

Timescape 421

Chapter 421: Drinking Unfiltered Rice Wine, Forging Bonds

The moment Xu Qing sensed that aura closing in on the border, he turned and fled at top speed. It was an instinct he had picked up after so many big jobs with the Captain. Sir Mountain-River, Wang Chen, and Duskspirit were no less slow. Clearly they had some instincts as well. Only Kong Xianglong lagged behind briefly to say those parting words.

All of a sudden, Xu Qing came to the realization that Kong Xianglong and the Captain were similar in some ways. The difference was that the Captain tended to be slow because of greed, while Kong Xianglong was slow because of posturing. Xu Qing sighed inwardly, thinking that it would have been great to have the Captain along on this mission. Unfortunately, that just wasn't possible, as this little group clearly didn't trust the Captain.

And thus, they sped through the night until dawn. By that point, they were far, far away from the border, and could be certain that no enemy was risking death to follow them. Exhausted, they found a grassy hill where they all dropped down to catch their breath.

It had been a very busy night. And the final battle with the Black Guard had very nearly drained them to the core. Once they all laid down in the grass, they felt limp and completely unwilling to stand back up.

That included Xu Qing. Though his injuries had already healed up, he was absolutely spent mentally.

Sir Mountain-River cursed a bit as his blood energy faded away, leaving him feeling completely empty. Duskspirit was no longer in her demonized form, and lay there looking like she was too tired to even breathe. Wang Chen moaned a bit as he painted sealing marks all over himself. It looked like if he went any slower with the sealing marks, he would be in big trouble.

Kong Xianglong was also having trouble catching his breath. That said, he looked to be in slightly better shape than the others. Looking over at them, he suddenly started laughing.

Sir Mountain-River, Duskspirit, and Wang Chen exchanged glances, and then they started laughing as well. They suddenly felt completely carefree. But then their laughing started opening wounds, and they cursed a bit, then kept laughing even more. Xu Qing laughed with them.

"That was awesome!" Kong Xianglong exclaimed. Waving his hand, he produced five bottles of alcohol. After distributing bottles to everyone, he held his bottle high.

Xu Qing raised his bottle. Sir Mountain-River, Wang Chen, and Duskspirit all followed suit. The three of them no longer looked at him like he was a stranger. Quite the opposite.

"Cheers!"

They drank deeply, then lay back down and laughed some more. As they drank and drank, they thought back to the young man who had dreamed of becoming a swordsage, and their laughter turned into emotional sighing. In that manner, time passed. The alcohol, the laughter, and the sighing drew them together. It's often the case that friendships form when people go through a dramatic event together. Especially an event that was fundamentally the wrong thing to do....

Eventually, Kong Xianglong got to his feet. “When we get back, we’re done for. The palace lord is definitely going to lock us up. And the pro-Holytide factions in the city will be badmouthing us, especially the Yao Clan. Ai. I think all of us need to lay low for a while.” Looking at Xu Qing specifically, he continued, “Xu Qing, you’re going to have it rougher than the rest of us. Trust me, I know the ol’ palace lord. Since you’re a jailer in the Corrections Division, he’s definitely going to punish you even harder.” Kong Xianglong blinked a few times.

“He’s right, Xu Qing,” said Sir Mountain-River. “You’re really going to be in for it.”

Wang Chen sighed dramatically. “Ai. That said, Xu Qing, you can always think of it this way: as a jailer, being locked up in the Corrections Division is going to be a great experience.”

Sir Mountain-River, Wang Chen, and Duskspirit kept joking around a bit, all the while keeping an eye on Xu Qing to see how he would react. They bore no ill will. This was actually an expression of approval. It was how friends got along.

Face expressionless, Xu Qing coolly said, “The Unit D jailers are my colleagues. You could even say we’re close. So if we really get locked up...” Xu Qing looked at the four of them one by one then solemnly continued, “Then I’ll just be going home. I hereby welcome all of you to be locked up at home with me.”

Kong Xianglong raised his alcohol and took a drink. Sir Mountain-River and the others smiled wryly and sighed heavily. That said, the way they looked at Xu Qing was different from before. More amiable.

In fact, Sir Mountain-River even cleared his throat and said, “In that case, Xu Qing, is there any chance you could arrange for me to be locked up in a cell block with a female jailer who—”

Before he could finish speaking, Wang Chen kicked him.

“Ignore him,” Wang Chen said. “He’s sick in the head. As if he’s going to get anything out of any female jailers. Xu Qing... when the time comes, is there any chance you could get me into a cell block with a lot of female prisoners?”

His eyes glittered with anticipation.

Sir Mountain-River immediately offered a heated retort, and the two of them were soon arguing back and forth.

Xu Qing had never seen this group acting like this before. That said, it wasn’t a surprise. Most people will act differently in front of their friends compared to strangers.

Duskspirit looked at Sir Mountain-River and Wang Chen with cold despidal. Taking out some flesh and blood melon seeds, she started eating.

Kong Xianglong looked at Xu Qing and chuckled. Then he asked Xu Qing about his divine abilities. “Xu Qing, that poison of yours is incredible. But what really caught my eye was how you turned your hand transparent, then ripped out your enemies’ gold cores. That technique... is totally gruish!”

Sir Mountain-River and the others also looked at Xu Qing curiously.

Xu Qing didn't feel the need to be too secretive, so he held his hand out in front of him and turned it transparent for them to see.

"It's a technique my Master created for me. It's related to the Gruegloom species."

Kong Xianglong could sense a bit of what the technique was about, and he sighed in admiration. "I bet when you cultivate that technique to its full potential, you'll be able to turn your whole body into that same state." He cocked his head in thought. "Grueglooms, huh? After we get back, I have a gift I want to give you. I killed a Gruegloom a few years ago, and still have some things left over from it."

Xu Qing opened his mouth to speak, but Kong Xianglong waved his hand dismissively and said, "You can't refuse a gift from a bro!"

Xu Qing looked at him for a moment, then nodded. After that, Sir Mountain-River and Wang Chen joined the discussion about divine abilities. They didn't feel the need to be secretive either, and went so far as to show some of their techniques to Xu Qing. It gave him a lot of inspiration, and also a greater understanding of the magical techniques associated with the three great sects. That was especially true of Duskspirit's demonization technique. Xu Qing was very interested in that.

Noticing Xu Qing's interest, Duskspirit continued to munch flesh and blood melon seeds as she said, "The Demonization Art is my sect's special magic. People say it has an extremely long history. Because of our sect's rules, I can't say much more than that. However, you can study it on your own if you want. The basic cultivation method isn't difficult. What's difficult is gaining enlightenment of the sect's demonization symbols. You have to imprint them into your sea of consciousness. Once you succeed to a certain level, then you can use the Demonization Art to summon it outside and transform yourself into a greater demon."

With that, Duskspirit gave a quick demonstration.

Shaken, Xu Qing thought of his Ghost Emperor mountain. From a certain perspective, that mountain could be considered a greater demon. It got him wondering what would happen if he mastered the Demonization Art. Could he possibly use it to summon it outside of himself? That seemed a lot simpler than the method his Master had described. Xu Qing suddenly felt his heart beating a bit faster.

"If it sounds like something you'd like, go study it!" Kong Xianglong said with a smile. "Remember, the three great sects are all deeply tied to the Swordsage Palace. There's long been an agreement in place that allows a swordsage to spend military credits to study any of the techniques from the three great sects."

It was Xu Qing's first time hearing about anything like that. Nodding, he decided that after he got back, he probably would take a shot at learning the Demonization Art.

Eventually, when it was about noon, and the group all felt rested, they started traveling again.

The trip back went smoothly, and there were no twists and turns. What was more, Xu Qing felt even closer with Kong Xianglong and the others thanks to the time on the road. Before the final major teleportation, Kong Xianglong lowered his voice and said, "Xu Qing, I'm not trying to stir up trouble, but... I feel like I need to offer some friendly advice. Be careful about that Eldest Brother of yours. He doesn't seem like a good person to me."

“That’s right,” Sir Mountain-River said. “Chen Erniu always goes around looking very shifty. Given that one-meter light, it wouldn’t surprise me at all if he turns traitor one day.”

Hearing that, Xu Qing calmly replied, “My Eldest Brother and I have gone through many life-or-death situations together. There’s no one I trust more than him.”

Kong Xianglong didn’t say anything further. Giving Xu Qing’s shoulder a squeeze, he stepped onto the teleportation portal. A moment later, bright light glittered, and they vanished.

When they reappeared, they weren’t in the Swordsage Palace. Instead, they were in a valley a short distance away from the county capital. In that valley was a short-range teleportation portal set up in a secret hideout Kong Xianglong had set up. Using this smaller portal was Kong Xianglong’s idea based on his extensive experience. According to him, if they teleported into the city using one of the Swordsage Palace’s portals, there would be a record of it. But the smaller portal would allow them to return secretly. It would be a lot safer that way. Then they could hide out for a few days, and when they made a public appearance, could truthfully say that they had been back for a while.

“I set up this place in secret,” Kong Xianglong said with a chuckle. “And to this day—” Before he could finish, his face fell as the portal activated of its own accord.

A moment later, all five of them vanished, then reappeared on a teleportation portal in the middle of the Swordsage Palace. When they materialized their hearts dropped as they saw the palace lord standing just outside the portal, his eyes cold and his expression grim.

The palace lord had long known about the teleportation portal that Kong Xianglong thought was a secret. And he had stationed himself here waiting for them.

Kong Xianglong started trembling. Sir Mountain-River, Wang Chen, and Duskspirit all looked very guilty. Xu Qing looked down and prepared to be thoroughly chastised. As swordsages, it was no small matter for them to have deviated so dramatically from mission protocol.

As the moments ticked by, and the palace lord didn’t say anything, Xu Qing looked up slightly and saw the palace lord studying them. In fact, it almost looked like he was checking to see if they were injured.

Xu Qing wasn’t the only one to notice that. The others, to their surprise, saw the same thing.

Seeing the five of them looking at him, the palace lord snorted coldly. “What are you standing there for? You’re preventing other people from teleporting in! Get out of here!”

With that, the palace lord coldly turned and walked away. It seemed as if he had come only to check if they were seriously hurt or not. And he was apparently relieved to find them hale and healthy.

“Weird!”

“He actually didn’t punish us?”

“He cares about us?”

The five swordsages exchanged delighted glances, then hurried off the teleportation portal and went their separate ways.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Xu Qing looked in the direction the palace lord had disappeared. All of a sudden, the palace lord didn't seem as unreasonable as before. With that thought on his mind, he left the Swordsage Palace.

Around the same time, Yao Yunhui and Zhang Siyun were also leaving the Swordsage Palace.

Yao Yunhui wasn't happy with the post her son had been assigned to, and had repeatedly made appointments with Zhang Siyun's Sect Grandfather to talk about the situation. However, his Sect Grandfather, Honor Guard Sima, just kept pushing off the meeting.

Therefore, she had decided to personally come to the Swordsage Palace to talk to him. After the discussion, she and Zhang Siyun were leaving when they spotted Xu Qing.

When Zhang Siyun saw Xu Qing, malice glittered in his eyes. However, unnoticed by him, his mother suddenly seemed a bit absent-minded when she spotted Xu Qing. She stopped walking. For some reason, whenever she thought about Xu Qing in recent days, she found herself pondering his good sides. As such thoughts persisted in her, they slowly intertwined with her revulsion of him, and gradually created some very complicated emotions.

When Zhang Siyun realized his mother had stopped walking, he turned to look at her. Noticing her facial expression fluctuation between different emotions, he felt worried.

"Mother...?"

Yao Yunhui was wearing a black gauze dress that created a perfect contrast with her fair skin, and really brought out her beauty. The cut of the dress accentuated her ample bosom and long legs, making her seem especially tall. In fact, even though she was standing there motionless, she seemed indescribably attractive. Normally speaking, her face was colder than ice, but it also contained something warm and bewitching.

As she looked at Xu Qing some distance away, the mixed emotions in her heart caused her to inexplicably murmur, "Yun'er, did you ever notice that Xu Qing looks a lot like your father?"

A tremor passed through Zhang Siyun, and his expression flickered wildly. His eyes went wide as waves of indescribable astonishment ran through him. It felt like his mind was being struck by millions of lightning bolts.

"What did you just say?" he blurted.

Yao Yunhui started. Realizing she'd said something strange, her face turned cold again.

"Pathetic. All pathetic." Snorting coldly, she stalked off, a malicious expression filling her face. As her dress clung to her curves and swished as she walked, she attracted the attention of quite a few surrounding swordsages.

Seeing her react that way caused Zhang Siyun to breathe a big sigh of relief. It was the first time in his life that hearing his mother curse his father actually made him feel relieved.

Meanwhile, high in the air above the county capital, another person noticed Xu Qing leaving the Swordsage Palace. It was an old man. His jaw dropped when he spotted Xu Qing, and he rubbed his eyes. Then his heart started pounding.

Th-that's... that's.... Just how damn unlucky could I possibly be? What is that little bastard doing here??

It was the innkeeper from Plankspring Way. He had come to the county capital to buy some things Ling'er needed for her legacy. He hadn't done much other than buy the necessary items, and was now on his way out, only to spot Xu Qing off in the distance. In addition to his disbelief, he also felt incredible happiness.

It's a good thing I didn't bring Ling'er along! I definitely can't let her know that vile Xu kid is here!

Grinding his teeth, he suddenly realized Xu Qing might be able to see him, so he quickly hurried on his way.

I'm never coming to the county capital again!

Chapter 422: Gruegloom Transformation

The first thing Xu Qing did after returning was send a voice message to let Arch-Immortal Plumdark know he was back. Back when the coalition was on the way to the county capital, she had told him and Chen Erniu that they were required to do that. After all, whenever they left the city, they would be facing unending dangers. And because Arch-Immortal Plumdark was ultimately in charge of the subsidiary sect, that meant she was one of the main lines of defense for the coalition swordsages.

Back at his sword pavilion, he took time to study the surroundings before going inside. He just wanted to make sure there were no signs that anyone had been snooping around or setting up some sort of trap. It was a habit that had long since become an instinct.

Once inside, he took a deep breath and thought back to everything that happened on the mission. He analyzed all the areas where he was deficient, and thought about how he could have done better. By the time he was finished, it was evening, and he settled down cross-legged to focus on rest and recovery.

However, he couldn't stop thinking about that young man in the middle of that spell formation, gasping for breath.

I bet his father was the agent....

And if that was the case, Xu Qing couldn't help but wonder if the father had just abandoned his son, or perhaps even used him as a distraction. Had there been other people who ended up just like that young man? Or had the agent made himself the distraction, and secretly given the intelligence report to someone else? There was no way for Xu Qing to know for certain. After thinking about it for a while, he shook his head. Then he thought back to the eight-palace Black Guard cultivator he'd killed.

Given my current battle prowess, I was able to kill an eight-palace cultivator by pulling out all the stops. But if it was a nine-palace cultivator... that would be a lot harder. Eight palaces was the limit for most four-flame cultivators.

Of course, it was also the case that some freakish hellions who didn't open their 121st dharma aperture could get two imperial-class techniques and possibly have life lamps. And therefore, it was possible for people like that to eventually get nine-palace battle prowess.

