about you too. And since you just got to the county capital, you're probably not very familiar with the Swordsage Palace. I'd be happy to explain a few things. What do you think?"

Xu Qing hesitated. It seemed like a sincere invitation, and he did want to learn a bit more about the swordsages. However, he got the impression these people didn't like the Captain very much.

Kong Xianglong came across as a bit boorish. But that was just his general personality, and the fact that he didn't like spending a lot of time thinking about things. It didn't mean that he was a fool. Obviously, he could tell why Xu Qing was hesitating. Suppressing his reservations about Chen Erniu, he said, "Fellow Daoist Chen, if you're busy...."

"I'm not busy!" the Captain said, feeling very pleased with the way Xu Qing was watching out for him.

Xu Qing nodded.

Kong Xianglong didn't care if an additional person came along or not. Hearing Xu Qing's response, he laughed heartily, and then they all headed off. Along the way, Duskspirit snagged Qing Qiu, who had been about to head off on her own. Qing Qiu really had no choice but to go along.

And thus, the seven of them left the Swordsage Palace.

Right about then, Zhang Siyun walked out of the study hall. Seeing them all leaving together, he snorted coldly and left on his own.

Kong Xianglong had grown up in the county capital, so it was only natural that he knew all the best restaurants and drinking spots. Instead of picking a fancy restaurant, he led them to an ordinary wine shop. There weren't many customers there. The proprietors were an old husband and wife who were obviously well-acquainted with Kong Xianglong and his friends. When the old couple came out bearing dishes for another table, they immediately noticed Kong Xianglong and smiled.

"Well if it isn't little Kong! And you brought new friends?"

"Uncle Zhou! Aunt Zhou!" Kong Xianglong hurried over and helped them with the dishes, taking them to the other table. The guest there didn't seem nervous at all in the presence of so many swordsages. [3]

In fact, he said, "Helping out again, little Kong?"

"Of course! I can work and drink at the same time!" Kong Xianglong laughed, put down the food, then went and grabbed some alcohol for his own table.

"What are you doing standing around?" he said. "Sit, sit! I brew the alcohol here, so I can guarantee you it isn't watered down." After making sure everyone had a place to sit, Kong Xianglong served the alcohol. It really did seem like he owned the place.

Qing Qiu found it very odd, and Xu Qing eyed Kong Xianglong a few times during the process. The Captain seemed as if he knew exactly what was going on.

Kong Xianglong opened his mouth to speak, except that another customer yelled for the bill. Standing, he hurried over and took care of it. He seemed like a completely different person from that menacing individual who had arrived at the Swordsage Palace.

When Duskspirit saw the reaction of Xu Qing and the others, she explained, "Big Bro Kong grew up in poverty. When he was small, he worked days in the Swordsage Palace, and then did odd jobs in the city at night to earn some extra spirit coins. He worked as a waiter at this particular wine shop for three years. He only quit after he had to start going on missions all the time. But whenever we

have a reunion dinner, we come here. After all, his Uncle Zhou and Aunt Zhou treat him very well. Big Bro Kong is the kind of person who cherishes old friendships.”

Xu Qing looked at Kong Xianglong hurrying around the restaurant. In his entire life, he had never encountered anyone like this.

Eventually, Kong Xianglong came back to the table. After sitting, he lifted his alcohol flagon and gave a hearty laugh. “Any day that I make so many new friends is a good day! Come, brothers. Drink!”

Sir Mountain-River, Wang Chen, and Duskspirit raised their alcohol flagons. Xu Qing, the Captain, and Qing Qiu did the same. Then everyone drank together.

They were young, so they drank quickly. Alcohol didn’t affect cultivators easily, but it could liven up the atmosphere. And Kong Xianglong’s friendly laughter made things even better. Thanks to his efforts, the mood quickly grew much more relaxed than before. Kong Xianglong’s open-minded personality was even more obvious when he was drinking. Clearly, he was a big drinker, as he downed flagon after flagon.

Eventually, even Xu Qing and Qing Qiu loosened up. That said, the two of them clearly didn’t like each other, and hardly exchanged a single glance.

The Captain, of course, was affable by nature, and didn’t hold back in drinking with Sir Mountain-River and the others.

“Little River, Duskspirit, Wang Chen,” said Kong Xianglong, “I know full well the three of you aren’t convinced that Xu Qing actually earned the veneration of the Grand Emperor. But let me tell you, one of the things we human chosen need to avoid at all costs is jealousy. We all listened to the same history lesson today. Remember how strong humankind used to be? If it wasn’t for infighting, we would still be just as amazing. I can’t speak for the rest of you, but I’m completely convinced by Xu Qing. 30,000 meters is 30,000 meters!”

Kong Xianglong’s heartfelt expressions eventually caused Sir Mountain-River and the others to relax somewhat, and they even started chatting a bit with Xu Qing. That said, they were still very wary of the Captain, and that wasn’t something that would go away quickly.

After three rounds of drinking, the food was served. Smiling at Xu Qing, Kong Xianglong said, “Xu Qing, you probably haven’t sought enlightenment of The Emperor’s Sword, have you? You either, little Duskspirit. I succeeded last year, so let me share some of my experience with you.”

Xu Qing was moved. He knew that such enlightenment sessions were rare, and that people usually didn’t want to talk about the details. The Captain was also surprised, and even Qing Qiu suddenly looked up.

Kong Xianglong laughed. “What’s with all the weird expressions? It’s just enlightenment of The Emperor’s Sword, that’s all!”

Up to this point, Wang Chen had said the least. He was the one who quietly said, “This is just how Big Bro Kong is. He gave me my life lamp.”

“I didn’t give you that life lamp. We stole it together!” Kong Xianglong went to clasp Wang Chen on the shoulder, except his hand went right through him.

“Big Bro Kong, my true form is in a key cultivation juncture....”

Kong Xianglong laughed again, then looked back at Xu Qing and went on to explain his experience with The Emperor’s Sword.

Thus, time passed. They continued to drink, until eventually the Captain took out some special spirit alcohol from Seven Blood Eyes. It was so strong that mortals who drank it would die. To cultivators, it was considered fine liquor. That improved Kong Xianglong’s impression of the Captain a bit.

Eventually, despite being cultivators, they were all starting to get a bit tipsy. After all, none of them were using their cultivation base to dispel the alcohol from within them.

Of course, that made them more talkative. Sir Mountain-River became less gloomy, and even started loudly cursing the Yao Clan. Clearly, he was not happy about how close the Yao Clan was with nonhumans.

Eventually, conversation shifted to the governor and the lieutenant governor. When it came to the former, they sighed, but at the same time, talked about him with understanding and admiration. As for the latter, he was widely regarded as a very intelligent and talented administrator who did a lot of good for the county capital.

Eventually the Captain and Kong Xianglong got into a drinking match, and the atmosphere got even more excited.

As midnight approached, they finally left the wine shop. Although this one gathering wasn’t enough for them all to become fast friends, at least they now knew each other a bit better.

On the way back to the subsidiary sect, the Captain threw his arm over Xu Qing’s shoulders and pointed out with his other hand as if he were looking down at all heaven and earth. “Let me tell you, little Ah Qing. Those people simply do not have a very high alcohol tolerance. Your Eldest Brother, on the other hand, has got some skill. Kong Xianglong really was subpar. He couldn’t come close to out-drinking me!”

Xu Qing smiled and nodded in agreement.

The night passed without incident.

The following days, classes continued in the study hall. As new swordsages, they learned more swordsage secret magics, and were taught many other things.

Eventually, the Swordsage Palace arranged for them to break up into smaller groups that generally met in separate locations. Because of constantly being put into different groups, the new swordsages gradually got to know each other.

On one occasion, Xu Qing ended up in a group with Qing Qiu, where they went through a course on dealing with ambushes. Although Qing Qiu’s face was as cold as ever, they cooperated well enough that, inside, she was starting to feel conflicted.

Another time, Kong Xianglong and the Captain worked together on a search mission. They failed, the reason being that when they found the item they were looking for, the Captain couldn't hold back and took a bite out of it.

After that, Kong Xianglong took the opportunity to secretly tell Sir Mountain-River and his other friends to be careful around Chen Erniu.

"That fellow has a nose like a dog's. He's incredibly skilled at searching for things. But he also likes to bite stuff. If you're on a mission with him in the future, you have to be very careful about your belongings!"

In that manner, the seven days of training passed in a flash.

Not only had they benefited greatly from the training, but also, the new batch of swordsmen wasn't filled with a bunch of strangers. Everyone knew each other, and there were also some budding friendships. They weren't deep friendships, but they were a start. The start of becoming comrades-in-arms. The only exception was Zhang Siyun.

When it came time for the final assessment, Xu Qing was told he didn't need to participate, and that he was being assigned a post with the palace lord.

The palace lord didn't stay in the Swordsman Palace. He stayed in the Corrections Division. That was a tradition among palace lords in the Swordsman Palace. They always led the Corrections Division.

After Xu Qing left the study hall with his post assignment, he headed to Sea-Sealing County's number one prison!

Chapter 403: Sea-Sealing's Number One Prison

The number one prison in Sea-Sealing County was the Corrections Division. Operated by the Swordsman Palace, it was known far and wide. The vilest cultivators from countless species were locked up there, including Saintfiends and Demi-Immortals. There were even some Holytides as well. Of course, humans who had been convicted of heinous crimes were also incarcerated there.

From ancient times until now, the peace treaty between humans, Saintfiends, and Demi-Immortals ensured that representatives of that species could survive easily in the prison. It wasn't the same with other species. The reason members of other species weren't executed on the spot for their crimes was that it would be a big waste. Instead, their cultivation bases were turned into a power source for the county capital's taboo treasure.

As long as they didn't all die at once, and as long as there were more to replace those who did die, then it wouldn't matter if thousands or even tens of thousands perished. To a certain degree, the lives of the prisoners were fully in the control of the Corrections Division. As a result, the prison abounded with an aura of death, and was a very sinister and gloomy place. Thus, it was no wonder that the jailers who served there were terrifying and fierce.

A good example was Ghost Hand, who had previously taught one of Xu Qing's classes. He was one of the jailers, and he had a baleful aura that Xu Qing had been able to sense quite clearly.

Based on what Xu Qing had learned in the classes during his training, the Corrections Division had been around since Sea-Sealing County was first formed. And the very first palace lord of the Swordsage Palace had been in charge.

It contained a hundred and seventy-seven levels, all of which contained dimensional spaces, unending warding spells, countless spell formations, shocking defensive precautions, and other secrets. Even a Void Returning expert who forced their way into the prison would end up trapped and unable to flee.

A lot of that was due to the tradition of having the palace lord stay there. That tradition had been in place from the moment the prison was built, and had been started at the suggestion of the first palace lord himself. Successive generations of palace lords had always honored the tradition, and kept both their offices and residences in the prison itself.

In addition to housing prisoners and powering the taboo treasure, the prison served another function. Intimidation. It was one way that humans struck fear into the hearts of all of the nonhumans that lived in Sea-Sealing County.

Over the years, no one other than the Corrections Division knew exactly how many cultivators had been imprisoned. People who attempted to estimate or make calculations would say that the number... was the same as the number of stars in the sky.

Xu Qing thought about all of that as he left the Swordsage Palace and headed to the Corrections Division.

From up above, the ground above the prison looked transparent, making it possible to look down toward the very depths of the prison. However, though the dozens of levels at the top were clearly visible, everything in the chasm below was so dark that it seemed like a sinister ghastr hollow.

The closer one got, the more profound that sinister atmosphere grew. In fact, when Xu Qing arrived and stood at the very edge of the Corrections Division, he could sense immense pressure coming from the prison depths. He also felt faint vibrations through his feet, making it seem like some massive, subterranean monster was struggling deep below. There was also a boundless baleful aura that rose up from below, accompanied by faint howls and screams.

Taking a deep breath, Xu Qing kept his assignment medallion gripped firmly in his hand as he proceeded. Soon, he sensed that he had run into an invisible membrane blocking his path. Next, a terrifying wave of divine will weighed down on him. It contained brutal power as well as a force of expulsion. It was as if some invisible giant had waved its hand to swat him away.

Xu Qing's mind reeled, but he didn't back up. He held up his assignment medallion and said, "Swordsage Xu Qing here, reporting for duty."

As soon as the words left his mouth, the terrifying divine will focused on the assignment medallion. Shortly thereafter, the divine will faded away. The invisible membrane glowed with red light, and then materialized in front of Xu Qing in the form of a door made of flowing blood, set into a wall.

The door seemed simple and archaic, and overflowed with the sensation of time. It was covered with countless magical symbols, each of which pulsed with immense power. Together, they formed the image of a huge beast which glared at Xu Qing.

