

Timescape 411

Chapter 411: Trees, Frost, and Water, Swaying in the Wind

Kong Xianglong had been assigned to the Field Operations Office, where he was tasked with tracking down criminals. Today, he had come with a criminal he had arrested. When Xu Qing spotted him, he was chatting with one of the jailers he knew on Level 9.

Lying on the ground next to him was a Dualface, gasping for breath. The Dualface had an impressive cultivation base. Despite being hurt and reclining, it still pulsed with the fluctuations of seven heavenly palaces. It was clearly an impressive representation of its species. That said, it was in bad condition. It had been beaten up so badly it was missing a leg, and from the wound, it had apparently been ripped off.

Kong Xianglong was also hurt, but he didn't seem worried about the injuries. Seeing Xu Qing, his eyes lit up.

"Xu Qing!"

"Big Bro Kong," Xu Qing replied, saluting him in return.

The other jailers called out greetings. Quite a few of them had heard that Xu Qing never requested a transfer after being assigned to D-132. What was more, he always went home after work, and had not yet died under mysterious circumstances. That had earned him the admiration of the jailers.

Xu Qing smiled at Kong Xianglong and looked closely at his injuries.

"It's nothing, really. Flesh wounds. Xu Qing, are you actually a jailer now? Hahaha! I should have expected that." Kong Xianglong had obviously noted his uniform with its dark flame markings, and also the way the other jailers treated him. He didn't seem surprised at all that Xu Qing was a jailer. "Actually, back when I heard you were assigned to be the palace lord's secretary-general, I totally knew that—"

"What exactly did you 'totally know'?" a cold voice said, interrupting Kong Xianglong before he could finish. It was coming from the staircase leading up to Level 9.

As the voice echoed out, the palace lord's cold visage appeared as he reached the top of the stairs and walked over to the group.

The jailers all clasped hands and bowed formally.

"Well met, Palace Lord."

Xu Qing did the same, while Kong Xianglong shivered, quickly clasped hands, and bowed.

All of a sudden, Xu Qing realized that Kong Xianglong looked terrified. He was even sweating.

The pressure coming off of the palace lord was immense, filling all of Level 9. Absolute silence reigned as he looked around at everyone. He looked at the Dualface criminal lying on the ground, then looked at Kong Xianglong.

“Given your cultivation base,” he said coldly, “you could have captured this cultivator with a single sword attack. Why did you use two attacks? People blather on about you being the top chosen of this generation. Is that why you’re so smug all the time? You might not have mastered anything else, but you’ve mastered how to be arrogant.” He turned to Xu Qing. “As for you,” he went on, his tone just as cold as before, “shouldn’t you be back home working on your cultivation already? You got things under control in D-132, do you? Well, if you’re that skilled, maybe I should promote you to Unit C!”

Xu Qing’s eyes narrowed thoughtfully. He was aware that the palace lord had a temper. After getting to know some of the other jailers, he had heard some stories about how strict he was. Combined with how the palace lord had scolded him on their first meeting, he knew that responding wouldn’t do any good.

As for Kong Xianglong, he had his head bowed and he wasn’t saying anything. The palace lord shifted his gaze from Xu Qing back to Kong Xianglong. “Well, speak up! I asked you a question!”

Kong Xianglong hesitated then said, “This Dualface cultivator had a handful of half-blood handmaidens, the poor things. Unfortunately, I didn’t control my attacks well and harmed the innocent. That’s why it ended up like this....”

Half-bloods were children born to humans and nonhumans. Oftentimes, their fates were much worse because of their status.

The palace lord took in the information and then said, “Even still, all you did was fight a seven-palace cultivator, yet you still ended up hurt. What else happened? Were you using your official authority to handle personal matters?”

Kong Xianglong was sweating, but given that the palace lord was directly asking him questions, he had no choice but to answer. “The criminal had some friends. They ran away, and though they weren’t on the wanted list, they’d done some really unconscionable things. I couldn’t hold back, so I chased them down and put them to death. Later, another tough opponent showed up, and I killed him too, which is how I got wounded.”

The palace lord looked coldly at Kong Xianglong, then turned and walked back toward the stairs. As he did, his cold voice rang out. “That’s understandable. However, you didn’t follow mission protocol, and as a result, side problems kept cropping up. As your punishment, you’ll be locked up here for seven days. Take him away!”

With that, the palace lord disappeared.

Xu Qing looked sympathetically at Kong Xianglong. As far as Xu Qing was concerned, the palace lord was being a bit unreasonable.

But Kong Xianglong just sighed and then smiled bitterly at Xu Qing. “If I’d known this would happen, I would have just dropped off the prisoner and left. How unlucky!”

Two jailers approached, bound the Dualface prisoner, and then walked up to Kong Xianglong.

Kong Xianglong resigned himself to his fate and held out his hands. They put manacles on them, and then led him down into the prison. Just before disappearing down the stairs, he turned and waved to Xu Qing.

Xu Qing watched him go, then left for his sword pavilion. Settling down cross-legged, he looked out into the night and thought about Kong Xianglong being rebuked and taken into custody. It just went to emphasize how much the palace lord emphasized following the rules. He had rebuked Xu Qing and had done the same to Kong Xianglong, who was a famous chosen.

So this is what the Swordsage Palace is like....

The more he thought about it, the more he liked it. The rules were simple, and though strength was important, the fact remained that meritorious service and following the rules was also important.

Back when Big Bro Chen mentioned that Zhang Siyun's Sect Grandfather was one of the four honor guards, he made a point to say that he didn't practice favoritism and engage in cronyism. With a palace lord like this, there's no way anybody will be allowed to do that.

After all of the things Xu Qing had experienced so far in the Swordsage Palace, including all the seemingly trivial matters, he felt like he was really starting to understand the place.

He also hadn't forgotten what Sir Inkwell said.

There's the clone of a god locked up in the prison depths??

Xu Qing shook his head. As far as he was concerned, knowing that information wasn't going to do much. It wasn't as if he could look into it and confirm the truth. Therefore, he tucked the information away, closed his eyes, and focused on his fifth heavenly palace.

That heavenly palace was just on the verge of forming, and based on what he could tell, he would only need five or six more days to complete the materialization.

The more progress I make, the longer it takes for the materialization.

Lately he had been putting a lot of thought into whether he should actually put his bluegreen dragon into a heavenly palace....

For one thing, he felt like his four current heavenly palaces were pretty amazing, and that the bluegreen dragon was only average. When forming gold cores for your heavenly palaces you could add an outside item or a technique. Because of that, Xu Qing had been contemplating using an imperial-class technique. Theoretically speaking, it was possible, but Xu Qing lacked detailed information about how to do it. After some thought, he finally braced himself, took out a transmission jade slip, and sent a voice message to Arch-Immortal Plumdark.

"Senior, are you there?"

"No."

Her reply came almost instantly. Xu Qing sat there quietly for a moment, but no further message came. Something about Arch-Immortal Plumdark's tone had seemed off, but he had no idea what it meant. Had he somehow done something to offend her? Next, he sent a message to Master Fifth asking her about using imperial-class techniques along with heavenly palaces.

"What? Arch-Immortal Plumdark didn't explain that to you? Before we came here to the county capital, your Master specifically asked her to explain how your imperial-class technique can be used to make a gold core."

“A few days ago, I even saw Arch-Immortal Plumdark talking with some of her friends about that exact subject. After all, imperial-class techniques are all different, so you need to put a lot of emphasis on the specific method you use. Arch-Immortal Plumdark visited the three great sects, and even paid a lot of money to browse through their Halls of Scriptures and Magic looking for details.

“If you just randomly do it, you won’t get hurt, but at the same time you won’t succeed.”

After some more thought, Xu Qing still couldn’t figure out why Arch-Immortal Plumdark would do so much for him. Feeling confused and nervous, he sent her another voice message.

“Senior...?”

“Huh? Who are you?” she replied through the jade slip.

“It’s me, Xu Qing.”

“Oh. You mean the one who’s been hiding out from me all the time in his sword pavilion and hasn’t come to see me even once?”

Xu Qing wasn’t sure how to respond. Finally, he quietly said, “Master Fifth explained everything. So... I offer profound thanks, Senior!”

The response came in the form of a cold harrumph. Then she said, “Your fifth heavenly palace is almost done, right? On the day you finish it, come see me. By the way, I really like the osmanthus cakes from the south part of the city.” [1]

“Okay.” Feeling a bit relieved, Xu Qing put away the jade slip and made sure to commit ‘osmanthus cakes’ to memory.

I need to find an opportunity to pay her back. Xu Qing wasn’t very good at expressing his feelings, so he took out his bamboo slip, flipped it to the side with benefactors, and carved ‘Plumdark’ on it.

Now, I still need to figure out how to make a lot of military credits. The thought of military credits made him frown. After becoming a jailer, he got a much better idea of how military credits were earned. For one thing, jailers got a certain amount per month. It wasn’t much, and didn’t come anywhere close to putting a dent in what he needed. If he wanted to earn more, he would have to go out on missions. Except, there weren’t many missions available. And those with good rewards were generally designed for either groups or Nascent Soul cultivators. That said, as long as he kept saving up, he would eventually reach his goal. Therefore, he decided that he should just accept some missions near the county capital. With that decision made, he closed his eyes and started meditating.

Time passed. When it was bright outside, he opened his eyes.

Why do I feel like I’ve forgotten something...?

He frowned thoughtfully.

Will today be the day the palace lord asks me if I have D-132 under control?

Something about that thought seemed unusual. And what was most unusual of all was that he seemed to be having memory problems.

What's going on? He had always been able to fully trust his memory. And he rarely forgot things.

Since when did my memory start going bad? After thinking back to recent events, his pupils constricted. I've been forgetting things related to D-132, but nothing else. That means the problem must have started when I was assigned there!

His mind spun. All of a sudden, he thought back to what Chen Boli had told him.

"When you think you know everything, you'll find there's only more to find out."

After some more thought, his eyes glittered coldly.

"D-132 is really affecting me somehow."

It was light outside, but it wasn't a sunny and dazzling day. It was hazy and rainy. The rainy season in the county capital would last for months. Xu Qing stood, his eyes cold as he pushed open the door of the sword pavilion and walked through the wind and rain toward the Corrections Division.

Once inside, he projected messages to Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior and the shadow.

"Starting now, I want both of you to record everything that happens."

The patriarch and shadow were both surprised, but they both voiced their acknowledgment.

"Milord, what's going on?" the patriarch asked cautiously.

"I suspect that some outside power is tampering with my mind. Interfering with my memories."

Eyes growing increasingly cold, he walked down to Level 57 and then... into D-132!

At some point, D-132 had stopped being so dark and cold. The head had stopped talking so much, the cloud troll didn't eat its own tentacles. The Rockdevil trembled as it rotated in place, and Sir Inkwell started showing his face more often. Perhaps some of that was because of the hard work of the shadow and patriarch.

Upon entering D-132 and looking around, Xu Qing came up with an idea.

The boy appeared, standing not too far away, looking slightly uncomfortable. Xu Qing glanced at him briefly, then started walking down the path like he often did, checking on all the cells.

When he reached the Rockdevil, he saw the chattering head. Instead of rolling around on the ground like usual, it was atop the millstone, staring at Xu Qing with an odd expression.

It looked at Xu Qing. He looked back.

The head didn't say anything.

"Why so quiet today?" Xu Qing said calmly.

"I don't want to get stomped. Besides, have you ever seen a living person talking to a dead one?" The head grinned very gruishly.

“I have,” Xu Qing replied.

The head was visibly surprised.

“I haven’t just seen it, I’ve talked about it,” Xu Qing said, sounding very serious.

The head looked back quizzically, then shivered and turned around so it was facing away from Xu Qing.

Xu Qing kept walking until he was in front of the Paintedfolk cell. Looking at Sir Inkwell, he said, “Repeat to me everything you’ve ever said to me. In full. Leave out one word and I’ll put you to death.”

The old man gaped.

Face completely expressionless, Xu Qing waved his hand, causing his shadow to stretch into the cell.

Sir Inkwell immediately started talking. Obviously, he had a very sharp memory, as he managed to repeat every single thing he had ever said since Xu Qing was assigned to D-132.

Hearing it, Xu Qing nodded, then went back to the door and sat down to meditate. The day passed, and nothing unusual happened. It was just like any other day. In fact, when his shift was over, he simply walked out. He went all the way back to his sword pavilion without stopping anywhere along the way.

Once seated cross-legged, he said, “You first, Master Freespirit.”

The black iron skewer flew out and the patriarch created a projection of himself. Looking very somber, he waved his hand, causing an image to appear.

It was Xu Qing.

The recording showed everything he did that day from the moment he stepped into the Corrections Division until he left D-132. Everything was recorded in detail, without anything missing. It also contained everything that Sir Inkwell had said. After watching the recording and not spotting anything unusual, Xu Qing had the shadow show its recording. Just like the first recording, nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

As Xu Qing thought about it, a possibility suddenly occurred to him.

Am I just thinking too much into this?

Eventually he squashed the thought and once again examined the recording in the jade slip. His eyes glittered as he focused on Sir Inkwell.

Voice trembling, Sir Inkwell said, “Exalted Jailer... do you know how many people are actually locked up in D-132? When you think back, can you determine... how many prisoners there actually are?”

“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 listened to that part of the recording a few times, then finally performed an incantation gesture, causing the part where Sir Inkwell asked for forgiveness to play in a loop over and over again.

“Master Freespirit, Little Shadow,” he said quietly. “Listen to what he’s saying, and tell me, is Sir Inkwell... actually talking to me?”

Chapter 412: Only Forgetting Can Sever Karma

Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior was visibly stunned. A host of eyes suddenly popped open on the shadow. “Or,” Xu Qing continued calmly, “is it possible those words were being spoken to some other entity that I just didn’t notice...? You see, Sir Inkwell has always addressed me as ‘exalted Jailer.’ However, in the portion just now, he used the simpler address ‘exalted one.’ It’s a somewhat obvious discrepancy, and yet strangely, I never noticed it.” Xu Qing’s eyes were as cold as ice. “And now I’m wondering how many inmates are actually housed in D-132.”

Eyes narrowing, he searched his memory.

“First, the cloud troll. Second, the human woman. Third, the Rockdevil. Thirteenth—” Xu Qing suddenly stopped talking. “Wait, what about the fourth? Who’s the fourth?”

His pupils slowly constricted.

To the side, Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior opened his mouth to speak, only to find himself dumbstruck. He couldn’t think of the answer. Then he started trembling, and a look of terror appeared in his eyes.

The shadow was similarly in a daze.

“And who’s the fifth?” Xu Qing continued. “More precisely, who are the fourth through thirteenth? And how come I can’t remember who they are?” Taking out the jade slip with the information about the inmates, he checked the roster, and sure enough, there were fourteen inmates. And yet, he simply couldn’t remember the nine in the middle. It was extremely bizarre.

Even after carefully reading through the jade slip, he found that he couldn’t remember the details.

“Chen Boli talked about the inmates, and yet... he didn’t mention any of the nine in the middle. At the time, I didn’t think anything of it. How interesting.”

Eyes flashing, he opened his bag of holding with the intention of making a personal record of what he’d just come to realize. After a moment of consideration, he decided not to use a jade slip, and instead, took out an empty bamboo slip. He had a lot of bamboo slips in his bag of holding.

Being very careful and precise, he recorded everything he had just discovered onto the slip. On the final line, he wrote five words followed by a question mark.

The power of a god?

With that accomplished, Xu Qing stood and walked out of his sword pavilion and into the night. As the rain continued to fall, he walked through the puddles to the Corrections Division.