But other than them, most cultivators who reach their limit with heavenly palaces will then try to step into the Nascent Soul level. Xu Qing's eyes glittered thoughtfully.

It wasn't exactly easy to break into the Nascent Soul level, and that was why most Gold Core cultivators who reached their limit would then start trying to form a nascent soul. It was a very mysterious and profound process, and because it was so common for people to stay in that state for an extended time, cultivators used a special name for that level. They would either call it half-Nascent Soul or pseudo-Nascent Soul.

Thanks to the fight he had just experienced, Xu Qing now had first-hand knowledge about the pseudo-Nascent Soul level.

It's stronger than the eight- or nine-palace level. It's actually much closer to ten palaces! I'm still too weak. I need to speed up my cultivation progress. What's more, I probably should take a trip to the Supreme Void Demonization Sect and try to learn their Demonization Art.

If Xu Qing's analysis was correct, the Demonization Art would help him materialize the Ghost Emperor in his sea of consciousness.

I wonder how much of a boost I'll get when the Ghost Emperor is fully materialized. The mere thought filled him with anticipation.

Hopefully it all goes smoothly. If it does, then maybe I can make one of my heavenly palaces into... a Ghost Emperor palace! My limit is ten heavenly palaces, and I've already completed five of them. That means that the remaining five... should include a sword palace and the Ghost Emperor palace. That leaves three.

Oh right, there's also my life essence bluegreen dragon.

In any case, the most urgent thing to think about right now is military credits. I previously asked for half a month off, which means I still have a week left. There's no point in going back to work early.

His eyes glittered as he thought about the military credits he needed both to study the Demonization Art and to visit Mount Daybreak. Everything was related to military credits.

I should earn a good amount of military credits from the mission, but it's still not going to be enough.... Xu Qing took out his command sword and started looking through the missions. Before long he found some bounty missions in the city. After checking his injuries to make sure they were stable, he left his sword pavilion, he left to try and gather some military credits.

Days passed. He never heard anyone talking about the big mission he'd gone on earlier. He had no idea who the real agent was, and had no idea if that agent had been successfully extracted and returned to the city. But apparently, the mission was concluded.

A week after his return, when he was out working hard to earn military credits, he got an urgent message from the Corrections Division. His vacation was over. Now he couldn't spend his days doing missions. Instead he checked in with the Corrections Division at dawn.

When he walked down the stairs inside the division, he sensed the familiar coldness. The occasional Unit D jailer called out greetings to him as he passed. His mind was still focused mostly on missions and military credits.

Back at D-132, he pushed open the door and stepped inside. The inmates looked just as they had half a month before. The cloud troll was still eating its own tentacles. The human woman was still trying to coax the scarecrows to sleep. Sir Inkwell said good morning in a very cordial fashion. The Rockdevil rotated endlessly.

The head blinked, sighed, and said, “Things were calm for a whole half a month. Why’d you have to come back?”

Just as before, Xu Qing checked on all the inmates, then went back to his spot by the door and sat down. As he did, his expression flickered. He hadn’t seen the boy. That seemed unusual. Based on his memories, he knew that the boy was always the first one to show up when he stepped inside.

“Where’s the destiny aura?” he asked, looking over at Sir Inkwell’s cell.

Sir Inkwell clasped hands and quietly replied, “There’s... something wrong with the destiny aura. I haven’t seen it for a few days.”

Frowning, Xu Qing walked past all the cells again to check them more closely. He eventually stopped walking in front of one specific cell. Inside was the boy, who seemed to be having trouble breathing. He was covered in grime, with his face all smudged up. At the same time, he seemed unprecedentedly weak. He was clearly not in a good state, as he was trembling painfully.

Upon noticing Xu Qing, he struggled to lift his head. However, he was in such a listless state that he couldn’t even open his eyes. Despite that, he flashed a smile, then tried to stand up. Apparently, he wanted to resume his usual routine of following Xu Qing around and keeping him safe.

Unfortunately, he didn’t have the strength. All he could do was look at Xu Qing and open his mouth as if to speak. No words came out. Given how lively and active he had always been in the past, his current state was very pitiable.

Concerned, Xu Qing squatted down and closely examined the boy. He could sense that the boy was in pain, and also noticed a black energy swirling inside of him. That black energy seemed to be transforming the boy in some way.

Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior and the shadow both appeared, and curiously assessed the boy.

Shortly after, the patriarch’s face filled with a very somber expression. Lowering his voice, he said, “Milord, given what I’ve read in books, I can speculate about what’s going on here.”

Xu Qing looked over.

“It’s a contamination. I’d say the boy probably went to some specific location and encountered an unclean thing.”

Hearing that, the boy nodded weakly.

When the patriarch saw his speculation confirmed, he knew that it was his moment to shine. Looking more somber than ever, he clasped hands to Xu Qing.

“Milord, based on my experience, most vile, unclean things can be dealt with using lightning. If you permit, milord, your humble servant can attempt to use my own heavenly tribulation lightning to purify the boy of the contamination.”

Xu Qing thought about it for a time. He didn't know much about destiny aura, and had no idea if the patriarch's idea would help. Then he thought about the palace lord.

“Does the palace lord know about you?” Xu Qing whispered.

The boy nodded.

“Does he know about your current state?” Xu Qing asked.

The boy lifted a hand and gestured, but Xu Qing wasn't sure what it meant.

At that point, the shadow spoke.

“Looks like... says palace lord knows... and helped it... said to rest up... be fine.”

Apparently the shadow had some experience with situations like this.

The boy nodded, then seemed to be hit by a wave of weakness, and closed his eyes.

Seeing how much pain the boy was obviously in, Xu Qing had Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior try out his idea.

The moment the patriarch had the go-ahead, he waved his hand, causing red lightning to appear. Carefully approaching the boy, he released one small bolt of heavenly tribulation lightning. When the lightning entered the boy, he shivered from head to toe. At the same time, the black energy within him faded a bit. Seeing that it was effective, the patriarch added more lightning. Before long, the black energy was disappearing rapidly, and the boy's weakness was transforming back into strength.

It wasn't a complete cure; in the end, there was still a little bit of the black energy in him. But its effects were greatly reduced.

Also, it did a lot to mitigate the pain. Eventually, the boy was back on his feet, walking a circle around Xu Qing and smiling happily. Considering there was still a bit of the black energy inside the boy, Xu Qing got the sense there was a lot more to the situation than he understood. But since the palace lord was aware of the situation, Xu Qing knew it surpassed his ability to truly handle.

He was right. The next morning when he showed up at D-132, the boy was completely back to normal. The black energy was gone, and he was in just as high spirits as usual.

With everything back to normal, Xu Qing spent his days at work and his nights doing missions to get military credits. Though his military credit balance was growing, he didn't have nearly enough for what he wanted to do. But then one evening when he was out on missions, he got a voice message from Kong Xianglong.

“Xu Qing, are you at your sword pavilion? If you are, I can swing by. Our military credits for the mission came in.”

Xu Qing's spirits lifted.

Before long, he was at the entrance of his sword pavilion, watching Kong Xianglong fly over.

Upon catching sight of Xu Qing, Kong Xianglong laughed heartily. Tossing him a bag of holding, he said, "There are two things inside. One is the military credit receipt. I already had it verified. All you have to do is add it to your command sword.

"The other thing is that gift I mentioned. Over the past few days I thought about your fighting style. I have the feeling that if you put some more mutagen into that Gruegloom hand of yours, it would probably be a lot more effective. Grueglooms also count as a nonhuman race, so if you do that, you'll need to balance the mutagen properly. It's just a suggestion. Give it a try if you think it might work. Anyway, enough of that. I have to take a trip to the Corrections Division now. Ai. The palace lord summoned me, so I have no choice but to go."

Sighing, Kong Xianglong clasped hands to leave. Xu Qing tried to get him to stay a bit longer, but regardless of how he pressed, Kong Xianglong hurried away.

As he left, Xu Qing clasped hands and bowed deeply, feeling deeply thankful in his heart.

Back inside his sword pavilion, he opened the bag of holding to find that there were indeed two items there. One was the military credit verification jade slip. The other was a blue chunk of ice. The ice was the manifestation of a magical technique, and inside of it was sealed a heart! The heart was semitransparent, and looking at it closely, it was obviously not completely dead. There were bits of life force in it.

Xu Qing's eyes narrowed as he came to the realization it was a Gruegloom heart. Xu Qing was by no means unfamiliar with Grueglooms. He had once captured one alive, and had ultimately assimilated it.

In fact, that foundation was what gave Master Seventh the initial inspiration for the Gruegloom Daoseizing Art. Assimilating that Gruegloom was what gave Xu Qing a solid foundation upon which to cultivate the Gruegloom Daoseizing Art.

Master Seventh had then taken inspiration from the fingers cultivated by Huang Yikun from the Dark Serenity Sect. Add in a Gruegloom heart from Sima Ru of the House of Grue Hunters, as well as dao-seizing techniques from numerous smaller sects, and Master Seventh had collected everything he needed to create the Gruegloom Daoseizing Art.

Theoretically speaking, another Gruegloom heart should make the Gruegloom Daoseizing Art even stronger.

Unfortunately, Grueglooms were a rare species. And by this point, Foundation Establishment Grueglooms wouldn't be of much use to Xu Qing. He needed a Gold Core Gruegloom heart. As for the heart in the blue ice, it did indeed come from a Gruegloom in the Gold Core level. Looking up, Xu Qing gazed in the direction of the Corrections Division, where Kong Xianglong had just gone to. To Xu Qing, this was a really amazing gift.

Eventually, he looked back at the ice. Eyes shining with determination, he activated the Gruegloom Daoseizing Art, causing his right hand to turn semitransparent. Without any hesitation, he reached

out with that transparent hand and stuck it into the ice. A moment later, he had extracted the Gruegloom heart from inside!

The moment he touched it, a tremor passed through him.

The Gruegloom heart emitted fluctuations of struggle, and then a howl of rage echoed in Xu Qing's mind. But Xu Qing's eyes glittered and he fiercely suppressed the struggling heart. The Gruegloom heart faded away as Xu Qing absorbed it using his technique. All of a sudden, a host of memory fragments appeared in Xu Qing's mind, whipping about like a tempest.

They were scattered memories from whoever this Gruegloom heart had previously belonged to.

They contained madness and defiance, and they battered at Xu Qing's sea of consciousness. However, Xu Qing snorted coldly, and the Ghost Emperor in his sea of consciousness flared with brilliance. A moment later, the memory fragments shattered into a cloud that then slowly dispersed into nothing. Xu Qing kept his Gruegloom Daoseizing Art active the whole time.

Gradually, the semitransparency of the technique wasn't just limited to his right hand. His left hand... was also transforming. After about an hour passed, he took a deep breath and lifted both his hands. Both of them were now semitransparent.

Next time he used the Gruegloom Daoseizing Art on an enemy, it would be a lot easier, and he would be able to take gold cores with much more ease. Looking at his two hands in satisfaction, he thought back to what Kong Xianglong had said about mutagen.

"I suppose I could try it out," he murmured. "That said, it seems inappropriate. It would be like telling all my enemies I'm skilled in the dao of poison and that I'm most effective when I have poison scattered everywhere.... It's probably fine to do occasionally, maybe just as a distraction. If people are focused on my hands, then they might not notice my poison as quickly."

Just as Xu Qing was thinking about what to do, his transmission jade slip vibrated as a voice message came in. It started with a long sigh, and then he heard the bitter voice of the Captain.

"Oh, how fickle you are, Little Ah Qing."

Xu Qing was very taken aback.

"I know you like to seduce women and then kick them to the curb. But I'm your Eldest Brother! You can't treat me like that! We already made an agreement between bros. We're supposed to travel the world together. But in the end, you leave all the hard work to me...."

The Captain's bitterness really came through on the jade slip, filling Xu Qing's sword pavilion.

"Eldest Brother...."

Xu Qing hesitated for a moment, and was about to keep talking when yet another sigh came from the Captain.

"If it weren't the fact that I work in the Merit Records Branch, and just happened to see that you earned a huge batch of military credits, then I would never have been

the wiser.... It's fine, little Junior Brother. As your Eldest Brother, I should offer congratulations. I hope that you and Kong Xianglong live a long and happy life together..." [1]

Xu Qing could sense that his Eldest Brother was really laying on the nonsense. And when that happened, it usually meant that he wanted something.

"Running low on spirit stones, Eldest Brother?" he asked coolly.

The Captain snorted coldly. "Is that what you think of your Eldest Brother, little Ah Qing? Is that the kind of person you think I am?"

"Fine, Eldest Brother. Since you don't need spirit stones, forget I mentioned it."

"Ahem... hey, hey, hey. Don't be like that. Okay, fine. I actually do need just a few spirit stones."

Chapter 423: The Mysterious Supreme Void World

"The thing is... it takes a lot of money to buy intelligence reports. But don't worry, little Ah Qing, that money was spent wisely!" The Captain gave an embarrassed chuckle. "You listen to me. Once I make all the final arrangements, you and I are going to hit it big. You could go outside and risk your life on missions for ten years and not benefit as much as you will from this job! And that... is why I need your support, little Junior Brother."

The Captain's voice was filled both with complacency and longing for the future.

Xu Qing was actually a bit curious. Knowing the Captain as he did, he got the feeling that the job would probably be just as amazing as the Captain was making it out to be. But it would also be incredibly risky.

After mulling it over, he decided to support the Captain with spirit stones. After all, he had plenty to spare nowadays; what he lacked was military credit. He exchanged a few more messages, and tried to arrange to either go meet the Captain to transfer the funds, or have the Captain come over. But the Captain was busy with something and said he didn't have time at the moment. The two of them agreed to meet up at the Supreme Void Demonization Sect the next day.

At the same time, Xu Qing let the Captain know about how swordsages could use military credit to learn the techniques of the three great sects. The Captain was immediately intrigued.

"You can do that? How come I haven't heard about that? Oh, I get it. The three great sects are really crafty, aren't they? From the perspective of the Swordsage Palace, the idea is that they don't want all their members coming from the three great sects. If that happened, then over a long period of time, it would create a lot of potential calamities. So they don't make a point of publicly announcing this study arrangement.

“The stance of the three sects is the opposite. They want more of their members to be swordsages, and that’s why they instituted the arrangement.

“That said, overall, the Swordsage Palace has the dominant position, and the three sects are inextricably tied to it. That’s probably the reason why the three sects have existed for so long.”

After hearing the Captain’s analysis, Xu Qing nodded in agreement. What the Captain said made sense.

Once the arrangements were made to meet up the next day, the Captain ended the conversation.

Xu Qing put down his transmission jade slip and went back to thinking about how to use the two hands of his upgraded Gruegloom Daoseizing Art.

About imbuing it with mutagen.... The reality is that I’m not limited to only mutagen or poison.

After some more thought, he tapped into his third heavenly palace, causing taboo poison power to spread into both of his hands. Almost instantly, his hands pulsed with poison. Then he changed tactics and filled his hands with mutagen. Next, he tapped into his fourth heavenly palace, whereupon his two hands became violet as the power of the violet moon filled them.

Using my hands in this way will make it very difficult for an enemy to defend against me in a fight. It could allow me to strike a fatal blow.

Xu Qing had always tried to keep his assets hidden and catch his enemies off guard. It was a practice that had started when he was young, and at the same time, conformed to the customs of the Seven Blood Eyes’ Seventh Peak.