Xu Qing looked at it expressionlessly.

A moment passed, then the door creaked open and an unprepossessing middle-aged cultivator walked out. He wore a swordmage uniform that looked very similar to Xu Qing's. The difference was that instead of the design manifesting as a red flame, it was pure black. He had some scars on his face that were obviously injuries inflicted by magical techniques that couldn't be removed. The skin around them was withered, making him look unusually fierce.

He also had triangular eyes. Looking at Xu Qing through those eyes, he flashed an eerie grin.

“Welcome to the Corrections Division.”

With that, he turned and walked in the other direction.

Xu Qing followed, stepping through the door and thus passing to the other side of the wall.

He was now able to look down into the chasm of the prison, and could also see the staircase winding down around the edges. Xu Qing followed the jailer down the staircase into the Corrections Division.

He sensed a cold and sinister aura from below, and the howls echoed around him, like those of wild animals. At the same time, darkness was everywhere. Not even the sunlight from above could penetrate the sinister haze which filled the place.

Xu Qing didn't pay close attention to all of that. As he reached the first level of the prison, he looked around at the various cell blocks built into the wall. Every cell block was massive, and contained countless cells inside. Within them were innumerable inmates from all sorts of species. The smell of blood and gore pervaded, creating a very noxious aroma.

Xu Qing took it all in calmly and without any reaction.

The jailer leading the way would occasionally look back at him, and soon seemed intrigued by Xu Qing's calm expression.

As they went further down into the depths of the prison, Xu Qing finally spotted other jailers. Most were older in years, and thanks to the sinister atmosphere of the prison, all of them abounded with cold, baleful auras. Some dragged corpses dripping with blood.

Their brutal nature caused Xu Qing's eyes to narrow. He also noticed that the jailers who looked at him seemed either cold, cheerfully ruthless, or suspicious. Xu Qing wasn't worried about the gazes. He could sense that every single jailer had a very powerful cultivation base, such that each one would definitely be a famous person outside the prison.

To Xu Qing, they seemed like a pack of wolves.

The people in the Swordsage Palace also seemed like wolves, but here, everyone was far more brutal and blood-soaked. They rejected anyone who wasn't a jailer, as if they had been here so long that the only people they recognized as important were the jailers and inmates.

As for Xu Qing, he was currently neither an inmate nor a jailer. Because of his physical appearance, and his penchant for disguising his true nature, he stuck out to the jailers like a bright torch on a dark night. Like a little lamb led into the den of wolves.

Despite how everyone was looking at him, Xu Qing remained calm and silent as he followed the jailer down to Level 89. That was the exact middle of the prison. Above it were eighty-eight levels and below it were eighty-eight. This level had no cell block. Instead, it had a pitch-black hall with

twenty-one pillars in it, going from floor to ceiling. Coiling around each pillar were numerous black dracolizards that glared at Xu Qing in sinister fashion. At the same time, the torchlight in the hall was so dim it didn't illuminate much. All Xu Qing could see was a person seated cross-legged at the far end of the hall.

Looking very respectful, the jailer said, "He's here, Palace Lord."

The jailer then backed up, going all the way to the stairs, where he waited.

Taking a deep breath, Xu Qing clasped hands and bowed to the figure at the far end of the hall.

"Swordsage Xu Qing, here to offer greetings, Palace Lord."

The moment the words left his mouth, a huge eye opened in the darkness of the hall. It seemed to be several dozen meters tall, with a vertical pupil amidst yellow. Within the eye floated numerous black motes, almost like a smoke or mist within the eye.

Beneath the eye sat a burly middle-aged man in a black suit of armor, with flowing black hair. A long spear rested in front of him as he sat in front of the huge eye, pulsing with terrifying fluctuations.

Looking at him, Xu Qing's mind spun, and he suddenly felt like he was looking at a god. This person had no mutagen, but he emanated such incredible pressure that he truly seemed like the god of this prison. This man was the current palace lord of the Swordsage Palace!

Opening his eyes, he looked coldly at Xu Qing. His gaze was like lightning, causing Xu Qing's flesh and blood to tremble. His soul almost seemed incapable of standing up to the force, as though it might explode.

Then the gaze retracted, and Xu Qing stood there with his face ashen, trembling. The palace lord then spoke in a deep voice.

"Every swordsage is a sharp sword wielded for humankind as a whole. They should be ready to sacrifice their lives at any moment, all for humanity's sake."

The palace lord's voice resonated with power as he spoke those twenty-seven words, all of which echoed like heavenly thunder in Xu Qing's ears. [1]

"Though swordsages differ in terms of cultivation base and rank, it doesn't matter if you're talking about you or me, we're all sharp swords that defend humankind! I normally don't like showing favor to anyone. But you earned the veneration of the Grand Emperor, something borne witness to by many outsiders. Therefore, I issued a dharmic decree that you should be appointed as my secretary-general.

"However, the entire purpose of that was to show respect to the Grand Emperor. You, Xu Qing, are simply a new swordsage who hasn't accomplished anything. Therefore, you don't deserve anything special.

"As far as I'm concerned, there's no difference between you and any of the other new swordsages. And you obviously can't compare to those who have already performed amazing services."

The palace lord spoke calmly, yet the pressure that came with his words caused all of Level 89 to tremble.

“Do you understand?”

Xu Qing nodded. What the palace lord said made sense to him. Besides, he wasn't exactly thrilled to be working as a secretary-general.

“In the Swordsage Palace,” the palace lord continued coolly, “we don't raise greenhouse flowers. If you thought you could skate by because of the Grand Emperor's veneration, perhaps by taking it easy here, then you can screw off back to Emperor-Receiving Prefecture and enjoy the glory of your 30,000-meter light there!”

After a moment of silence in which Xu Qing acclimated to the pressure, he looked up and said, “Palace Lord, is there really anywhere in this world where one can ‘take it easy’?”

The palace lord looked back at him.

“I don't know the answer myself,” Xu Qing continued. “I do know that some people ‘take it easy’ after others endure extremely difficult circumstances on their behalf. But there's another way to ‘take it easy.’ And that's to kill every single enemy that threatens you. I don't like owing people things, so I don't want to be the former. I want to be the latter, and always have been.”

Xu Qing rarely talked so much, so after saying those things, he bowed deeply and didn't say anything further.

The palace lord looked at him, his eyes shining brightly. “You can keep the title of secretary-general. However, I don't have any need for you to follow me around doing that type of work. I'm going to have you work as a jailer. I want to see exactly how you behave as the second type of person you just described.”

Having received his orders, Xu Qing bowed again to the palace lord, then turned and left.

After watching Xu Qing disappear, the palace lord coolly said, “What do you think of him?”

“He speaks sincerely,” came the response, a voice that rumbled through Level 89 like the roar of a wild beast.

The dracolizards coiled around the twenty-one pillars all trembled and bowed their heads.

“My thoughts exactly.” With that, the palace lord produced a jade slip which contained information from Emperor-Receiving Prefecture's Swordsage Court. It had all of the details about Xu Qing. It even mentioned that he had started out at Peerless City, a city that had vanished when the god's eyes opened.

“The god's eyes opened on him twice, yet he survived, then slaughtered his way to prominence. I suppose he deserves some mentoring.” The palace lord closed his eyes.

Chapter 404: He IS Hell

Xu Qing currently stood just outside of Level 89, looking at the jailer who had led him down here.

The scar-faced jailer had already received instructions about Xu Qing's post, and what to do next. Leaning against the wall with his arms crossed, he looked Xu Qing up and down. He had looked at Xu Qing before, but had been assessing him as an outsider. Now, things were different.

"Considering how good-looking you are, boy, you're not going to have an easy time down here. To the brutal villains that call this place home, you're simply not going to be very intimidating. They're going to have a lot of fun with you."

The jailer grinned maliciously.

Xu Qing said nothing in response, and merely looked at the man.

Seeing Xu Qing's calmness, the jailer chuckled. "Interesting. Come with me."

Pushing away from the wall, he started climbing the stairs back up. As he passed the dark cell blocks, he would inspect them and bark a few curses. It didn't matter how the inmates were clamoring, when they heard the jailor's curses, they went quiet.

Xu Qing noted that thoughtfully. Each cell block contained a large dimensional space, within which were hundreds of cells. Imprisoned in those cells were all sorts of prisoners from every imaginable species. Many were bizarre in appearance, with the majority not even being humanoid. Xu Qing even spotted a few Seazombies.

After looking around, Xu Qing retracted his gaze and then peered into the darkness below. A chill, sinister wind rose up from there, along with occasional howls and screams.

"Don't even bother looking," the jailer said coolly. "Everything below Level 89 is Unit C. You're not allowed to go there. Not even I'm qualified for that."

"Was this place once a ghastr hollow?" Xu Qing suddenly asked.

"You're very well-informed. Yes. This place was indeed a ghastr hollow. Back when the Corrections Division was established, the emperor himself sent people here to take control. Hold on, what was that?"

The jailer's facial expression darkened. Turning, he kicked open one of the cell block entrances. As he stepped inside, the door smacked shut behind him, then turned blurry, making it impossible to see inside.

Xu Qing stood patiently waiting outside.

Shortly thereafter, the cell block door opened, and the jailer emerged, grinning cruelly as he wiped his mouth free of blood.

"One of the inmates is a Hornmerchant who used to be in the same little sect as me. After I became a jailer, I requested time off specifically to go arrest him. He never behaves well. Whenever I get a chance, I go in and show him a thing or two. Of course, I have to be careful. Can't kill him. Otherwise all the fun will come to an end."

The jailer seemed a lot more relaxed now. He even whistled a bit as he led Xu Qing onward.

Glancing into the cell block, Xu Qing saw that it was absolutely still and quiet, with a faint blood mist slowly settling down. Obviously, when the jailer mentioned 'showing him a thing or two,' it was more complicated than it seemed on the surface. That said, this was roughly how things worked in the Violent Crimes Division, so Xu Qing wasn't surprised.

As Xu Qing followed along, he saw more and more jailers. Most were in the cell blocks standing guard. However, things were different compared to when the jailer led him down. This time, the jailer called out greetings to whoever he saw.

"We got a newbie here!"

The jailers they encountered, all of whom pulsed with bloody and baleful auras, seemed intrigued, and some of them even started following along. In short order, there were over thirty jailers in their little group. Many were urging the first jailer to 'hurry up.'

"Come on, Ol' Li, this is far enough," one of them said. "We're already at D-170. There's nothing interesting past this point. We've all got things to do and just want to enjoy the show. Enough with the delays!"

The middle-aged jailer grinned and stopped in front of one particular cell block. "Alright. This is the spot."

He kicked the door open, then beckoned at Xu Qing to follow him as he stomped inside.

Xu Qing looked over his shoulder at the more than thirty jailers behind him. All of them looked at him with gleaming eyes, like a pack of wolves.

"Wanna bet on the outcome?" he asked suddenly.

The jailers laughed.

"I'll bet on myself," Xu Qing said. With that, he took out a small sack that had about a hundred spirit stones in it. He tossed it to Ol' Li. Without saying another word, he turned and entered the cell block.

"Very interesting." The jailers outside the cell block exchanged even more curious glances, then followed.

The moment Xu Qing stepped inside, his vision blurred briefly, and then he found himself in another spatial dimension, surrounded by over a hundred cells. There were all types of prisoners. Some looked vicious, some looked grim, and some grinned wildly. None of them spoke. They just watched as Xu Qing entered with the jailers.

The middle-aged jailer the others had called Ol' Li glanced around then called, "It's play time, fellas. It's your lucky day. The same rules apply as always. For every chunk of flesh you rip off, you get one month cell-free. You'll be free to roam D-170 as you wish, and won't face any reprisals. Same as ever."

The inmates were already breathing heavily, and their brutal and wild gazes were fixed on Xu Qing, as if they wished to rip him limb from limb with their eyes only.

To them, Xu Qing looked dainty and tender, like a pastry that could be consumed in a single bite. Vicious cruelty rose in their hearts. After all, a month of freedom without being locked in a cell was something each and every one of them longed for. Though they all knew that the people assigned to work here as jailers weren't ordinary individuals, they all still felt confident. Any criminal sentenced to serve time here was someone who had slaughtered numerous human beings. Being locked up constantly only caused the perverse energy within them to build higher and higher. Not only did Xu Qing himself pique their interest, but also, they detested swordsages. Because of that, the ominous atmosphere in the cell block grew more intense.