Then his footsteps echoed about as he walked down the stairs. It was the first time he'd come to the Corrections Division at night. Everything was dark, except for the occasional lamps on the wall that cast flickering, shadowy light. That light definitely wasn't enough to fully penetrate the darkness.

That said, to Xu Qing, day and night were virtually the same, and he didn't want to wait until the next day. What was more, the longer he waited, the more he was worried about his memories fading. He wanted to see for himself who the fourth through twelfth inmates were. Everything was dark and quiet when he reached Level 57, and the dark door of D-132. He pushed it open.

Do the fourth through twelfth prisoners even exist?

As the door creaked, Xu Qing walked inside, his face completely expressionless. Then he shut the door behind him.

D-132 was as dark as usual.

The moment he entered, he could sense gazes locking onto him from within the cells. At almost the same time, the boy appeared next to him, looking somewhat helpless and concerned.

Noticing that, Xu Qing frowned. The gazes that had locked onto him were why he was here! Back when he checked the jade slip, he hadn't seen the boy. Yet he clearly remembered the boy's helpless facial expression. That was why he had come here in the middle of the night. He wanted to find out why the boy's gaze was like that.

That was his only goal at the moment.

"What is this?" Xu Qing asked, holding up his right wrist and looking at the boy.

The boy opened his mouth and began to speak. And yet, no matter how Xu Qing strained, he couldn't hear a thing. It was almost as if the two of them existed in a different part of space and time. He tried other methods, for instance writing. But no matter what he did, he couldn't establish a method of communication with the boy. Eventually, when he could sense that it was getting light outside, he sighed and gave up.

He looked around at D-132 and the fourteen prisoners there. Everything seemed normal.

He turned to leave. However, just when he was about to push the door open, a look of confusion suddenly appeared on his face.

I came in the middle of the night just to try to communicate with some destiny aura? That doesn't sound like me! That's something I could do in the middle of the day just as well as at night. So why did I come here at nighttime? I... think I forgot some things.

Turning, he once again looked at D-132. It looked exactly the same as he remembered it looking.

"Wait. No!" Xu Qing's eyes glittered.

My memory isn't that bad, yet somehow I can't remember.... Don't tell me there's some power influencing me? On the way here, I wasn't affected. But as soon as I stepped inside, I forgot why I came.... In that case, it means I must have uncovered some clues.

After looking around one more time, he opened his bag of holding, rummaged around, and eventually pulled out a bamboo slip.

Written on the bamboo slip were numerous lines of text.

He frowned. The bamboo slip seemed familiar, but he didn't remember there being anything written on it before. After carefully reading the bamboo slip, his expression flickered.

What's in the fourth through thirteenth cells?

The power of a god?

Shock filled Xu Qing's mind. The writing was familiar. He knew it was his own. Yet the contents were unfamiliar. Finally, he looked up.

Something's messing with my memories?? His eyes flickered with killing intent as his third heavenly palace vibrated. The aura of the taboo poison swept out, covering him. Then he took a deep breath and, for the first time, called on the power of his fourth heavenly palace.

That was his violet moon heavenly palace. In response to his thoughts, the fourth palace trembled, and then a stream of violet moonlight erupted from his sea of consciousness. As it surrounded him, every single part of him was augmented. His expression became infinitely cold, and his eyes turned empty. Though his physical appearance hadn't changed, he suddenly gave off the sensation that he wasn't a human anymore. Instead of being filled with ordinary emotions, he was a god that looked down on all living beings. While in that state, he once again examined D-132.

This time, the cellblock looked completely different.

It wasn't black anymore, but instead, red. It was like blood. The floor was covered in gore, as were the walls and the cells.

There was only one spot where brilliant light shone out, and that was from right next to him, where the boy stood. Because the boy was standing so close to him, the light he cast enveloped Xu Qing. He stood in the light, while beyond the light, everything was the color of blood. There was even a blood mist that sought to invade him, only to be blocked by the light.

Shaken, Xu Qing looked in the direction of the cloud troll, and saw... that there was no cloud troll! Instead, it was a headless stone lion! It was greenish-black and exuded something unknowable.

Next, Xu Qing looked at the cell with the human woman. She looked different as well. It was as if a veil had been lifted; instead of her being tender and beautiful, she was actually just a skeleton. Inside the cell there was a huge, blood-colored scarecrow, rocking back and forth. Straw fell off of it, which then turned into smaller scarecrows which would bite off chunks of the woman's skeleton. After chewing a bit, they would spit out the pieces and put them back in place. It was as if this woman was condemned to be eaten over and over again, through all her reincarnations. Noticing Xu Qing's gaze, the huge scarecrow turned, looked at him, and then smiled.

The cell with the Rockdevil and the head was also different. The Rockdevil was gone, and in its place was a huge water bucket that emanated an ancient aura. Within the bucket was a turbid liquid, out of which grew a black lotus, as well as countless vine-like branches which filled the cell. Quite a few of them had stabbed into the head, which looked like it was enduring intense pain. When the head noticed Xu Qing looking in its direction, a curious and helpless expression appeared on its face.

"I didn't change," it said weakly. "I told you. I'm one of the good ones...."

Not responding, Xu Qing looked at the other cells, and what he saw filled him with waves of astonishment.

He did not see the fourth through twelfth inmates.

Instead, he saw a huge finger that filled over a hundred cells. It emanated a godly might that was difficult to put into words, and the blood which oozed out of it made the surrounding cells bright red. In fact, the blood mist and the gore on the floor were all brought forth by him. This was... the finger of a god!

In the final cell was Sir Inkwel. He looked emaciated as he stood there naked from the waist up, his torso covered with bite marks. And his expression was ferocious as he used his finger to paint something. His cell was filled with countless scroll paintings, too many to count. The ground was covered with discarded paintings, and if you looked at them closely, each one depicted Xu Qing!

When he noticed Xu Qing looking his way, he smiled. "Good morning, exalted Jailer."

This was what D-132 really looked like. There weren't fourteen inmates. There were six.

Looking very grim, Xu Qing took in everything, then turned his attention to the cell with the stone lion. He waved his hand, activating the spell formation in the cell. The lion exploded. Next was the scarecrow. The spell formation ripped it to shreds. After that was the water bucket with the black lotus, and then the head.

Xu Qing personally stomped the head to death with his foot. In the moment before it was gone, it sighed.

"Why do you still refuse to trust me?"

Last was Sir Inkwel. As the old man smiled gruishly, Xu Qing flicked his sleeve, sending a fireball into the cell which burned everything. Having done that, he looked at the finger of the god for a long moment, then turned to leave.

That finger was the true secret of D-132. What was really being locked up in this cellblock was the finger of a god. And yet, Xu Qing didn't understand why something like that would be in Unit D.

He looked at the boy, and the light shining off of him that counteracted the blood from the god's finger. Suddenly, everything made sense.

"Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior was wrong," Xu Qing whispered. "The misfortune wasn't caused by my inability to withstand the destiny aura. Rather, it's from a curse. The curse of a god. And the destiny aura is here to keep that curse under control. That's why any jailer assigned to this cell block will be affected by the curse, and will suffer misfortune. It's a cognitive curse, which means that breaking it is simple. You just need to see through it. And what that all means, is that you are the real guard here."

The boy nodded.

Reaching the door, Xu Qing took one last look at the bamboo slip and then crushed it. He didn't need it any more. He had already decided to step down from his position as the guard of D-132. The place was too gruish. Even though he had already seen through to what was really going on, he didn't see any reason to stick around.

Retracting the power of the violet moon and the taboo poison, he pushed the door open. Once he was outside, with the door closed behind him, he took a deep breath and frowned.

Even though I couldn't communicate with that boy, it didn't seem like he had any evil intentions. He just seemed curious. Ah, whatever. D-132 only has fourteen prisoners. That's a really low number.

It seemed to him that he should figure out a way to get some more prisoners for D-132. With such thoughts on his mind, he went off to find Kong Xianglong.

After Xu Qing left, everything went back to normal in D-132.

The cloud troll sat there chewing like before. The human woman kept trying to get the scarecrows to go to sleep. The Rockdevil rotated endlessly. The Paintedfolk painting was still there, as was Sir Inkwell.

Sighing, he said, "Why'd we have to get such a terrifying fellow? He wakes up every day. When will it end? Warning him doesn't do any good. Once he wakes up, he just kills us. Not warning him results in the same thing. Every time he analyzes things, he wakes up."

"I got it way worse than you!" shrieked the head atop the Rockdevil. "The first time he came around, everything was fine. But the second time he came, he woke up. And every day after that he always wakes up, and every single time he stomps me to death. It never changes! Am I that stompable? I've told him over and over again not to stomp me to death. Dammit! I'm gonna kill him! No, wait. Straw-hat will kill him. He's doomed to die!"

Amidst all the clamor, the image of the boy appeared by the door of the cellblock. Kneeling, he picked up the broken pieces of the bamboo slip, then took them over to a dark corner of the cell block and tossed them... onto a large pile of broken bamboo slips. Every single piece was covered with Xu Qing's handwriting. If you counted how many bamboo slips there were, you would find that they equaled the number of days Xu Qing had been on duty, less one. And every day he was here, a new slip would get added.

The boy sighed, then blurred and vanished. When he reappeared... he was outside of D-132, right behind Xu Qing.

No one could see him, not even Xu Qing.

He followed Xu Qing quietly, in accord with the agreement to protect him that the boy had made with that nice girl who agreed to be his friend. It was a formal agreement.

What was frustrating to him was that, starting with the second day, this person who he had been tasked with protecting actually didn't need any protection. That was the day he realized what was going on in D-132, and how the boy was involved. He had resolved the misfortune on his own, without any help from the boy.

Because of that, he would wake up every day, and once he realized what was happening, would kill everyone in the cellblock. And then, because of the god and the inherent power of the Corrections Division, he would forget everything.

It was an endless cycle.

This was D-132, and it was the core of the Corrections Division. The misfortune didn't come from the destiny aura, but rather from a curse. The curse of a god.

No one could deal with it, except by forgetting, which would sever the karma.

Chapter 413: The Most Tragic God in History

Kong Xianglong was being treated well. He was currently locked up in D-003 on Level 1, which meant it was very bright and there were no other prisoners nearby.

After asking around, Xu Qing learned that the first ten levels were set aside for swordsmen guilty of rules violations. In the end, Kong Xianglong was being treated like a guest.

Currently, Kong Xianglong sat in the middle of his cell, looking piteously at Xu Qing. "It's too bad this happened so suddenly," he said, licking his lips, "otherwise I would have brought along some alcohol...."

Obviously he was really in the mood to drink.

Xu Qing looked around to confirm that Kong Xianglong was the only one in the cell block, then took out a jug of alcohol from his bag of holding and passed it through the bars.

Kong Xianglong's eyes lit up. He quickly guzzled some alcohol, then burped. Finally, he laughed heartily. "Simply amazing! Normally speaking, drinking isn't this good. But go for a bit of time without drinking, and then you start to miss it. Come on, Xu Qing, drink with me." He hoisted up the jug in a toast to Xu Qing.

Xu Qing performed an incantation gesture, closing and locking the door to D-003. Then he took out another jug of alcohol and drank with Kong Xianglong.

Kong Xianglong looked even happier. They drank together for a time, and Xu Qing even took out a few apples for Kong Xianglong to eat.

However, after taking a bite of one of the apples, Kong Xianglong said they didn't have any flavor. After that, he stuck to drinking.

Xu Qing thought the apples were fine, so he ate and drank at the same time. The more Kong Xianglong drank, the more he talked. Soon, he was chattering endlessly.

"I've spent time in all the cell blocks on Level 1. Sometimes I get lucky and nobody catches me when I go off protocol. But occasionally I get unlucky and somebody reports me. This time I got really unlucky thanks to running into the palace lord." Upon mentioning the palace lord, Kong Xianglong sighed heavily. "By the way, Xu Qing, what have you been up to lately? It looks like your cultivation base is on the verge of a breakthrough. Why haven't you taken the next step? Once you break through, the two of us can go on some missions together and get some military credits."

Xu Qing thought about it. Considering that Kong Xianglong also had imperial-class techniques, as well as ten heavenly palaces, it made sense to ask him for help. So Xu Qing gave a quick overview of what he was thinking regarding his fifth heavenly palace, then asked for advice.

“Well, I definitely have relevant experience,” Kong Xianglong said. “Using an imperial-class technique for your heavenly palace is different from using ordinary techniques. There’s always a special ritual involved, plus you need to have a dharma protector. Back when I did it, I purchased my imperial-class technique with military credits, and I also paid for one of the honor guards to be my dharma protector. Hmm. You know, this is all kind of abstract, isn’t it? How about I just show you?”

With that, he waved his hand, causing his body to turn transparent and reveal his ten heavenly palaces.

Beneath the life mist, he had six. Above the life mist, he had four. Of the four on top, three were made from life lamps, and glittered dazzlingly. They all had strange, unique appearances, and all of them emanated astonishing fluctuations. The other six heavenly palaces were also extraordinary, especially two of them, which seemed particularly unique. One of them had a golden dragon coiled around it, which emanated dazzling golden light. When Xu Qing looked at it, the dragon suddenly lifted its head and focused its gaze on him.

Xu Qing’s golden crow materialized behind him, then glided through the air in D-003, looking at the golden dragon.

The crow and the dragon seemed drawn to each other because of their energies, and were closely studying each other.

Kong Xianglong’s other unique palace was a sword palace. It looked very similar to the halls in the Swordsage Palace, and it emanated an incisive, sword-like energy.

Looking at it caused Xu Qing’s mind to spin. He had merely been asking for some advice, only to have Kong Xianglong directly show him all of his heavenly palaces. Most people considered their heavenly palaces to be their biggest secrets, and generally wouldn’t reveal them except to people they deeply trusted. Yet Kong Xianglong didn’t seem to have any such misgivings.

“What are you staring like that for? You’re not the only one who’s seen them. I showed them to little River and little Chen as well. See those there? Those are my two heavenly palaces made with imperial-class techniques.” Kong Xianglong made some adjustments so that those two palaces became even clearer. “You probably gained enlightenment of The Emperor’s Sword, right? I sensed the energy fluctuations earlier. Once you get that technique to the second stage, you can use it to make a sword palace.”

Having personally seen Kong Xianglong’s heavenly palaces, Xu Qing felt moved. Looking very serious, he stood and bowed deeply to Kong Xianglong. “Many thanks, Big Bro Kong.”

“Thanks aren’t necessary between bros,” Kong Xianglong said. His heavenly palaces disappeared, and he took another long swig of alcohol. “Once you use that imperial-

class technique for your fifth heavenly palace, I'll check and see if there are any missions we can go on. If so, I'll give you a shout. We actually have lots of missions like that in the Field Operations Office. Little River and little Chen asked me to help them find missions as well. Both of them need a lot of military credits so they can buy legacies."

Xu Qing offered sincere thanks again. He and Kong Xianglong drank for a bit more until Xu Qing's shift was over. Then, instead of going back to his sword pavilion, he went to the south part of the city to look for osmanthus cakes.

Tonight he planned to return to the subsidiary sect and visit Arch-Immortal Plumdark. His fifth heavenly palace was already materialized, so now all he had to do was insert Golden Crow Assimilates Myriad Spirits into it, and he would have his fifth imperial-class heavenly palace.

My life essence bluegreen dragon... will have to get pushed off again. I'll use it next time!

Xu Qing took a moment to cast his gaze inward and look at the bluegreen dragon swirling amidst his dharma apertures. The dragon looked up at him.