As the night passed, Xu Qing spent more time becoming familiar with the upgrades to his Gruegloom Daoseizing Art. The next day, he requested three additional days off from the Corrections Division to go visit the Supreme Void Demonization Sect.

As one of the three great sects of Sea-Sealing County, the Supreme Void Demonization Sect had long occupied a large section of the southwestern part of the capital. They had teleportation portals active year-round to connect them to their main sect headquarters.

As for their subsidiary sect, it had one mission: to serve the swordsages. Upon arriving, Xu Qing saw a lot of swordsages coming and going. The Captain was already there waiting, squatting nearby and eating an apple. When he saw Xu Qing, he waved.

“Over here, little Ah Qing!”

Xu Qing walked over.

The Captain tossed him an apple.

Xu Qing caught it and took a bite. Then he handed some spirit notes to the Captain.

The Captain got visibly excited when he saw the spirit notes. Taking one more big bite of his apple, he glanced around and then said, “Don’t you worry, little Junior Brother. Based on my plan, it won’t be long before we accomplish something really big.”

“How dangerous will it be?” Xu Qing asked.

“Dangerous? It won’t be dangerous!”

Xu Qing nodded. Clearly, the plan was going to be incomparably dangerous.

“Forget about that,” the Captain said. “I need to go find Wu Jianwu. Can you believe he spent a bunch of spirit stones to tap into my personal connections, all to get a chance at qualifying to be a swordsage? Today he’ll go through the Grand Emperor’s assessment of the heart. Last night we had a cram session based on all the information I previously bought. At least that way, my investment won’t be totally wasted.” The Captain stood. “I want to go see how he performs. Will he also get a one-meter light?”

Eyes shining with anticipation, the Captain hurried away.

Xu Qing watched him go, musing that the Captain must really have a big grudge with Wu Jianwu, otherwise he wouldn’t be scamming him over and over again.

After the Captain was gone, Xu Qing entered the subsidiary sect of the Supreme Void Demonization Sect.

The sect was constructed from concentric rings of buildings that formed the sect’s unique Supreme Void Formation. Every building was adorned with carvings of strange and bizarre animals. Some were vicious and cruel, others were calm and auspicious. Most were mutant beasts from forbidden regions, and some were even nonhuman species. Based on the understanding of the Supreme Void Demonization Sect, all of them could be subjects of demonization.

One of the halls here was where one could study the Demonization Art. It didn’t look like an ordinary hall. Instead, it was made up of countless stone alcoves that allowed people to work on cultivation without disturbing the others present. There were well over a hundred such alcoves.

After paying the required military credit, Xu Qing was led inside by a very polite sect disciple, whereupon he was allowed to enter one of the alcoves.

Inside, Xu Qing saw that there was a spell formation carved on the floor, at the head of which was a stone stele. The stele wasn’t some ancient artifact pulsing with a sensation of ancient time. It was new. That said, it was covered with deeply meaningful magical symbols. Obviously, the marks on the stone stele weren’t original, but had been transferred there. It seemed most likely that this stele was a copy of an original maintained by the sect. The fact that it was a copy wouldn’t influence the enlightenment gained from it, so Xu Qing sat down cross-legged, took a deep breath, and looked at the stele with determination flickering in his eyes.

It took a lot of military credits to get in here. I have three days to seek enlightenment. Hopefully I can make it work on the first shot! And I hope this Demonization Art really can help my Ghost Emperor mountain to fully materialize!

Without the slightest hesitation, he closed his eyes and cast his senses into the stone stele. The moment he made contact, he could hear what sounded like a roar from ancient times. The roar grew more intense, until it was like a wind sweeping over him. Then a tremor passed through him as he sensed something like the power of teleportation.

This was different from any previous instance in which he sought enlightenment. Eyes opening, he found that he was now in an astonishing void.

He was no longer in an alcove in the Supreme Void Demonization Sect. Instead, he had been teleported into the inside of a semitransparent fish. The fish was about thirty meters long. In some locations on its body it had black magical symbols that resembled crying faces. The sound of weeping echoed out into the void as the fish swam along. In front of the fish was a greenish lantern that emanated netherworldly fire into the void. It was like flickering ghostfire leading the way forward.

Xu Qing was shaken. This turn of events went beyond what he had anticipated. Expression flickering, he kept his guard up as he remained within the fish. A moment later, an ancient-sounding voice echoed into his ears.

“Greetings, trial-taker.

“You are currently on your way to the location where you will seek enlightenment of the Demonization Art.

“That place is... the Supreme Void World, a fragment of a profound and mysterious world discovered by our sect’s founder. While in the Supreme Void World, you will form a pact that will allow you to use the demonization ability.

“The Demonization Art actually does not require any enlightenment. It requires the pact. That pact is what requires enlightenment. Once you succeed, then the image of a demon will be transported into your sea of consciousness. The basic principle of demonization is to borrow the power of the Supreme Void World to materialize the demon in your sea of consciousness. That is why... the pact is so important.

“There is no guarantee that you will formalize the pact. The chances of failure are high. Furthermore, the Supreme Void World is crafty. Whether or not you succeed with the pact will depend on your personal good fortune. Remember, this is a secret of our sect, and cannot be revealed to outsiders. Any who violate that rule will be punished!

“Regardless of whether you succeed, you can always call upon this fish to return from the Supreme Void World. And with that, I wish you good luck.”

Xu Qing’s eyes glittered. He could tell that the voice wasn’t speaking to him specifically. Rather, it was a standardized message that everyone received. As he pondered the situation, his eyes narrowed. Off in the distant void, he saw what appeared to be a massive stone statue of a cyclops. In the statue’s chest was a cavity that went through its entire torso. The statue’s facial features weren’t clear, but its mouth was open wide and it looked like the entrance to another world.

The fish Xu Qing was inside was moving rapidly toward that statue. Once in front of it, the semitransparent fish twitched as it spat out a bubble. Inside of that bubble was Xu Qing. When the bubble entered the statue’s mouth, Xu Qing saw another world that surpassed anything he could have imagined.

It was filled with mist, and within that mist were whispering voices that gave the place a sinister, gruish air. Floating up right in front of Xu Qing was a very large white object. As Xu Qing took the white object in, he saw that it was covered with many folds that looked almost like waves. Eventually, it was revealed in its entirety.

Astonishingly, it was a gigantic brain! Not only was it covered with numerous folds, but also, it had a central sulcus separating the front part of the brain from the back. And it had a dark brainstem which split into two sections, at each of which was a smaller brown-colored brain. It was completely horrid in appearance. As it floated in the mist, Xu Qing saw that, beneath the brain, there was a network of nerves and blood vessels. They almost looked like a chaotic mass of tree branches.

There wasn't just one such 'brain tree' floating in this world of mist.

Xu Qing's pupils constricted as he looked around and saw many, many more of them out there. There had to be hundreds of them just in his vicinity, with more further in the distance. There were simply too many to count them accurately.

All the brain trees around him were shivering, and he could hear them whispering to each other.

"Another one's here."

"Sssh! Keep it down! You'll scare him away."

"There's another one off in the distance. I wonder if they know each other."

"Hard to say. But this one looks quite delicious. I heard the Voidlings are going to war. We have to be careful."

"Come over here. Pick me! Let's enter a pact!"

"You want to learn demonization? I can help make it happen. All you have to do... is give me some of your memories."

"You can sacrifice any of your memories to me. As long as they're good enough, I'll enter a pact with you."

Numerous voices echoed into his ears. It was very gruish.

His expression was grim; this was his first time participating in any enlightenment like this. As he looked around coldly, one of the brain trees floated over to him.

"They're lying. They just want to eat you. So why not enter a pact with me? Just reach out and touch me. I only want a small, minor memory. Give it to me. I'm hungry! Hurry up. Hurry up and give it to me...."

As it spoke with clear greed and longing, it wriggled in a very disgusting manner.

"Don't trust it! It's fooled a lot of people. Last time it ate one of your companions alive. People who lose their memories forget to enter pacts."

“That’s right. It’s very cunning. Pick me! I only want to eat a little bit. Give it to me! To me!”

“Pick me... I’m so hungry. I want to eat! If you don’t give it to me, I won’t let you leave!”

The voices built up as dozens of brains floated toward Xu Qing, surrounding him, all of them expressing longing mixed with open malice and greed.

Xu Qing thought back to what the voice had told him before he entered this place. This place was the fragment of a world, and you needed to enter a pact to use the Demonization Art. Apparently, formalizing that pact involved giving one of these brain trees some memories to eat. If the brain was satisfied, the pact would be entered.

Of course, what exactly ‘satisfied’ meant was up to the crafty brain.

“Memories, huh...?” Xu Qing’s eyes narrowed as he identified the largest and most malicious of the brains.

“I pick you,” he said, extending his hand.

The wriggling brain approached and touched his hand.

“So, which memory are you going to give me...?” As the words echoed out, a malicious and greedy will reached out to Xu Qing’s mind. However, it couldn’t just take whatever it wanted; it needed Xu Qing to give the memory freely.

Eyes cold, Xu Qing quietly said, “I’ll give you a memory from when I woke up in D-132. I can’t remember that, so let’s see if you’re able to. Enjoy!”

A moment later, Xu Qing could feel through his hand that the brain was trembling.

Chapter 424: The Ghost Emperor Arrives!

It was a gruish world, but something even more gruish was playing out.

Within that boundless mist, the malicious and greedy tree-like brain that wanted to devour Xu Qing’s memories was currently feeding on the memory he had given it of D-132....

The giant brain spasmed. It was seeing something it shouldn’t be able to see. The suppressing power of the Corrections Division wasn’t present, so maybe that was why it couldn’t forget what it was seeing. It was a unique entity that specialized in devouring memories. As a result, the brain tree suddenly felt immeasurable pain that caused it to suddenly let loose an agonized shriek.

Because the other brain trees in the area rarely saw anything like this, or perhaps because it had been so long since they had, curious fluctuations immediately began to fill the area.

“What’s happening? Is something wrong?”

“It’s that delicious?”

“I want to have a try!”

From those words, Xu Qing suddenly realized that the brains in this Supreme Void World were actually quite naïve.

As the brains expressed their curiosity, the screams of the brain in front of him turned shriller. The large central brain as well as the two smaller auxiliary brains were all wriggling and twitching. And then they started struggling as if to pull away from Xu Qing.

Instead, Xu Qing gripped down hard with his hand, his fingers sinking into the brain so that it couldn't escape. Then he calmly asked, "Taste good?"

"I..." The brain's screams grew in intensity, filling the area until there was a massive boom. Countless chunks of mucus-covered brain chunks exploded in all directions. It had been destroyed in body and soul.

Everything went completely silent. Even if the other surrounding brains were more naive than they were, they could see what had just happened. One by one, they started backing away.

"How could it have exploded?"

"What memory did it eat?"

"What did he feed it?"

Xu Qing's face remained expressionless as he flicked his hand free of some mucus.

This was the plan he had come up with, partly as a test regarding D-132. The truth was that Xu Qing wasn't as ignorant regarding D-132 as he had been in the past. Although he didn't know all the details, he had noticed his supply of bamboo slips dwindling. He had also been paying attention to the specific things the head told him. As a result, he had long since come to a general realization of what was going on.

There was something terrifying in D-132, and he had woken up to its existence many times already. He just couldn't remember any of the details.

It must have something to do with a god. Or perhaps it's just some entity that casts a death curse on anyone who sees it and remembers. Maybe the Corrections Division itself is ensuring that whoever sees that entity forgets about it as a way to sever karma? Is that why I can't remember anything about it?

He couldn't help but remember what Chen Boli had told him. "When you think you know everything, you'll find there's only more to discover."

It was very thought-provoking.

Does it mean that I've actually uncovered the truth already? But after I do, I forget it? Or maybe there's some even deeper secret that I don't know about? How much, if any, of my speculations are correct?

With such thoughts on his mind, he looked at the other brain trees in the area.

He found this grisly Supreme Void World to be very interesting. Not only could he possibly get the Demonization Art here, but also, he might be able to dig into the truth about D-132.

He decided to do some more experimentation. Striding forward to another of the brain trees, which was currently shivering and inching away from him, he reached out his right hand.

“It’s delicious. Come have a taste.”

The brain trembled. However, its longing for memories ensured that it cautiously approached Xu Qing and touched his hand. The other brains in the area watched to see what would happen.

A moment later, the brain Xu Qing had touched started to shiver. Then it screamed and writhed dramatically. Just before it exploded, Xu Qing said, “What do you see?”

“I see—”

Before it could finish speaking, it exploded.

Xu Qing’s expression was unsightly as he looked around at the other brains. Without exception, they were madly backing away in terror. However, Xu Qing wasn’t ready to give up quite yet. Chasing one down as it screamed, he reached out and touched it.

“Come on. It’s delicious.”

Things continued in that manner for three days. Soon his time limit was up, and the big fish came to the statue and sucked him out. Once he was inside, the fish turned and zipped off in the other direction. Xu Qing looked over his shoulder at the statue and sighed inwardly.

Sadly I didn’t get a full answer. Only bits and pieces. If only I had a bit more time in there....

He got the feeling that this place was going to be the key to figuring out D-132.

It just takes so many military credits to get in here.

Shaking his head, he lifted his hand, above which floated a magical symbol that greatly resembled the brains in the Supreme Void World.

That magical symbol was a pact.

Every trial-taker who could satisfy one of the brains with their memories would be given a demonization symbol like this to formalize the pact. As a result, they could then utilize the Demonization Art. Demonization was draining. Though the cultivator who used it would bear some of that burden, the rest of the burden was taken by the Supreme Void World. The exact ratio was different for each person, and was determined by the specific pact with the specific brain.

Stifling his disappointment, Xu Qing waved his hand, producing a second pact, then a third and a fourth...

In total, he had thirty-two demonization symbols. Each and every one of them was a pact that would help bear the burden of demonization. Xu Qing had quite a few, and he knew why. They were an expression of approval from the brain trees in the Supreme Void World. The fact he had so many went to show how much he was approved.

Sighing, he flicked his sleeve to gather up all thirty-two symbols, then he closed his eyes to meditate.

Time passed. At a certain point, he shivered as he sensed himself being teleported. When he opened his eyes, he was back in the alcove in the subsidiary sect of the Supreme Void Demonization Sect.

Thinking back to what he had experienced during the past three days, he took a deep breath and walked out. His plan was to go back to the cultivation chamber in his sword pavilion and see if the Demonization Art would help him materialize the Ghost Emperor as per his plan.

With such thoughts on his mind, he flew out of the Supreme Void Demonization Sect's subsidiary sect and back to his sword pavilion. Once inside, he activated the spell formation defenses, sealing himself inside.

Inside the cultivation chamber, he looked around. It was a self-contained dimensional space that was very roomy. After ensuring that it was large enough to accommodate a projection of the Ghost Emperor, Xu Qing took out one of the demonization symbols and sent it toward the Ghost Emperor mountain in his sea of consciousness. As the symbol got close, it started shining with dazzling light. The light grew brighter, eventually fully covering the Ghost Emperor mountain.

Meanwhile, outside of Xu Qing's body, a vague mountain was now visible, gradually taking his place.