Seeing all that, Ol' Li looked at Xu Qing. "Alright, ya little punk. This is how we do things in the Corrections Division. Every new jailer has to quell a cell block riot. If you fail, you'll end up as someone else's assistant, and won't qualify to do real jailer work. If you succeed, then you'll qualify to be in charge of an entire cell block. Have fun. And make sure to kill a few for us."

With that, Ol' Li strolled back to the main entrance where he stood with the other jailers. There, he waved his hand, and clanging sounds rang out as all of the cells in the cell block opened up.

At the same time, the restraints constricting the inmates' cultivation bases were removed. Gold Core auras instantly sprang up everywhere. In Unit D, most inmates were Gold Core cultivators.

Because of being locked up, their spirit energy was weak. But there were over a hundred of them, all with various skills and abilities. What was more, they all had brutal auras that only the most resolute, high-level swordsages would be able to face without shying away.

Beyond that, there were some species present who had extremely impressive fleshly bodies. Obviously, this wasn't going to be any sort of conventional fight.

The inmates were already moving toward Xu Qing, some of them cackling madly, others stoic, others howling in rage. Some moved quickly, others took their time. Some seemed to advance with wild abandon, others were clearly planning things out. And while some had terrifying fleshly body power, others were clearly using astonishing magical techniques. They were like a horde of devils or a pack of wild beasts, pouring out of the cells and converging on Xu Qing.

Xu Qing stood there looking like a helpless lamb just waiting to be ripped to pieces.

The observing jailers already seemed to be having fun. All of them had gone through this process, so they all looked forward to watching other newbies go through it. Of course, if it got to the point where it looked like Xu Qing might die, they would interfere. This really was a tradition, not bullying or harassment.

"Remember, kid," Ol' Li called, "you need to ask for mercy if things get too rough. Don't get yourself killed before we can save you."

Nodding, Xu Qing strode forward toward the first inmate, who was a nonhuman covered with scales that resembled armor.

As the nonhuman closed in, grinning viciously, Xu Qing lunged forward.

A boom rang out. The vicious grin remained on the nonhuman's face. All he felt was something like a strong wind hit him. Then a tremor passed through him and blood sprayed out of his mouth. A look of shock filled his face as a dagger appeared in Xu Qing's hand, which then slashed through

his throat. The blow was delivered with such force that the nonhuman's head flew off his shoulders within a geyser of blood.

Xu Qing shot backward, slamming into another nonhuman. Before the nonhuman could react, Xu Qing thrust his dagger backward, stabbing into him. The dagger pierced the nonhuman's abdomen, and then Xu Qing ripped it up all the way to his forehead.

Next, Xu Qing dropped to his knees, avoiding a magical technique, then jumped forward with the agility of a cat to land right in front of a third nonhuman. Bending his leg, he slammed a knee into the nonhuman's face. The nonhuman managed to utter an agonized shriek before his head exploded.

Everyone could hear the sound of blood splattering onto the ground, as well as the thump of bodies hitting the ground. It almost seemed like the gates of hell had been opened, and a fiend of slaughter had emerged.

Xu Qing had moved so quickly that none of the other inmates had yet reacted. And before any of them could, Xu Qing blurred into motion, arriving in front of a four-armed nonhuman with a gemstone growing out of his forehead. This nonhuman clearly had a very strong fleshly body. All four of his hands were clenched into fists as he launched an attack at Xu Qing.

Xu Qing was too fast. Grabbing one of the nonhumans' arms, he tapped into his own explosive fleshly body power and pulled hard. The nonhuman's face fell as he felt an immense force yanking him toward Xu Qing.

As blood erupted everywhere, Xu Qing's right hand turned semitransparent, and he stabbed it into the nonhuman's chest and grabbed his four heavenly palaces. As everyone watched in shock, Xu Qing ripped four dull gold cores out in a haze of blood, crushed them, and absorbed them. The nonhuman screamed as Xu Qing tossed him over his shoulder, and then blurred toward the next nonhuman. His index and middle fingers were like a needle that stabbed into the nonhuman's throat. At the same time, Xu Qing crushed his gold cores.

Similar things happened to eight inmates. Twelve. Seventeen.

The inmates were now coming to realize how terrifying Xu Qing was, and how difficult he was to deal with. They exchanged grim glances, and then some continued to approach him, while others prepared magical attacks from a distance. They hoped to use nets above and snares below to see him dead.

But Xu Qing was just too fast, and his fleshly body was beyond astonishing. Magical techniques flared around him, and the golden crow appeared behind him. The crow's piercing cry rang out as its power fought back against the magical techniques unleashed by the dozens of inmates.

Surrounded by flashing, multicolored light, Xu Qing closed in on one of the nonhumans using a magical technique. This nonhuman had a pair of wings. He wasn't a Demi-Immortal, but rather, looked like some sort of birdman. Upon seeing Xu Qing close in, the birdman's pupils constricted, and he backed up. However, he was too slow. Xu Qing grabbed his neck, then slammed him into the nearby wall. The wall trembled as the birdman's neck and head exploded.

"What a pity," Xu Qing said, realizing he hadn't left himself an opening to take his opponent's gold cores.

He threw the corpse off to the side. Looking around at the vicious nonhuman inmates, he licked his lips and burst into motion again. He didn't use any poison. It seemed like a waste to resort to trump cards in a situation like this. In fact, he didn't even use many magical techniques.

He suddenly appeared behind a shocked inmate, who tried to flee but wasn't fast enough. Xu Qing's right hand pierced into his back, grabbed his heart, and crushed it. Then he wrenched his hand to the side, destroyed the nonhuman's heavenly palaces, and pulled out four dim gold cores.

In this manner, bloodcurdling screams filled the D-170 cell block. The screams never stopped. They just echoed out, shriller and more miserable with each moment that passed.

Thirty inmates. Forty. Fifty....

Xu Qing killed with increasing speed and efficiency. Leaving behind a string of blood-colored afterimages, he grabbed a nonhuman by the neck and, as he screamed, ripped out his gold cores.

An inmate tried to ambush him, but before getting close, Xu Qing's shadow twitched. A moment later... half of the nonhuman's body was gone, having been devoured by some invisible force.

The slaughter continued. An incense stick's worth of time passed, which wasn't much. The stench of gore filled the cell block. Bodies littered the floor. Most of them had no more heavenly palaces or gold cores. They were desiccated corpses, their energy and blood having been absorbed by Xu Qing's golden crow. Some corpses were headless. Others were dismembered. It was a grisly scene.

There were a couple unique species whose skin Xu Qing had ripped off. There were only a few dozen nonhuman inmates left. Their innate ferocity had now been crushed, and they felt nothing but pure terror. They hadn't seen Xu Qing's facial expression change one time, and yet to them, he looked so different from before that they almost couldn't process it mentally.

Xu Qing had looked like a helpless lamb to them. But now it seemed like he had ripped off his sheep's clothing to reveal that he was really a vicious wolf. In fact, 'wolf' wasn't even the right term. He was like a walking, living hell!

Their hearts swelled with astonishment and fear, and they trembled physically as they backed away from him.

"He's not a Unit D jailer!"

"Unit D jailers release emotional fluctuations when they attack. This guy... has none!"

"He's a fiendish killer! He's obviously been wounded, but he hasn't so much as batted an eyelid this entire time. This kind of person... I FORFEIT! Exalted jailers, we give up!!"

It was true that Xu Qing had been wounded. There was no way he could fight so many enemies without using trump cards, and come out completely unscathed. However, the more he got wounded, the more viciously he fought. Even as the terrified inmates backed away from him, he shot toward one and head-butted his face, causing his entire head to explode.

The surviving inmates' hearts went cold. They were brutal individuals, but their eyes were full of terror as they looked at Xu Qing. He was obviously capable of a lot more brutality than them. In fact, when the blood-drenched Xu Qing turned to look at some of the inmates, they couldn't control their fear. Trembling madly, they ran in the direction of the jailers.

That said, the jailers by the cell block door were also deeply shaken by the unforgettable scene they had just witnessed. They looked at the bodies and the blood. They saw the terrified inmates. And there was Xu Qing, looking incomparably calm. Some of the jailers gasped. All were shocked. They had witnessed slaughters before. They themselves were killers to the core. So what shocked them wasn't the mere act of killing. Rather, it was Xu Qing's facial expression while he did it. They were vicious individuals, but none of them could match Xu Qing, who slaughtered his enemies without the slightest change in facial expression.

Whether one was carrying out the slaughter, or facing the prospect of being slaughtered, it was common to get riled up emotionally. People about to be slaughtered would feel terrified and despairing. Those carrying out a slaughter would reveal excitement or anger. They were all emotions that couldn't be faked. And they would all be revealed on the face.

It was the same with all the jailers in Unit D.

Only people who had carried out endless slaughter might not have any emotional reaction at all. Either that, or people who had experienced hell on earth, and had developed the instinctive ability to be able to completely control their emotions.

These jailers had seen people like that before, but they were all in Unit C, below Level 89, which meant they were much higher-ranking jailers. All of the jailers in that place were like that!

"Unit C!" the jailers murmured, exchanging glances. All of a sudden, their expressions weren't amused as they looked at Xu Qing. Instead, their eyes shone with respect.

Chapter 405: A Mysterious Cellblock

Xu Qing was still carrying out the slaughter. Hell personified was still on the move.

Truth be told, the Unit D jailers were both correct and incorrect. They were correct in that Xu Qing's facial expression hadn't changed at all during the slaughter. They were incorrect... that Xu Qing was controlling his emotions. In his life, he had climbed through piles of corpses. He had flirted with death. Twice had he faced the gaze of a god. Therefore, he didn't need to control his emotions. To him, killing was an instinct.

If you hurt me, I kill you.

The inmates' brutal ferocity had set their fate from the beginning. It didn't matter if the setting was a prison or outside. Xu Qing wouldn't hold back because the inmates suddenly lost courage. And he wouldn't stop because of their anguished screams.

He continued moving. Continued attacking. He chased down one fleeing inmate after another, attacking them in vital spots. Using what he had learned in his training, he killed them one by one. Of course, he still needed more gold cores. And thus, many miserable shrieks rang out during the process.

Enough time passed for another half an incense stick to burn. At that point, Xu Qing stood amidst a host of corpses, holding the severed head of a Dualface cultivator in his left hand. The stench of gore filled the cellblock. Expression calm, Xu Qing looked toward the door and the jailers standing there with grave expressions on their faces.

"All done," Xu Qing said, tossing the head down.

Looking very serious, the jailers all clasped hands and bowed deeply to Xu Qing.

In the front of the group was Ol' Li. "Welcome to the Corrections Division, Brother Xu Qing!"

The jailers behind him echoed his words. "Welcome to the Corrections Division, Brother Xu Qing!"

The strong always received respect, wherever they went. It was the same in the Corrections Division. However, the jailers needed to see something beyond strength. They needed to see someone that was similar to them. If they saw that, they would give their approval. And if someone surpassed that, it would earn respect.

That was exactly what had happened with Xu Qing.

Xu Qing clasped hands and returned their salute. Inside, he could sense that his fifth heavenly palace was rapidly materializing.

"Can I do the same thing in another cell block?" he asked.

Hearing that, the Unit D jailers all looked back at him ruefully.

With a wry grin, Ol' Li said, "Xu Qing, though we can deal with the inmates as we see fit, the reality is... we can't just go around killing them all the time. In fact, you just reached this month's quota for all of us here, combined. That said, don't worry. We get new inmates all the time. And customarily, we're allowed to dispose of the same amount that they bring in on a monthly basis."

Ol' Li opened the door and everyone went out. Along the way, Xu Qing spotted his bag of spirit stones.

The other jailers cleared their throats, exchanged glances, then took out spirit stones and handed them to Ol' Li.

Accepting them, he sighed. "I went to all the trouble of bringing a newbie here, thinking I'd get rich. Who would have thought....?" Shaking his head, Ol' Li distributed some of the spirit stones to five of the other jailers.

Chuckling happily, the other jailers took the spirit stones. They were the only ones who had bet on Xu Qing. Ol' Li then gave the rest of the spirit stones to Xu Qing. Xu Qing had made a good decision about the bet, as had those five others. Most of the other jailers had bet that Xu Qing would last for a certain period of time. Ol' Li served as the bookie. Clearly, though some people had bet on him winning, Xu Qing himself came out with the most profit. After all, he had bet the most.

He felt very pleased taking his spirit stones.

The other jailers all had cell blocks to manage, so they clasped hands and left. Then Ol' Li took Xu Qing to register.

Along the way, his attitude was very different compared to before.

"Brother Xu Qing, I'm normally in charge of Level 35. If you have trouble with anything, just come find me. I can help out. Right now I'll take you to register. You'll get your own cell block and a jailer's uniform. We'll also keep a record of your aura so you can come and go as you please."