"Next time. Promise!" Arriving in the south of the city, he found a shop that sold osmanthus cakes.

Around the time Xu Qing left the Corrections Division, down on Level 89, the palace lord's eyes opened and he looked up. Frowning, he snorted coldly.

Then the huge eye behind the palace lord opened, and a deep voice echoed out. "A jailer and an inmate drinking together in the cell block? Downright outrageous! When those two were drinking, you were just pretending not to notice? They finished already; one left, and the other's asleep. Only now do you open your eyes and snort? Who are you doing that for, me?"

The eye's pupil burned like fire, and caused winds to whip around the palace lord.

The palace lord didn't seem to care that the spirit automaton was being snippy with him. Eyes cold, he said, "The two of them agreed to go on a mission together... I want you to send a message to the Yao Clan in my name."

"Same content as last time? Do you have a death wish, Yao Yunhui?" The voice rumbled like bells in the wind.

"No, ten words this time," the palace lord replied coldly. "Xu Qing is my personal secretary-general. Don't you forget it."

"Isn't it a violation of your own personal rules to send a dharmic decree twice for the same swordstage? Is it because Xu Qing has no more misfortune on him? Wait, hold on a second. The misfortune actually left him quite a while ago. Let me think. It was actually the second time he went to D-132 that it vanished.

“Weird. The misfortune left, just like that? It’s been about a month since Xu Qing’s second visit to D-132. So what happened? Sadly, I don’t have the authority to see what went on. Aiya. So annoying! As a spirit automaton, I just don’t have the authority to look into D-132!” The rumbling voice in the wind sounded disappointed.

“Yao Yunhui won’t understand if I don’t spell it out to her,” the palace lord said coolly, ignoring the spirit automaton’s pontificating about Xu Qing, the misfortune, and D-132. “Swordsages can die at the hands of enemies. Endings like that can be considered honorable. But they can’t die at the hands of vile simpletons. That would be a disgrace. I simply cannot let such a thing happen to any of my swordsages.”

The rumbling wind ceased momentarily. Then the voice boomed, “Does that include Zhang Siyun? According to the secret report from the Swordsage Court in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture, he’s been parasitized by a god. Even the emperor himself wanted to talk with the divine likeness of the Grand Emperor to get details. There are some people who are very interested in this Zhang Siyun.”

The palace lord was quiet for a long moment. Then he shook his head. “As long as he’s a swordsage, I won’t allow him to be used as bait. And I’ll figure out a way to deal with that god inside him.”

“What about Chen Erniu?” asked the voice, suddenly more intense than before. “I refuse to believe you don’t see what’s going on with him. And if I’m not mistaken, I actually saw him in his previous life. Except I can’t remember the details. Weird. Why can’t I remember the details?”

The voice in the wind sounded more and more irritated as it talked, until it unleashed a howl. In response, a howl echoed back from the very depths of the Corrections Division, a response that seemed to overlap with the spirit automaton’s voice. “I can’t remember. Can’t remember. I’ve forgotten.... Who am I? I need to think this through to figure out who I am. I’m....”

The palace lord’s expression was the same as ever as he slowly lifted his right hand and pushed out. That movement caused all one hundred and seventy-seven levels of the Corrections Division to tremble. Brilliant light then converged in the middle of each level, right above the center of the prison depths. The light turned into a hundred and seventy-seven magical symbols that slowly dropped down.

Rumbling sounds echoed out, and then the howling from below grew weaker until it faded away. Back on Level 89, the howl was no more, and the eye behind the palace lord started to close. Just before it did, a blank look appeared in the eye, and it spoke in a faint voice.

“Who am I...?”

“You’re the spirit automaton of the Corrections Division!” the palace lord replied.

A look of understanding flashed within the eye. “That’s right. I remember now. I’m a spirit automaton. The spirit automaton of the Corrections Division. My mission is to keep control of all the inmates.”

The eye closed.

The palace lord looked at the closed eye and frowned.

Hē's been coming to his senses more frequently in recent years....

If anyone could see the palace lord's thoughts, and noticed him use the word hē, they would be absolutely shocked.

That was the form of address for gods.

As it turned out, that eye absolutely was not just the spirit automaton of the Corrections Division. The eye thought it was a spirit automaton. But the truth was that hē was the main reason why the palace lord of the Swordsage Palace always remained on duty in the Corrections Division. Hē was actually a clone of the god of unknown origins that slept in Forbidden by the Immortal!

Continuing to look at the closed eye, the palace lord thought back to the words from earlier.

Hē recognizes Chen Erniu. That's problematic. But the Grand Emperor endorsed him, and let him become a swordsage. And that means he's a swordsage. Since he's a swordsage, he's my subordinate. And my subordinates die in blazes of glory. Not at the hands of despicable villains!

That was the palace lord's personal rule.

Chapter 414: Golden Crow Descends Into Heavenly Palace

In the county capital, osmanthus cakes weren't cheap. One package with five cakes cost a whole spirit note. The reason was that the osmanthus cakes contained various spirit plants. And according to the proprietor, the osmanthus flowers used to make the cakes were imported from Tidefall Prefecture.

Xu Qing bought three packages.

As he walked back toward the subsidiary sect, he opened one of the packages to see how they tasted. It went without saying that, given the cakes were for sale here in the county capital, they were absolutely delicious. By the time he got to the subsidiary sect, he had already finished the entire package. Taking a deep breath, he walked into the subsidiary sect.

He encountered a few coalition disciples, all of whom offered respectful greetings. Even Huang Yikun had no choice but to clasp hands and bow in greeting.

As Xu Qing neared the A Wing, he started getting nervous. Every time he thought about Arch-Immortal Plumdark, he felt strange. Whether it was because of her cultivation base or her moodiness, he just didn't know how to deal with her. But he had no choice but to see her.

Taking another breath, he entered the A Wing, walked past a few courtyards, and eventually stopped at the large courtyard in front of Suite A-1. It was filled with decorative rocks, verdant plants, and numerous handmaidens. Even in the county capital, Arch-Immortal Plumdark maintained the same living standards as before.

When the handmaidens spotted Xu Qing, their eyes glittered curiously. They offered curtsying bows as Xu Qing walked past, and after he was gone, they whispered and giggled furtively amongst themselves. Neither the handmaidens nor Xu Qing noticed that, as he entered the courtyard, he was being followed by the boy. Curious, the boy stopped by the handmaidens to listen to their chatter.

As for Xu Qing, he was now right in front of Suite A-1. Looking very somber, he clasped hands and said,

“Disciple Xu Qing here to seek an audience with Arch-Immortal Plumdark.”

The door slowly opened, and Arch-Immortal Plumdark stepped out. She wore plum-colored court attire, with her long hair cascading past her shoulders. She seemed noble, refined, and elegant, like an immortal from heaven descended into the mortal world. However, there was a touch of irritation in her phoenix-like eyes, a bit of emotion that made her beautiful face even more full of expression. Because of her presence, the evening seemed a bit brighter.

She walked right up to Xu Qing and stopped in front of him. When she noticed the packages he was carrying, the irritation in her eyes transformed into pleasure. “I was wondering why you came so late to see me, child. As it turns out, you remembered what I told you before.”

“Senior, I would never dare to forget anything you said to me.” Trying very hard not to be so nervous, Xu Qing handed her the osmanthus cakes.

She took them and opened her mouth to continue speaking. Before she could say anything, Xu Qing brought out more gifts. He gave her mung bean cakes, immortal dew biscuits, pineapple tarts, sweet pea pudding, almond biscuits, nine layered cakes, and more.... Altogether, he had over fifty different kinds of desserts, and at least two of each kind.

A nearby handmaiden hurried over with trays to put the desserts onto, until they were piled up like small mountains.

Arch-Immortal Plumdark was visibly surprised, as was the handmaiden.

After handing over all the desserts, Xu Qing looked at Arch-Immortal Plumdark and said, “Senior, I wasn’t sure if you liked things other than osmanthus cakes, so I decided to just buy everything.”

Xu Qing was being very sincere. For one thing, he had always valued knowledge. Also, he knew that Arch-Immortal Plumdark was about to tell him how to use his imperial-class technique to form a heavenly palace, and was also going to stand as dharma protector for him. It was a kindness that he would engrave deep in his heart. Therefore, he had spent a bit of time buying a large collection of desserts. That was another reason why he came so late in the evening.

Arch-Immortal Plumdark could see the sincerity in Xu Qing’s eyes. A moment passed, and all the displeasure she had been feeling lately vanished. Turning to the handmaiden, she said, “Put the desserts in my room. Be careful. I want them all in perfect condition.”

“Yes, ma’am,” the handmaiden said. Looking at Xu Qing and Arch-Immortal Plumdark, she blinked a few times and then hurried away to handle the desserts. She knew that it wasn’t appropriate for her to stay.

Ignoring the handmaiden, Arch-Immortal Plumdark smiled warmly and waved her hand. The limestone tiles then transformed into a grassy field. The decorative rocks turned into mountains. The flowers became a forest. And an open-air stone pavilion appeared next to them. [1]

“Come, Xu Qing.” She stepped into the pavilion and sat down on one of the stone benches. As she did, the wind stirred her hair, and her garments tugged against her body, making her curves even more prominent. She was truly beautiful.

Xu Qing hesitated briefly, then stepped into the pavilion and sat down at a stone bench across from her. From this position, he could see her even more clearly, and also could smell her familiar perfume. It smelled wonderful.

Resting her elbow on the stone railing, she put her chin into her hand, looked at Xu Qing, and said, "Tell me how things have been going in the Corrections Division over the past month."

All of a sudden, she didn't seem refined and elegant like she had when she walked out of her room. Nor did she seem gentle and tender like when she saw the osmanthus cakes. She was acting more like a teenage girl. Meanwhile, her facial features were so beautiful that it was impossible to tell how old she was.

It wasn't the first time Xu Qing had seen her suddenly change in that way, yet this time she seemed unusually hard to resist. He had to admit... that Arch-Immortal Plumdark really was spectacularly attractive. In fact, she was so attractive that not even the tiniest scrap of negative emotion was able to rise up in him. Everything she did just seemed good.

Forcing himself to remain calm, he quietly explained everything about the Corrections Division, including his friendship with Kong Xianglong and the unreasonable palace lord. It wasn't anything very complicated.

Neither Xu Qing nor Arch-Immortal Plumdark noticed that, a short distance away from the pavilion, a young boy stood there looking curiously at them. His head was tilted slightly and he looked a bit confused. But after sizing up Arch-Immortal Plumdark, he came to the conclusion that she bore no ill will. That said, he also got the impression she was somewhat possessive, so he decided not to get any closer. Feeling a bit anxious, he sat down and looked in a different direction.

Arch-Immortal Plumdark listened to every word he said. Eventually, when the moon hung high above them, Xu Qing finished his story about his post.

"I can tell," she said, her voice soft and warm, "that you're... not quite sure what to make of the swordsages."

He looked up at her.

"It's hard for you to accept that a group like this really exists. After all, you've never encountered anything like them before. Therefore, you're suspicious. You doubt. Your instincts are telling you to run. Because you don't want to be tied down." She laughed softly. "Follow your heart. But at the same time, don't overthink things. Keep calm-headed and just observe things. Maybe when you develop a bit of admiration for the organization and the people in it, you'll eventually turn that admiration into respect. And when that happens, you'll have figured things out."

Feeling a bit shaken, Xu Qing stood, clasped hands, and bowed.

"Now, close your eyes, child."

Xu Qing hesitated briefly, then sat back down and closed his eyes.

As soon as he did, Arch-Immortal Plumdark slid closer to him.

He struggled to breathe steadily as he realized that her perfume was much stronger than before. He could almost feel her breath on his face. Just when he was about to open his eyes, she reached out and gently touched his forehead.

Her voice, seemingly full of insight and also enticement, echoed in his ears. "Calm your heart, child. Then, imagine your fifth heavenly palace, complete. Perhaps you've done so before, but I have the feeling you might not have truly seen it clearly...."

Along with her words, an image appeared in Xu Qing's mind. It was a dragon chariot! Deep in the sea, a dragon chariot was being pulled along by a giant. Seated in the chariot was a sun.

"This is how you can use your imperial-class technique to make a heavenly palace. The method to do so is different for each technique. For Golden Crow Assimilates Myriad Spirits... you need that dragon chariot."

Xu Qing's mind reeled as he suddenly understood. Within his mind, he could clearly see the dragon chariot. That said, when all was said and done, it was lacking.

And that was because Xu Qing had actually been on that dragon chariot. What was more, he had stayed on the chariot longer than was common. That was how he had acquired the full legacy of Golden Crow Assimilates Myriad Spirits. The image in his mind was still effective, though, as it neatly overlapped with the image of the dragon chariot from his memories. And because of that, his memories became clearer, and the dragon chariot became clearer.

A moment later, Xu Qing shivered. The stone bench he was sitting on turned into a rush cushion, and the open-air pavilion around him became a towering walled pagoda, surrounding him and protecting him. The grassy plain became a crowd of tiny people, their expressions somber as they stood protectively with their backs to Xu Qing, eyes scanning the surroundings vigilantly. The mountains became giants that rose high above the landscape, emanating majestic might. The trees transformed similarly. [2]

Everything transformed according to Arch-Immortal Plumdark's design, becoming the perfect safe location for Xu Qing. However, though it was highly unlikely anything unusual would happen, she still wasn't ready to rest at ease.

Therefore, she sat down cross-legged next to him to guard over him.

And thus, Xu Qing's breakthrough began.

It started with his fifth heavenly palace changing appearance, gradually coming to look like the dragon chariot. Then, the image in his mind that combined his memories with the dragon chariot that Arch-Immortal Plumdark had meticulously created... started to become useful. When the fifth heavenly palace looked even more realistic than the representational image, it began to emit an astonishing aura.

Sensing his fifth heavenly palace, Xu Qing softly said, "As the golden crow returns to the chariot, let the moonfall begin!"

The golden crow tattoo on his back flared with light, and the golden crow emerged above him. Spreading its wings, it let loose a cry of joy as it circled around a few times, then dove toward Xu Qing. It pierced into the top of his head, flying into his sea of consciousness and the dragon chariot

that was his fifth heavenly palace. Once inside, it shimmered with dazzling light and then transformed into the blurry image of a young man.

Astonishingly, that young man looked exactly like Xu Qing. He wore an emperor's robe of black gold, had an imperial crown of the same color, and seemed like the epitome of noble grandeur as he sat mightily in the dragon chariot that was the fifth heavenly palace.

Xu Qing's fifth heavenly palace then erupted with multi-colored fire which transformed into a projection of the golden crow. Rumbling sounds rolled out in all directions as the power of Golden Crow Assimilates Myriad Spirits erupted. Now, instead of nineteen tails, the crow had a total of twenty-two.

Looking at those tails, Xu Qing was suddenly struck with understanding. Once he passed a hundred, Golden Crow Assimilates Myriad Spirits would reach the third stage!

Xu Qing's eyes snapped open and everything around him vanished. The pagoda, the people, the giants, everything went away.

He was in the courtyard outside Suite A-1, seated cross-legged on the ground. Just ahead of him, standing at the door of the suite, was Arch-Immortal Plumdark.

Turning, she smiled and said, "It's daytime already. Don't you have to go to work?"

The dome of heaven was indeed starting to turn bright. An entire night had passed.

Eyes filling with gratitude, Xu Qing scrambled to his feet, clasped hands, and bowed deeply. "Many thanks—"

"Don't call me Senior," she said softly. "Use my name."

Xu Qing hesitated. "Many thanks, Plumdark."