Although it was vastly smaller than the real Ghost Emperor mountain, it was still astounding. What was more, it eventually looked like a person seated cross-legged in meditation. Though it was semitransparent, it still looked profoundly menacing. Furthermore, it was soon clear that the meditating figure wore black armor and had a huge bladed weapon. And there were two worlds on its shoulders.

It looked like the spirit of some sort of wretched god sitting there meditating. Each bit of its suit of armor contained incredible destructive power, and the weapon looked like it could slice worlds in half. Astonishing fluctuations rolled off of it, full of brutal madness, as though it were furious at heaven and earth. What was more, there was a staff materializing on its knees, and it also pulsed with terrifying might.

The figure was none other than the Ghost Emperor! And his facial features were about eighty percent similar to Xu Qing's. That said, those facial features were only about ten percent materialized. Meanwhile, the sword pavilion was having a hard time sustaining this Ghost Emperor, and it was rumbling as if it might collapse.

Loud cracking sounds rang out, and eventually, the demonization symbol in his sea of consciousness shattered.

The sea of light from the pact vanished, and the projection of the Ghost Emperor vanished as if it had never existed.

Shivering, Xu Qing opened his eyes and coughed up a massive mouthful of blood. However, his eyes were shining brightly.

“It works!”

He'd hoped to keep the Ghost Emperor mountain projected outside of himself for longer, but had been unable. However, he finally had some hope that he could eventually pull it off. The end failure had really been a result of the demonization symbol reaching its limit.

Ten symbols should be for a full materialization! Excited, he took a deep breath and suppressed any thoughts of doing further experiments. He only had thirty-one symbols left, and he just couldn't bear to waste them for testing purposes.

This will be a trump card. And that means I basically have the ability to use a projection of the Ghost Emperor three times.

Eyes glittering, he started to contemplate more ways to accumulate military credits. That way, he would have enough for another trip to the Supreme Void World after he used those three chances he already had.

As he was thinking about that, his transmission jade slip vibrated as a voice message came in from the Captain. He sounded confused.

“Little Junior Brother...”

Surprised, Xu Qing lifted his jade slip. “What is it now?”

“Why does it have to be like this, little Junior Brother. Why? WHY?” The Captain sounded miserable, but at the same time, deeply confused. “When that idiot Wu Jianwu went through the heart assessment, he used the answers I gave him! Do you know the incredible price I paid for that information? I made sure he memorized all of it. And just to make sure he didn’t forget, I personally quizzed him several times. Then, when he went through the assessment of the heart, he actually got... a dazzling 15,000-meter pillar of light!

“15,000 meters!! Same question! Same answer! Why did I only get one meter? I was hoping Wu Jianwu would also get one. That way I would at least have some company...”

Xu Qing thought for a moment, then decided to try comforting the Captain. “There’s a good side, though. You’re still the only one with a one-meter light!”

A very long moment passed before the Captain replied, sounding very depressed. “You’re not very good at comforting people, little Junior Brother. Say, maybe Wu Jianwu did another Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity impression. Maybe he started reciting some poetry! No. This can’t stand! I have to ask him the details!”

Xu Qing did feel bad for the Captain. Therefore, out of respect for their friendship, he observed a brief moment of silence....

After that he quickly put his jade slip away and then went out to start more missions and get more military credits.

Time passed. Xu Qing never found out if the Captain got the answer he was looking for from Wu Jianwu. All of his focus was on military credits.

He did a lot of patrol, search, arrest, and backup missions. Sir Mountain-River, Wang Chen, and Duskspirit offered a lot of help. Being in different departments, whenever they had a good mission, they would call him to join. Sometimes Kong Xianglong came along as well, and they would all do missions together. Though they had to split the military credits, it ensured that they were accomplishing missions constantly.

Eventually Arch-Immortal Plumdark came to find out that Xu Qing wanted military credits, so using her authority as the administrator of the Eight Sect Coalition’s subsidiary sect, she called

upon all the swordsages who had originally come from the coalition to help out. Xu Qing was the palace lord's secretary-general, and was known for his 30,000-meter pillar of light. That made it easy for him to make new acquaintances. And that wasn't to mention that they came from the same coalition. In the past, Xu Qing had kept such a low profile that people rarely had a chance to interact with him. But thanks to Arch-Immortal Plumdark, a lot of people were willing to lend a hand and establish good karma as a result. Few people said no.

It reached the point where Xu Qing was able to finish six or seven missions a night. His military credits were rapidly piling up, which was a very good feeling. What was more, the fact that he was going crazy on a mission ensured that his name was spreading in the county capital.

He spent his days in the Corrections Division, where everything went on like usual. The boy never developed any further problems.

One day about half a month later, when Xu Qing had just walked out of D-132 to start working on missions again, an order came in on his command sword.

"Xu Qing, come to the Swordsage Palace immediately!"

The voice was cold, somber, and full of authority.

Chapter 425: Coming With Ill Intentions

Xu Qing stopped in place and looked down somewhat suspiciously at his command sword. The order came out of nowhere, and it didn't explain what it was about. The voice sounded familiar, though. After thinking about it, he realized it was Honor Guard Sima who was originally from the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society. That, in turn, made Xu Qing think of Zhang Siyun and the Yao Clan. His guard went up.

What does Honor Guard Sima want with me?

Even as he pondered the situation, his command sword vibrated again. This time it was a voice message from Kong Xianglong.

"Xu Qing, did you just receive some orders?"

"Yeah," Xu Qing replied. Already he was getting an idea of what was going on.

"I knew it. It's the same with both little River and little Chen. Ai. I bet this is the aftermath of killing those Holytides."

Kong Xianglong didn't say anything more, as he was currently on his way to the Swordsage Palace.

After one final bit of thought, Xu Qing left the Corrections Division.

It was evening, and the dome of heaven was lit with red. And as the light shone down, it made the lands below seem like they were covered with blood. Xu Qing glanced down, then headed in the direction of the Swordsage Palace.

The honor guard position was a very important one in the Swordsage Palace, and it came with a lot of authority. Honor Guard Sima had responsibilities related to law enforcement, especially as it related to swordsage rules. Therefore, no one would dare to ignore his orders, neither Kong Xianglong nor Xu Qing.

Before long, Xu Qing landed outside the Swordsage Palace. Kong Xianglong and Duskspirit arrived at the same time.

“We die before telling the truth!” Kong Xianglong said quietly.

Xu Qing nodded. Soon enough Sir Mountain-River and Wang Chen were there as well, both of them looking very grim. After landing next to Kong Xianglong and Xu Qing, Sir Mountain-River started cursing.

“Big Bro Kong. Xu Qing. What the hell is the Swordsage Palace up to? What exactly did we do wrong?”

“Little River!” Kong Xianglong snapped, glaring at him.

Sir Mountain-River gave a cold harrumph but didn’t say anything further.

“Maybe there’s more to the situation than occurred to us,” Kong Xianglong said. “Let’s go. We don’t want to keep Honor Guard Sima waiting.” He walked in.

Xu Qing, meanwhile, looked at the furious Sir Mountain-River and Wang Chen in his Smokewight doppelgänger.

“We should make sure there are more witnesses around to see what happens,” Xu Qing said quietly.

Sir Mountain-River and Wang Chen immediately knew what he meant, and took out jade slips. Duskspirit did the same.

Kong Xianglong didn’t stop them. That said, he slowed his walking pace a bit. Thus, the group entered the main gate of the Swordsage Palace. After walking for the time it takes an incense stick to burn, they eventually arrived at the Hall of Regulations.

There were currently a few dozen people already gathered there. All had cold facial expressions and powerful cultivation bases. None of them wore Swordsage Palace uniforms. Instead, their garments were the color yellow, and had the character ‘dao’ embroidered on them. [1]

As Xu Qing and the others approached, the gathered individuals looked over at them.

Kong Xianglong’s eyebrows shot up, but he held back from saying anything about them. Stopping in front of the Hall of Regulations, he clasped hands.

“Your humble servant Kong Xianglong has come at the behest of Honor Guard Sima.”

Meanwhile, Wang Chen’s Smokewight doppelgänger leaned over to Xu Qing and whispered, “They’re Yao Clan cultivators.”

Then he did the same as Kong Xianglong, clasping hands and introducing himself. Xu Qing, Sir Mountain-River, and Duskspirit all followed suit.

Afterward, a cold voice echoed out from within the Hall of Regulations, whereupon three people emerged.

In the middle was Zhang Siyun's Sect Grandfather, who was Honor Guard Sima. To his left was an old man wearing the daoist robes of the Yao Clan. He emanated clear Spirit Trove fluctuations, and his eyes glittered as if with lightning as he expressionlessly sized up Xu Qing and the others.

On Honor Guard Sima's right-hand side was an individual that caused Xu Qing's pupils to constrict the moment he saw them. This person was not human. He was a Holytide. In fact, it was the very same middle-aged Black Guard cultivator that had shouted angrily at them when they fled the border. He was obviously an important person among the Holytides. His cultivation base was also in the Spirit Trove level, and from the fluctuations he emanated, he already had four secret troves. As he stood there, he coldly looked at Xu Qing and the others.

To Xu Qing, it almost seemed like a cruel, ironic joke to see a Holytide here in the Swordsage Palace. Meanwhile, Kong Xianglong and the others were breathing heavily.

Around this time, Honor Guard Sima looked at the old man from the Yao Clan and said, "Steward Sun, they're here. You can go ahead and ask."

Steward Sun nodded, then clasped hands and bowed to Honor Guard Sima. Next, he turned and looked coldly at Xu Qing and the others. Expression grim, he sternly said, "You five have got a lot of gall! You haphazardly ignored right and wrong to, without any reason whatsoever, cold-bloodedly and brutally murder the emissaries sent to Sea-Sealing County by the Holytide people! The punishment for brazenly violating the agreement between our two species is the death penalty!"

Xu Qing frowned slightly. There was something off about this man's wording. It wasn't about the killing, but rather how he mentioned 'haphazardly ignoring right and wrong' and 'without any reason whatsoever.'

That wording led Xu Qing to suspect that he was waiting for Xu Qing and the others to explain the reason for what they did. However... based on Xu Qing's training and understanding, he knew that they couldn't very well speak about the agent they had been sent to extract. Both species had agents in each other's territory. It was a tacit mutual understanding. But if you talked about it openly, that would change everything, and would make things very difficult. What was more, however they responded to this, it would reveal clues that needed to remain hidden.

As Xu Qing thought about this, he assumed that Sir Mountain-River and the others were coming to a similar conclusion. They weren't fools. Therefore, nobody said anything.

Looking confused, Kong Xianglong said, "You think we murdered the Holytide emissaries? That's not even possible. We've been working on our cultivation this whole time. You can go check the logs."

Steward Sun from the Yao Clan snorted coldly. Not wanting to get in an argument with a nobody like Kong Xianglong, he turned to the Holytide cultivator and respectfully clasped hands.

"Fellow Daoist Chen, see what I mean, sir?"

The Black Guard cultivator looked at Xu Qing and the others, then suddenly smiled. Turning to Honor Guard Sima, he said, "Honor Guard Sima. All of this started because, on the way here, the emissary delegation realized that they had a mole in their midst who was planning to steal Holytide relics. Because of that, the emissary issued orders for him to be arrested. Unfortunately, they couldn't find him. It was in those circumstances that the delegation was ambushed and viciously slaughtered by your Swordsage Palace.

“Don’t tell me that mole who was stealing from us was actually someone dispatched by your Swordsage Palace. Did you assign him to steal from us? Our two species have got along for many generations. Did the Swordsage Palace put you up to this, or perhaps it was Sea-Sealing County. Or is it something humans in general are doing?”

The Black Guard cultivator’s eyes glittered and he waved a hand to produce a jade slip. Instantly, it projected an image. Within that image, Xu Qing and the others were killing the fleeing half-Nascent Soul cultivator. The things Kong Xianglong said before fleeing were also clearly audible. Kong Xianglong stood there with his eyes glittering coldly.

Xu Qing’s face remained expressionless, but his eyes were also ice cold.

Honor Guard Sima didn’t react visibly. After looking at the image projected by the jade slip, he shook his head. “This was not done at the behest of the Swordsage Palace. We don’t even have any agents in your territory.”

Steward Sun from the Yao Clan coldly said, “No agent? And they weren’t on an extraction mission? That means that this was some sort of personal vendetta. Maybe they wanted to murder Holytide cultivators to start a war between the two species. These five have committed an unforgivable crime! Men, arrest them and hand them over to the Holytides! Only in that manner can we pay homage to the dead heroes of our allies here!”

The moment the words left his mouth, the dozens of Yao Clan cultivators unleashed the power of their cultivation base as they started walking toward Xu Qing and the others.

Xu Qing’s eyes flashed with cold light. Kong Xianglong suddenly looked up, his eyes brimming with a vicious look.

But then, a host of bright lights appeared behind them, speeding in their direction. Piercing sounds filled the public square as a host of figures descended. They were all swordsages. Specifically, they were swordsages who started out as cultivators in the Eight Sect Coalition. Over the years, most of those swordsages had been assigned to work in other prefectures, but today they were here in the county capital. Xu Qing had sent messages to all of them on the way here. They all burst with baleful auras as they took up positions around Xu Qing and the others. Then they cast malicious, contemptuous grins at the Yao Clan people.

“Interesting. Do you really think you’re going to arrest swordsages right in the middle of the Swordsage Palace?”

“Come on, bitches. You want to deliver someone to the Holytides? Take me!”

“You want to ‘pay homage’ to dead Holytide ‘heroes’?”

“Ya bunch of bloody wankers!” [2]

The swordsages unleashed their cultivation base power, causing their energy to surge, and filling the area with a killing air.

The Yao Clan cultivators stopped in place.

Steward Sun opened his mouth to speak, but then a whistling sound rose up in the distance.

Another group of swordsages was flying at top speed in their direction. There were over a hundred, all of them bursting with baleful auras. They were people who originated in the Supreme Ancient Lightning Order, and they had come at the behest of Wang Chen. As they neared, rumbling sounds echoed out, shaking heaven and earth.

Chen Tinghao was in the group, and he laughed coldly as he called out, “How dare you make a move on one of us swordsages!” [3]

The other Supreme Ancient Lightning Order swordsages shouted similar things.

“Who cares if a few damn Holytide cultivators died? Is that a big deal or something? I’ve even eaten a few of them in the past!”

“Do you have any face at all, Yao Clan?”

The Yao Clan looked around, feeling deeply shaken.

But things weren’t over yet. A moment later, more swordsages showed up. They were from the Supreme Void Demonization Sect and the Blood Chill Society. Altogether there were hundreds of them. The swordsages from the Supreme Void Demonization Sect had already been demonized, and were in the form of a host of greater demons. The mere sight of them was shocking to the core. The cultivators from the Blood Chill Society emanated a towering blood energy that kicked up powerful winds in the area. Their cold voices echoed out to fill the area.

“Maybe you can’t act human, but does that mean you have to act like dogs?”

“Calling them dogs is an insult to dogs!”

“You scum are worse than dogs!”

“We’re very interested to see who would dare make a move on a swordsage!”

Other similar curses echoed out.

The combined aura of so many swordsages shook the area, while countless cold, bloody, fiendish gazes locked onto the Yao Clan cultivators and the Holytide expert. Killing intent roiled, shaking everything. It seemed that the slightest move on the part of the Yao Clan would prompt the swordsages to crush all of them out of existence. Facing such an intense baleful aura caused the Yao Clan cultivators to shift in place nervously. What was more, there were even more swordsages approaching as the moments ticked by, all of them pulsing with killing intent.