Xu Qing nodded. As he passed the various cell blocks, he felt a bit of regret.

Ol' Li noticed his expression and grinned. "There's something you should consider. If you can dominate eighty-eight levels of Unit D, then you can get a promotion and become a Unit C jailer." Ol' Li's grin wasn't fake, it was very sincere. "If you become a Unit C jailer, then you can deal with prisoners however you want. No limitations. Furthermore, you can earn a lot more military credits."

"You're talking about the levels below 89?" Xu Qing asked. He had noted the talk about Unit C.

"That's right. The Corrections Division is divided into Units A, B, C, and D. Level 88 and above are Unit D. Below Level 89 is Unit C. As for Units A and B, well, that's beyond the scope of our authority. Truth be told, even just Unit C is mysterious enough. I've never been there, and I don't know how many levels are in it.

"I just know that even the weakest inmates there are at the Nascent Soul level. And they're far more brutal and ferocious than anyone in Unit D."

Ol' Li led Xu Qing to the registration office on Level 9. There, Xu Qing got his Corrections Division uniform with its black flames, and also left a record of his aura. He also got his cell block assignment.

"D-132."

When Ol' Li saw Xu Qing's assigned cell block, he was shocked, and looked Xu Qing up and down a few times.

Xu Qing wasn't sure what that meant. "Is something wrong?"

"D-132. Well, how to explain this...? It's both very lucky and very unlucky, all at the same time. It's on Level 57." Ol' Li's expression was impossible to read.

Xu Qing frowned slightly.

"It doesn't have anything to do with the inmates," Ol' Li went on. "Though the inmates there have a slightly stronger perverse energy than average, they're still just Unit D inmates. The reason I say it's unlucky is that about half of the jailers who get assigned this specific cell block eventually die on the outside under mysterious circumstances. Because of that, the cell block is considered inauspicious.

"Of course, not everyone assigned there dies. Some have no trouble at all. As for why it's a lucky assignment, the reason is that our palace lord was in charge of D-132 back when he was a Gold Core cultivator. Furthermore, D-132 hasn't had anyone formally in charge of it for nearly a hundred years."

Xu Qing paid very close attention to all the information.

Hefting the jade slip that contained all the details about the D-132 inmates, he scanned it with divine will. There actually weren't very many prisoners in D-132. Upon glancing over the basic information, Xu Qing didn't notice anything unusual that stuck out. That said, he planned to do further digging once he got to D-132.

Xu Qing asked a few more questions about how things worked in the Corrections Division, and then finally left.

It was already evening outside.

It had been an eventful day as far as Xu Qing was concerned. He had been able to offer greetings to the palace lord, had been appointed as a jailer, had killed a bunch of inmates, and had pushed his fifth heavenly palace closer to full materialization.

Now I need to go build my sword pavilion. After examining all of the various sword pavilions of different heights and sizes, he went to the outermost ring, then made sure he was about 3,000 meters from the last sword pavilion in line. There, he stabbed his command sword into the ground.

The command sword erupted with dazzling light, then rumbling sounds echoed out as a 30-meter-tall sword pavilion rose up in front of him. Its general shape and structure was the same as the other sword pavilions.

30 meters was the standard starting height.

After forming the sword pavilion, Xu Qing retrieved his command sword and then entered the pavilion. Though it was only 30 meters on the outside, the inside was larger. It was laid out like an ordinary mansion grotto, with several rooms including a pill concocting chamber, an equipment forging alcove, a sleeping room, and a reception hall. There was also an energy convergence formation which ensured that the spirit energy was strong inside the pavilion. Doing breathing exercises inside would be very useful.

Because of all that, Xu Qing chose not to return to the subsidiary sect, and instead rested in the pavilion. Of course, he set up various defenses, including spell formations and poisons. Although the sword pavilion had formidable built-in defenses, Xu Qing wasn't going to change his habits.

Sitting down cross-legged, he began meditating.

Time passed.

Sometime later he got a voice message from the Captain. The testing was done for the new swordsmen, and the Captain flauntingly explained that he had a new post.

"The Swordsage Palace obviously values your Eldest Brother quite a bit, as they assigned me work in the Credit Auditing Branch!

"That chick Qing Qiu got assigned to Inspections. Kong Xianglong is in the Field Operations Office, where he's in charge of tracking down criminals. Of all the new swordsmen, only five, including you, were assigned to civil posts. Oh right, me too."

The Captain was very pleased with himself, and Xu Qing even heard him munching on an apple as he sent his voice message.

"What about you, Xu Qing? How are things as the palace lord's secretary-general? Busy?"

"Not bad," Xu Qing replied. He was actually a bit surprised that the Captain seemed so happy with his assignment.

“I bet you don’t get it, do you, little Ah Qing? Fine, let me explain. When the others heard about my post, they turned up their noses in disdain. But they’re the idiots. Unlike me. As soon as I saw that assignment, I knew it was more complicated than it seemed.

“Ah, the Credit Auditing Branch! That’s where they track everyone’s military credits! Taking advantage of that position will bring incredible benefits.

“What’s more, I’ll be able to see who is earning the most military credits. By cross-referencing that with swordsmen military credits in general, as well as the specific mission and cultivation base involved, I’ll be able to see which missions provide the most military credits with the least effort. As long as my calculations are correct, I can also tell which locations are most ideal to earn military credits. I have such a critical position now! In fact, if I do my research carefully, I should even be able to get my hands on some intelligence reports.”

The Captain’s excited tone of voice made it clear how pleased he was with his post assignment.

However, as Xu Qing listened to the voice messages, a strange expression appeared on his face. He was starting to think that the Swordsman Palace hadn’t put enough thought into what kind of position they were giving the Captain....

“Anyway, enough about that. I still have a lot more digging around to do in the Credit Auditing Branch. Trust me, little Ah Qing, you won’t have to wait very long before I find out the best ways and best places to get military credit. And then I’ll take you with me! The military credits will be ours for the taking!”

Having finished his message, the Captain went back to his research.

Meanwhile, Xu Qing’s eyes glittered with anticipation.

“Military credits!” Turning, he looked in the general direction of Daybreak Prefecture, and within it, Mount Daybreak.

There’s also The Emperor’s Sword. I still have one more shot to seek enlightenment. I should do that sooner rather than later.

Taking a deep breath, he produced his command sword. It was necessary to make arrangements ahead of time to seek enlightenment of The Emperor’s Sword. After all, there were a lot of swordsmen, and thus limited daily slots. Using his command sword, Xu Qing made a reservation for evening of the next day.

At that point, he devoted some thought to D-132. Taking out the jade slip with the information about the inmates, he started studying.

There were only fourteen inmates in D-132, all of whom had been locked up there for five hundred years or more. There were some who had been imprisoned for a thousand years. No new inmates had been locked up in that time, and none had died. But because no one had been in charge of the cell block for a hundred years, it hadn’t been inspected. Nor had anyone come out of the cell block

during that time. The only maintenance was to occasionally send spirit energy into the cell block to keep the inmates alive.

After going over all the information thoroughly, Xu Qing still didn't see anything particularly noteworthy. If there was anything that could be considered unusual, it was that the inmates in D-132 seemed much more long-lived than those in other cell blocks.

Finally, Xu Qing decided he just needed to see the situation with his own eyes.

The next day at dawn, he went to the Corrections Division, going directly to Level 57. Soon, he found himself standing in front of the door of D-132.

It was pitch black, and had a simplistic, ancient feel to it. After standing there for a moment, Xu Qing's eyes glittered with determination, and he slowly pushed the door open....

The odor of decay wafted out from inside, filling the area.

Meanwhile, many of the jailers on other levels looked toward the stairs, and the general direction of Xu Qing.

“D-132 is open again.”

Chapter 406: The Fourteen Prisoners in 132

D-132 only housed fourteen inmates. Considering that most other Unit D cell blocks had over a hundred prisoners, that was obviously a very low number. In fact, it was such a low number that it didn't take any effort for Xu Qing to memorize the details of every single prisoner.

When the door of D-132 opened and the smell of decay emerged, Xu Qing looked quietly at the entrance, observing. Beyond the door, it was pitch black.

After a moment of thought, Xu Qing stepped inside. Once he was in the darkness, the cell block door slammed shut behind him. The sound echoed into the ears of the jailers, filling their hearts with astonishment.

Inside the darkness of D-132, the only sounds to be heard were Xu Qing's footsteps. He didn't use his jailer's authority to light the lamps in the cell block. That was because he preferred this darkness to light. It suited him more. After all, he preferred moving about in the shadows.

When he adjusted to the darkness, everything was murky, but he was able to see. Just like the cell block where he had slaughtered all the inmates, D-132 had a large open area in the middle surrounded by cells. Xu Qing walked the pathway that led past the cells. It was only when he reached the nineteenth cell that he stopped.

There was an inmate in the cell. It was a figure seated cross-legged, back to Xu Qing, so tall that its head nearly touched the ceiling. It wore no clothing, but was covered with countless tentacles, some long, some short, all of which swayed back and forth and covered it like a garment.

The giant seemed to be completely ignoring Xu Qing. It was also apparently eating something, as chewing sounds echoed out from its head, which slowly bobbed up and down.

Xu Qing stood outside the cell, watching coldly. By means of his shadow, he could see exactly what this prisoner was eating. It was feeding on its own tentacles, slowly ripping them off one by one and consuming them. Xu Qing was also able to get an overall picture of the prisoner.

As the information in his records had revealed, this prisoner was a cloud troll. On the trip to the county capital, Xu Qing had seen some cloud trolls in Cloudywind Prefecture. They weren't intelligent, and tended to be about 300 meters tall. This prisoner was much smaller than that, and also looked somewhat different from the cloud trolls Xu Qing had seen. [1]

Looking away, he continued walking past all the cells. About seven or eight cells later, he saw the second inmate.

It was a woman, and she was human. She was filthy, and seemed to be covered with bite-shaped scars. Despite her dirty state, she was pretty, and also had an attractive figure. She was currently crouched in a corner of the cell, her arms wrapped gently around a scarecrow. She seemed to be trying to get it to sleep. When she sensed Xu Qing's presence, she raised her index finger to her lips and quietly shhh-ed. It was almost like she was trying to prevent him from awakening a child. The floor of her cell was covered with straw. If you looked closely, you would just be able to make out the shapes of countless more scarecrows, all tattered and damaged.

Xu Qing observed coldly. Based on this woman's information, she had once been a chosen disciple from the Supreme Void Demonization Sect. In a fortuitous encounter, she ended up acquiring some precious materials that were similar to longevity beans. As a result, her sect had high hopes for her. However, later on it came to light that she was brutally murdering and eating human babies. The matter caused a huge stir. She had been sentenced to death, except that the family members of her victims demanded that she live out her days in endless torment. Thus, she ended up locked up in here.

As Xu Qing looked on, all of the tattered scarecrows on the floor of the cell suddenly opened their eyes. Glaring at the woman, they howled and lunged. The scarecrow in her arms did the same thing, shrieking as it snapped viciously at her. The woman shivered and allowed the scarecrows to viciously bite her. At the same time, she looked up at Xu Qing and smiled. It was a strange smile, almost like a greeting.

Looking away, Xu Qing continued on to the next prisoner.

In that manner, he walked around the entire cell block, familiarizing himself with all the prisoners based on the information he had. He also looked for anything suspicious.

Xu Qing wasn't very curious about D-132's reputation for being unlucky. Considering that he had been put in charge of this cell block, he wanted to make sure he had the entire place in control.

After his initial inspection, Xu Qing got the feeling that the inmates in D-132 were a lot more freakish than the inmates he had killed the day before.

In fact, the seventh prisoner wasn't even a living thing with flesh and blood. It was a rotating stone disc, like a millstone. It turned and turned endlessly, pulsing with a gravitational force that seemed capable of sucking in and crushing anything else in the cell. That disc was a species that Ghost Hand hadn't talked about in his lecture. According to the information, it was a Rockdevil.

Many strange and unusual species had come to be after the arrival of the broken face of the god. Another example was in the two hundred thirty-seventh cell, within which was the thirteenth inmate.

This inmate had no body. It was only a head that rolled this way and that inside the cell. When it noticed Xu Qing, it stopped and stared at him with crimson eyes. Then it smiled.

“This is so fun! You’re already dead, yet you don’t know it. So fun! Next time you’re going to die at the hand of someone wearing a straw hat. Except, you’re already dead! How can you die again? You died horribly. Your whole body exploded, leaving behind only a head. And the killer promised to take your head somewhere. Tragic. So tragic! Everyone’s looking for you, except they can’t find you.... Hahaha! They have no idea where you’re buried. But I know. I saw.