"That does sound strange, doesn't it?" she murmured, shaking her head. "Alright, let me teach you how to do it. Repeat after me. 'Thank you, Plumdark.' Keep your voice soft." She looked at him in anticipation.

After a moment of silence, Xu Qing softly said, "Thank you, Plumdark."

Her eyes lit up and she smiled radiantly. Nodding, she said, "You're welcome, Xu Qing."

All of a sudden, the atmosphere outside of Suite A-1 seemed different from before.

A moment passed, then Xu Qing took a deep breath and bowed again. "I'll take my leave now."

With that he turned to leave. Just when he was about to walk out of the courtyard, Arch-Immortal Plumdark spoke in a languid, enticing voice.

"I want you to come with me to visit my best friends here in the county capital. That's the second thing you promised me." Her voice was delicate but enchanting, soft but enticing. It was like the cry of a hawk or phoenix, but at the same time was incomparably sweet and gentle. Its mysterious power could seep into the heart and turn it warm.

1. The “pavilion” here could also be translated as “pagoda.” The one described here probably looks something like this. 📖
2. The “pagoda” here would probably look something like this. 📖

Chapter 415: Think Better of Him, Yao Yunhui

As the sun rose over the horizon, light spilled out, covering the lands and driving away the darkness. The streets of the county capital were already bustling.

As Xu Qing walked along, he could sense his fifth heavenly palace within him. The totem tattoo of his imperial-class technique was still there on his back, and his battle prowess had not dropped because of putting Golden Crow Assimilates Myriad Spirits into his fifth heavenly palace. His imperial-class technique still provided the battle prowess of a single heavenly palace. However, it was now more threatening. And the same could be said of his fifth heavenly palace.

In fact, if he ran into someone else with five heavenly palaces, then as long as techniques and magical treasures weren't a factor, then fundamentally speaking, he would stand on the same level as the most elite members of the countless species that existed. And when you looked at people who weren't the elites, then on a foundational level, his five heavenly palaces would be considered above and beyond.

After all, every single one of his heavenly palaces was astonishing and unique. Though they might not be considered literally unrivaled, they were close. Two of his heavenly palaces were made from life lamps. One was from a taboo poison pill. One was the violet moon. And now he had a golden crow dragon chariot palace.

Those were the reserve powers Xu Qing had built as he walked his path. All of them came as a result of him putting everything on the line. Most people wouldn't get strong overnight. They had to take their time and build up that strength. It was the same with Xu Qing. That was why he could fight people with more palaces than him.

Xu Qing was in a very good mood. As he walked along, the smell of fried dough sticks coming from the breakfast vendors made him think about Seven Blood Eyes. [1]

“I wonder when I'll be able to go back,” he murmured, looking in the direction of Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. He missed Master Seventh and Sir Bloodsmelter, as well as the breakfast vendors he'd visited in both Seven Blood Eyes and the Eight Sect Coalition.

Picking a vendor, he sat down and ordered breakfast. Although the flavor wasn't exactly the same as back at home, it was still good.

As Xu Qing ate, the boy squatted impatiently off in the distance, watching him. He seemed bored, to the point where he kept looking around at the crowds bustling down the streets. Eventually, something caught his attention on the second floor of a nearby building. In the window there, a figure had appeared briefly in the window, and seemed to be looking venomously in Xu Qing's direction. Curious, the boy vanished.

When he reappeared in that building, he saw a pretty woman cursing a young man.

“Pathetic! That Xu Qing is not only a secretary-general, but also, he’s a jailer in the Corrections Division! Meanwhile, you got a mere civilian post as a clerk? And you just accepted that?? Where’s your sense of pride? Aren’t you the top person in your generation in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture? Why didn’t you go ask help from your Sect Grandfather?”

Of course, the person being berated was Zhang Siyun, while the person doing the berating was his mother, Yao Yunhui. Because of the sensitive nature of her position in the Justice Palace, she couldn’t communicate such words via a jade slip. Therefore, she had arranged for Zhang Siyun’s Sect Grandfather to come for a visit. Unfortunately, on the way she received a message from her clan, within which were the details of the palace lord’s warning. In turn, the clan had strictly warned her not to provoke the Swordsage Palace.

Yao Yunhui was not pleased about that. And then she happened to spot Xu Qing on the street, and her feelings of revulsion flared. Because of that, just looking at her son made her angry.

Zhang Siyun kept his head bowed. Inside, he absolutely hated Xu Qing. Every time his mother compared him to Xu Qing, the perverse energy in his heart grew stronger and stronger. The truth was that he had gone to see his Sect Grandfather, only to have been met with a strange look. That said, considering how angry his mother was, he didn’t offer any explanation. He just silently endured her cursing. Besides, he didn’t think that his job as a clerk was useless. At the very least, during the month he had been working at that post, he had found a number of clerical errors that had earned him the praise of his superiors. Of course, he couldn’t mention that to his mother.

Actually, I was a lot better off in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture.

She went on cursing for a while until her transmission jade slip vibrated. Taking it out, she checked the latest message, whereupon her expression turned very dark. A crack rang out as she snapped the jade slip in half.

“He’s busy with official work? I arranged this meeting days ago, and he’s only now backing out? I bet this is because of that dharmic decree issued by the palace lord! Nobody from the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society has any backbone. They’re all imbeciles!”

Yao Yunhui only seemed to be getting angrier and angrier.

Sighing inwardly, Zhang Siyun said, “Mother—”

“Get the hell out of my sight!” Yao Yunhui said coldly.

Zhang Siyun didn’t say anything. He stood, bowed to his mother, and left. His expression seemed lonelier than usual, and his hatred for Xu Qing burned hotter than ever. After walking down the street some distance, a tremor suddenly passed through him, and his vision spun. He reached out and put his hand on the wall to steady himself. The image of a red moon flickered in his eyes, and a vicious expression filled his face. It only lasted a minute, and then he was back to normal.

Is something wrong with the technique? This is the seventh time I’ve gotten dizzy like that.

Expression unsightly, Zhang Siyun went on his way.

Back in the building, the boy hadn't paid any attention at all to Zhang Siyun. He was now standing next to Yao Yunhui, a curious expression on his face as he tried to determine if this woman had malicious intentions regarding Xu Qing.

As Yao Yunhui sat there, the anger slowly left her face. Eventually, she took a sip of the lotus seed soup that was sitting on her desk. Her movements were refined. She seemed like a completely different person than the one who had just angrily cursed Zhang Siyun.

Yun'er, I'm being hard on you to bring out your determination and backbone. I want you to succeed. Years ago, your father never had enough courage, and he never realized that my intentions were good.

A cold light appeared in her eyes.

Xu Qing, you stole my Yun'er's good fortune, and ruined his prospects for the future. I'm not going to just let that go. I can't do anything to you in the county capital. But once you're outside, I'll figure out a way to make you pay for your crimes. I won't kill you. I'll just make sure Yun'er can bear witness to your final fate, and maybe gain some confidence as a result.

The boy could sense what Yao Yunhui was thinking. He suddenly looked worried. He had promised that girl that he would protect Xu Qing. However, he couldn't kill anyone. After some thought, he faced Yao Yunhui and exhaled gently. His breath landed right on her face.

Yao Yunhui's spoon stopped moving through the bowl of soup. For some reason, she found herself thinking differently than before. It was as if, all of a sudden, she wanted to focus on the positive aspects of other people.

"That Xu Qing isn't so bad," she murmured. After the words left her mouth, her eyes widened. Looking around suspiciously, she rose from her chair.

Something's off! She quickly performed an incantation gesture to scan the area, but didn't find anything out of the ordinary.

The boy, looking a bit annoyed that his idea hadn't worked very well, again exhaled.

Yao Yunhui shivered, and then a thoughtful expression appeared in her eyes.

"Xu Qing isn't that out of line." Yao Yunhui's eyes went wide at the downright outrageous nature of her words. Without any hesitation, she performed another incantation gesture, causing defenses to spring up around her. At the same time, she scanned her mind and soul. Everything seemed normal. Even still, she immediately left the building, appearing a moment later in an alley outside. As she walked along, she thought back to what just happened.

Although Xu Qing isn't completely loathsome, I still need to punish him a bit.

The moment the thought occurred to her, the boy, who had been following her, looked angry. This time, he exhaled nine times in a row.

Yao Yunhui shook from head to toe and started breathing heavily as the revulsion for Xu Qing inside of her faded, to be replaced by a good feeling.

A moment passed.

Xu Qing is mostly innocent in all of this. And Yun'er has done some things that aren't exactly appropriate....

Looking pleased, the boy brushed his hands off and walked away with a skip in his step.

By now, Xu Qing had finished his breakfast and was back in the Corrections Division. Just like always, he walked down the stairs to Level 57 and entered D-132. It was pitch-black inside, but the moment he entered, it got a bit brighter. Other than that, there was no change compared to before. The cloud troll still had its back to him. The human woman was still coaxing the scarecrows to sleep. And the Rockdevil rotated. As for the head, it looked helplessly at him and repeated the same things it always said.

“Don't stomp on me. I don't like being stomped....”

Xu Qing walked the path around the cells, examining all the inmates. After passing thirteen of them, he reached Sir Inkwell.

Sir Inkwell respectfully clasped hands in greeting. “Good morning, exalted Jailer.”

Xu Qing's face was completely expressionless. After looking around coldly, he went back to sit by the door. The shadow and the patriarch emerged to have their daily dose of fun.

The boy appeared as well, sitting off to the side so Xu Qing could see him. There was some helplessness in his eyes, as he knew it would only be a short time before Xu Qing woke up.

He was right. After Xu Qing meditated for a while, he looked around suspiciously.

It seems I've forgotten some things. Why do things seem unusually peaceful...? Why do I get the feeling this place should be red? What did the palace lord tell me? Why does the boy seem so helpless? And why is the head always telling me not to stomp it? Why is my memory so bad all of a sudden? Is it because I'm stationed here...? Don't tell me something's secretly influencing me?

He opened his bag of holding and rummaged around. Everything seemed normal. Frowning, he looked at the cell block, his expression turning more and more unsightly. He suddenly had the very strong sensation that there was a veil blocking his sight. Eyes turning cold, he unleashed the power of his taboo poison core, and his violet moon heavenly palace. His aura changed, and every part of him grew stronger.

Meanwhile, the head started howling. “He's waking up again! He's waking up! Please, please don't stomp on me! Can't you do things differently for once?”

Sir Inkwell sighed, closed his eyes, and waited to be burned to death again.

Expression grim, Xu Qing stood up and walked forward.

A moment later, everything was quiet. Other than the finger of the god, Xu Qing had destroyed everything. Looking at the finger, he could sense terrifying fluctuations that made it clear he couldn't do anything to it. They were so far apart from each other, that he knew even touching it would kill him.

A moment passed and he took out a bamboo slip. After recording details of everything, he walked to the door, where he stood for a long moment. Without turning around, he calmly asked, "I wake up every day, don't I? Every single day I come in here and figure out that there aren't fourteen inmates, but six. And five of the inmates are undying, no matter how many times I 'kill' them."

The boy appeared and nodded.

"Previously, I recorded reminders for myself, and took other measures to help me remember. But whenever I leave, the power of that god wipes those things out of existence. And any object I use to record information ultimately vanishes."

The boy nodded.

"Once I open this door, I'll forget everything, right? The palace lords knows about all this, right? This is both good fortune and a test, right?"

The boy just continued nodding.

It was obvious to Xu Qing that Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior and the shadow were also having their memories tampered with.

A moment later, he smiled. "In that case, let's keep going. I just hope that one day when I open the door, I won't forget everything. And that's when I'll get true good fortune."

The boy nodded helplessly.

"I bet I've said this same thing over and over again, haven't I?"

Xu Qing smiled again as he looked down at the information he'd recorded on the bamboo slip. At that point, his eyes glittered.

There might be another way. I could sow karma here, and wait for it to develop....

After some more thought, he crushed the bamboo slip and tossed it onto the ground.

"Could I ask you for a favor?" he said. "Keep this broken bamboo slip for me. Put the pieces with the others. I probably carved up a lot of them."

Nodding, the boy held up some of his fingers as if to tell Xu Qing how many bamboo slips he had.

Xu Qing smiled, took a deep breath, then pushed the door open and walked out. Out on the stairs, he started walking up, all the while thinking about military credit.

There are fourteen inmates in D-132. Always the same. I really need to start thinking of a way to get some military credits.

A few days passed.

Xu Qing's routine changed. He spent days on guard duty at D-132, while at nighttime, he would go on various missions to earn military credits. He would capture criminals, go on search-and-rescue missions, or help other departments. There was always something to do.

The third day after Kong Xianglong was released, Xu Qing got a message from him when he was getting off of his shift.

“Xu Qing, I got a big job that’ll pay lots of military credits. You in?”

1. Fried dough sticks (youtiao) are a quintessential breakfast item in China. Although the story never mentioned them specifically on previous occasions when Xu Qing got street food, it makes sense that he would have eaten them. They even offer these things at McDonald’s in China. They’re sort of like doughnuts, except not sweet, and they’re usually eaten along with congee or something else to dip them into. Here’s a tiny gallery of images that includes a street vendor making them, plus the McDonald’s version. 📖

Chapter 416: The Black Guard!

Xu Qing agreed to join.

The job that Kong Xianglong mentioned was actually a secret mission assigned to him by the Field Operations Office. Normally speaking, people from other departments wouldn’t be allowed to go on such secret missions. However, Kong Xianglong knew that Xu Qing needed military credits, as did his other friends. Therefore, after a lot of coaxing and pestering his superiors, he received approval to allow swordsages from other departments to help. The main reason was that he agreed to act as their guarantor.

The participants included other Field Operations Office swordsages, plus Xu Qing, Sir Mountain-River, Wang Chen, and Duskspirit.

As for the task at hand...

“It’s an extraction mission.”

It was in the middle of the night when the team met in the Field Operations Office headquarters. There were a total of seventeen swordsages present. Kong Xianglong stood in front of them, looking very serious.

“We’ll get moving first. Along the way, I’ll explain how the mission is going to work. As per standard operating procedure, all transmission jade slips need to be sealed. During the entire duration of the mission, you cannot contact anyone for any reason. The only person who can do so is the mission leader, who is me.”

With that, he waved his hand, and someone from the Field Operations Office stepped forward, clasped hands officially, then started sealing all the jade slips. It was a simple seal involving a warding spell. The Field Operations swordsage performed an incantation gesture, and the sealing marks flew out into the crowd.

Xu Qing looked around and noted that everyone seemed fine with having their jade slips sealed. At the same time, he knew it was one of the mission requirements. After the sealing was done, he checked his transmission jade slip and confirmed that it wouldn’t work. The warding spell only had that one single function, and wouldn’t do anything else.

Before coming, he had sent a message to Arch-Immortal Plumdark letting her know he was going on a mission. He had also requested time off from the Corrections Division.

After the sealing marks were all in place, Kong Xianglong waved his hand again, and the group went to the Swordsage Palace’s teleportation complex.

Before long, glittering light covered the seventeen of them, and they vanished.

When they reappeared, they were a great distance away from the county capital, near the border of Heavencloud Prefecture.

Lowering his voice, Kong Xianglong said, "In three days, we'll reach another teleportation portal. We'll travel covertly, so change out of your swordmage uniforms."

Xu Qing could already tell that this was an unusual mission. It made sense considering how many military credits were being given. It was definitely going to be dangerous. He quickly changed out of his swordmage uniform.

No one spoke as they moved along through the night at top speed, with Kong Xianglong leading the way.