Steward Sun saw all of that and was deeply shaken. He couldn’t help but pant a bit as his pupils constricted. As far as he was concerned, this was a potential rebellion.

“Honor Guard Sima!” he said, turning to look at the honor guard. The Holytide Black Guard cultivator looked similarly grim.

Meanwhile, Honor Guard Sima didn’t betray any reaction at all. Smiling woodenly, he said, “Steward Sun, I called these five here to give some face to the Yao Mansion. You got to ask your question, and you heard their answer. The situation isn’t complicated. We didn’t dispatch any so-called agents. And we obviously didn’t kill the Holytide emissaries. As for that silly jade slip of yours, they’re easy to make. If you’d like, I can have a few more made and sent to you later.”

Stroking his beard gently, Honor Guard Sima smiled faintly. “The Swordsage Palace has done what etiquette requires. But you Yao Clan cultivators have foolishly gone and run your mouth here in the Swordsage Palace. The inaccuracies in your statement have provoked the wrath of these swordsages, and sadly, there’s nothing I can do about that!”

Chapter 426: Walking Alone in a Dark Alley

“You!” growled Steward Sun from the Yao Mansion. His expression was very unsightly as the baleful auras of hundreds of swordsages made them seem like a pack of wolves glaring at him and the Holytide emissary.

Inside, he was weeping bitterly. The truth was that coming here this day wasn’t his idea. Frankly speaking, it seemed completely absurd for a Holytide to come to the Swordsage Palace and arrest some swordsages. Unfortunately, the Noble Marquis had given him clear orders to keep the Holytide emissary happy. Therefore, at this moment, he had no choice but to viciously grit his teeth.

Glaring aggressively, he said, “The Noble Marquis has issued clear orders. Take Kong Xianglong and his four companions into custody!”

Honor Guard Sima frowned slightly. Meanwhile, a dour smile appeared on the Holytide Black Guard emissary, while an imperceptible glimmer passed through his eyes. The truth was that causing trouble for Kong Xianglong wasn’t the real reason the emissary was here. His real mission was to assess the Yao Clan. During this entire time, he had been keeping a close eye on the facial expression of each member of the Yao Clan. What was more, he had been using a secret magic to determine whether or not their attitude was genuine or fake.

When the dozens of Yao Clan cultivators heard the emissary’s orders, they secretly groaned. However, because the orders had been given, they had no choice but to take action. As their cultivation bases flared to life, they charged toward Xu Qing and the others. Just when it seemed open fighting was about to break out, a cold harrumph echoed out from the dome of heaven.

“What madness is this??”

Mountain-toppling, sea-draining energy weighed down from above, crushing onto everyone present. The entire Hall of Regulations trembled, and everyone present reeled in heart and mind. That was especially true of the Yao Clan cultivators, who were suddenly as immobile as if a massive mountain were right on top of them.

A figure descended from above. It was an old man with a thousand daos streaming in his eyes. That indicated that he was in the first stage of the Void Returning level, Space-Shattering 1,000 Daos.

He wore a swordsage uniform, and the sky behind him rippled and distorted as countless illusory versions of himself stretched back upward, causing the entire Swordsage Palace to tremble. That was the sign of the second stage of the Void Returning level, Transform 10,000 Veracities.

But there was more. As he descended, the space around him seemed to split apart. It was almost as if his every movement forward caused new worlds to be born, except they were like bubbles that existed for only a moment before popping. That was... the sign of the third stage of the Void Returning level, 100,000,000 Thoughts Split Heaven.

That said, there weren't very many worlds around the old man, which indicated that he hadn't fully stepped into that third stage. He was only about halfway there. Even so, he was still immeasurably mighty, and his mere presence caused the entire Swordsage Palace to go silent.

Xu Qing instantly recognized him. This man was the very same person who had appeared when he swore his swordsage oath. He was one of Swordsage Palace's deputy palace lords.

Honor Guard Sima was the first to react. Clasp hands, he bowed and said, "Well met, Deputy Palace Lord!"

Xu Qing, Kong Xianglong, and the others quickly joined him, along with all of the surrounding swordsages.

"Well met, Deputy Palace Lord!"

The deputy palace lord's face was expressionless as he looked at the clearly shocked Steward Sun.

"Screw off!"

Steward Sun shivered from head to toe. He looked like he wanted to say something, but didn't dare to. Instead, he bowed his head, clasped hands to the Black Guard cultivator, then quickly led the Yao Clan cultivators away.

Ignoring the Yao Clan, the deputy palace lord looked at the Holytide cultivator. "As for you, you're an emissary, so I'll give you the time it takes an incense stick to burn to flee for your life. And that's only because we humans value etiquette. If you aren't back in Holytide territory by then, I'll personally cut you down."

Expression flickering, the Black Guard cultivator turned and raced toward the teleportation complex.

When all that was done, the deputy palace lord turned to Xu Qing and the others. Snorting coldly, he said, "You five sure have guts, don't you? Well, at the behest of the palace lord himself, I'm sentencing all of you to a month in the Corrections Division! Honor Guard Sima, I want you to personally take them there!"

Xu Qing kept his head bowed. Sir Mountain-River, Wang Chen, and Duskspirit all sighed inwardly as they also kept their heads bowed. Only Kong Xianglong stood there tall and straight. He would only show fear in front of the palace lord himself. That said, he was a bit disappointed. He had worked very hard to avoid repercussions from their deviation from mission protocol, but in the end, still ended up getting thrown in jail.

"Yes, sir!" Honor Guard Sima said somberly.

Obviously, the deputy palace lord wanted him to escort Xu Qing and the others as a protector, just in case there were repercussions from the Holytides or the Yao Clan.

"What are the rest of you standing around gawking for? Get out of here. And remember, you're all swordsages!" With that, the deputy palace lord turned coldly and disappeared.

Honor Guard Sima approached Kong Xianglong and the others. Looking them over, he eventually focused on Xu Qing.

“I’m a swordmage honor guard first,” he said, “and a Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society cultivator second.”

Perhaps an outsider might not understand what he meant by that. But given Xu Qing’s background, he knew exactly what message was being sent. Clapping hands, he bowed deeply. That said, he wasn’t quick to believe words. He would need more evidence before he was convinced.

“Let’s go. I’ll escort you to the Corrections Division.” Honor Guard Sima then led the way.

Kong Xianglong looked at Xu Qing and breathed a sigh of relief. Sir Mountain-River and Wang Chen blinked a few times, then edged closer to Xu Qing.

“Xu Qing,” Sir Mountain-River said, “since we’re visiting your home, we’ll stick close to you.”

Xu Qing nodded. All of them seemed relieved as they left with Honor Guard Sima toward the Corrections Division.

In the city center of the county capital there was a round building that resembled an altar. It was very large, and had an open center. Inside of that open area were three palatial halls. One was black, one was red, and one was white. There were many smaller side chambers attached to each hall, a whole network of majestic buildings and towers. Each of the three main palaces had roof tiles of a different color and style. It was a very impressive sight.

There was something very unique and unusual about this area. Though it seemed like the palatial complex existed within the altar, it actually didn’t. If you stood within the complex and looked out, you wouldn’t see the county capital. Instead, you would see an endless void with nothing in it. The palatial complex was the only thing that existed in that void.

Within the white palatial hall were three people. Two of them sat opposite of each other playing Go. The third stood next to the board watching them play.

One of the people playing Go was the palace lord. The person sitting opposite of him was a middle-aged scholar in an embroidered robe. The scholar had fair skin and seemed somewhat soft and feminine. Smiling faintly, he took a black game piece, put it onto the board, and slid it into place with his finger.

“Palace Lord, your gameplay is very aggressive. If you’re not careful, you’ll become an arrogant dragon that flies so far over the horizon it can never return.” [1]

Not looking up from the Go board, the palace lord said, “I heard something I liked over in the Swordsage Palace just now.”

The scholar in the embroidered robe smiled. “Oh, what was that?”

Face completely expressionless, the palace lord looked up at the scholar. “The Noble Marquis is a goddamn motherfucker!”

This scholar in his embroidered robe was actually the clan lord of the Yao Clan. He was this generation's Marquis Yao, and thus, the person the governor and palace lords referred to with the respectful address 'Noble Marquis.'

The palace lord's words didn't seem to anger the Noble Marquis. In fact, he was still smiling. Standing, he turned to the person who had been watching the game. Clapping hands, he bowed. "Governor, the game has been decided at this point. There's no point in continuing to play. I have Holytide guests to accommodate, so I'd like to take my leave and go receive them."

With that, Marquis Yao left, his garment swishing as he entered the dark void beyond the palatial hall. He seemed very lonely.

The person who had been standing to the side and watching the Go game was an old man in a rough hemp jerkin. He looked like a very ordinary person, with kind eyes and not a hint of might or grandeur. He had even smiled and nodded in response to Marquis Yao's words a moment ago. This man was none other than the governor of Sea-Sealing County.

"Exalted Governor," the palace lord said, "I still don't trust him."

The governor chuckled and sat down across from the palace lord. As he cleaned up the board, he quietly said, "Brother Liangxiu, I'm aware that you were intentionally playing the part of the 'arrogant dragon' in your gameplay just now. You wanted to remind Yao Tianyan not to turn the ruse into reality, and thus make himself the arrogant dragon. [2]"

"But remember, your role is to be the aggressive killer, while Brother Tianyan's job is to form alliances and friendships. The two of you are supposed to be as opposed as fire and water. That's the secret plan the three of us devised years ago."

"For years now, people everywhere have been cursing the Yao Clan. They curse them for being shameless. They curse them as brainless. They curse them for being traitors. They curse them for intermarrying with nonhumans. They curse them for being arrogant and despotic. They call them worse than pigs or dogs."

"There are very few people in the Yao Clan who are privy to our plan. And those who do know the truth are required to keep it a secret. They can only bitterly endure all of that hardship. Yao Tianyan... was an outstandingly gifted scholar who shook the imperial city to the core. He was an amazing chosen cultivator. But now he bears the curses of all humanity on his shoulders. Things are a lot worse for him than you."

"All of that is thanks to my own uselessness. Because of me, Sea-Sealing County is unstable. Because of me, humankind continuously declines. Thus, we have no choice but to play out this strategy."

The palace lord didn't reply for a while. He just looked off into the distance. Then he said, "Governor, there's no need for you to be so self-deprecating. Without your painstaking efforts, our Sea-Sealing County, which is so far away from the core of humankind here in the Holytide Region, would long since have been devoured by the Holytides."

“I understand everything you just said, and I also understand that he has a harder lot than me. I understand his sacrifice. But I’m worried that there are people in the Yao Clan who are going to push things far enough that they really become a bunch of arrogant dragons.”

The governor thought for a moment, then quietly said, “He’s a leader who has the interests of all humankind at heart. He has no choice but to move forward and forget about all his previous ambitions. Just like the Grand Duke Holytide of old. If you know the truth, yet still distrust him, then that means he’s done a good enough job that the Holytides will likely never suspect him.”

Evening was gone and the dome of heaven was dark. Thankfully, a bright moon hung above, casting light onto the world below, including the area round the Corrections Division.

After escorting Xu Qing and the others there, Honor Guard Sima left.

Kong Xianglong looked at the familiar prison and sighed. Sir Mountain-River, Wang Chen, and Duskspirit all looked crestfallen. Xu Qing led the way, calling out greetings to the jailers that met them. Then he watched as the cold-faced jailers got out the manacles.

However... they didn’t put manacles on Xu Qing. In fact, one of the jailers who Xu Qing was familiar with actually handed him a pair and asked him to help with the others.

Xu Qing was the one to lock the manacles onto Kong Xianglong.

It wasn’t lost on Kong Xianglong and the others that the jailers smiled and chatted with Xu Qing, but hardly looked at them. They were already feeling a bit envious.

He really does get special treatment...

That was what they were all thinking

Ol’ Li was among the jailers. Eyeing Kong Xianglong and the others, he lowered his voice and said to Xu Qing, “I heard about what happened today at the Hall of Regulations. Come on, we already have the cell block ready.”

Winking, he led the way inside.

And thus, Xu Qing and the other jailers led the chained-up Kong Xianglong, Sir Mountain-River, Wang Chen, and Duskspirit into the Corrections Division.

They went to D-010, and when the door opened and Xu Qing looked inside, he smiled faintly. Although D-010 was a cell block, it had about thirty big jugs of alcohol stacked up inside, as well as stacks of food that surely cost a lot of spirit stones. Five cages had been specially prepared; inside of them were nice rush cushions perfect for use in meditation. It was all very simple, but definitely vastly nicer than what the normal inmates got.

Kong Xianglong and the others were happily surprised, and looked at the cold-faced jailers.

“We heard what happened,” Ol’ Li said coolly. “Since you’re being locked up as a punishment, we have to do our duty as jailers. But as swordsages, we think you did exactly what you should have done. You killed those who needed killing!”

“We want you to feel at home here for the next month. Rest well. If you need anything, talk to Xu Qing. Xu Qing, you can’t be lax in tending to D-132, so feel free to go there as you please. Just make sure to come back here after your shift is over.” With that, Ol’ Li and the other jailers gave them a long hard look. “Finally, we want to say it one more time. You killed those who needed killing!!”

With that, the jailers all took out their command swords and saluted Xu Qing and the others. After that, they turned and left.

D-010 was quiet.

Xu Qing walked over to the jugs of alcohol. Waving his hand, he sent a jug each flying to the others. With jugs in hand, they exchanged glances then laughed.

“Bottoms up!” Kong Xianglong said loudly, then he took a big swig.

Chuckling, Xu Qing also drank.

Everyone took off their manacles, as they weren’t necessary inside the prison.

And then, time passed. Being locked up together made the five of them think back to the time after they slaughtered the Black Guard cultivators and fled. Laying in the grass, they had suddenly felt less like strangers, and had chatted extensively.

Sir Mountain-River and Wang Chen frequently got into verbal sparring matches. Duskspirit spent all her time next to Kong Xianglong. Even a blind person could tell that she was in love with him. [3]

As for Xu Qing, he would occasionally leave for D-132. Other than the fact he couldn’t leave the Corrections Division or do missions, things weren’t very different for Xu Qing. Whenever he left D-010, he would go to D-132. After all, he was in charge of D-132, so if he didn’t go there, it would be dereliction of duty. Xu Qing was not the kind of person who would ever be derelict in duty.

Half a month flew by in the briefest of moments.

To mortals, being locked up for half a month would be mind-numbing. But to cultivators, it wasn’t very much different than going into seclusion for cultivation purposes. What was more, they had alcohol to drink and nice food to snack on. And they could chat with each other. In the end, the days were passed in comfort.

However, one day when Xu Qing’s shift ended and he stepped back into D-010, he could sense that something was off. Things were too quiet.

Chapter 427: Meeting the Best Friends

Xu Qing’s heart started racing. Normally speaking, when his shift ended and he returned to D-010, things would be lively.