“You want to resolve this situation? Just throw me into the cell with that cloud troll. Stick me there, and I’ll help you figure it all out. How about it? You’ve just got to trust me. That’s all I’m here for. To help you run this place. You know, the people who survived as guards here only did it with my help.”

Xu Qing didn’t say anything in response. After sizing up the head, he moved on to the last cell and the last inmate.

This one was special.

There was no cultivator inside the cell. Only a painting, hovering in the air. It depicted a large family with the elderly and young ones all living together under one roof. There were a total of twenty-three family members, and all seemed to be smiling. Among them was a burly man with children clustered around him. He was smiling the most broadly, and the artist had clearly spent time capturing his facial expression perfectly.

Looking at the painting, Xu Qing’s eyes glittered. This was one of the new species that had come into being after the broken face of the god arrived. They were called the Paintedfolk. They were a species that didn’t exist in corporeal form. Rather, they lived their whole lives inside of paintings. To them, everyone in the outside world existed in a painting, while they did not.

Eventually, Xu Qing had walked in a full circle, and was back to the cell with the first inmate. The cloud troll there had stopped chewing, and was now muttering to itself.

“Don’t trust 237. Doesn’t matter what it says. Don’t trust it.”

237 was the cell-number of that jabbering head.

Ignoring the cloud troll, Xu Qing went to the cell block door, sat down cross-legged, and stared out into the darkness. He found all of these inmates very interesting.

Time slipped by slowly but surely. The cell block was comparatively quiet.

He saw nothing suspicious or fantastic. He just sat there, not interacting or talking. And whether it was during his short tour earlier, or just sitting there cross-legged, he kept poison swirling around him at all times. He didn’t let it spread out far. He kept it close, separating himself from everything else.

This was his normal cautious routine.

So far, he had not seen anything that made D-132 seem unlucky. That said, he was ready to take his time finding out the details. Seeing that the day was over and it was time to end his shift, Xu Qing stood to leave. He had already registered for a slot to seek enlightenment of The Emperor’s Sword, and it was almost that time.

However, as Xu Qing got to his feet, he looked over at the cell with the human woman in it and noticed something.

A young boy stood there, in front of the cell, seemingly talking with the woman inside.

Eyes flashing, Xu Qing waved his hand, sending his black iron skewer flying out. It glittered with red lightning as it shot to the cell and slammed into the ground right in front of it.

The boy vanished.

Face expressionless, Xu Qing walked over. As he neared, Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior projected a message to him.

“Milord, there wasn’t anything there!”

Xu Qing looked into the cell and saw the woman in the corner, smiling at him. After looking at her for a moment, he turned and walked back to the main door. Exiting, he closed the door behind him, then projected a message to the patriarch via divine will.

“You didn’t see anything?”

“Huh? Milord, there wasn’t anything there. I couldn’t see or sense anything.” The patriarch was being cautious in his response, and was feeling quite anxious. He felt like he was on Xu Qing’s bad side right now... therefore he cherished every opportunity to shine. But he really hadn’t noticed anything.

Xu Qing frowned and looked at his shadow.

“... milord... n-nothing....” the shadow stammered. Just like the patriarch, the shadow felt like it was also in Xu Qing’s disfavor.

Eyes glittering, Xu Qing looked back at D-132. However, right now he needed to keep his appointment to seek enlightenment of The Emperor’s Sword. Stowing his curiosity, he left the Corrections Division.

Evening was already approaching. Dark clouds filled the sky; it seemed it would be a rainy night.

As Xu Qing flew up toward the Swordsage Palace, he suddenly noticed a 300-meter sword pavilion shining with dazzling light. As it rumbled, dozens of beams of sword light erupted from it.

An old man wearing a swordsage uniform rushed out from that sword pavilion, his hands flashing double-handed incantation gestures as he tried to stop the sword light. Unfortunately, he failed, and one of the beams of light shot straight toward Xu Qing. It moved with such speed, and with such power, that it obviously surpassed the Gold Core level. It was more like a Nascent Soul attack.

Face turning grim, Xu Qing shot backward. At the same time, his Violet-Heaven Supreme-Limitless Crown glittered brightly, helping him to dodge.

Sword light screamed past him.

“My apologies, young friend. I’m so sorry!!” The old man managed to stop all the other sword energy, then looked over apologetically at Xu Qing. “I was just researching a new technique, and made a bit of a mistake.”

The old man smiled wryly. Despite being a Nascent Soul cultivator, he was still being very apologetic as he approached and clasped hands.

Xu Qing studied the old man with a frown. He didn't get a sense that the incident had been intentional. After all, a single stream of Nascent Soul sword energy wouldn't be enough to kill him. Besides, this was the county capital, and he had just come out of the Corrections Division. Killing someone here would require launching a single deadly blow that wouldn't miss.

After a moment of thought, Xu Qing nodded.

It seemed most likely the whole thing was an accident. That said, he kept his guard up as he proceeded to the Swordsage Palace.

Before long he arrived. After spending his enlightenment credits, the spell formation was activated and Xu Qing disappeared. When he reappeared, he was inside the location to seek enlightenment of The Emperor's Sword.

The location was roughly the same as the one back in the Swordsage Court in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. There was a large boulder, upon which was chained a sword. The ground was filled with a large spell formation.

When Xu Qing arrived, there were seven or eight other individuals seeking enlightenment. Three of them were new swordsages that Xu Qing recognized. All had their eyes closed and their defenses up.

Xu Qing found a place to sit down. Back on his first attempt, he had nearly succeeded. The swordsage back then had claimed everyone felt that way, but Xu Qing wasn't convinced. The reason was that he already had an illusory version of The Emperor's Sword in his sea of consciousness. Although it had been fading ever since then, the majority of it was still there.

Besides, given what Kong Xianglong had told him about his own experience, Xu Qing was very confident that he could succeed this time around. Filled with anticipation, he closed his eyes and cast his senses into the huge rock.

The moment he made contact, he saw the same blurry scene as before. This time he didn't need to waste as much time as before. Pushing through the mist, he eventually caught sight of the image of The Emperor's Sword. Focusing on the sword, he got closer and closer. As he did, it became more and more clear. He could also hear the thrum of a sword, and even saw illusory figures surrounding it.

Those figures weren't possible to make out clearly, but they were moving in unison. They were drawing a sword and then chopping down with it!

Plain and simple.

That said, when looking at the move, Xu Qing didn't feel that it was simple at all. The image of those figures striking with the sword filled his heart and mind with intense rumbling. As that internal storm grew stronger, he noticed one of the figures chopping down with the sword and splitting a sea apart so deeply it hewed a ravine into the sea floor. He saw another figure slashing the ground, turning the earth of half a prefecture into dust. He saw another person slashing a sword into a forbidden region, transforming it into rubble. Many of the figures slashed their swords toward nonhumans, who screamed before they died.

Finally, he saw a figure whose face wasn't visible. This person wore an emperor's robe, and was very noble and mighty. He hovered in the sky, facing a gigantic entity rising from the deep sea that was covered in tentacles and exuding boundless mutagen. He slashed down with his sword, and a heaven-shaking, earth-shattering howl erupted from the deep sea as the gigantic creature was slashed into bits.

That figure in the emperor's robe was the Swordsage Palace's Grand Emperor.

As for the entity in the deep sea... it was a god.

All of those scenes seemed fixed in the River of Ancient Time, and as they appeared to Xu Qing, his mind spun. Then, all of those sword strikes superimposed.

They became one single sword!

The Emperor's Sword!

Xu Qing felt himself shaken to the core.

Six hours later, he vanished from the spell formation. When he opened his eyes, they glittered like swords. Calming himself, he took a deep breath and cast his vision into his sea of consciousness.

There inside was a dazzling Emperor's Sword. He had successfully gained enlightenment of The Emperor's Sword!

Chapter 407: So Close, Yet So Far; She Just Doesn't Recognize Him

Xu Qing took a deep breath as he sensed The Emperor's Sword in his sea of consciousness. As of now, he could already feel that the sword was fully fused with him. It was an inseparable part of him. It was a sensation that would lead anyone to feel immensely mighty. That was one of the blessings of imperial-class techniques, and was also a result of now being far more familiar with the sword. As Xu Qing experienced those sensations, he checked to see what transformations the enlightenment of The Emperor's Sword had wrought.

He could sense every tiny bit of the sword's structure. He could sense every inch of the blade's sharp edge. And he could sense every mote of light glittering on the weapon's surface.

That said, those seemingly familiar sensations were also illusory, like flowers in a mirror or the moon in the water. He would still need further contemplation and practice before he could make them a reality, and infuse the technique into his soul, to the point where using it came as an instinct.

"Upgrade it to the second stage, and it will give me additional battle prowess equivalent to a full heavenly palace," he murmured.

After a bit more contemplation, he looked down at his right hand. He sent out a thought, whereupon dazzling light shone up from the creases in his palm. Swirling around, it eventually converged into the shape of a sword. It felt like it was so sharp it could slice through any and all living beings. And it was mighty enough to cause all gods and devils in the universe to tremble.

Xu Qing could tell that this imperial-class technique belonging to humans and swordsages was definitely not designed for defensive purposes. It was meant for killing, and it pulsed with a baleful aura. It was a sword that would defend humanity by means of killing.

As he came to that understanding, his eyes shone brightly, linking him further to the sword. Just barely, he could hear the thrum of the sword, and it sounded intimate and familiar to him. At the same time, he could almost see the countless figures he had witnessed earlier using the sword strike. All of them held The Emperor's Sword, and all of them smiled as they bore witness to a successor pursuing the same great dao as they.

Xu Qing stood and bowed deeply. He was bowing to the sword, and bowing to those who also pursued that dao.

As of this moment, he truly did wield two imperial-class techniques. Golden Crow Assimilates Myriad Spirits could devour countless living beings in heaven and earth. The Emperor's Sword could slaughter anyone who ranked lower than the emperor.

The latter could unleash power that surpassed that of the wielder's cultivation level, but to do so required that it power up for years. But now that Xu Qing had gained enlightenment, that moment was certain to happen sooner or later.

Seeing The Emperor's Sword form from sword energy caused Xu Qing's heart to pound. However, after a moment, he calmed himself. A thoughtful look appeared in his eyes.

I can't just wait for years before using The Emperor's Sword. I need it to be available as a possible trump card in every battle I fight. Therefore, my goal should be to familiarize myself with the sword as quickly as possible, and then get it to the second stage. That way, it will count as additional battle prowess equivalent to an entire heavenly palace. If I want to familiarize myself with it, I'll need to use an actual sword....

Suddenly, something clicked, and he looked down at his sword's command sword. Looking at it, he felt a bit stunned as he realized that it had an additional function.

Other than its everyday functions used by swordsmen, and the fact that it could be used to build a sword pavilion, it had another hidden feature. And that feature was its function in aiding the user in becoming more familiar with The Emperor's Sword. After all, its physical appearance... was exactly the same as The Emperor's Sword.

Just what I would expect of a legacy belonging to humankind and kept in the Swordsman Division. Every single step of the way involves deep meaning and reserve powers. Considering how long the Swordsman Division has considered this technique a reserve power, there must have been countless swordsmen who succeeded in gaining enlightenment. And though people who succeeded in one shot are probably rare, people who succeeded in two shots are surely not so unusual.

Xu Qing had to remind himself that he couldn't get complacent just because he succeeded in two attempts. After all, Kong Xianglong had also succeeded after only two attempts.

With that thought on his mind, he took a deep breath and left.

Unbeknownst to him, the moment he succeeded in gaining enlightenment, down in the Corrections Division on Level 89, the palace lord opened his eyes.

Behind him, the enormous eye with the vertical pupil also opened. "Yet again someone has gained enlightenment of The Emperor's Sword in only two attempts. His name is Xu Qing."

The voice caused great storm-like winds to sweep through Level 89. It was the very same voice that had spoken to the palace lord when Xu Qing departed previously.

After some thought, the palace lord said, "How are things in D-132?"

"That place is unique," replied the thunderous voice. "I might be the spirit automaton of the Corrections Division, but not even I qualify to peer in there. That said, Xu Qing is already wrapped up in misfortune. Furthermore, only you know the true secret of D-132. Why not just tell him the truth? Actually, even I'm curious about what other secrets might be buried there."

"D-132..." the palace lord said, his eyes flickering with reminiscence. "There's not just one secret buried there, that's for sure. That said, I don't cater to personal whims. Everything will come down to destined opportunities. If he's still wrapped in misfortune seven days from now, then I'll remove him from D-132 guard duty and assign him to another cell block. That will just prove that he has no predestined good fortune."

The palace lord closed his eyes.