"Now I'll explain the mission in detail. We're tasked with extracting one of our agents who has been on a deep cover assignment in the Holytides for years. Their assignment is now complete, and our job is to go to meet them at the border and escort them safely back to the Swordsage Palace. They have an important intelligence report to deliver.

"You probably have some questions. Was the spy's cover blown? Was the information uncovered by the spy somehow urgent? Why can't the spy just sneak out? I suggest you not dwell on such questions, as they aren't within the realm of what we need to know."

From the way Kong Xianglong eyed Xu Qing, Sir Mountain-River, Wang Chen, and Duskspirit, it was obvious that the last statement was meant for them, the non-Field Operations Office swordmages.

Xu Qing nodded. Given how long he had worked in the Violent Crimes Division, he knew how operations like this worked. Sir Mountain-River and the others also indicated that they understood.

Lowering his voice, Kong Xianglong gave some further details to Xu Qing, Sir Mountain-River, and the others.

"All of you can rest assured that, considering this agent was willing to participate in a deep cover operation in Holytide territory, there's absolutely no question about their loyalty. There is no chance they could betray the Swordsage Palace. Furthermore, based on my personal analysis, I believe that this agent probably has multiple exit strategies planned. In all likelihood, the person we're going to meet is a decoy, and not the real agent.

"There are almost certainly other teams involved in this mission, all heading to different extraction points. Our superiors have probably assigned extremely powerful experts to go along on the mission. In fact, maybe one of them is on our team."

"Big Bro Kong," said Sir Mountain-River, "you really don't need to go into such extreme detail."

His eyes flickered in Xu Qing's direction. Duskspirit frowned as she also looked at Xu Qing. The truth was that all of them were a bit hesitant about having Xu Qing along. It wasn't that they disliked him. They just weren't used to him. Their group had worked together for a long time, and had never asked anyone to join them. Xu Qing was the first 'outsider' to work with them in many years. Wang Chen was the only one who didn't look like he cared. He just yawned as he flew along on his coffin.

Xu Qing's expression was the same as ever, and he didn't say anything.

Kong Xianglong smiled. "Since this is Xu Qing's first time coming on a mission with us, I just want to make sure we don't have any misunderstandings. So I'm explaining everything upfront."

Duskspirit and Sir Mountain-River said nothing further.

The other Field Operations swordsages pretended not to have heard any of that. They were already familiar with Sir Mountain-River and the others, as Kong Xianglong had already brought them on missions before.

As the group sped through the night, time slipped by slowly but surely.

Xu Qing felt like he wasn't moving very fast, yet also wasn't moving slow. While they traveled, he reviewed the mission details, and also thought back to the lieutenant governor's history lecture.

The Holytide people were a species that formed when Grand Duke Holytide rebelled against humankind. Considering they were outright rebels, it was no wonder that their relationship with humans was like that between fire and water. They were mortal enemies.

The Holytides were very close with the Nightshades. In fact, they had intermingled with the Nightshades so deeply over the generations that the red blood which ran through the Holytide's veins was streaked with black. [1]

Over the years in which Holytides and humans had clashed, the Holytides had become even more ferocious than the Nightshades. It was as if the more viciously they treated humans, the more they could prove their own worth.

Of course, Sea-Sealing County was the only county in the Holytide region that wasn't under the control of the Holytides, so they had long eyed it like tigers eying prey. If it wasn't for the fact that they feared the human imperial capital, they would have long since swallowed up Sea-Sealing County.

That said, humankind in general, and specifically Sea-Sealing County, knew that it was only a matter of time before war broke out. Right now, the balance of power seemed very precarious, and could be broken very easily. The truth was that the situation wasn't just like that in Sea-Sealing County. In his training, Xu Qing had learned that the other six county capitals were in similar circumstances. In fact, all of the other counties had lost prefectures to other forces.

"Tossed about by wind and rain. A great mansion teetering on the verge of collapse." Those were the idioms the lieutenant governor had used to describe the situation.

Xu Qing was wrapped up in such thoughts for their three days of travel. At one point, Kong Xianglong asked Xu Qing what code name he would like to use on the mission. Normally speaking, they didn't use real names when out on missions.

“Call me the Kid,” Xu Qing said softly. He planned to use that code name both on this mission and in general, going forward.

“Nice. On this mission, you can all call me Dragon Bro! Hahaha!” [2]

Soon they reached the second teleportation portal. After teleporting to another location, they traveled for a few more days before reaching Tidefall Prefecture, which was on the border between Sea-Sealing County and Holytide territory.

“We have one more teleportation,” Kong Xianglong said. “Then we’ll be right on the border.”

Everyone was more on guard than ever. After all, though they were still in Sea-Sealing County, they were also very close to where the Holytides operated. Though there was a peace treaty between the two species, ensuring that anyone in the Nascent Soul level or higher who unlawfully crossed the border would be instantly killed by taboo treasures... it was still important to be ready at all times. After all, high-level Gold Core cultivators with dangerous weapons could be very deadly.

It was currently late at night, and dark clouds covered the moon. The only illumination came from occasional bolts of lightning that snapped through the clouds. It was raining. Seventeen shadowy figures sped through the rain toward the teleportation portal. As the rain fell harder and harder, they eventually spotted a simple stone fort up ahead. Xu Qing’s eyes glittered coldly as he detected the odor of blood.

At around the same time, Sir Mountain-River, Wang Chen, and Duskspirit all noticed the same thing.

Kong Xianglong’s eyes narrowed, and he raised his right hand in a signal. Everyone dropped to the ground and crouched, looking very serious.

“They don’t have the secret signal up,” Kong Xianglong said. “Something’s gone wrong. Kid, Demongirl, Sunspirit, Riverbed. Each of you take three people. I’ll go alone. We’ll split up and approach from five directions. If you see any nonhumans, kill them on sight! If you run into anyone with more heavenly palaces than you, wait for me.” [3]

With that, he sped off toward the fort. Sir Mountain-River and the others quickly picked the swordsages they wanted on their teams. The remaining three looked at Xu Qing.

“Don’t get too close to me, Fellow Daoists,” Xu Qing said, taking out three bottles of antidote pills and passing them out. After what happened in the classroom during his initial training, Xu Qing had decided to carry around a small stockpile of antidote pills that would be effective against his ordinary poisons. Of course, his poison mixtures were so dangerous that if they were inhaled directly, not even the antidote would help very much. Therefore, keeping a good distance away from him was the safest thing.

After giving the three swordsages antidote pills, Xu Qing started moving. The three swordsages exchanged glances, then followed.

Before long, seventeen swordsages were approaching the fort from five different directions.

Xu Qing didn't pause or slow down. He charged forth, his taboo poison core pulsing. Though he didn't send that poison outside of him, he kept it ready for defensive purposes. And he did scatter poison powder around him.

When he reached the fort, he could already detect the sound of magical techniques nearby. Then, as he stepped inside the fort, he heard a cold snort as a shadowy figure rushed toward him in an ambush.

It was a middle-aged man in a black robe embroidered with ginkgo leaves. He didn't look very different from a human, except that he had a black mark on his forehead. He pulsed with the power of five heavenly palaces, and yet, before he could even get close to Xu Qing, his face fell and his eyes went wide with astonishment. Then he coughed up a mouthful of black blood.

"What poison is this?"

It wasn't that he was surprised by the use of poison. Rather, he was surprised at how strong the poison was. After inhaling it only once, his organs were on fire and his vision was dimming. A moment later, he couldn't even move. Meanwhile, Xu Qing sped forward. In his hand appeared the dagger the Captain had given him as a gift, with the shroud wrapped around it to form a hilt. With that weapon in hand, Xu Qing sped past the middle-aged cultivator. The dagger removed the cultivator's head, causing it to fly off his shoulders! [4]

Xu Qing's expression was the same as ever as he crouched down and sped deeper into the fort. He had instantly turned from prey into predator. Sticking to the shadows, he picked up speed, keeping his dagger at the ready.

A cultivator leaped out, but before anything could happen, Xu Qing removed his head.

Not sparing the enemy a single glance, he blurred into motion, vanishing.

Another Holytide cultivator lurked in the shadows, keeping an eye out for someone to ambush. Suddenly, his expression flickered, but he was already too late to react. Xu Qing appeared behind him, his dagger flashing. The weapon slashed right through the cultivator's neck.

Next, Xu Qing frowned as a whistling sound rose up from behind him. But then red lightning flashed, and numerous eyes opened up within his shadow. A moment later, the cultivator that had been ambushing him from behind fell, an iron skewer stabbed into his forehead.

Rumbling booms filled the fort, accompanied by the sounds of slaughter.

Meanwhile, Kong Xianglong howled furiously in the air above the castle as he fought four eight-palace Holytide cultivators. The fact that these Holytides had eight-palace battle prowess showed how incredible they were. In fact, all of them had imperial-class techniques. That said, all of them had the exact same imperial-class technique. It manifested as the pitch-black hand of a devilish monster. Combined, the four hands released stupefying might, and formed something like a spell formation. In addition, all four of the cultivators had fragments of magical treasures. They weren't actually trying to kill Kong Xianglong, as that was too difficult of a task. Instead, they were trying to trap him. At the same time, lightning was gathering up above. That was what they hoped would kill Kong Xianglong.

Seeing all that, Xu Qing's eyes turned even colder. However, instead of rushing to help, he turned to look into the nearby shadows.

A figure slowly walked into the open from that spot. "Interesting. You human swordsages are a bit different from the type we from the Black Guard usually face."

The Holytides had a department similar to the Swordsage Palace. It was called the Black Guard. [5]

Meanwhile, the three swordsages from the Field Operations Office approached from behind Xu Qing. Having sensed how much poison Xu Qing had used along the way, they had been constantly consuming antidote pills.

Xu Qing had tried to retract as much poison as possible after killing each enemy, otherwise not even the antidote pills would have done much.

The three swordsages had seen all the headless Holytide corpses along the way, and could tell that each one had five-palace battle prowess. All of them were deeply shaken at how strong Xu Qing was. They had heard that the latest group of new swordsages was a bit different, and that there were several freakish hellions among them. Xu Qing was one of them, but up to this point, none of them had seen him in action. Now, Xu Qing's terrifying nature had already struck them to the core. That said, all three of these people were extraordinary individuals, all of whom had been on many dangerous missions on their own.

"Three more, huh?" said the Holytide cultivator. He wore a black daoist robe embroidered with golden flames. In the dead of night, those flames seemed to burn like holy fire, and they pulsed with extraordinary fluctuations. Behind him, was a huge pitch-black hand from his imperial-class technique. Combined with his six heavenly palaces, he emanated nothing short of seven-palace battle prowess.

1. In Chinese, 'Nightshade' has the character 'black' in it. 📖

2. Remember, the "long" in Kong Xianglong's name means "dragon." 📖

3. Code names. Demongirl: Although we don't know Duskspirit's real name, we do know she's from the Supreme Void Demonization Sect, and that she can demonize herself into a demon. Sunspirit: As explained in the footnote of chapter 397, Wang Chen's given name Chen means "morning, dawn, daybreak." So his code name is based on the "sun" element to his name. 📖

4. The Captain gave him the dagger in chapter 338. He used the shroud to make a hilt for it in 347. 📖

5. The name of the Black Guard also contains the word for "clothing," implying that they wear black garments. This is not an unusual naming convention in Chinese culture. If you've seen the 2014 wuxia film Brotherhood of Blades (which is amazing, by the way), the lead characters are members of the historical Embroidered Uniform Guard, which was an elite group of imperial secret police. In the movie subtitles, I'm pretty sure they translated that department as "imperial assassins." Anyway, the point is that, historically speaking, it's not strange for government agencies to be named after the type of uniform/clothing they wear. That said, translators often opt for something that flows a bit better in English, and in this case, that's what I'm doing. 📖

Chapter 417: A Show of Force From a Generation's Strongest

Noticing the three swordsages approaching from behind, Xu Qing decided he should finish this fight quickly.

The three swordsages following him all had five heavenly palaces, and of course had their various techniques and abilities. However, this Holytide Black Guard cultivator had seven-palace battle prowess, and as such, they weren't a match for him. They took note of the Black Guard cultivator emerging from the shadows, and their expressions turned very serious. Because of the honor and code of the swordsages, they didn't turn tail and run. In fact, they closed in, their cultivation bases at the ready.

"Kid, let's work together to hold this guy up for a bit."

"You can't," said the Holytide Black Guard cultivator, his expression one of disdain and brutality. Then, just as he was about to launch an attack, Xu Qing's eyes gleamed with ferocity.

"The shadow bans, the ghost commands; the immortal declines, the world is mine."

Xu Qing had tasked Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior with creating that code phrase so that he could use Shadow Fusion Secret Magic without his enemies realizing the truth about what he was doing. [1]

As the words left his mouth, he exercised a thought, and his shadow sprang from the dagger in his hand, formed a coffin, and then closed around Xu Qing. Instantly, Xu Qing became covered in shadow and began to pulse with mutagen. Although it was the middle of the night, there was faint illumination from the lightning above, and that made it possible to see the air around Xu Qing distorting.

A sense of terror rose up in the hearts of everyone present, as if their very life level was being shaken.

However, because of the code phrase Xu Qing had used, everyone assumed that it was just some unusual technique. That belief was further reinforced because of the mutagen, which all cultivators were leery of.

As the three swordsages' hearts pounded with fear, Xu Qing looked up, and explosive fleshly body power erupted from within him. The Shadow Fusion Secret Magic required sacrificing magical techniques and cultivation base power in exchange for an apex level of fleshly body might.

Even when Xu Qing only had four heavenly palaces, he could use that secret magic to unleash six-palace fleshly body power. But now that he had five heavenly palaces, he could use it to reach seven-palace fleshly body battle prowess. That level of fleshly body battle prowess was actually superior to magical techniques of the same level, and could be astonishingly deadly. As soon as he unleashed the secret magic, his aura skyrocketed, causing a wild wind to kick up in the area. Invisible shockwaves rolled out, causing the three shocked swordsages from the Field Operations Office to back away, their faces filled with astonishment.

Even the Holytide cultivator looked surprised.

Before anything else could happen, Xu Qing took action. He struck like lightning, moving so fast it was hard to track his movement. Intense rumbling echoed out as Xu Qing appeared right in front of

the seven-palace Black Guard cultivator, where he launched a fist strike. His first blow contained the convergence of all his fleshly body power.

The Holytide cultivator's pupils constricted. The change to this human cultivator was beyond dramatic, especially considering the overflowing mutagen. Heart sinking, the Holytide cultivator activated his external defenses and pulled out a magical device to fight back.

In the blink of an eye, the two of them clashed. Shocking rumbling echoed out as a tremor passed through the Holytide cultivator. Feeling like his internal organs were shaking violently, he staggered backward.

Xu Qing didn't stop. Striding forward, he unleashed more fist strikes.

Two blows. Three.

Not daring to be careless, the Holytide cultivator performed another incantation gesture. Instantly, the monstrous black hand behind him thrust forward, pulsing with terrifying fluctuations as it met Xu Qing's attack.

Xu Qing didn't shirk away, he just kept going with full force.

Four fist strikes. Five. Six.

Booms rang out as the Holytide cultivator staggered backward repeatedly, his face turning ashen. His external defenses were crumbling, and the huge black hand simply couldn't do anything about Xu Qing's onslaught.

Xu Qing accelerated, launching a seventh fist strike. Then an eighth. And finally, he unleashed a ninth fist strike.

A huge cracking sound rang out. Blood sprayed out of the mouth of the Holytide cultivator as one of his dharma apertures exploded, and one of his heavenly palaces collapsed. As he tumbled backward, his face was a mask of terror.