But instead of bantering with Wang Chen, Sir Mountain-River was seated cross-legged in the open area between the cages. He was working on cultivation. His facial expression was serious and determined, as if he were trying to make it very clear to any onlooker that he, Sir Mountain-River, was a person with staunch discipline. Maybe he was in jail, but he wasn’t going to forget about cultivation. Any location could be a place for Sir Mountain-River to hone his temperament.

As for Wang Chen, his true form had emerged from his coffin. He sat cross-legged in his cage, his facial expression incredibly solemn. His hands were clenched into fists as if he regretted a huge mistake. Under his control, his Smokewight doppelgänger was currently writing some sort of essay onto the wall of the cell. It was a very, very long article, and it appeared to be all about Wang Chen's faults. From the expression on his face, it really seemed that he was determined to criticize himself. Anyone who saw him would feel deeply moved.

And then there was Kong Xianglong. His situation was more dramatically exaggerated than any of the others. He sat cross-legged in his cell, facing the wall, with his back to the door as he loudly gave voice to his regrets.

"I really messed up big this time, Duskspirit. The palace lord only locked us up for a month, but I don't think that's enough. I need more punishment. I can't let the old man down. Come, Duskspirit. You stand in for the palace lord to beat me. Only if you do that on a daily basis will I feel slightly better."

As he spoke, Kong Xianglong's facial expression went from being regretful, to angry, to wistful, to proud. He seemed to be putting all of his inner distress and other emotions on full display.

Duskspirit stood behind Kong Xianglong, holding a rod in her hands. Nodding gravely, she said, "The fact that you can admit your error shows that you've grown up some, Big Bro Kong. You used to be too impulsive. But then again, I have my own faults. I think we need to keep each other in check."

As Duskspirit spoke, she viciously hit Kong Xianglong on the back with the rod, causing loud smacking sounds to echo out.

After seeing all of this, Xu Qing bowed his head and quietly entered his own cell. Sitting down, he took out a bamboo slip and his iron skewer, then slipped manacles onto his wrists. His motions seemed smooth, almost rehearsed, as if he always did this when coming back from his shift. With the manacles on, Xu Qing solemnly began using the iron skewer to carve all the swordsmen's rules onto the bamboo slip. Line after line, he wrote, as if he had done this day after day as a way to admit his faults. It really looked like he was pouring his thoughts onto the bamboo slip. What was more, the fact that he had put the manacles on himself made it seem like he was truly being strict with himself.

Time ticked by. About an hour later, a cold harrumph filled the cell block.

"You're like a bunch of wolf pups. Very clever."

As the voice filled the cell block, the palace lord appeared. Sir Mountain-River looked up and, seeing the palace lord, quickly scrambled to his feet, clasped hands and bowed, his face a mask of regret. Wang Chen also stood and bowed to the palace lord from within his cell. He opened his mouth as if to speak, but then closed it and averted his eyes, his facial expression full of regret. Kong Xianglong and Duskspirit did the same thing, as did Xu Qing.

As they bowed in greeting, the palace lord clasped his hands behind his back and walked around to inspect them.

“You five have got some skills. After your extraction mission, you actually chased the Black Guard cultivators all the way to the border! Since you obviously have so much energy to burn, I think I’ll add to your burden. Sir Mountain-River, after you leave custody, you’ll add a part time shift to your schedule at the Law Enforcement Office. You can spend time there catching criminals.

“Wang Chen, since you love sleeping in a coffin, you’ll start working part time during the night shift with Patrol.

“You’re adding a night shift too, Duskspirit. I happen to know that the Inspections Division is short-staffed. You can start working part time there.

“Kong Xianglong, you seem to have a hard time remembering swordsmanship rules. Therefore, your part time assignment will be in the Hall of Regulations. Your main responsibility will be lecturing people who break the rules.

“And as for you, Xu Qing, since you’re so energetic, in addition to working as a guard in Unit D, you can start working part time as a Unit C jailer.”

Everyone kept their heads bowed and looked as apologetic as possible.

“In addition, I’m giving all of you a mission. I want you to run a secret investigation. We’ve received reports from spies indicating that a lot of immortal puppets have appeared among the Holytides. We have the feeling the Demi-Immortals have brokered a secret weapons deal with the Holytides. It’s a very sensitive matter, so I want all of you to use every skill and ability at your disposal to get to the bottom of it here in the county capital. Whoever can dig up hard evidence will receive a grade-two battle credit along with 500,000 military credits.”

Xu Qing’s eyes lit up, and the other four reacted similarly.

500,000 military credits was a big sum, and that wasn’t to mention a battle credit! Battle credits were very difficult to earn. In fact, for all intents and purposes you couldn’t earn it. It was only given out when you went on an extremely dangerous and potentially deadly mission.

To date, only Kong Xianglong had earned one battle credit, and it was only grade three. He had earned that previously when he accepted a mission to go into deep cover in Holytide territory, at the risk of his life. But now they had a chance to earn a grade-two battle credit, merely by finding evidence that the Demi-Immortal and Holytides were working together.

When the palace lord saw their eyes glittering, he nodded. Without another word, he turned and left. After he was gone, the cell block went quiet for a moment.

Everyone exchanged glances, and they could all see how much they longed to earn that battle credit. Finally, they took deep breaths and went back to what they had been doing before.

Two hours went by.

Finally, Kong Xianglong cleared his throat. “He’s gone.”

Sir Mountain-River exhaled and flopped onto his back.

Wang Chen's Smokewight doppelgänger disappeared, and his true form sighed. He had been putting on his act for so long he felt like his face was stiff.

Duskspirit put away the rod and started tenderly applying medicine to Kong Xianglong's back. Kong Xianglong didn't seem worried about such minor injuries. He actually looked very pleased as he hefted a jug of alcohol.

"It's a good thing I reacted quickly, otherwise we would have been in big trouble. I just knew the palace lord was going to make a surprise inspection. Xu Qing, you did a wicked job of adapting. The palace lord knows what we're really like, but he's just too straight-laced. Everything comes down to the rules with him. Showing him what he wants to see is the real key."

Kong Xianglong looked around a bit nervously; whenever he mentioned the palace lord, he felt a bit antsy.

Xu Qing took off his manacles and walked out of the cage, all the while thinking about the situation with the Demi-Immortals.

Walking over, Wang Chen kept his voice low as he said, "Big Bro Kong, how did you know the palace lord was coming?"

Kong Xianglong laughed heartily. "I have my ways. And they're top secret!"

"Top secret? Well, never mind then. Oh, by the way, Big Bro Kong, are you very familiar with the Demi-Immortals?"

Kong Xianglong shook his head. "Not very. But I'm confident I can get to the bottom of this immortal puppet situation. It shouldn't be too hard."

Sitting back up, Sir Mountain-River said, "Does this have something to do with our last mission? Don't tell me that the intelligence report from that extraction mission was about this situation?"

"I doubt it's that simple," Xu Qing said.

Duskspirit's eyes flashed. "It doesn't matter either way; the Demi-Immortals have crossed the line. Immortal puppets are essentially weapons of war. I can't believe they would dare to sell them to the Holytides!"

"There's no point in overthinking things, especially right now," Kong Xianglong said. "Once we're out of here, we can all use our various methods of investigating the situation."

They continued to discuss the matter until it was time to rest.

The remainder of the month flew by.

One cloudy, rain-swept afternoon, the time came for them to be released.

When the doors of the prison opened, Sir Mountain-River was the first to rush out into freedom. Wang Chen was right behind him. Kong Xianglong and Duskspirit weren't in as much of a hurry, and Xu Qing was more relaxed. For Xu Qing, the last month hadn't been much of a deviation from his normal life.

"I hope we can all be together the next time we're all locked up," Kong Xianglong said, sighing.

Xu Qing was going to reply when something caught his attention in the distance.

A woman approached, walking beneath an oil paper umbrella, flanked by a group of handmaidens. Her long, plum-colored garment swayed as she walked, making her look like a blooming violet in the rain. She was elegant, refined, and gentle as she waved at Xu Qing. She was none other than Arch-Immortal Plumdark.

When Kong Xianglong saw that someone had come to meet Xu Qing, he and Duskspirit turned to leave. Glancing at Arch-Immortal Plumdark, he then looked at Xu Qing and winked. He looked like he was even going to say something, but then Duskspirit dragged him away.

Xu Qing hesitated briefly, then approached Arch-Immortal Plumdark. As he neared, a handmaiden hurried forward, opened an umbrella for him, and led him to Arch-Immortal Plumdark.

"Arch-Immortal," he said by way of greeting, clasping his hands and bowing. He knew she didn't like being addressed as 'Senior,' but just using her name didn't seem right, so he stuck with her title.

She stood beneath her umbrella smiling gracefully. Then she handed her umbrella to him. He took it, and she stepped next to him so they were standing together beneath the same umbrella. She had obviously spent time on her makeup, and her hair was coiled atop her head. Her face was absolutely flawless, and though her eyes were always beautiful, there was something even more dazzling about them today. She looked natural, unrestrained, valiant, and formidable.

"Let's go," she said with a smile.

Considering she was so close to him they were nearly touching, Xu Qing felt very stiff. Looking up at the dark sky, he wondered where she planned to take him.

Seeing his hesitation, she smiled softly and said, "I'm taking you to meet two of my friends. We talked about this before. Did you forget?"

Her eyes shone in a way that would cause anyone she looked at to feel their heart racing.

Xu Qing bowed his head in acknowledgement and let her lead the way.

Together they walked, under the umbrella. One wore a violet gown. The other wore a white robe. The colors created an obvious contrast, and when you added the rain into the picture, it made a lovely scene.

Floating up into the air, they headed toward the city, specifically, a place called the Apricot Flower Pavilion. It wasn't a restaurant. Rather, it was more like a private resort filled with small pagodas and kiosks, ponds, and waterside pavilions. Rising above the buildings were green pine trees and emerald cedar trees. Given the rainy weather, it looked very charming. There were ornamental

rocks, flower arrangements, bonsai trees, vine formations and bamboo. All of it was immaculately cared for.

In the middle of it all was a four-sided pavilion where a few dozen handmaidens waited on call. Each of them was incredibly good-looking and youthfully exuberant. However, they were mere foils for the three women inside the pavilion. Just like the plum blossom, orchid, bamboo, and chrysanthemum, these three women were all spectacularly beautiful, yet were unique in their own right. [1]

One of the women wore a bluish-green daoist robe. She had bright eyes and pearly teeth and was currently playing a song on a flute. Her music drifted amidst the wind and rain, sounding very free and beautiful. [2]

Another woman wore a dark blue gown tied with a green sash, which created the perfect contrast to her snow-white skin. She sat there very properly, and from her bearing, she seemed like someone from the Senior generation. Her fingers danced on the strings of a zither, which she played in company with the flute. The two instruments harmonized perfectly. [3]

There was another woman present. She wore exquisite court attire, and had a face as pure as a lotus flower. Her expression was tranquil and indifferent, as though the impurities of the mortal world couldn't affect her.

While the other two women sat, she stood. Her face was curved in faint smile, and as she looked up at Arch-Immortal Plumdark and Xu Qing approaching under the umbrella, she spoke in a soft voice.

“Long time no see, Big Sis Plumdark.”

When the woman in court attire spoke, the other two women stopped playing their instruments. The one with the flute and the daoist robe looked over and smiled amiably at Arch-Immortal Plumdark.

As for the woman in the blue gown with the zither, she looked like someone from the younger generation. When she saw who was approaching, especially Xu Qing, her fingers froze in place, and a complicated expression appeared on her face.

That woman was Yao Yunhui.

Chapter 428: Erniu! Yes? No?

When Xu Qing saw Yao Yunhui, he frowned ever so slightly. Considering he had come here with Arch-Immortal Plumdark, he couldn't do anything more than that.

As they approached the pavilion, the woman in court attire and the female cultivator in the daoist robe simultaneously looked at Xu Qing. When they realized that the two of them were sharing an umbrella, their expressions turned slightly more curious. Looking Xu Qing up and down, their expressions flickered a bit, and they smiled.

Xu Qing remained silent as he sensed the cultivation base pressure coming from Yao Yunhui and the two other women.

Those two were similar to Arch-Immortal Plumdark. Each one had a thousand streams of starlight in their eyes, indicating they were in the first stage of Void Returning.

As Xu Qing took in his surroundings, Arch-Immortal Plumdark stepped into the pavilion and smiled.

“Long time no see, Big Sis Feihe, Little Sis Shitao.”

The two women smiled in response. As for the woman in court attire, she'd shifted her attention back to Arch-Immortal Plumdark, while the woman in the daoist robe was still looking at Xu Qing, her cheeks a bit flush.

“Big Sis Plum, who is this child?” asked the woman in the daoist robe.

“He's Xu Qing, whom I've fallen in love with.” [1]

Arch-Immortal Plumdark's extremely bold words left Xu Qing at something of a loss. He had never imagined that she would be so direct with her wording. For the moment, he had no idea what to do. He wasn't the only one to be surprised. The woman in the court attire and the woman in the daoist robe were both visibly surprised. Then their eyes lit up.

Only Yao Yunhui seemed to lose spirit.

Arch-Immortal Plumdark's eyes shifted away from her best friends. Indicating that he should sit, she gestured at the woman in the daoist robe and said, “Xu Qing, this is Li Shitao, your Big Sis Li. She's one of the honor guards in the Administration Palace. And this is Yao Feihe, your Big Sis Yao. She's the younger sister of Marquis Yao.” [2]

During the entire time, Arch-Immortal Plumdark hadn't spared a single glance for Yao Yunhui. She seemed to be completely ignoring her.

Xu Qing felt very out of sorts, but he kept his expression somber as he clasped hands formally in greeting.

Li Shitao blinked and covered her mouth as she laughed softly. “So, you're Xu Qing,” she said playfully. “Did you know that you're the first person Big Sis Plumdark has ever introduced to me like this? Now, you just have to tell us how you managed to get her so worked up about you!”

Yao Feihe in her court attire was obviously a much more serious-minded person than Li Shitao. Instead of joking around with Xu Qing, she gently said, “We heard that an outstanding chosen disciple had appeared in Big Sis Plumdark's sect. But seeing you in person is much better than simply hearing about you.”

Arch-Immortal Plumdark's straightforward manner of introducing Xu Qing ensured that these two women were very interested in him. Instead of acting like high-level cultivators, they seemed more like people his age. Because of that, a bit of joking around was inevitable.

“We've been trying to meet up with Big Sis Plumdark for days now, but she kept putting us off. Now we know the reason. She had a little surprise in store for us.”

“And now it makes sense why she asked us about imperial-class techniques and heavenly palaces last month. She must have been getting ready for you, Xu Qing!”

Xu Qing nodded seriously. There was simply no way he could relax in a situation like this, and was sitting there on pins and needles.

Plumdark herself made him nervous, but now she was with her best friends and they were all bantering. To Xu Qing, who wasn't a wordy person, and had never done anything like this, it was

simply too much to handle. However, the more he acted like that, the more Li Shitao wanted to tease him.

“What gives, Little Bro? Why so silent? Aiya, Big Sis Plumdark. This Xu Qing of yours is so shy!”

Seeing that Xu Qing was at a loss for words, Arch-Immortal Plumdark smoothly turned the conversation topic around on her friends.

“How have things been the past few years? How are things going with you and Elder Brother Chen from the Supreme Ancient Lightning Order?”