Meanwhile, Xu Qing walked through the Swordsage Palace.

Since I'm already here, I might as well go see what kind of poisonous plants are available for sale in the county capital. I can't give up on the dao of poison. What's more, I need to find one of those pallid boluses to study.

With that, he flew toward the city. It was already late in the night, and clouds covered the sky. Thunder rumbled above; a big rainstorm was obviously coming. That said, the business in the county capital stayed open both day and night. After all, visiting cultivators didn't just go shopping at one specific time.

However, just as soon as he flew away from the Swordsage Palace, and right before he reached the city, a boom rang out from above, and a lightning bolt appeared, shooting right down toward Xu Qing.

It looked like an upside down tree, splitting apart as it dropped. It moved with shocking speed, making it almost seem like heavenly tribulation.

The suddenness was unexpected. However, Xu Qing's vigilance was something that was part of his soul, and therefore, as soon as the lightning bolt dropped, he stepped out of the way. It sliced through the air right in front of him and then slammed into the ground below. Expression unsightly, Xu Qing looked up into the dome of heaven. As he hovered there, the lighting up above reflected in his eyes. Clouds filled the sky, and the thunder rumbled constantly. It seemed just like any ordinary storm, except for that strange bolt of lightning.

Something's off!

Xu Qing's expression darkened. Whether it was that stray beam of sword light from the old swordmage earlier, or this random bolt of lightning, both seemed too coincidental. All of a sudden, he thought back to the rumors about D-132, and what Ol' Li had mentioned.

Half the people assigned to guard duty there end up dying violently.

Expression grim, he continued to the edge of the city. There, he looked down from the sky and to the lands below. Though it was a dark, cloud-covered sky, the occasional streaks of lightning coupled with Xu Qing's own cultivation base power enabled him to see all the way down to the Corrections Division.

The two coincidences had him thinking. Upon reaching the city, he cast his senses out in all directions.

Not everyone assigned to D-132 ended up dying. Only some did. The palace lord must know what's really going on. In that case, why did he assign me there...? Is it a test, or is it something else?

As he pondered the situation, he started looking around for the nearest medicine shop.

Thunder crashed above, and it seemed like the rain must be building up in preparation for a huge downpour. Not many mortal citizens were out and about; most people on the street were cultivators.

It took about an hour to find a shop. As he neared, a frown broke out on his face. There were seven or eight cultivators shopping for medicinal plants and pills. One of them was a young woman in a swordmage uniform. Xu Qing recognized her.

It was none other than the scythe-wielding Qing Qiu.

Qing Qiu had just got off work in the Inspections Division, and had come here to purchase some medicinal pills. Upon seeing Xu Qing, she frowned behind her mask. Meanwhile, the evil ghost's voice echoed in her mind.

"We just can't get rid of this Xu Qing! I bet he's following us. From now on, let's not go this way after you get off work. I feel like Xu Qing is just too, too dangerous. We need to avoid him. Otherwise, you might not be able to hold back from ending things in mutual destruction with him! It wouldn't be worth it to do that. We should end things in mutual destruction with someone else. For example, Mad Dog!"

Xu Qing glanced at Qing Qiu briefly, but that was all. As he headed to the counter, Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior projected a message to him.

"Milord, your humble servant, er... has a small matter to report."

Expression the same as ever, Xu Qing told the shopkeeper what medicinal plants he wanted. Inside, he said, "Talk."

"Milord, did you know that Girl in Red's scythe has a spirit automaton? It hasn't detected me, so it has no idea that, because I'm a high-level lightning soul, I can hear what it's saying. Every time the spirit automaton sees you, it curses you viciously."

Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior had long since been able to overhear Qing Qiu and the evil ghost when they spoke via divine will. However, he had never said anything, as he wanted to find exactly

the right moment to reveal the details. Because he had failed to do anything impressive earlier in the cell block, he had decided that now was the time to make his move.

“Based on the things I’ve heard that little rascal saying, I think the two of them have some special way of ending a fight in mutual destruction. Milord, whenever the time comes to get rid of Girl in Red, you need to be careful.”

Xu Qing looked thoughtfully at Qing Qiu’s scythe.

“He’s looking at me!” the evil ghost shrieked. “There’s something wrong with his eyes. Something very wrong! We need to get out of here. I have a really bad premonition. Xu Qing’s noticed something. And he did earn the veneration of the Grand Emperor. He also became the palace lord’s secretary-general. We can’t afford to provoke him. There’s definitely something off about him. I have a really bad feeling right now!”

As the evil ghost shrieked to Qing Qiu, the voice of Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior echoed in Xu Qing’s mind.

“Milord, you’re incredible! By merely looking at that wimpy spirit automaton, you got it terrified! Don’t worry, milord. Going forward, I’ll help you keep an eye on that little rascal. Hmph! How dare that thing have evil thoughts about Master Freespirit’s lord and master! Is it looking to die? With me here, there’s no way any malicious spirit will ever harm my most beloved lord. It’ll have to deal with me first!

“By the way, milord, it probably wouldn’t hurt to occasionally show off how domineering you are. Err... all the books I’ve read say that. The majesty of a king! The aggression of a tyrant! Milord, you have those things, so you can easily scare that upstart spirit automaton half to death!

“Later on, your humble servant will figure out a plan to work against it. That way, when the time comes to kill Girl in Red, we won’t have any unexpected setbacks.”

The patriarch was clearly going into overdrive trying to prove his worth.

Xu Qing thought about it for a moment. Having purchased all of the medicinal plants he wanted, he suddenly recalled the pallid bolus.

“Do you have any pallid boluses?” he asked.

The shopkeeper smiled and nodded. Pulling out a bottle of pills from behind the counter, he placed it in front of Xu Qing.

“Ten pallid bolus for one spirit coin.”

Xu Qing was shocked at the seemingly incredibly low price. After all, even back in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture, white boluses cost far more than that.

“Our exalted lieutenant governor is the epitome of benevolence and morality,” the shopkeeper explained. “He’s the one who invented this pill. There really is no end to

his virtuous achievements. In order to ensure that the common folk in the county capital don't have to deal with the encroaching effects of mutagen, he's set the price for the pill at all shops in the city. For all intents and purposes, they're basically free."

Xu Qing felt admiration in his heart as he paid for the bottle. Later, he would research it and see if he could learn from the lieutenant governor's pill concocting technique. With that, he turned and left.

Qing Qiu watched all of this, and suddenly found herself thinking back to the scavenger basecamp in South Phoenix. She remembered when she worked as a clerk at a general store, and a scrawny, grubby young man would cautiously approach and buy white boluses.

Qing Qiu frowned. She had no idea why seeing the detestable Ghost Hand buy medicinal pills would dredge up the memory of her most cherished Big Bro Kid. It was almost pure blasphemy. Feeling more revulsion at the sight of Xu Qing than ever, she quickly purchased the medicinal pills she wanted and then left the county capital, flying down toward the ground. She wasn't staying in the Church of Departure's subsidiary congregation in the city. She didn't have much in the way of fond feelings for the church, and much preferred her own sword pavilion.

However, before she could reach her pavilion, she suddenly frowned again.

Inside her head, the evil ghost shrieked. "It's Ghost Hand again! We really just can't get rid of him! Don't tell me he's out to get us! Wait, I know what's going on. He was looking at me earlier, which means he must know about my existence! He must be coming to end things in mutual destruction!"

"Shut up!" Qing Qiu said, grinding her teeth. Turning, she looked maliciously in the direction of Xu Qing, who was flying toward her.

Chapter 408: A Very Mysterious Clue

Xu Qing had also chosen to return to his sword pavilion, and along the way he had kept his guard up, so it was only natural that he noticed Qing Qiu. Knowing that they were simply both going in the same direction, his eyes flashed with cold light as he continued on his way.

Qing Qiu also understood that they were simply heading toward the same destination. However, in her mind, the evil ghost was screaming and howling like it usually did.

Gritting her teeth, she interrupted, "You're such a chatterbox! How about I end things with YOU in mutual destruction?"

The evil ghost suddenly went silent.

And thus Qing Qiu and Xu Qing arrived at the sword pavilions one after the other. When they both landed only 3,000 meters apart, they exchanged a glance. Both frowned. As it turned out, they were sword pavilion neighbors.

It wasn't exactly a random coincidence. There had been fifty-one new swordsages who all established sword pavilions at roughly the same time, and were all in roughly the same area. That said, Xu Qing didn't like crowds and lots of activity, so he had waited a few days in the hopes that

the other swordsages would all build their sword pavilions first. As it turned out, Qing Qiu was also somewhat antisocial, which had increased the chances of them ending up next to each other.

All told, it wasn't a huge deal to Xu Qing. After entering his sword pavilion, he checked the area for safety, then sat down cross-legged and started familiarizing himself with what he had learned of The Emperor's Sword.

Now that he had gained full enlightenment, the sword within him had changed. With the proper foundation, instead of being dazzlingly bright, it seemed dignified and weighty. It also emanated faint streams of sword energy. That sword energy didn't spread out around Xu Qing. Instead, it circulated around The Emperor's Sword, slowly forming concentric rings around it

Currently, it had 11 rings. Though the 12th ring existed, it was only about half complete. Obviously it would complete itself as long as enough time went by.

That's obviously the sign of The Emperor's Sword's powering up.

After determining the time since he had succeeded at enlightenment, then doing some simple calculations, he came to the conclusion that the sword would generate over a hundred rings of sword energy per day. The more sword energy, the more devastating the attack when unleashed.

In one year, it can form 30-40,000 rings. In ten years, 300-400,000. And after a hundred years.... He started to calculate, but then realized it was so far off in the future he might as well forget about it. Even if I only power it up for a short time, The Emperor's Sword will still be impressive.

As he sensed the might of The Emperor's Sword in his sea of consciousness, he thought about the golden dragon Kong Xianglong had revealed, which was also an imperial-class technique.

That golden dragon had been keeping The Emperor's Sword in its mouth.

After some thought, he stimulated the totem tattoo on his back, causing intense heat and bright light to fill his sword pavilion. The golden crow appeared behind him, and then circled in the air around him. Burning phoenix-like feathers drifted down, making an incredibly beautiful scene. But Xu Qing's focus was on drawing The Emperor's Sword out of his sea of consciousness and up through the top of his head.

Once it was completely out in the open, the golden crow let loose an exultant cry, then flew over and clamped its beak down onto the sword. A tremor passed through it, and it transformed. For one thing, it now pulsed with sword energy. That was even more the case with its tail. And it was generally much stronger than before.

So, as it turns out, you can actually combine imperial-class techniques in this way....

At least, that was Xu Qing's guess. It also seemed highly likely that it had something to do with the special qualities of The Emperor's Sword. After further examination, Xu Qing couldn't be totally sure. But he did know that the golden crow was more impressive now. What was more, this change didn't affect the power-up function of The Emperor's Sword. Settling his thoughts regarding that matter, he took out a pallid bolus and started studying it.

Time passed. Eventually, the rain started, and as the pitter-patter filled the outside world, Xu Qing immersed himself in pill research. After dissecting several of them, he started to get an idea of the concocting method.

It's a very ingenious method. But that's not the key to the pill. The reason it's so effective in purging mutagen is that it has some very unique medicinal plant ingredients.

He couldn't tell what those ingredients were. But then he thought back to what the lieutenant governor had mentioned in his lecture about how living things would adapt to their environment. Considering that, it seemed highly likely the lieutenant governor had used that method to get the ingredients he wanted.

Finally, Xu Qing took one and swallowed it, then paid close attention to the effects. It was indeed impressive. However, by closely examining what happened, Xu Qing came to the conclusion that the pill actually had some flaws. It wasn't perfect. That said, he had no way to make any changes. In some respects, this pill seemed to be something completely new in the dao of medicine.

He sighed. Looking outside, he saw that it was hazy and still a bit rainy. Given the dusky environment, it was hard to say if it was dawn or evening.

Xu Qing spent a bit of time meditating, then left the sword pavilion and headed through the rain toward the Corrections Division. Along the way, he thought about the two accidents that had nearly befallen him, and his eyes glittered with incisive light.

Today I'm going to figure out what's going on in D-132! If the prisoners refuse to cooperate... I'll kill them all!

As he walked through the puddles, the rainwater splashed like blossoming flowers. Eventually, he reached the Corrections Division and passed right through the defensive barrier. Because of those defenses, the rainwater didn't fall into the prison. That said, the sense of humidity that the rain brought was still present.

Expression calm, Xu Qing walked through that humidity down the stairs that ringed the walls of the prison. Along the way, he spotted a few jailers he recognized, and exchanged greetings with them. He didn't immediately go to D-132. Instead, he went to Level 35, to the cell block where he had passed his initiation hazing. There, Ol' Li was still cleaning up all the corpses.