"What technique is that?" he shrieked.

It was none other than Within the Nine Springs. Although it seemed like a magical technique, the reality was that it relied on fleshly body secrets! In Foundation Establishment, it could destroy dharma apertures. In Gold Core it could destroy heavenly palaces!

When his heavenly palace collapsed, the Holytide cultivator finally started to realize how terrifying Xu Qing was. As an intense sensation of deadly crisis swept through him, he decided to flee. His mission had been to prevent any swordsages from passing this point, or at the very least, to delay them. But no mission was more important than life itself.

He was now fleeing, except... he made that decision too late. Even as he backed away, a group of countless beetles that had filled his body without him even being aware... exploded into action, devouring him from the inside out. His face fell, and he screamed. Black blood sprayed out of his mouth, and his face turned greenish-black. Terror overwhelmed him.

Meanwhile, Xu Qing approached like a soldier from hell. He didn't hold back from inflicting mortal blows in the hopes of taking his opponent's gold core. That wasn't his style. Without a moment of hesitation, he thrust his dagger right toward the Holytide cultivator's chest.

However, Holytide Black Guard cultivators were extraordinary. He managed to throw himself backward while simultaneously performing a double-handed incantation gesture and produced a magical treasure fragment, which created a defensive barrier around him like a turtle's shell. At the same time, the black mark on his forehead erupted with black threads that shot toward Xu Qing like needles.

Xu Qing's opponent evaded too quickly. As a result, Xu Qing lost his momentum and couldn't attack with his dagger again. However, he reacted quickly to the counterattack, flipping forward and then launching himself up with his hands to kick toward the Black Guard cultivator's chest.

The turtle shell defense glittered brightly and held strong, bending under the force, and even cracking a bit, but not breaking. However, because of the force behind Xu Qing's kick, the Black Guard cultivator was launched into the air, and the black threads coming from his forehead were thrown into chaos.

Xu Qing took advantage of the moment to leap up, closing the distance between them and once again stabbed with his dagger, this time toward the weakened part of the turtle shell defenses. Coupled with the shroud's ability to bypass defenses, the dagger pierced right through.

The Black Guard cultivator screamed shrilly, wishing he could escape, but being incapable of doing so. Xu Qing's dagger stabbed upward. It hit the Holytide cultivator right into his abdomen, then up past his neck to his jaw, and finally, out through his forehead! Blood erupted as the seven-palace cultivator was slashed in two!

All of the attacks, and the ruthless speed Xu Qing was capable of, made it clear what his fighting style was like.

Xu Qing looked at the corpse and his expression flickered. There was an aura inside the Holytide's corpse that seemed familiar. It was something that caused the violet moon in his fifth heavenly palace to shiver.

The aura of that red moon?

A curious expression appeared in his eyes momentarily, but he quickly dispelled it. Now wasn't the time to be thinking about such things. Taking the Black Guard cultivator's bag of holding and the turtle shell fragment, he checked the corpse's fading heavenly palaces.

Because I was using the Shadow Fusion Secret Magic, I couldn't use the Gruegloom Daoseizing Art. After a cultivator dies, their sea of consciousness collapses, their heavenly palaces crumble, their gold cores fade into nothing. None of them can be used.

Xu Qing felt a bit disappointed. If there hadn't been anyone else present, and he wasn't on a mission, then he could have used his taboo poison as well as other methods to drag the fight out a bit longer and create an opportunity to rip out those gold cores.

Except, he had three other swordsages to think about. If he had wasted time trying to get those gold cores, it was entirely possible other Black guard cultivators would have arrived to provide backup. Not only would the swordsages have been in danger, but Xu Qing himself might have been in trouble. All things considered, it made more sense to end the fight quickly. There would always be other chances to get more gold cores.

The shadow on Xu Qing converged onto his forehead, becoming an eye. Then he glanced at the shaken swordsages, nodded, and disappeared into the darkness.

The three swordsages looked at the dead Holytide cultivator, then the direction in which Xu Qing had disappeared. Finally, they exchanged glances. They were all top chosen from their respective prefectures. However, after coming to the county capital, they had discovered that there are always people more important than you, and there is always a heaven beyond heaven. There were definitely people stronger and better equipped than they were.

Whether it was Kong Xianglong, Sir Mountain-River, Duskspirit, or Wang Chen, and now this Xu Qing, these three were left sighing inwardly.

“Everybody’s been talking about how this new group of swordsages is different from anything before. They say they’re a bunch of freakish hellions, and that’s no exaggeration!”

That said, these realizations didn’t make them lose confidence. Instead, their eyes gleamed with fierce light as they pressed on. That said, instead of following Xu Qing, they went in a different direction.

Meanwhile, Xu Qing had raced to the middle of the fort. The fighting there was equally intense.

The Holytide Black Guards had set up a sizable ambush, and right now Riverbed, who was of course Sir Mountain-River, had unleashed an astonishing wave of blood energy, along with a frigid aura. The results were deadly. The more he slaughtered, the more the will of blood intensified, and the higher his battle prowess. This was a secret magic from the Blood Chill Society that involved cultivating killing energy. As long as that energy wasn’t released, the more one killed, the stronger it got.

Sir Mountain-River laughed maniacally as he fought, making him very different from his usual gloomy self.

Demongirl was Duskspirit, and she was also extraordinary. Being from the Supreme Void Demonization Sect, she had transformed into a nine-meter-tall, green-skinned demon surrounded by a green-colored mist. Her body was actually partially transparent, allowing her to pass through just about any physical matter. Her fighting style was brutal, as she would take the hearts and heads of enemies. The special technique she employed allowed her to ignore physical attacks and attack with extreme brutality. She would occasionally swallow enemies whole. Any opponent who fought her would end up covered with melon seeds made of flesh.

Sunspirit was the code name for Wang Chen, and he was just as fierce. He never came out of his coffin, but instead controlled a Smokewight doppelgänger. Smokewights were natural-born assassins, as they could merge with any type of energy, allowing them to appear and disappear unpredictably. Occasionally, Wang Chen’s Smokewight doppelgänger would disappear, materialize inside an enemy’s body, then rip them apart from within. After shedding the resulting blood, the doppelgänger would then proceed to its next victim. In addition to that, occasional bolts of lightning would fall from above. Because Wang Chen was from the Supreme Ancient Lightning Order, lightning made him about thirty percent stronger than normal.

When Xu Qing saw the three of them fighting, he could immediately sense how strong they were.

Around the same time, the three of them noticed Xu Qing arriving. When they saw the gruish eye on his forehead, and the fact that he emanated fleshly body fluctuations of the seven-palace level, they were all astonished.

What shocked Xu Qing most of all was Kong Xianglong, fighting high up above.

Despite being surrounded by four Holytide Black Guard cultivators with eight-palace battle prowess, plus imperial-class techniques and magical treasure fragments, Kong Xianglong didn't seem to be in a bad position at all. In fact, when he saw his companions unleashing all sorts of deadly moves, he felt like he was losing a bit of face. Glaring, he let loose a mighty cry. As a result, his ten heavenly palaces erupted, and the cry of a golden dragon pierced the dome of heaven, causing the clouds to part. Kong Xianglong slapped his forehead, and an illusory blood-colored garment flew out of the top of his head, then draped over his shoulders. With that blood robe on him, a blood mist erupted around him, turning the pitch-black night into a blood-red night. Kong Xianglong's battle prowess instantly skyrocketed, and an intense baleful aura erupted from him.

The four Black Guard cultivators coughed up blood, and the monstrous hands from their imperial-class technique collapsed. Their magical treasure fragments were knocked to the side, and one by one, they backed away.

Unfortunately for them, they fled too late. Kong Xianglong blurred into motion, appearing in front of one of them. Expression ferocious, he slammed his palm into their head, and a boom rang out as the cultivator exploded from the top of their head to their waist.

Kong Xianglong blurred into motion again, appearing in front of the second Black Guard cultivator. Before his shocked opponent could react, Kong Xianglong plunged both of his hands into the cultivator's chest. As the Black Guard cultivator screamed, Kong Xianglong literally ripped him in two. The other two Black Guard cultivators had no hope of getting away. One was gobbled up by the golden dragon, and the other was surrounded by the blood mist. As he screamed, he was melted into blood that became part of the blood mist.

Seeing that, Xu Qing recalled the Captain mentioning how brutal Kong Xianglong was in dealing with nonhumans. As for his blood robe, Xu Qing could sense the fluctuations of the Garmentfolk coming from it.

Wang Chen's Smokewight doppelgänger looked over at Xu Qing, his eyes glittering with mysterious light. "That's Dragonbro's taboo treasure fragment, which has a fivefold ensorcelling. Kid, that fleshly body trick of yours... is strong! If we have time later on, can you give me some tips?"

"You should probably stay a bit further away from me," Xu Qing said calmly.

"And if I don't?" Wang Chen said, raising his eyebrows.

"Then I won't be able to control my poison, and you might need to get a new doppelgänger."

Wang Chen vanished, reappearing a short distance away. Looking at Xu Qing, he cleared his throat awkwardly.

Around then, Kong Xianglong dropped down and landed on the ground with a thud. Looking around, he saw that the other swordsages from the Field Operations Office were all present. Though some were injured, none had died.

He nodded at Xu Qing, then turned his attention to Wang Chen.


“Sunspirit!” he yelled. “So, you think you’re hot stuff because you can make a Smokewight doppelgänger? You might not have learned anything else, but at least you learned how to be arrogant. Maybe you should try fighting me and see how tough you are, what do you think?”

“My apologies, Dragonbro,” Wang Chen said.

“Hurry up and fix the spell formation!”

“Yes, sir.” Wang Chen hurried over and started working on the spell formation.

Seeing that, Xu Qing was suddenly struck by how much Kong Xianglong was acting like the palace lord had when he criticized the two of them.

1. The patriarch made up the code phrase in chapter 347. 

Chapter 418: A Dream That Never Fades

The rain fell just as before, soaking the ground and falling onto the fort. The teleportation portal was in an open-air section of the fortress, so the rain was already washing away the blood that had been spilled.

Surrounded by crackling electricity and rumbling booms, Wang Chen’s Smokewight doppelgänger quickly made repairs to the teleportation portal. At the same time, he made adjustments to change the destination they would teleport to. Considering that Holytide Black Guard cultivators had been stationed here in an ambush, it was entirely likely that the mission had been compromised. The safest option seemed to be teleporting to a different location.

As Wang Chen worked, Kong Xianglong looked in the direction of the border of Holytide territory, his expression unreadable.

“This ambush couldn’t have been set for us specifically. There’s no way they could have known our group would be the ones coming here. And if they were here for us specifically, they wouldn’t have sent so few people.”

Keeping his voice low, Xu Qing said, “It seems more likely they were here to lock down this teleportation portal in general. This must not be the only fort where something like this is going on.”

“What if the Holytides are already at our target destination, searching for the agent?” asked Sir Mountain-River.

“Hold on,” Duskspirit said, looking surprised. “Could it be that we were assigned to extract the actual agent?” She looked around suspiciously. As they had already

speculated, whichever group was assigned to actually extract the agent would likely have an extremely powerful expert planted secretly among the operatives.

“Not necessarily,” Kong Xianglong said, his eyes glittering. “Most likely it proves that the Holytides don’t know where the agent is going to be. They must be searching all along the prefectural border.”

Xu Qing nodded.

They had all known from the beginning that their mission was likely just a distraction to draw attention away from the real extraction team. In all likelihood, there would be nine decoy mission groups and a single real one. That would make it much more difficult for the Holytides to determine where to strike. It was a given that there were Holytide agents in Sea-Sealing County, which meant that if only one mission group were sent, they would easily be able to report about it. That was why multiple teams had been sent.

In fact, Xu Qing had the feeling that all of the teams which had been openly sent on the mission were probably decoys. It wouldn’t surprise him at all if there was also a secret team no one knew about. It was also possible that the returning agent didn’t even need a team to escort them.

This entire thing was a complex game. That said, it also emphasized to him how much humankind was in decline. Even though Nascent Soul cultivators couldn’t cross the border, the fact remained that lower-level Holytide cultivators could cross it. And that showed just how weak Sea-Sealing County was. Everyone else understood the same principle.

Eventually, after a series of thunderous rumbling sounds, the teleportation portal was repaired.

Regardless of whether their mission was a distraction or real, they still had work to do. They flew onto the teleportation portal, light flared, and as the rain continued to fall, they disappeared. When they reappeared, they were near the border of Tidefall Prefecture, in a location hidden in a ravine.

“Stay on guard, everyone,” Kong Xianglong said. “It’s not likely there will be large numbers of Holytide infiltrators here. Let’s go check the rendezvous spot. Hopefully, the agent we’re extracting is still alive, whether it’s a decoy or not.”

With that, Kong Xianglong pulled out a geomantic compass. The swordsages had a number of secret ways to establish communication with each other, and on missions like this, only the mission leader would know which one to use. For example, this geomantic compass was a special magical device prepared just for this mission, and would lead them directly to the location of the agent. The mission protocol was to use the geomantic compass to find the agent, then leave as quickly as possible. [1]

Xu Qing was familiar with the generalities, as they had been explained during his training.

Kong Xianglong performed an incantation gesture and pointed at the compass, the needle of which spun briefly, then settled on a fixed direction. A simple map appeared in the air above. There was a faint, flickering red dot on the map not too far away from their current position.

When they saw the red dot, all of them breathed sighs of relief. That indicated that the agent they were meeting was alive.

Kong Xianglong's face lit up, and he immediately assigned everyone what to do next.

Extraction missions couldn't be handled impulsively. If they weren't careful, it was possible they could reveal the agent's position to the enemy. The plan was to lure any nearby Holytide cultivators into the open, make sure the area was clear, and then swoop in to extract the agent.

Xu Qing was responsible for making sure the area was clear, and he would be working with Duskspirit. Sir Mountain-River and Wang Chen would be drawing the Holytide cultivators into the open. Kong Xianglong would actually extract the agent.

When Kong Xianglong explained everything, Xu Qing nodded. Kong Xianglong was doing everything by the book, which was to be expected. After the explanations, they split into three groups.

Xu Qing quickly stole out into the night to start searching for any enemies. Duskspirit did the same, as did the Field Operations Office swordsages who were working with them.

Time passed. About an hour later, rumbling sounds filled the air, along with the fluctuations of magical techniques.

Looking over, Xu Qing saw that it came from the direction of Sir Mountain-River and Wang Chen, who were trying to draw the attention of any Holytide cultivators that were nearby.

However, Xu Qing quickly frowned. For one thing, Xu Qing himself had not encountered any signs of Holytide cultivators this entire time. It seemed almost like there weren't any in the area. It didn't make sense, considering their previous assumption that the Holytides were scouring the border looking for the agent.

Something's not right! Xu Qing's guard went up even further than before.

Sir Mountain-River and Wang Chen had come to a similar conclusion. Their work to draw out Holytide cultivators hadn't resulted in anything. It was a very bizarre situation, and they both had a bad feeling about it.

A short while later, a bright light shot up into the sky. It was a magical technique used to create a signal. Specifically, the signal called for the mission team to regroup urgently.

When Xu Qing saw that signal, his heart sank as he realized that something must have gone wrong. The reason was that the signal was coming from the direction where Kong Xianglong had gone to extract the agent. If things had proceeded according to plan, Kong Xianglong would never have needed to send up that signal. He would have taken the agent away and notified the rest of the team when he was safe.