“Don’t even mention him!” Li Shitao said, sighing. She looked back at Xu Qing. “Little Bro, do you happen to have any friends you could introduce me to?”

Xu Qing thought for a moment then nodded. “I have an Elder Brother...”

When Arch-Immortal Plumdark heard that, she cleared her throat to change the conversation topic. Looking at Yao Yunhui, she said, “Who might this be?”

Under normal circumstances, Yao Yunhui wouldn’t have been so quiet. But today her aunt had forced her to come along for some reason. Truth be told, she’d had no idea that her aunt, whom even her father had to treat respectfully, would actually turn out to be a close friend of Arch-Immortal Plumdark. [3]

Sighing inwardly, and suppressing her mixed emotions, she rose to her feet and gave a curtsying bow to Arch-Immortal Plumdark.

“I’m Yunhui. Well met, Arch-Immortal Plumdark.”

Arch-Immortal Plumdark nodded slightly then looked at Yao Feihe. “What exactly is going on here, Big Sis Yao?”

“Yunhui tends to be a bit rash. She made some mistakes in the past, so I brought her here with me so she could apologize to you and Xu Qing.”

It wasn’t lost on Yao Feihe that Arch-Immortal Plumdark had addressed her differently than before, which went to show how displeased she was. [4]

Yao Feihe had originally simply planned to have her niece apologize to Plumdark. But after being introduced to Xu Qing, she realized what was really going on, and therefore she added him into the apology explanation. Yao Feihe was very different from Li Shitao. Li Shitao was energetic and playful, and would make friends with just about anybody, regardless of their social standing. But as the younger sister of Marquis Yao, things were different for Yao Feihe. She was very choosy about who she befriended.

For example, Plumdark was from a distant sect that wasn’t considered very powerful. But in terms of intelligence and aptitude, Plumdark was among the best of the best. You never knew where people like that might end up, and most definitely should not look down on them because they had humble beginnings. In fact, people like that could, seemingly in the blink of an eye, rise to much higher heights than her.

What was more, Yao Feihe was one of the few people who knew the sacrifice her older brother was making on behalf of Sea-Sealing County. And thus, she knew more than anyone that though the Yao Clan seemed like an incredibly powerful clan, it was really in a very precarious position. Of course, she couldn't reveal the truth to anyone. Because of that, she didn't want the Yao Clan making any more enemies than necessary. That was why she wanted to turn weapons of war into gifts of jade and silk.

Her assessment of Xu Qing was similar. That said, he had a long way to go before he grew up, and she planned to keep a close eye on him going forward. After giving her explanation, she turned and looked sharply at Yao Yunhui.

Yao Yunhui bowed her head and clasped hands to Plumdark and Xu Qing.

"Yunhui has had a rough life," Yao Feihe said softly. "Her husband passed away young, and being a single mother isn't easy."

Arch-Immortal Plumdark's facial expression didn't change, making it impossible to see if she agreed with Yao Feihe's assessment or not. Instead, she just started chatting with her two friends. Before long, the three of them were laughing merrily.

Yao Yunhui continued to follow her aunt's previous instructions, and went back to playing the zither. As the music mixed with the sound of the wind and rain, it created a very pleasant atmosphere.

For the entire time, Xu Qing didn't say a single thing. Now that he knew Arch-Immortal Plumdark and Marquis Yao's sister had a close friendship, he didn't feel comfortable reacting at all to what just happened. Besides, whether or not the apology was real didn't have any bearing on his choices. He still planned to find an opportunity to put that mother-and-son team down for good. As the saying went, death solves all problems.

With such thoughts on his mind, his cold eyes shifted to look at Yao Yunhui. As it happened, she had just looked up at him. Their eyes locked briefly, then Yao Yunhui instinctively looked away. At the same time, her zither twanged.

Frowning in surprise, Xu Qing made sure to keep his guard fully up. He was convinced that Yao Yunhui was plotting against him, which caused killing intent to fill his heart. However, he kept it under control so it didn't show in his eyes.

Thus, time passed. When evening fell, Arch-Immortal Plumdark said her goodbyes to her two best friends.

Just before leaving, Li Shitao laughed softly and poked fun at Xu Qing a bit more. "Little Bro, don't forget about that Elder Brother you said you'd introduce."

Xu Qing looked back at her and nodded earnestly.

Feeling very pleased, Li Shitao waved goodbye to Arch-Immortal Plumdark and then walked away. The rain had stopped. Arch-Immortal Plumdark and Xu Qing walked side by side back toward the subsidiary sect.

"Those two are good friends of mine here in the county capital. Li Shitao seems a bit frivolous, but the truth is that she's a very profound schemer. That said, she's a

responsible person, so when things get tricky, you know you can trust her. As for Yao Feihe, she has grand ambitions that reach far beyond Sea-Sealing County. Unfortunately, she has few friends. Although she's cold and calculating, she lives by principle. For example, no one asked her to bring Yao Yunhui out to apologize. By the way, don't change your plans about Yao Yunhui based on that. Do what you believe needs to be done."

Xu Qing nodded thoughtfully.

Arch-Immortal Plumdark didn't say anything further. She led the way back, clearly in a very good mood.

Xu Qing walked with her beneath the moon. By the time they reached the subsidiary sect, the wind had picked up.

It carried the chill of winter with it.

"Winter is on the way. The autumn rains will pass soon...." Arch-Immortal Plumdark turned to Xu Qing, and as the moon glittered in her eyes, she looked unusually beautiful. Reaching out, she gently adjusted his garment. As he stiffened, she smiled warmly.

"Xu Qing," she said softly, "can you speed up your cultivation...?"

Giving him a deep look, she turned and entered the subsidiary sect. Her handmaidens curtsied to Xu Qing and followed her. Soon, she and her plum-colored gown were nowhere to be seen, but the smell of her perfume remained.

Xu Qing stood at the entrance of the subsidiary sect for a while, thinking about what she'd just said. Finally he nodded, clasped hands and bowed. Then he turned and left.

Back at his sword pavilion, he found some new missions to earn military credits.

In the following days, he worked nonstop to get military credits. Most of the missions he accepted involved tracking down and arresting criminals. Because of that, he became familiar with the criminals in the city. That was especially true of one criminal who left a deep impression on him.

That criminal had the same nickname as he did. He was called the Kid.

Seven days later when he had enough military credit built up, Xu Qing went to Level 9 in the Corrections Division. There, he spent a lot of military credits to apply for the D-001 guard assessment.

Taking that test was the only way a jailer from Unit D could get promoted to Unit C.

The test was to quell a prison riot in D-001. Doing so would qualify the applicant to be promoted to Unit C, and earn the qualification to visit the levels below Level 89.

As far as the Corrections Division was concerned, Unit D and Unit C were completely different. The latter was very profound and mysterious, and the jailers there were brutal. They were all Nascent Soul cultivators, and any single one of them had a status that vastly surpassed any of the Unit D jailers. That was why all Unit D jailers dreamed of eventually being promoted to Unit C.

The fact that Xu Qing was applying to take the test raised the notice of all the Unit D jailers. As they gathered to watch, Xu Qing stepped into D-001 on Level 88!

Two hours later, the D-001 door opened and a figure staggered out, dripping blood. It was none other than Xu Qing. He was gasping for breath and was lame in one leg. Every step he took left behind a trail of blood. His arm was dislocated, and he had numerous grievous injuries all over him. Many of them went down to the bone. He had a wound on his back that went from the top of his head down to his waist. It was absolutely ghastly looking. What was more, he had a gash that went from his forehead to his right cheek, a wound so horrid the flesh hung down and it dripped blood.

The prisoners in D-001 were from a variety of species, but all of them had nine-palace battle prowess.

Their years of imprisonment had weakened them, but all were outstanding chosen from their respective species. Xu Qing had even used his taboo poison to defeat them, and still had paid a very high price to do so.

The moment he stepped out, he coughed up a mouthful of chunky blood. Then he looked up at the jailers and smiled.

“All dead,” he said. Behind him, D-001 was a lake of blood. There wasn’t a single corpse visible.

His taboo poison core had melted every single one of them. He could hardly have looked more ghastly.

Chapter 429: A World in a Mural

Usually, the only thing separating winter from autumn was a good snowfall.

In the fifth month after Xu Qing arrived in the county capital, winter arrived along with the first blizzard. White snowflakes filled the sky, falling to cover all the buildings and streets, and even the hair of the pedestrians. It painted the world silver, and made it seem like everyone in the city had white hair.

The snow fell fast and hard. Outside of the Corrections Division, all the sword pavilions were quickly covered in snow.

In the middle of the snowstorm, Xu Qing emerged in his swordmage uniform and made his way to the Corrections Division. Today was his first shift in Unit C.

A few days after he passed the test by quelling the riot in D-001, he was officially no longer a Unit D jailer. Instead he was a Unit C jailer. That said, he wasn’t planning to abandon his duties in D-132. He would still work part time as the guard of that cell block.

The uniforms worn by the Unit C jailers were no different than those of the Unit D jailers. However, they had a black badge on the collar, shaped like a tree branch. If you likened the Corrections Division to a tree, then the Unit D jailers were the leaves, while those from Unit C were the branches.

As Xu Qing walked down the stairs, he could already sense the glory that came along with that badge. Everywhere he passed, the Unit D jailers clasped hands and bowed, their expressions full of reverence. Xu Qing returned their salutes. Eventually, he reached Level 88. Then he passed Level

89. And finally he reached the stairs that led down to Level 90. There, he took a deep breath, his expression very somber.

Level 90... Taking a step forward, he continued.

Clicking sounds rang out with each step he took; his footfalls were the only sound to pierce the quiet surroundings. The light that came into the Corrections Division couldn't reach Level 90, so everything around him was increasingly dark.

Eventually, he reached the final step. There he stopped, looking around at Level 90. Things were different here compared to Unit D.

The humidity ensured that the floor was covered with moss. It really felt like a different world, especially when he looked up. For one thing, though this floor was circular like those above, there were no cell blocks and no doors!

There was only a mural that circled around the entire floor. The mural went from floor to ceiling, and depicted a sun, moon, clouds, rivers, mountains, buildings, and even living things! It looked like an entire world! However, the colors were very drab, making the mural seem dark.

Shaken, Xu Qing suddenly found himself thinking about Sir Inkwell in D-132.

A moment passed, and then Xu Qing stepped closer to the mural to examine it. When he did, his pupils constricted. The mural was so realistic that everything inside of it, including the clouds and rivers, seemed to be moving. It was like there really was a dark world inside the mural, and Xu Qing was standing outside of it, observing.

"Level 90 only has one cell block," a cold, familiar voice said from behind Xu Qing.

Xu Qing turned and saw a figure emerging from the shadows.

It was a tall, burly old man who pulsed with incredible might. He had cold eyes and emanated a baleful aura that, if you focused on it long enough, would cause the sound of weeping ghosts and howling wolves to fill your mind. It was as if this man had killed too many living things to count, and their resentful souls swirled around him constantly.

"Greetings, Senior Ghost Hand!" Xu Qing said. This was the very same swordmage who had given the training lecture about the most common nonhuman species and their lethal weaknesses. Xu Qing had been his assistant in that lecture, giving him a close-up view of many of the corpses, as well as Ghost Hand killing a few of them personally. [1]

He remembered Kong Xianglong mentioning that Ghost Hand was a jailer. However, in all the months Xu Qing had worked in the Corrections Division, he hadn't seen him once, which had led him to believe that Ghost Hand must work further down in the prison. As such, seeing him here wasn't a huge surprise.

Seeing Xu Qing's respectful bow caused Ghost Hand to look at him with even more approval.

"I remember you. You're the one who turned the tables on Ailing Ghost by poisoning him. You've already been promoted to Unit C? Well done."

Though Ghost Hand was smiling, his baleful aura was so strong that the smile came across as very sinister. Most ordinary people would be scared witless by him. But Xu Qing didn't find it unusual. In fact, it seemed normal to him.

When Ghost Hand saw Xu Qing wasn't reacting much, he liked him even more. Truth be told, the reason he had picked Xu Qing as his assistant during that training lecture was because he had already taken a liking to him.

Walking up to stand next to Xu Qing, he looked at the mural and coolly said, "Unit C jailers are all in the Nascent Soul level. Do you know why?"

Xu Qing thought for a moment, then answered, "Because the Unit D inmates are kept under control in a different way than in Unit C?"

"I thought you were going to say it was because the inmates have stronger cultivation bases." Ghost Hand grinned. "Unit C convicts do have higher cultivation bases. There are both Nascent Soul and Spirit Trove inmates here. But that's not the main point. The main point... is that only Nascent Soul jailers can bear the weight of the natural and magical laws that govern the minor worlds here."

"Laws of minor worlds?" Xu Qing asked, still studying the mural.

"Unit C consists of Level 90 to Level 122. There are thirty-three levels in total. The cell blocks are not like they are in Unit D. Instead, every level has a mural like this. And every mural is a minor world! There are thirty-three minor worlds that form the cell blocks of Unit C!"

Xu Qing's eyes shone brightly as he realized that his speculation about the mural was correct. After experiencing the Supreme Void World, he knew a thing or two about how minor worlds worked. That said, he was still deeply shaken by what the Corrections Division had done here.

Thirty-three minor worlds make up the cell blocks of Unit C. What about Units B and A? What are they like...?

Xu Qing took a deep breath.

"I'm in charge of World 1," Ghost Hand continued, "and thus manage the jailers who do the guard work there! Your new assignment is to be a jailer in World 1. However, given that your cultivation base isn't in the Nascent Soul level yet, you couldn't sustain the laws of the world. So for now, I'll take you on a little tour so you know what the place is like."

Ghost Hand exhaled, sending a stream of black mist to the mural. As the mist spread out, the mural suddenly became very colorful. Instead of being dark and muted, it was now full of life.

"Let's go."

Ghost Hand clasped his hands behind his back and stepped toward the colorful mural.

Xu Qing followed Ghost Hand into the mural, in other words, into World 1.

What he saw first was a vast, endless void. Then he noticed a gray land mass off in the distance, covered with what looked like a crimson dome of light. It looked almost like a shell filled with countless spell formation and warding spells. There were millions upon millions of magical symbols that made them up, and altogether they formed an astonishing sealing power that kept the entire landmass tightly shut off.

The magical symbols glittered brightly in a special pattern, making it clear they were in compliance with some sort of special laws.

In addition to the magical symbols, there were four illusory statues situated around the landmass. They were enormous, and were clearly not shaped like humans. Instead, they looked like wild beasts. The head of each statue was just as large as the landmass itself, and were located to the east, south, west, and north. All of them were looking down at the land mass itself. Their gazes converged to make the sun and moon. And as the spell formations and magical symbols glittered, the statues rotated, creating the cycle of night and day.

It was an astonishing scene that left Xu Qing deeply shaken.

“This is World 1,” Ghost Hand said. “The void you see was personally extracted by the first palace lord, and brought here to mask the aura of World 1. You can think of the magical symbols on the dome as the natural and magical laws that govern the world. They were created by the Swordsage Palace. As for the four statues, they are the embodiments of this world’s heavenly dao. And now, leave your personal mark in the spell formation, that way you can go in without being crushed by the laws.”

Ghost Hand stepped forward, passing through the spell formations and sealing marks, and floating down toward the land mass.

Xu Qing quickly performed an incantation gesture and placed his personal mark on the dome, then followed.