Clasping hands to Ol' Li, Xu Qing said, "Senior, there's something I wanted to ask you about."

Ol' Li was more than happy to make friends with a newcomer like this, so after tossing the corpse he was holding into the pit outside, he smiled. "How can I help you?"

Xu Qing mulled it over for a moment, then asked, "Is there anyone that still works in the Corrections Division who survived guard work in D-132?"

Ol' Li thought for a moment, then nodded. "There are! Chen Boli was the last person stationed there, about a hundred years ago. He held the station for three years before transferring to Level 77. Although, after his stint at D-132, Chen Boli's personality changed. He became eccentric, and will rarely interact with anyone else. If you want him to talk, you'll have to ply him with gifts. Do you happen to have anything really tough that can be used to sharpen bladed weapons?"

Xu Qing rummaged through his bag of holding and found a table-and-chair set from August Spirit Nethersprite's mansion grotto that seemed like it was quite hard. "Yeah."

Ol' Li smiled. "In that case, this'll be easy. Follow me."

He led Xu Qing to Level 77, where they found a pock-faced old man.

He squatted in the corner with his back to the wall, as he felt that was the safest position. Given how the shadows fell around him, he seemed very ferocious. He was in the middle of sharpening a dagger. As he slid the blade back and forth across the sharpening stone, it caused an unsettling, ear-piercing noise to fill the area.

Seeing Xu Qing and Ol' Li, the old man looked up with grim eyes that seemed to warn other living people to stay away.

“Brother Chen! I'd like you to meet Xu Qing. He's new here, and he got assigned to D-132. He wanted to ask you some questions about that.” After making the initial introduction, Ol' Li was apparently not inclined to stick around, and he left.

Chen Boli didn't say anything, and looked as grim as before. After watching Ol' Li leave, he shifted his gaze to Xu Qing.

Xu Qing clasped hands and bowed, then took out Nethersprite's chair-and-desk set and put it off to the side.

“Senior, these items are very hard.”

He could sense that this man had a very profound cultivation base.

Chen Boli glanced at the furniture, then reached out and rubbed his hand along the material. After that, he made some experimental swipes to sharpen his dagger. When he saw the results, he looked pleased.

“What do you want to know? How to avoid dying on the outside?”

Xu Qing's eyes narrowed. Already he could tell that he was on the right track. Clasping hands, he bowed again. “I hope you can clear up my confusion, Senior.”

“Have you already experienced some misfortune?” Chen Boli asked, looking Xu Qing up and down.

Xu Qing nodded.

Chen Boli's expression flickered and he put his dagger onto the ground next to him. “It seems to me the unknowable has already gathered to a sufficiently high level to manifest. That was very fast. Avoiding death on the outside is simple. Just don't leave the Corrections Division. Either that or have a very strong life force. I'm not the latter, so when I had that post I never left. That's what the person assigned to the post before me said to do.” Chen Boli was looking at Xu Qing like he was already dead. “You need to be careful. When that unknowable misfortune locks onto someone, they usually don't survive a month.”

Xu Qing considered everything for a moment, then asked, “Senior, this ‘unknowable’ you mentioned, does it come from the inmates in D-132? Do they have some special characteristics? Although, I suppose if they did, they wouldn't be locked up in Unit D, but rather, somewhere deeper.”

Chen Boli both nodded and then shook his head. “The inmates in D-132 are indeed special. After being locked up and managing to survive, they became inherently unknowable. At least, that's what I think. My sense is that all of them contribute a bit to the unknowable.

“Or maybe D-132 itself is unknowable. Or it’s even possible that one of the inmates has turned the tables and taken charge in there. That said, the palace lord doesn’t pay much attention to D-132, so I’d say my first guess is probably the correct one.

“Did that head in 237 beg for you to put it in with the cloud troll? Ignore it. Someone tried that once, and it didn’t do anything.”

With that, Chen Boli went on to give Xu Qing some details about the various inmates in D-132.

“The thirteenth inmate, that head, really does have some skills. But not many. Again, don’t take any of its advice, or it could affect you negatively.

“And then there’s the Paintedfolk. All twenty-two figures in that painting are part of it. That’s the inmate who’s been locked up the longest, but at the same time, causes the least problems. During the entire time I was assigned there, I never once saw it out in the open.”

Hearing all that, Xu Qing’s eyes narrowed slightly. “Senior, doesn’t that Paintedfolk painting have a family with twenty-three members?”

Chen Boli’s eyes also narrowed. “Twenty-three? No, definitely not. It’s twenty-two.”

After some thought, Xu Qing nodded. Then he asked a few more followup questions, and finally placed some spirit stones off to the side before bidding farewell.

Just before Xu Qing left, Chen Boli suddenly said, “Xu Qing, everyone who gets assigned to D-132 is someone the palace lord believes to be important. It’s a test. According to the rumors, there aren’t just secrets buried there. There’s also incredible good fortune. Unfortunately, I never found it.

“If you really want to avoid dying, go to Level 9 and request to be transferred. Every new jailer has that right. After you transfer, you’ll be fine. The only consequence is that your name will be removed from the list of people who’ve been assigned to D-132.

“Finally, let me tell you something that one of the other jailers told me about the secrets of D-132. When you think you know everything, you’ll find there’s only more to discover.”

Chapter 409: The Shadow Explodes

In response to Chen Boli’s information, Xu Qing clasped hands and bowed.

Chen Boli didn’t say anything further. He just kept sharpening his knife.

The loud scraping sound accompanied Xu Qing as he walked away. Eventually, he was back on Level 57 and D-132. Stopping out front, he examined the pitch black door briefly before pushing it open and entering.

The first thing he heard was the head in 237, calling out to him.

“Jailer! Jailer! Is that you? Well, how did it go? Did you get unlucky when you went out? Hurry up and throw me in with the cloud troll. I’ll help you resolve the situation. You can trust me. Really!

“If you don’t, then it means you’re well and truly finished. I can already see you dying very horrifically. Yet you never see it coming. Over and over again, you never see it. What’s more... do you really think you’re the first person to ever serve in D-132? Can’t say. I really can’t say! Hurry up and throw me in with the cloud troll. If you do, I’ll tell you more of the truth.”

Xu Qing calmly walked the path next to the cells, looking at each one of the prisoners as he passed. Then he stopped in front of the cell with the head in it. Opening the cell, he reached in and grabbed the excited head.

“Oh yeah, that’s right! Hahaha! I’m coming, little Cloudy!”

As the head jabbered excitedly, Xu Qing walked over to the cell with the Rockdevil in it, then tossed the head inside.

The giant millstone vibrated in surprise. And then fluctuations of happiness rolled out from him.

Meanwhile, the excitement on the head’s face turned into terror. It screamed. “Let me out! I don’t wanna be in here! My mistake, exalted Jailer! I’ll talk! It’s a curse. D-132 is cursed. But I can help you get rid of the curse. Everything I said before was true. I wasn’t lying. I really can see you dying over and over again. It’s not a trick!”

Ignoring the head, Xu Qing turned and walked to the cell with the final inmate, the floating painting. Looking at the twenty-three figures inside, Xu Qing looked at his shadow and said, “Eat it.”

Fluctuations of greed rolled off the shadow as it stretched away from Xu Qing’s feet and into the cell.

At the same time, a vile aura began to build on the shadow, spreading out to fill the cellblock. D-132 suddenly went completely quiet. The head wasn’t screaming. The Rockdevil didn’t move. The cloud troll stopped chewing. The scarecrows stopped howling....

But the Paintedfolk painting trembled. As the shadow neared, that trembling grew more intense, until the shadow was only about three inches away. That was when the voice of an old man spoke from the painting.

“Exalted Jailer, the one on the far bottom right isn’t a member of my species.”

Xu Qing shifted his gaze to the bottom right of the painting.

A boy stood there, smiling. He looked no different from any of the other figures, as if he belonged in the family. But as soon as the voice of the old man spoke out, the boy frowned. The shadow blurred toward the boy, and then a snapping sound rang out, like jaws suddenly closing.

After, the shadow slid back to Xu Qing. The painting wasn’t harmed at all. However, there was no more boy inside. He had been devoured by the shadow.

Except, as soon as the shadow was out of the painting, something extraordinary happened. The shadow suddenly started trembling violently. As Xu Qing looked down, it suddenly let loose an anguished scream and then exploded. A blurry figure shot out from the fragments of the shadow, and then laughter rang out in the darkness. At almost the exact same time, the black iron skewer shot out at high speed, but the boy had vanished without a trace. Of course, the shadow couldn't be killed so easily. Though it had exploded into bits, it didn't take long for it to piece itself back together. That said, it was visibly weak. Looking anxiously at Xu Qing, it sent out a surge of emotional fluctuations.

“Destiny aura... devoured... boooooom....”

Apparently fearful that Xu Qing would find it to be useless, it had explained things fairly clearly.

Xu Qing's eyes narrowed as he looked at the spot where the boy had disappeared.

“Destiny aura?” he murmured.

The iron skewer circled back around, and Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior materialized. After looking at the weak state of the shadow, he turned to Xu Qing nervously. This was twice in a row that he had failed. Granted, the shadow had also failed, but then it had concocted some story about destiny aura.

“You've learned some bad habits, you bratty shadow! Detestable!”

The patriarch snorted coldly inwardly. As far as he was concerned, it was eighty percent likely the shadow was making things up to avoid coming across as useless. You want to tell stories? You couldn't possibly compare to me in that regard, you bratty shadow! Since you want to run your mouth, I'll add fuel to the fire. That way when the deadly killer figures out what's really going on, you'll be in major trouble. As long as I keep myself out of it, I'll come off scot free.

He had read a lot of books that talked about destiny aura. In most cases, destiny aura was something the main character absolutely required. In fact, in novels, it seemed that everyone was always after 'destiny aura.'

“Destiny aura?” he said smoothly. “Milord, I can't see destiny aura, and apparently don't know as much about it as the erudite Little Shadow. But since the shadow mentioned it... Congratulations, milord. Congratulations! You've clearly been favored by fate to find destiny aura here!”

Xu Qing looked at the patriarch and frowned.

Shivering inwardly, the patriarch quickly went into a description based on things he'd read in various printed novels. “Milord, based on what Little Shadow has indicated, and assuming it's correct, then your humble servant can guess about why people assigned to D-132 end up perishing on the outside. If Little Shadow is right, then I think I already know the secret of D-132.

“Obviously this place has some destiny aura. In all likelihood, it's a portion of Sea-Sealing County's destiny aura. Who knows how it ended up here, or why it took a specific form. The reason other people stationed here died is that destiny aura can only be taken by extremely extraordinary people. As the old saying goes, too much is

worse than not enough. The resulting backlash caused the misfortune and suspicious events.”

After making his explanation, the patriarch was actually stunned. After all, what he had just said... made perfect sense. Don't tell me the bratty shadow was telling the truth?

As the patriarch reeled inwardly, Xu Qing's frown deepened. The first time he heard about destiny aura was when his Master told him the story of the Crown Prince of Violet and Cyan. He'd said that some stories claimed that the crown prince was born bearing the destiny aura of the entire human species. [1]

As Xu Qing contemplated that, his expression flickered and he looked to the right-hand side of the cell block off in the distance. Floating out of the shadows there was the very same boy from moments ago. He was looking curiously at Xu Qing.

Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior immediately shot toward him, but the boy vanished again. This time, he appeared in a different part of the cell block, still looking curiously at Xu Qing.

Xu Qing could sense that the boy's gaze was specifically drawn to his own right wrist! Surprised, he lifted his right hand.

The boy's line of sight followed along with his movement.

Xu Qing's right wrist didn't seem unusual in any way. But he knew about the thread of golden light hiding there. Back when he risked his life to form his poison core, that golden light had flickered and gave him a series of very strange sensations. [2]

“What is this?” he asked, looking at the boy.

In response to his question, all of the inmates in D-132 remained completely and utterly silent. The cloud troll turned in place. The woman climbed to the bars of her cell. The decorations carved on the Rockdevil turned into an eye. The head in the corner of that very same cell seemed to be looking off into the distance. As for the Paintedfolk scroll painting, it blurred, and then turned into the illusory image of an old man, leaning up against the bars of his cell.

Xu Qing ignored the inmates and kept his gaze fixed on the boy. He waved his right hand.

The boy's eyes followed the movement of his hand, as if Xu Qing's hand was the only thing that mattered to him in the world. His expression was an odd mixture between confusion and blankness. He had obviously heard Xu Qing's words. A moment later, his gaze left Xu Qing's wrist and locked onto his eyes.