Xu Qing shifted directions and headed toward the spot where the signal had come from. After the time it takes an incense stick to burn, he could see Kong Xianglong, Sir Mountain-River, and the others off in the distance.

They were in the middle of a sprawling plain. Shockingly, only a few hundred meters in front of them, a person lay on the ground, gasping for breath.

It was a young man of about fifteen or sixteen years of age. He was covered in countless wounds that cut down to the bone and left him covered in blood. In fact, if you looked closely, you would

realize that other than his face, which seemed normal, he didn't have any skin on the rest of his body! It had been sliced off!

It was only possible to imagine the pain and suffering he was experiencing. Most of his bones were broken, and all of his dharma apertures had been destroyed. Before they were destroyed, there had been a hundred and twenty of them, indicating that this young man was a chosen cultivator of some sort. One of his eyes was missing, having been dug out of his skull, and both of his ears were gone. He had also been poisoned, causing much of him to start rotting. There was no way he would survive, and he clearly had only moments to live. He looked extremely ghastly.

Xu Qing looked on with a grave expression and coldly glittering eyes. As he approached, he noticed that the area for 300 meters surrounding the young man was actually a spell formation. Xu Qing was no expert when it came to spell formations, but he could sense a towering killing intent within this one. Clearly, this extraordinary spell formation was extremely deadly. As for the young man, he had been placed right in the middle of that formation.

"He's not the agent," Kong Xianglong growled through gritted teeth. His eyes were bloodshot. "But he must be connected to the agent. He was like this when I got here. And the Holytides left this jade slip behind!"

He activated the jade slip, and a cold, brutal voice spoke.

"Hello, swordsages. Sadly, I can't be there to talk to you in person. The Black Guard just wanted to leave you a little gift. Hope you like it. Enjoy!"

The message ended with cold laughter.

Duskspirit and the rest of the swordsages had just hurried over. They, along with Sir Mountain-River and Wang Chen, all heard the message. Afterward, their eyes burned with rage.

The situation was clear. They didn't need to spend a lot of time analyzing it. Everyone knew what was going on. The Holytides created a diversion at the fort to delay the team. With the time bought, they managed to find this young man. The young man wasn't the actual agent, therefore, they had brutally tortured him until he was on death's door, then left him in this deadly spell formation.

The Holytide Black Guard wanted the swordsages to personally witness his death.

If anyone entered the formation, the young man would die. So would every person who stepped into the formation. In fact, it was possible it would do more than that. Perhaps the spell formation would detonate and kill people outside of it. Regardless of whether or not the spell formation exploded, the young man would die. He was already about to breathe his last.

This was the vicious manner in which the Holytides operated.

Everyone stood there silently.

Wang Chen, who knew the most about spell formations, knelt and examined the formation. A moment later, he looked up at Kong Xianglong with a bitter expression.

"This is the Black Guard's signature Spirit-Heart Fatality Formation. Supposedly they learned it from the Nightshades. It uses a person as the heart of the formation. That young man is fused with the formation now, so any attempt to get to him will activate

it. Not even sending a grue in will do anything. The lieutenant governor is still researching the details of this formation, so at the moment there's literally nothing we can do. It's a single-use formation, so once it's activated, that's it. As for the young man... he's at the end of the line."

Kong Xianglong's eyes were completely bloodshot and he was breathing heavily.

Keeping his eyes on the unconscious young man, Xu Qing walked to the edge of the formation. He wasn't sure if his shadow could do anything, so he said, "I can try something. I'm not sure if it'll work...."

Kong Xianglong's hands were balled into fists as he opened his mouth to speak. However, before he could, the young man in the formation slowly opened his eyes. Pain flickered in his eyes as he looked blankly in the direction of Xu Qing and the others.

"Are you... swordsages?" His voice was weak, but even still, it was possible to detect the distrust in his words.

Xu Qing drew his command sword. Kong Xianglong and everyone else did the same. The glittering light of their swords pierced through the darkness to illuminate the young man's eyes.

"Thanks to the seal my father placed on my soul, I can sense that you're swordsages.... I'm sorry that you had to see me like this." The young man clearly thought highly of swordsages, and wanted to maintain his dignity. Unfortunately, he wasn't able to. "My father is human. My mother is a Holytide.... So no, I'm not a swordsage. But I mastered one of your secret magics. My father taught me. I didn't tell anything to the Black Guard. No matter what they did to me, I didn't say a thing!"

The young man tried to muster his strength. He forced a smile onto his face, but the pain he was in robbed that smile of any beauty.

"Father wanted me to bring something here to give to you swordsages. He told me I mustn't break it. Otherwise, you wouldn't be able to take it with you after I died. Looks like I accomplished my mission."

The young man was still smiling. Apparently accomplishing that final mission was the last bit of dignity he had. Eventually, his smile became one of true contentment. But his torment ensured that the smile was already fading. He was growing weaker. Because of the agony he was in, his voice trembled when he talked.

"My father was a swordsage, and he always talked about their glory. I wanted to become a swordsage too. I'm not human, but he said if I could accomplish this mission that I might be able to stay in Sea-Sealing County, and maybe I could become a swordsage after all! I accomplished my mission, but it doesn't look like I'll become a swordsage...."

His words struck Xu Qing's heart. Kong Xianglong and the others were similarly moved.

“I wish... that I could be a swordsage like my father...”

The young man was so weak that he couldn't keep his eyes open. As they slowly fluttered shut, he performed an incantation gesture, causing his personal dimensional space to open. A bag appeared next to him. Everyone present was shaken to the core. River-drying, sea-draining waves of emotion filled them.

“You are a swordsage!” Kong Xianglong said loudly. Then he lifted his command sword. “I am willing to become a swordsage, loyal to my post, not afraid to sacrifice my life.”

As he recited the oath of the swordsages, the others present joined him, including Xu Qing. The young man shivered, and his closed eyes opened. As he looked at them, he recited the same words.

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

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

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

The young man's voice became one with the others. Then his eyes closed, and his smile became fixed for all eternity. When he died, the formation activated. A heaven-shaking, earth-shattering boom rang out as the formation exploded. As the shock wave rolled out, whipping the clothing and hair of everyone present... the young man's corpse was ripped to shreds and scattered in the wind.

The only thing left behind was a box, sitting on the spot where he had died. It was a wish box, which was the delivery container for the intelligence report. It was open.

Chapter 419: Black Guard Nightmare

What are the swordsages? Xu Qing thought.

In the past, he didn't really understand. In fact, the reason he originally wanted to join the swordsages had nothing to do with some grand aspiration to defending humankind. There was no way someone with a childhood as bitter as his could naturally develop patriotic feelings for humanity.

Xu Qing's main goals in life were: to try to stay alive; to improve his life a bit if possible; to live long enough to kill the crow and the eagle.

And there were three reasons why he had become a swordsage: because the Captain wanted to be a swordsage; because becoming a swordsage would provide him with a measure of safety; because his authority as a swordsage would aid in his search for the crow. Most important was how his status as a swordsage became a weapon in his toolbox against the crow.

All of those reasons were ultimately selfish in nature. That said, it wasn't as if Xu Qing was the only person with such motives. In reality, new swordsages from prefectures far and wide generally started out thinking that way. Other than people who were raised in the Swordsage Palace hearing stories about the swordsages and their mission, there were very few cultivators in the outside prefectures who cared at all about the goal of defending humankind.

For Xu Qing, the ceremony in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture, including the assessment of the heart by the Grand Emperor, had changed things. That change had been almost imperceptible. But it made it so that Xu Qing understood the swordswage way of thinking.

Then he arrived at the county capital and encountered people who were different from those he had known before. For instance, Kong Xianglong. He had met chosen cultivators who were a bit hostile but not malicious. And the palace lord, who was strict, but only because he wanted to safeguard the ideals of the swordswages.

Then Xu Qing had participated in the swearing of the oath, and had also learned of the history of humankind. It would be impossible for all of those things to have no effect on him. The influence, small at first, slowly sank into his mind and heart.

And now he had witnessed something else that left him deeply shaken.

A young human with 120 dharma apertures who had long dreamed of becoming a swordswage ended up tortured to death by the Holytides. Yet he hadn't revealed even a bit of information to them. When he recited the swordswage oath with them, he smiled and closed his eyes. Then he disappeared in the exploding spell formation.

Xu Qing had never met that young man before. What was more, he had seen a lot of death in his life. Perhaps too much. So what shook him to the core wasn't the young man's death. Rather, it was his dream and his decision. He obviously had a bright future ahead of him, yet he decided to walk a path that ended in death.

It was somewhat confusing to Xu Qing, but deep down, he understood. Because Xu Qing kept his heart closed tight, it wasn't easy for him to accept strangers or new organizations. It was even harder for him to truly approve of them, or make them a part of himself. That was the case even now.

Despite that, he was coming to realize that, without him even noticing, his feelings for the swordswages seemed different from before. He felt more respect. Though he did not yet have a sense of belonging, he respected Kong Xianglong's sincerity, the palace lord's strictness, and the oath of the swordswage. What was more, he respected this young man who had just met his death.

Therefore, Xu Qing clasped hands and bowed deeply to the spot where he had died.

The wind blew, scattering the dust and rubble, and dispersing the young man's ashes. It also carried the aura from inside the wish box all the way to the gathered swordswages. It was a very unique aura, mixed with the aroma of osmanthus flowers.

Kong Xianglong's expression was one of grief and indignation as he strode forward, gathered what remained of the young man's ashes, and put them into a bottle. Then he picked up the opened wish box.

"This mission is over," he said softly, his back to them as he held the wish box.

Xu Qing said nothing. Neither did any of the other swordswages.

The extraction mission was a failure. However, they did acquire the delivery container for the intelligence report. Whether that aspect of the mission would be considered a success or a failure wasn't certain.

“Kid, head back to the county capital and deliver this to the Field Operations Office.” Kong Xianglong waved his hand, sending the wish box flying over to Xu Qing.

Xu Qing caught it, and the fragrance of osmanthus grew stronger.

Without turning around, Kong Xianglong calmly said, “The rest of you go back with Kid. I’m in a bad mood now. I’m going to travel a bit to clear my head.”

“Sure thing, Dragonbro,” Sir Mountain-River said, clasping hands. Veins bulged on his face as he continued, “You head off on your own. Kid, take the others back. I have a personal matter to attend to, so I can’t come along.”

“What a coincidence,” Wang Chen said grimly. “Me too. I need to pay a visit to my hometown, so I can’t go back either.” As the words left his mouth, he looked off to the distant horizon.

“I’ll go with Dragonbro,” Duskspirit said firmly.

Xu Qing looked at them for a moment. Then he handed the wish box to one of the swordsages from the Field Operations Office. The swordsage took it, and it looked like he wanted to say something, but instead held back.

“I also have a personal matter to deal with,” Xu Qing said. “You head back without me.”

His words caused Sir Mountain-River, Wang Chen, and Duskspirit to look at him with expressions of masked surprise.

Kong Xianglong finally turned around. Looking at Xu Qing, he said, “You don’t have to do this, Kid.”

“I need to pay someone back for a gift they gave,” Xu Qing said, sounding very serious.

Kong Xianglong simply stood there for a long moment. Then he nodded, turned, and flew off into the distance. Sir Mountain-River, Duskspirit, and Wang Chen followed. They were heading toward the border of Sea-Sealing County. Holytide territory.

Xu Qing took a step forward, then shot after them like an arrow loosed from a bow. He knew exactly what they were going to do. It wasn’t an unusual thing for Kong Xianglong to ignore mission protocol. Considering he had personally seen how the Black Guard had brutally tortured that young man, given his personality, there was no way he could simply stand by and do nothing in response. Besides, even Xu Qing could still hear the message left by that Black Guard cultivator ringing in his mind.

Since the Black Guard had made a point about giving a gift to the swordsages, it was only natural that they return the favor.

As the five of them flew away, the remaining swordsages from the Field Operations Office watched them go. They seemed slightly envious, but in the end, they clasped hands in salute and then turned

to start the return journey to the county capital. Not all swordsmen were so willing to disrespect mission protocol.

What was more, they had a more important task at hand. They needed to get the intelligence report safely back to the county capital. That was the true heart of the mission.

They disappeared into the darkness.

It was a cold night, and the wind was like an ambassador of death itself, wielding a sickle to harvest the lives of mortal beings. Xu Qing and the others sped through that wind, their garments fluttering, their hair streaming behind them. And yet, when the coldness touched their skin and sank into their hearts, it couldn't possibly compare to the desolate iciness that already existed within them.

Killing intent was already bubbling inside them. The faster they flew, the more intense it became. Given the lack of moonlight and the strong wind, it was a good night for killing.

They were already moving as fast as they could. They were holding nothing back. Ever since Xu Qing made his comment about paying back a gift, Sir Mountain-River, Wang Chen, and Duskspirit all looked at him differently. Their approval deepened.

Sir Mountain-River exuded a blood mist that surrounded him and made him seem like a blood shade from the Yellow Springs. Duskspirit had once again demonized herself. Instead of the green-skinned evil ghost, she was now a death bird made of pure bone, covered with flames. Wang Chen had put away his Smokewight doppelgänger. Now, his doppelgänger was a dwarf wearing luxurious robes. He flashed a smile at Xu Qing and then licked his lips. The intense coldness surrounding him caused the ground below to ice up. Kong Xianglong had a golden dragon circulating around him, causing him to pulse with terrifying fluctuations as he sped along.

Given the circumstances, Xu Qing felt no need to let them outdo him. His shadow covered him, causing him to pulse with seven-palace fleshly body power. He shot through the night with lightning-like speed, like a disturbing spirit.

The five of them were like vicious rakshasas out to take lives, and with every moment that passed, they got closer and closer to the Holytide Black Guard cultivators, who were still not yet out of Tidefall Prefecture.

As they flew, they communicated with each other, devising a simple battle plan. Although they didn't know how many enemies they would be facing, based on experience and intuition, they could come up with a general strategy.

Eventually, just before the break of dawn when the night was deepest, and when they were only about an incense stick's worth of time from the border, they saw a group of few dozen figures speeding along ahead of them. All of them wore black robes, and there were over sixty in total! They weren't moving very fast. Clearly, they were in a great mood after their mission, and were even chatting and laughing amongst themselves.

That said, they hadn't let their guard down, so as soon as Xu Qing and the others closed in, the Black Guard cultivators noticed them. Turning, their expressions flickered. Noticing their pursuers did them no good.

Kong Xianglong was in the lead, and he howled a battle cry as he smashed into the enemy forces.

Xu Qing came second, like a black lightning bolt that slammed into a five-palace Black Guard cultivator. The Black Guard cultivator screamed briefly, until his entire body collapsed into a haze of blood, and his cry was cut short.

Blood was already spraying by the time Sir Mountain-River, Wang Chen, and Duskspirit arrived. Slaughter erupted.

The Black Guard cultivators howled furiously as they fought back. Considering that they had infiltrated Sea-Sealing County, it went without saying that they had immense battle prowess and extensive experience. Forty of them had five-palace battle prowess, and there were twelve at the seven-palace level. The seven-palace members all had special Black Guard imperial-class techniques. There were two with eight-palace strength. Those two had not illuminated heavenly palaces with five life flames. They had used four flames to illuminate seven palaces. But thanks to their imperial-class techniques, they had extraordinary eight-palace battle prowess. In addition to them, there were three officers leading the group. All were halfway into the Nascent Soul level.

A group this powerful could be the core of a sect. But to the Holytide people, who controlled the entire Holytide region, it was only a small squad. And when you added this group together with the group that had ambushed Xu Qing and the others earlier, it made it clear that 'small squads' from the Holytides would still be rather large, and would contain extremely powerful experts.