As the land mass filled his field of vision, he descended, moving through the clouds. Below, the minor world stretched out in all directions, filled with all sorts of terrain features.

“This world was created in accordance with the first law put in place when the prison was built. Outside living beings are not allowed to reproduce here.”

Xu Qing followed as Ghost Hand led the way down. Looking around the minor world, he saw that it was relatively large, and that the immediate area featured a desert landscape. There wasn’t much spirit energy, to the point that he initially felt like he was suffocating. It was as if his entire body was being restricted by some invisible force. Given the mountainous weight crushing down on him, he doubted that he could use ten percent or even one percent of his full strength.

Thankfully, the spell formations in the dome adjusted quickly, allowing him to relax a bit. That alone gave him a new understanding of how the prison worked.

The climate in the minor world was horrid. From a vantage point high in the sky, it was possible to see sandstorms here and there, all of them filled with the power to scrape flesh from bones. In some places, acid rain fell, and the living beings beneath it howled in grief. In some places magnetic tempests raged, causing heavenly lightning to fall with deadly force.

“There are so many nonhumans and grues imprisoned in the thirty-three worlds that you could never count them. They live in torment in the minor worlds, unable to control their own life or death. After all, the natural laws here are all controlled by the Corrections Division.”

He waved his hand, and the desert landscape changed. Mountains suddenly rose up, and great rivers spread out across the lands. However, he wasn't finished. He waved his hand again, and the mountains instantly disappeared. Water vapor began to gather, and seawater bubbled up from the land until they were in a huge sea. Mountain-hurling, sea-draining force could be unleashed with the wave of a hand.

Xu Qing looked at it all with a very serious expression.

“Xu Qing, do you know why the prison is so fear-inspiring?” He looked at Xu Qing.

“Because of what it takes away,” Xu Qing replied somberly.

“Exactly. We take away what used to belong to the prisoners. Things that they took for granted become things they can only dream about. And that creates a torment that gnaws at the heart. The principle behind the thirty-three worlds is to use magical laws as prison cells. All Nascent Soul cultivators imprisoned in World 1 are subject to how the world works. They're still in the Nascent Soul level; we don't limit their cultivation base. But they are Nascent Soul cultivators from a minor world.

“In the Revered Ancient mainland, a four-flame Foundation Establishment cultivator is roughly equivalent to a Nascent Soul cultivator from a minor world. And a Gold Core cultivator with one heavenly palace is about the same as someone in the mid Nascent Soul level.

“The inmates here are used to being able to call the wind and summon the rain with their techniques in Revered Ancient. But here, they're much weaker. They're restrained by heaven and earth, and they can feel it. Because of that, the outside world is a beautiful place they can only dream of seeing. And that is their torment!

“What they once had has been taken away. What they once took to be simple has turned into a longing for extravagance. This is how Unit C works.”

Chapter 430: Jailers Supreme

In World 1 of the thirty-three worlds in the Corrections Division, the sun hung high in the sky, emanating intense heat that baked the lands below.

There was no broken face of a god in the sky, yet the mutagen in the world was very strong. Mutagen was ubiquitous in the Revered Ancient mainland, and it didn't just affect the continent itself, but also any minor worlds connected to it.

Neither the sun nor the moon here was the resting place of a god. Instead, the light came from the eyes of the heavenly daos, which were creations of the Swordsage Palace. As the sunlight of their gaze shone down through the clouds, an old man and a young one appeared in the sky.

The old man was, of course, Ghost Hand, and the young one was Xu Qing.

“Unit C jailers have simple work,” Ghost Hand said as he led the way down. “They patrol this world. You’re not the only jailer assigned here. Including you, there are a total of sixty-seven. In terms of the patrol route and the scheduling, that will all be arranged before you arrive for duty. For now, I’ll take you around to let you start getting familiar with the place.”

“Yes, sir,” Xu Qing said respectfully.

“Also, Xu Qing, as a Unit C jailer, you get two big perks.” Grinning, Ghost Hand took out a flagon of alcohol and drank a mouthful. “The first perk is that you have no limit on the number of prisoners you can kill per month. That said, don’t go overboard.

“The second perk is the one that Unit C jailers care the most about. And that’s related to enlightenment opportunities in the minor worlds. The natural and magical laws here are under the control of the jailers. As a result, you can seek enlightenment of the operations of heaven and earth, and can even do research into the formation of the dao of heaven.

“Those things will be critical when you break into the Spirit Trove level. The secret troves of the Spirit Trove cultivators are all governed by a heavenly dao.

“Right now you aren’t even in Nascent Soul. That said, the earlier you start seeking enlightenment, the better it will be for you. Once your cultivation base is high enough to go on patrol, your senses will lead you to the spots where you can benefit. As for how much you benefit, that will be up to your personal good fortune.”

Xu Qing committed that to memory. It was his first time hearing much at all about Spirit Trove. Though he could obviously ask questions of his Master or Arch-Immortal Plumdark whenever he wanted, just this offhand remark from Ghost Hand had given him new insight. Clapping hands, he bowed thankfully.

Ghost Hand grinned and took another swig of alcohol. As they passed through a vast wilderness, Ghost Hand looked down and chuckled.

“Right. I forgot to mention that, as a jailer, you should occasionally scatter some provisions when you go on patrol.”

He waved his hand to toss out some shriveled medicinal pills that contained vast amounts of mutagen and only scraps of spirit energy.

Licking his lips, he said, “Watch. The fun’s about to start.”

Ghost Hand looked off into the distance, and Xu Qing followed his gaze. Suddenly, the wilderness ground in that direction exploded as a host of scrawny figures burst out into the open. Some of them were human, but the vast majority were nonhumans in all shapes and sizes. There were even some spirit plants among them. They rushed forward with madness and longing in their eyes. And as they closed in on the shriveled pills, they began unleashing brutal attacks on each other. To them, even those shriveled pills could be considered treasures, and it had already driven them into a state of madness.

Xu Qing saw a nonhuman with six arms and blue scales who grabbed one of the pills only to lose half an arm in the process. He didn't seem to care. After throwing the pill into his mouth, a look of contentment filled his face. Then he turned to flee. He wasn't fast enough. A group of several nonhumans fell on him and ripped him to shreds, all to get some of the lingering effects of the medicine.

In another area, a group of about a hundred inmates with bloodshot eyes were fighting fiercely among themselves. In the end, one of them came out victorious and covered with blood. The pill was also covered in gore, but he consumed it without hesitation.

Similar scenes played out everywhere. Every single pill resulted in fierce and violent fighting.

Before long, the surrounding wilderness was littered with corpses. The survivors noticed Xu Qing and Ghost Hand up in the sky, and reverently dropped to their knees to kowtow. It was almost as if they were bowing to gods.

"This is where we've been putting the liveliest prisoners over the last hundred years or so, which is why things got so spirited.

"That Sixarm that got ripped to shreds was once a seven-soul cultivator who murdered a cultivator from the Administration Palace. On the outside, he had quite a fierce reputation. But in here, it doesn't matter that he was in the Nascent Soul level. Once part of a minor world, he was incredibly weak." [1]

"See that Wingflyer? The one with the wings on his back? I arrested that one personally. He was really incredible on the outside. As an eight-soul cultivator, he terrorized Daybreak Prefecture. What do you think it's like for them to think back to when they could call the wind and summon the rain, all while being weak and powerless in here?"

Ghost Hand grinned.

Xu Qing looked around and noted how all the inmates had such weak cultivation bases. Clearly, some of them were in the Nascent Soul level, and yet they seemed weak enough that he could kill them as easily as turning over his hand.

"They all covet those shriveled pills because they live in a place almost completely bereft of spirit energy. If they want to keep on living, then they need to keep their cultivation base intact. Therefore, they have to be willing to die at least once to get those pills."

Xu Qing frowned. What Ghost Hand said seemed strange. In order to avoid dying, they had to be willing to die? It seemed contradictory.

Ghost Hand chuckled and said nothing further as he led Xu Qing onward.

They passed mountains and deserts until they eventually reached a sprawling plain.

Looking around, Xu Qing's pupils constricted. As far as the eye could see, there were figures seated cross-legged in meditation. Just about every species imaginable could be seen, and all of them sat perfectly motionless with their eyes closed. They all had very weak life force. And the plain upon which they sat had a shocking spell formation built into it that slowly extracted their life energy and cultivation base.

“The main rule that governs this place is something we call the Reset. Other than the inmates killed by jailers, everyone who dies here experiences the Reset on a monthly basis. When that happens, they get resurrected, missing some of their memories, and their record wiped clean.

“After dying enough times, they eventually become like the walking dead, completely bereft of any memories. Then they wander mindlessly here, where they become a power source for the county capital's taboo treasure.

“Xu Qing, most inmates consider losing memories to be the most painful thing imaginable. That's because their memories remind them of what it was like outside, and how much better it was than here.

“At the same time, their memories make them an individual, so they view them as priceless. Losing memories means losing themselves as a person. Therefore, the idea of slowly losing their memories fills most of them with terror.

“If they don't fight for those pills, then they can't replenish their spirit energy, and they'll die sooner. That's why most of them are willing to die trying to get a pill, just in the hopes of ultimately dying less. It's a case of drinking poison in the hope of quenching one's thirst. Wonderful, eh?”

Ghost Hand laughed maliciously.

Xu Qing nodded. He had already come to a good understanding of Ghost Hand's personality during that training lecture. As he studied the area, he noticed one section that looked different. The ground there was crimson red, something that was particularly noticeable from up in the air. Seated cross-legged there was a group of over forty Demi-Immortals.

Xu Qing recognized one of them.

It was the very same one Ghost Hand had brought along during his lecture on the fatal weaknesses of various species.

Noticing where Xu Qing was looking, Ghost Hand took a swig of alcohol and said, “Due to the three-species treaty, there's nothing we can do about them. Demi-Immortals can only be locked up for ten years before we have to hand them back to their people.

“Though you can’t erase many memories in that short a time span, you can do a bit. That said, about three hundred years ago the governor showed mercy. In the interests of continuing our friendship with the Demi-Immortals, he issued orders prohibiting us from tampering with Demi-Immortal memories. From that point onward, Demi-Immortals get thrown directly to this spot to serve as temporary spirit stones.”

Xu Qing nodded. Then he thought back to the secret mission to find out more about the immortal puppets that the Demi-Immortals could create.

“Senior Ghost Hand, have you ever fought any of the Demi-Immortal’s immortal puppets?” Xu Qing asked.

“Immortal puppets? Of course I’ve fought them. But those things are vile. They’re full of mutagen and very difficult to defeat. They can also repair themselves on the spot.” Ghost Hand looked at Xu Qing. “Are you interested in immortal puppets?”

Xu Qing nodded.

“I suggest you ask the lieutenant governor for guidance. He’s extremely knowledgeable about many things, and I know he’s done some deep research into immortal puppets. Anyway, let’s not waste time talking about that now. We need to keep going. There’s more I need to show you.”

Ghost Hand continued onward and Xu Qing kept pace.

The two of them flew across the astonishing plain until they saw a vast sea and a withering jungle. Occasionally Ghost Hand would throw out some medicinal pills, which would lead to vicious life-or-death struggles like the one Xu Qing had already witnessed. They sometimes ran into other Unit C jailers, all of whom were in charge of different areas. When they saw Ghost Hand, they would clasp hands respectfully. Ghost Hand would introduce Xu Qing, and the Unit C jailers would study him and nod. That said, most of them treated him fairly coldly.

“Once you can sustain the natural and magical laws of this place, and start going on patrol, they’ll warm up to you. Right now, though... you’re not good enough.”

“By the way, do you know why they treat me with respect? It’s not because I’m in charge of this world. Every single one of these jailers is a proud person, and many have cultivation bases superior to my own.”

Ghost Hand looked very pleased with himself as he took another drink of alcohol. It wasn’t an expression he commonly wore on his face.

Xu Qing looked at him curiously, wondering about the answer to the question.

Ghost Hand laughed heartily and pointed at his own head. “I’m old and have average talent. I reached Nascent Soul eight hundred years ago, but have never been able to break into Spirit Trove. But during my entire life, I’ve never used The Emperor’s Sword! Mine has been powering up for eight hundred years! Once I unleash it, the results will be heaven-shaking and earth-shattering!”

“Eight hundred years?” Xu Qing said, looking surprised. The Emperor’s Sword became more mighty the longer it was powered up. He hadn’t forgotten the story of a Nascent Soul cultivator who powered up The Emperor’s Sword for two thousand years, and then used it to kill a Void Returning expert. Of course, that was just what he had read in the description; he had never seen it actually used that way.

Today was the first time he had encountered someone who had actually been powering up the sword for nearly a thousand years. It was no small task. When cultivators fought to the death, you couldn’t just hold back from using the sword if you reached a critical moment in which your life was on the line. Being able to power the sword up for that long would obviously require luck and destined opportunities.

When Ghost Hand noticed the look on Xu Qing’s face, he looked even more pleased than before.

“Since I’m a jailer, I think of The Emperor’s Sword as a tool to use when watching over this world.

“I’ve already thought everything through. One day when my longevity is running out and I can’t be a jailer anymore, I’ll go look for the strongest nonhuman I can find that I don’t like, and kill them. If I can eliminate something that might be harmful to humankind, then my life will not have been in vain, and my death will be worthwhile.”

Hearing that caused Xu Qing’s eyes to glitter with admiration. Yet again, he clasped hands respectfully to Ghost Hand.

Clearly, Ghost Hand was very proud of the sword that he had been powering up for eight hundred years. Seeing the show of respect from Xu Qing, he laughed heartily, took another long swig of alcohol, then led the way forward.

In that manner, a number of hours passed quickly. Ghost Hand led Xu Qing around, allowing him to get familiar with the world. Eventually, they prepared to return to the Corrections Division.

Just before leaving, Ghost Hand looked over his shoulder at something, and his expression turned grim. His gaze landed on a withered forest. Among all the dead trees was one towering tree that, despite being as wilted as the others, still seemed mighty. On the side of the tree was an ancient face. The eyes of that face slowly opened, revealing two green eyes that looked up fearfully at Xu Qing and Ghost Hand.

“Greetings, exalted Ghost Hand.”

Expression dour, Ghost Hand coldly said, “Didn’t I tell you not to leave your spot? And yet you disobeyed my orders and came here.” Turning to Xu Qing, he explained, “Remember this fellow. He’s not an ordinary treant. He’s actually the only Wood Spirit in the entire Corrections Division. Though his species isn’t much to talk about nowadays, in the past... they were incredible.”

Xu Qing looked down at the Wood Spirit.

“Before Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity, the ruler of Revered Ancient was Emperor Ancient Spirit, who was a member of the Ancient Spirit species. Back then, the Ancient Spirits were the top species in Revered Ancient, and were occasionally called

the Heavenfates. Emperor Ancient Spirit had five generals associated with the five elements, and each one started one of the species' main bloodlines. [2]

“After he perished, the Ancient Spirits' bloodlines slowly ceased to exist, and the five generals were all killed. Eventually, only the Wood Spirit branch remained here in Sea-Sealing County. They're generally peaceful and live in harmony with those around them. But this one has a different personality compared to other members of his species. He's bloodthirsty. Three hundred years ago, he caused great turmoil before I finally managed to quell him and imprison him here.”