Then he opened his mouth as if he were speaking. However, no sound came out, nor any divine will. Nor did his lips move.

Xu Qing frowned.

The boy's curious look remained. Then he finished 'speaking,' and cocked his ear as if listening to something. When he finished listening, his eyes lit up, and he opened his mouth again. After that, he listened again. Eventually he seemed to hear an answer he liked. Looking to be in very high spirits, he looked at Xu Qing, thumped his own chest, then backed up and melded into the shadows.

Within the administrative district of the county capital, about a month away from the city itself, near Netherworld Prefecture, there was a sprawling mountain range. One end stretched deep into Netherworld Prefecture, the other ended near the county capital.

These mountains were unique, as both the soil and stone that made them up were all violet. It was unusual to see that color in natural geological formations, and thus, the name of this place was the Violet Spirit Mountain Range. Somewhere in the Violet Spirit Mountain Range, relatively close to the county capital, there was a massive abyss. It was incredibly deep and dark, with its depths impossible to see clearly. The only thing visible was some violet fog that rose up from the bottom of the abyss.

Two figures approached the abyss. It was an old person and a young one. The old one was none other than the innkeeper from Plankspring Way. The young one was the flawlessly beautiful Ling'er, dressed in white.

Based on the agreement they had reached with the flying giant, they had flown close to the county capital, then dropped off the giant to the ground and walked the rest of the way to the Violet Spirit Mountain Range.

At long last, they were nearing their destination.

“Ling'er, the Wood Spirits will be here soon. Based on the ancient treaty, you can get part of your legacy here. That said, it'll be dangerous. Right now you need to rest and build your strength. Stabilize your bloodline. Then you can give it a try. For the time being, don't get greedy. You....” The innkeeper trailed off as he realized that Ling'er didn't seem to be paying attention.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“Papa,” she replied, her eyes glittering joyfully, “there's a boy talking to me.”

“What?” Surprised, the innkeeper looked around. “What boy? What's he saying?”

“Oh nothing,” Ling'er said, blinking a few times. “He's gone now. Maybe he was one of the Wood Spirits.” It was the first time Ling'er had ever lied to her papa. She knew he didn't like Xu Qing, and therefore, felt like it made more sense to keep the truth from him. Meanwhile, she quickly replied to the voice of the boy that had suddenly echoed into her mind. [3]

“That's totally right! I was the one that put that life essence destiny aura there. Who are you? Did you see my Big Bro Xu Qing? Where are you two?”

A moment passed.

“The county capital??” Ling'er's eyes lit up. “Ohhh. You mean you don't have even a single friend? Okay fine, we can be friends. But you have to help me take care of Big Bro Xu Qing. In a little bit I'll go find both of you.”

The innkeeper looked at Ling'er suspiciously.

“Let’s go, Papa,” she said with a smile. Inside she was happy, and outside, she looked as pure and beautiful as always.

That only made the innkeeper more suspicious. But he couldn’t figure out what might be going on, so finally he just shook his head and went back to his usual admonitions.

“You absolutely, positively must not start daydreaming. This particular legacy is very important. You cannot afford to fail, as it’s a matter of life or death. Now, when the Wood Spirits get here, you need to go into seclusion to stabilize your blood. While you do, I’ll go to the county capital to buy a few of the things we’ll need.”

“Got it, Papa,” Ling’er said, keeping her arm wrapped around the innkeeper’s arm. The mountain breeze blew, lifting her hair and tenderly caressing the fair skin of her face. Ling’er reached up and tucked her hair behind her ear. While her hand was blocking her eyes, she glanced in the direction of the county capital. Her smile deepened.

Chapter 410: Mountains and Clouds Obscure the Sky

Back in the county capital’s Corrections Division, in D-132, Xu Qing frowned as the boy vanished. Then he walked toward the Paintedfolk’s cell.

Perhaps because of the threat of the shadow, the old Paintedfolk man didn’t hide away. Instead, as Xu Qing approached, he quickly clasped hands and bowed in greeting.

“I am Sir Inkwell of the Paintedfolk. Well met, exalted Jailer.”

“What was that thing?” Xu Qing asked the old man.

“Sir, that boy was destiny aura!” Sir Inkwell responded immediately.

Xu Qing’s gaze became sharper.

In response, Sir Inkwell shivered. For some reason, he was getting the feeling that this jailer was different from the others. Generally speaking, Sir Inkwell didn’t care about the guards in the prison. Because of the unique qualities of his species, it wouldn’t even bother him if the people in the painting ripped the painting to shreds. After all, they were illusory. However, when this particular guard sent his shadow into the cell, Sir Inkwell had felt an intense sensation of deadly crisis. It had seemed to him that the shadow really could devour him. That got him nervous, as he had the feeling being eaten would be painful.

When he saw Xu Qing’s eyes flicker, Sir Inkwell said, “With all due respect, exalted Jailer, I have no idea what that destiny aura is doing here. It was here when I got locked up. In fact, I have you to thank, exalted Jailer. That destiny aura loved to stay in the Paintedfolk world, and because of that, I never dared to show myself in the open. I always had the feeling it wanted to eat me. That was why I could never warn you of the situation. I truly hope you can forgive me, exalted Jailer.”

Sir Inkwell knew that it was unlikely this jailer would believe him. After all, he had never made any indication he wanted to offer a warning. But he still had to say the words. Sometimes providing an

explanation and not providing an explanation could lead to very different results. At the very least, it went to show what his attitude was.

Xu Qing looked coldly at Sir Inkwell. He didn't believe much of what the man said, and wasn't inclined to question him. So he turned and went back to the door. There, he sent his shadow out with orders to stand guard. It was a bit of a reward.

The shadow was very excited, and let out happy fluctuations that made it seem like it had just been given a new toy. Quickly separating into fourteen parts, it went over to the fourteen cells. The cloud troll wasn't eating anything, as the curious shadow was doing the eating instead. The woman trembled and ceased trying to coax the scarecrows to sleep. Because of the shadow, the scarecrows trembled and rose to their feet, ready to accept orders. In fact, shortly after, they were arrayed around the woman, glaring at her aggressively. The Rockdevil was turning, but not of its own accord. The head was pushing it. Both inmates were terrified, as a shadowy whip had appeared in the cell, which repeatedly lashed in their direction. The over twenty figures inside the Paintedfolk scroll painting were no longer smiling. They looked terrified. And that was because the shadow was laying atop the painting, licking its lips.

All of the prisoners seemed demure and quiet.

However, the boy would occasionally appear and look at Xu Qing, and his gaze always seemed focused on the right wrist. He seemed extremely curious. Eventually, he sat down cross-legged in front of Xu Qing and cupped his chin with his palm.

Xu Qing looked at him. He knew that this boy was the secret of D-132.

Time passed. Half a month.

During that time, Xu Qing didn't experience any further strange incidents when he left the Corrections Division. Under his management, nothing unusual happened in D-132.

However, whenever the inmates there saw Xu Qing, their eyes shone with terror. And that was because they were always missing body parts. It was the work of the shadow. The shadow couldn't control its curiosity, and would occasionally take a bite here or there. Thankfully for the inmates... their gruish nature ensured that the bitten spot would grow back by the next day.

The head didn't chatter anymore. When Xu Qing passed by, it would sigh.

"Don't stomp me to death! Don't kill me! OW!"

The boy had gotten used to Xu Qing. Whenever he came for duty, the boy would manifest and sit next to him. He almost seemed like a follower who had been tasked with bodyguard work. On some occasions, the boy would run over and watch the shadow striking fear into the hearts of the inmates.

As for Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior... he looked miserable. Xu Qing didn't put him away into his bag of holding. Instead, he gave him work similar to the shadow. As of now, there were two additional jailers in D-132.

The patriarch seemed very interested in the Rockdevil. Then, he and the shadow apparently came to some sort of agreement, after which the patriarch took over management duty of that specific cell.

The shadow was most interested in the Paintedfolk. It loved laying atop the painting and licking its lips. Eventually, the painting turned blurry.

Seeing all that, Xu Qing did some calculations. Based on what the other jailers had told him, every month, their quota would reset, allowing them to deal with inmates however they saw fit. That said, the quota was based on how many inmates were in each cell block. Because of that, Xu Qing only had the right to get rid of two prisoners. That was a bit disappointing.

“There just aren’t enough inmates in D-132,” he murmured.

As he pondered ways to get more inmates into the cell block, Sir Inkwell tremulously called out to him. “Exalted Jailer. I have a secret I want to tell you. I don’t want anything else in return other than... if you think the secret is worth it, please get rid of the shadow.”

Xu Qing ignored him.

Voice trembling, Sir Inkwell said, “Exalted Jailer... do you know how many people are actually locked up in D-132?”

He sounded absolutely terrified, as if he had no choice but to reveal this secret to Xu Qing.

Hearing that, Xu Qing frowned and looked over coldly. There were fourteen inmates in the cell block. He’d known that from the beginning, and had checked on them as soon as he arrived. Besides, he had already discovered the secret of D-132.

Beyond that, it seemed like Sir Inkwell was being deliberately mystifying, which was suspicious.

Xu Qing was about to look away when, all of a sudden, his expression flickered as he remembered something.

“Exalted Jailer, you just sensed it, didn’t you...?” Sir Inkwell asked, voice trembling.

“Exalted Jailer, do we really have fourteen inmates here? Think back. Scour your memories. When you do so, can you determine... how many prisoners there actually are? Did you really figure out D-132’s secret?”

Sir Inkwell’s voice grew fainter and fainter until it vanished. Xu Qing looked at Sir Inkwell’s cell, his eyes glittering. Sir Inkwell was obviously trying to lead him to a conclusion, that much was obvious.

Regardless, he searched his memories to confirm the information. On his first day here, he had carefully checked all the inmates. There were fourteen. The first was the cloud troll. The second was the human woman. The third was the Rockdevil.... The thirteenth was the head, and the fourteenth was Sir Inkwell.

“Fourteen. For sure.” He even took out the jade slip and reviewed all the information, confirming that there were fourteen inmates.

And yet, for some reason, Xu Qing felt like his memories contained different information. That said, he wasn’t sure what it could be. Standing, he walked over to the cloud troll’s cell.

After examining it, he started strolling the path, looking into all the cells until he finally reached Sir Inkwell. Along the way, he yet again counted fourteen.

As he stood outside Sir Inkwell’s cell, he looked grimly at the blurry painting. Then, he mentally sent a message to Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior. Instantly, the black iron skewer shot out, circling

around the entire cell block, entering into each cell to inspect it. Afterward, he informed Xu Qing that there wasn't anything out of the ordinary.

After that, Xu Qing had his shadow inspect everything. When it was done, it sent him fluctuations via divine will. Just as before, there was nothing unusual.

There really were fourteen inmates.

Xu Qing's face darkened further, and he had the shadow send a section of itself to the painting.

Sir Inkwell appeared, looking extremely nervous as he wailed, "Exalted one, I really had no choice but to say that stuff. That shadow was about to eat me! I had to do it to buy some time! Otherwise I'd be done for. Exalted one, please forgive me! Forgive me. Just this one time!"

Xu Qing didn't say anything. His eyes grew colder.

Sir Inkwell trembled even more violently as his anxiety turned into terror.

Finally, he blurted, "I'll just say. The real secret, exalted Jailer, is that the Corrections Division is really only worried about one inmate. And it's... a god!"

"Explain," Xu Qing said.

"Exalted Jailer, I'm not actually sure of every detail. I just once heard a prisoner older than me explaining that the Corrections Division was built on top of the sealed clone of a god. That... is why the palace lords always stay here."

Xu Qing thought back to his first time coming to the prison, and how he had heard howling from the depths of the chasm. Then he thought about the vibrations he had sensed from deep down. What was more, dead inmates were thrown into the bottom of the chasm, as if they were food. As those thoughts coalesced, and he realized the implications, he realized why Sir Inkwell had been acting deliberately mystifying.

A moment later, Xu Qing looked at Sir Inkwell and called the shadow away. The shadow seemed disappointed, but couldn't disobey. All it could do was focus on having fun with the other inmates. Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior did the same, and returned to his spot watching over the Rockdevil. D-132 was back to normal. Everything was normal.

The boy formed of destiny aura appeared again. He always showed up close to Xu Qing, as if he wanted to stay close to him.

Several days passed.

Everything was going normal for Xu Qing. However, he was putting a lot of thought into what Sir Inkwell had told him. For some reason, he couldn't stop thinking about it.

Eventually, one day when he was about to get off work and head back to his sword pavilion, he saw a familiar face in the Corrections Division.

It was Kong Xianglong.