After all... the Holytides were the sovereigns of the Holytide region. And any species that controlled an entire region would have to have many powerful experts in reserve. Comparatively speaking, the reserve powers of a single county couldn't possibly compare.

That said, the swordmage squad they were facing was very different from anything they had encountered before!

When the two sides clashed, fierce fighting instantly broke out. The three half-Nascent Soul experts all shot toward Kong Xianglong. The two eight-palace cultivators tried to join them, except a coffin dropped down out of nowhere and blocked their path. The dwarf-form Wang Chen grinned viciously, and at the same time, his Smokewight doppelgänger appeared next to him. Duskspirit was off to the side, and Sir Mountain-River was there as well. The three of them faced off against the two eight-palace cultivators, buying time for both Kong Xianglong and Xu Qing.

The former was fighting the strongest opponents, the three half Nascent Soul experts. The latter was taking care of everyone else. That was the plan they had settled on along the way. It had been decided when Xu Qing said one simple thing.

"I'm good at fighting large groups."

Right now, Xu Qing hefted his dagger and tapped into his taboo poison core in his third heavenly palace. As the poison spread out, countless beetles swarmed out from him as well, becoming a black cloud pulsing with terrifying energy and fatal poison. As screams rang out from the Black Guard cultivators, Xu Qing remained expressionless, and he charged into the thick of the fighting.

Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior sent the black iron skewer shooting out in the form of a red lightning bolt. And Xu Qing's shadow stretched out from the eye on his forehead, piercing into the shadows of the Black Guard cultivators and devouring them.

As of this moment...

A nightmare had arrived.

Chapter 420: An Acrid Odor Overwhelms; A Sea of Poison Spreads

Xu Qing was right. He was good at fighting groups. Once he unleashed the poison from his third heavenly palace, shocking death would result. In fact, from the moment Xu Qing had acquired that taboo poison core until now, he had never tapped into its full potential. Even now, he was keeping control of it carefully.

After all, that poison did not distinguish between enemies and allies. It wouldn't hurt Xu Qing, but it could be deadly even to Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior and his shadow.

Despite keeping it under a level of control, it was still absolutely astonishing to the Holytide Black Guard cultivators. In the shortest of moments, three of the five-palace cultivators screamed in terror as their bodies disintegrated. The skin of their face melted, their bodies turned into blood, and their eyeballs fell out of their eye sockets. Despite all of that, they didn't feel any pain. That was the terrifying thing about the poison of Xu Qing's taboo poison core. It caused the body to rot away without the victim being able to sense anything. By the time any pain hit them, the poison was deep in the marrow.

As those screams of terror echoed out, Xu Qing was like a wind of death. He appeared in front of a six-palace cultivator, and his dagger slashed a throat. A swishing sound could be heard, and then blood sprayed. As the head tumbled down, Xu Qing kicked it, turning it into a string of afterimages that sped toward another Holytide Black Guard cultivator. There it exploded, sending out poisoned blood in all directions.

The cultivator backed up, shocked, but he wasn't fast enough to escape death.

Face expressionless, Xu Qing took a step forward, exploding with the full fleshly body power of seven palaces. Violent winds erupted all around him such that, from a distance, it resembled a hurricane.

Xu Qing himself was like a weapon that slammed into the Black Guard cultivator. Blood exploded in all directions.

At the same time, poison continued to infect surrounding cultivators. Another three Black Guard cultivators screamed as their bodies started rotting. In the shortest of moments, their bodies became bloody liquid that splashed onto the ground below.

The other surrounding enemies were shaking with unmitigated terror.

"This poison is too strong!"

"Everybody run!"

It wasn't just the Black Guard cultivators who were scattering. Kong Xianglong, Sir Mountain-River, Wang Chen, and Duskspirit were visibly taken aback. They and the people they were fighting all subconsciously put more distance between themselves and Xu Qing.

Xu Qing's expression was the same as ever. The more he spent time with this poison, the more he felt like he could control it. Next, he appeared like a phantom right in front of the ninth Holytide cultivator he had faced so far, one with seven heavenly palaces. Without hesitation, he threw his

dagger out with full force. However, this particular Black Guard cultivator was extraordinary, erupting with fleshly body power, he grabbed the dagger to stop its momentum.

However, the moment he touched it, needles shot out from the shroud that made the hilt. The Black Guard cultivator's face fell as intense pain swept up his arm and all the way to his heart, mind, and soul. Unable to release the dagger, he could only watch as it stabbed into his throat and then jerked to the side.

That ability was a secret power of the dagger that Xu Qing had never needed to use before. The downside to it was that whenever he used the dagger, he had to endure the stabbing pain that resulted from holding it. Thankfully he had long since grown used to that sensation, and hardly noticed it.

Pulling the dagger out of the cultivator's throat, Xu Qing was about to continue fighting when his expression flickered and he stepped to the side just in time to avoid a flying sword. Turning, he saw a seven-palace enemy unleashing an imperial-class technique. A huge black hand stretched out from behind him, heading with deadly momentum toward Xu Qing.

This time, Xu Qing didn't need to do anything. Two six-palace cultivators grinned gruishly, then lunged toward their seven-palace comrade. As they did, each shouted the same thing.

“My lord and master says hello!”

Then they self-detonated. The gruish scene caused all of the other Holytide Black Guard cultivators' faces to fall.

The massive explosion caused by the two self-detonating six-palace cultivators smashed into the seven-palace cultivator, causing blood to spray out of his mouth. Then he looked visibly shocked as he reached out to grab a black iron skewer that had shot toward him out of nowhere. However, though he grabbed it, he simply couldn't control the skewer with its endless red lightning. It stabbed right into his head, sending a tremor through his entire body.

Then Xu Qing's dagger flew through the air and stabbed into his heart. Pulling out of him, it then stabbed back into him, seven times in a row, each blow extremely brutal.

As the screams echoed out, Xu Qing came to the conclusion he'd done enough with his poison. The surrounding Black Guard cultivators were all melting, terror on their faces as they realized their cultivation bases were powerless to help them.

That should do it. The shadow eye on his forehead transformed back into a coffin. It opened, and Xu Qing stepped out. At the same time, he made sure to loudly use the code phrase so as not to reveal his Shadow Fusion Secret Magic.

Next, Xu Qing used his Gruegloom Daoseizing Art. Bursting into motion, he turned his right hand semitransparent and stabbed it into the chest of a six-palace enemy.

The cultivator struggled, but it didn't do any good. Xu Qing ripped his gold cores out of him. As he absorbed them, blood droplets rained down everywhere. As miserable screams rang out, the golden crow appeared behind him. It now had forty-two flaming tails that brought brilliance to the predawn darkness. The golden crow's eyes shone brightly as Xu Qing, still absorbing the gold cores, sent it to the black hand formed by the Black Guard's imperial-class technique. Not to be outdone, his shadow stretched out.

The cultivator was being absorbed in three ways.

A moment later, his imperial-class technique collapsed, his body withered up, and his heavenly palaces were completely destroyed. Anyone watching this would be astonished to the core; Xu Qing's method of fighting was incomparably ferocious.

That said, Sir Mountain-River, Wang Chen, and Duskspirit weren't far behind him. Duskspirit had transformed into a gigantic cyclops with green fur. This was a greater demon unique to the Supreme Void Demonization Sect, and its single eye burned with dark soul fire. Her torso was very demonic, as she had four fleshy growths that looked like giant fingers. At the end of each finger was a vicious face that would devour enemies. And if any of the fingers were destroyed, they would grow back moments later.

Sir Mountain-River was surrounded by a mist of blood. He was wounded all over, except it was because he specialized in taking injuries for his companions. His technique was bloodline-related, and it ensured that the more wounds he received, the stronger he got. Right now, he seemed to ignore any injuries. As he devolved into madness, his eyes filled with killing intent and nothing else.

Wang Chen's dwarf was also going all out. It was covered with lightning, and even had a life lamp of lightning over its head, giving it incredible speed. Then he suddenly changed shape. Instead of being a dwarf, he looked like a tall young man. However, his entire body was covered with black totem tattoos that resembled sealing marks. One by one, they began releasing terrifying auras and fluctuations.

With every tattoo sealing mark he opened, a nonhuman doppelgänger would appear. Lightborn. Rockdevils. Garmentfolk. The Smokewight was also there. With all of those doppelgängers, he was fighting to the death with the two eight-palace Black Guard cultivators. They all had magical treasure fragments as well, so though they weren't truly a match for the eight-palace cultivators, they could at least buy time at the expense of being wounded.

Kong Xianglong was making an even bigger scene. The gold dragon behind him roared, making him look like a god from heaven descended into the mortal world. He was also surrounded by the garment of blood. As he fought the three half-Nascent Soul cultivators, heaven shook, and the earth quaked violently. He was a mere Gold Core cultivator, yet was surrounded by half-Nascent Soul enemies. Even still, he didn't seem to be at a disadvantage, and instead, was incomparably mighty.

"This is the Swordsage Palace's Hell Squad for this generation!" one of the Black Guard cultivators shouted. Terrified, the enemies scattered.

Before they could get very far, they started toppling over, blood spraying out of their mouths as their bodies rotted into bloody sludge.

Xu Qing continued attacking. The golden crow let loose a joyful cry as it continued devouring the enemy. And Xu Qing's Gruegloom hand extracted one gold core after another. Unfortunately, his attack rate couldn't match the speed of his poison. By the time he personally killed his nineteenth Black Guard cultivator, there were only seven left.

Three were fighting Kong Xianglong. Two were fighting Sir Mountain-River and the others.

The remaining two... were almost completely rotted away. Together, they staggered over to Xu Qing, flopped to their knees, and looked up at him, their eyes filled with despair and terror. Then, they spoke the same thing in fanatical voices.

“Milord, please take these as gifts for you exalted swordsages!”

With that, they stabbed their hands into their own heavenly palaces, ripped out their gold cores, and held them high overhead. Xu Qing used his Gruegloom hand to absorb them. Then he reached out, put his hands onto the heads of the terrified Black Guard cultivators, and twisted forcefully. Cracks rang out as their heads turned to face the opposite directions. Then their bodies sagged down, dead. Until the moment they died, their mouths were twisted in gruish smiles.

Everyone present was a killer who couldn't possibly be afraid of the act of killing itself. But whether it was the way the enemy despaired as they rotted away, or their terror as they apparently killed themselves, this was far more terrifying and gruish than anything they had ever seen.

Every single person present, whether a friend or a foe, was shaken by the sight of Xu Qing. He currently stood in the middle of a gory sludge. There were no corpses around him, as they had all melted into liquid. The golden crow glittered behind him, crying out loudly, its phoenix-like feathers trailing flames as it soared. The wind stirred Xu Qing's long hair, revealing eyes that were unsurpassably calm.

As he stood in the gore, Xu Qing looked up at Sir Mountain-River and the others, who were still stalling the two eight-palace cultivators. Then he moved in their direction, accelerating rapidly. At the same time, his third heavenly palace erupted with a gravitational force that caused all of the taboo poison in the area to rapidly reconverge directly around him. Everything around him turned black, like a dense mist filled with innumerable beetles.

Sir Mountain-River and the others were visibly shaken, and the two eight-palace cultivators were appalled. Surrounded by the black mist, Xu Qing approached.

His arrival split the battlefield, and before anyone could do anything, he descended on one of the eight-palace Black Guard cultivators. The mist surrounded them, so dense that no one could see inside. But they could hear shouting, and they could sense astonishing shockwaves.

All of a sudden, Sir Mountain-River and the others weren't facing two eight-palace cultivators, but instead, one. The tide of battle had turned.

After enough time had passed for an incense stick to burn, the vicious Kong Xianglong finally managed to rip one of the half-Nascent Soul enemies to shreds. Sir Mountain-River and the others had also felled their opponent. The latter could be described as freakish hellions. Though they weren't on the same level as Kong Xianglong, they still had peak seven-palace battle prowess. By combining their efforts and pulling out their trump cards, they slaughtered an eight-palace Holytide Black Guard cultivator, and survived with only injuries.

Around that time, an anguished scream rang out from Xu Qing's black mist. Then footsteps could be heard before Xu Qing strode out into the open.

His eyes shone with a strange, thoughtful light. Wounds criss-crossed his entire body. His chest was a mangled mass of flesh and blood. He had a huge chunk cut out of his waist. His legs trembled. His neck bled profusely from a wound that looked like a bite mark. His mouth was covered with blood, and the hand that held his dagger hung limply at an unnatural angle.

As he walked, he spat some blood onto the ground and tossed down an eyeball that he had been holding. The poison mist behind him then flowed toward him and merged into his body.

As it disappeared, it revealed the battleground behind him, and a figure standing there. It was the Black Guard cultivator he had been fighting. His body was mostly dissolved. His belly had been ripped open and his gold cores extracted. His heavenly palaces were destroyed. He only had one eyeball left, and it revealed the incredulity he had experienced before death.

Sir Mountain-River, Wang Chen, and Duskspirit looked at him, their eyes shining.

Xu Qing looked up at them, spat out another mouthful of blood, and then quietly said, "Sorry to keep you waiting. Killing that one was hard."

Behind him, the Black Guard cultivator fell onto his face.

Given Xu Qing's current battle prowess, killing an eight-palace cultivator like that was indeed difficult. During that life-or-death battle, he had used every tool he had at his disposal. Even still, his opponent had viciously bit a chunk out of his neck.

That said, he had benefited a lot. What was more, he had indeed sensed the aura of the red moon on his opponent, which was why he had a thoughtful look on his face when the fighting was over. Now wasn't the time to contemplate that, though, as an anguished cry rang out from the dome of heaven.

The second half-Nascent Soul cultivator's neck had just been snapped by Kong Xianglong.

The lone remaining half-Nascent Soul cultivator looked absolutely terrified. It wasn't just Kong Xianglong he feared. All of these swordsages were ferocious. Therefore, it was without any hesitation that he turned and fled.

Grinning viciously, Kong Xianglong gave chase. Meanwhile, Xu Qing calmly slammed his fist onto his broken leg. A crack rang out as the bone set. Then he joined the chase.

Because of that, the approval in the eyes of Sir Mountain-River, Wang Chen, and Duskspirit grew even deeper. All of them had even more serious injuries, yet they ignored them as they joined the chase as well, their killing intent burning.

If they were going to return the favor of a gift to the Black Guard, then they were going to kill everyone. They weren't far from the border, and the half-Nascent Soul expert had actually laid eyes on it when the swordsages caught up.

All five of them attacked at the same time. With Kong Xianglong there to keep things in control, there was no question how it would play out. A massive boom rang out as the half-Nascent Soul cultivator exploded into bloody chunks that rained down onto the border itself. The moment he died, an explosive aura erupted on the other side of the border, and a figure blurred in their direction.

"Swordsages!" a voice howled angrily.

In response, Kong Xianglong shouted back, "Hey you, bozo! We're standing in Sea-Sealing County. Any nonhuman Nascent Soul cultivator who crosses this border will be instantly killed by Sea-Sealing County's taboo treasure! Feel free to come on over, bitch!"

Then Kong Xianglong turned and sped in the opposite direction. Sir Mountain-River, Wang Chen, and Duskspirit were already fleeing. Xu Qing fled even faster.

A moment later, a middle-aged Holytide cultivator wearing the black uniform of the Black Guard appeared on the border. His face was extremely unsightly as he gritted his teeth and looked at the fleeing Kong Xianglong and the others. Killing intent boiled in his eyes, and yet, he didn't dare to step across that border!