

Timescape 431

Chapter 431: A Bamboo Skewer for Qing Qiu

Ghost Hand flicked his sleeve, causing numerous bolts of heavenly lightning to form. As they smashed down, he snorted coldly and left.

Xu Qing looked down at the Wood Spirit with his ravaged body. Then he turned away to leave.

Down below, the huge tree trembled and looked up with a bitter expression. Then his gaze locked onto Xu Qing. His right wrist has a spirit aura thread on it....

A few hours later, at the far end of the minor world, Ghost Hand finished the tour.

Before they left the world, Xu Qing begged Ghost Hand to let him experience what it was like to directly sustain the natural and magical laws. After all, he would need to do that eventually or else he would never be able to do patrol work, in which case, being a Unit C jailer would be meaningless.

“Are you sure?” Ghost Hand asked, eyeing him. “Sustaining the weight of a world’s laws is something only Nascent Soul cultivators can do. Though a Gold Core cultivator might last for a while, perhaps four or five breaths of time, they’ll ultimately collapse under the weight.”

After some thinking, Xu Qing clasped hands and nodded in the affirmative.

“Okay.” Without another word, Ghost Hand ceased to bear the weight for Xu Qing.

Instantly, rumbling sounds filled Xu Qing, and he felt like countless mountains were crushing down on him. Cracking sounds rang out, and his soul trembled. He felt like he might soon be ripped to shreds.

Ghost Hand shook his head and was about to retract the power when Xu Qing unleashed Golden Crow Assimilates Myriad Spirits. His fleshly body power skyrocketed, and he began to fight back. It was obviously very hard, as he was trembling from head to toe. Yet as each breath of time passed, Ghost Hand’s expression grew more and more surprised.

After a hundred breaths of time passed, Xu Qing looked up at Ghost Hand. “Senior, I can sustain the natural laws for this long.”

Ghost Hand’s eyes slowly began to shine. “Not bad, boy. You’ve got an impressive fleshly body as well as an amazing soul. Most cultivators with a similar cultivation base aren’t able to do that.”

Ghost Hand flicked his sleeve, and the pressure on Xu Qing faded as Ghost Hand once again assumed the burden.

Xu Qing shivered. He could sense that in that short one hundred breaths of time, his fleshly body power had improved slightly. It felt like a re-tempering. His spirits lifted.

“Don’t get cocky, though. Although not a lot of Gold Core cultivators can do that, you aren’t the only one.” Ghost Hand grinned, and without another word performed an incantation gesture to pull himself and Xu Qing out of the minor world.

Soon they were outside in the void.

On the return trip, Xu Qing didn't feel any cockiness because of the hundred breaths of time. At the same time, he found himself wondering about the Ancient Spirit species, so he asked Ghost Hand for more details.

"The Ancient Spirits?" Ghost Hand thought for a moment. "They were a fantastic species. Historically speaking, I think it makes a lot of sense that they used to be called the Heavenfates.

"Supposedly, they had innate abilities that were absolutely shocking. I guess they're related to destiny auras. They could use them to bless themselves, but could also use them to bless outsiders. I'm not really sure of all the details.

"According to the stories, Emperor Ancient Spirit tried to use the destiny aura of Revered Ancient to break past the Ancient Emperor level and into a higher realm. He failed, thus wasting the destiny aura. In a single night, ninety percent of his bloodline was wiped out of existence, and that ended the era of the Ancient Spirits."

Around that time, the two of them emerged from the mural back onto Level 90.

"We'll stop here for today. Since you can sustain the laws for a time, then going forward you should be able to slowly acclimate. We'll have to see how far you can take it before we can determine if you have what it takes to go on patrol."

After offering a few more words of encouragement, Ghost Hand turned and left, sipping alcohol along the way.

Xu Qing clasped hands respectfully. Feeling mentally drained, he left the Corrections Division and went back to his sword pavilion. Along the way, he thought back to everything he had seen and learned in the minor world. The methods employed by the Swordsage Palace were nothing short of astonishing. He also found himself thinking about those Demi-Immortals he'd seen.

Demi-Immortals.... If I want to investigate the immortal puppet situation, I'm going to have to get close to some Demi-Immortals or Holytides. Otherwise, I'll never get any information.

He really wanted to run a thorough investigation, no matter how many difficult obstacles he had to overcome. After all, there were 500,000 military credits on the line, as well as a chance at a grade-two battle credit. Going to Mount Daybreak wasn't going to just require military credits, he also needed battle credits. After analyzing the situation, his heart started pounding.

There's another option. If I can get my hands on an actual immortal puppet, then maybe I could figure out how the Demi-Immortals make them.

Then he thought about what Ghost Hand mentioned, that the lieutenant governor had done research into immortal puppets. Taking out his swordsage command sword, he paid the military credits to get a consultation with the lieutenant governor.

Everyone in the county capital talked about how knowledgeable the lieutenant governor was. Because of that, he was usually someone people sought for advice. Normally speaking, though, the

lieutenant governor had plenty of administrative work to do to help the governor. Therefore, you had to submit an application if you hoped to spend any time asking him questions.

As it turned out, Xu Qing got lucky. About an hour after he got back to his sword pavilion, the lieutenant governor responded to his application.

“Xu Qing?”

Taking out his jade slip, he respectfully replied, “Exalted Lieutenant Governor.”

“How can I help you?” The lieutenant governor sounded tired, like he had just finished a heap of official business.

Xu Qing didn’t want to disturb him unnecessarily, so he sent a very succinct message asking for information about immortal puppets.

“Immortal puppets, huh? I actually have time right now. If you don’t mind coming over here, I can show you personally.”

The lieutenant governor’s response enlivened Xu Qing, and he immediately left his sword pavilion for the city.

It was late at night, but the county capital was well lit. Most shops were still open, and even a lot of mortals were out and about. Street food carts were on every street corner, and swordsages were on patrol.

Xu Qing went to the east part of the city where the Lieutenant Governor’s Mansion was located. When he explained himself to the guards there, one of them led him inside to the study.

Expression somber, Xu Qing clasped hands and bowed. “Swordsage Xu Qing here to request a meeting with the exalted Lieutenant Governor.”

“Come in,” the lieutenant governor said from inside. He still sounded tired.

Xu Qing respectfully pushed the door open and entered. The first thing he saw was the lieutenant governor flanked by a handful of assistants. All of them were working on various medicinal liquid mixtures. Among the assistants was at least one of the swordsages who had joined at the same time as him. That swordsage made eye contact and nodded, then continued to work on the medicinal liquid.

Xu Qing didn’t interrupt. He stood off to the side, taking everything in. Further inside, he noticed an array of potted medicinal plants, many of which had unusual and fantastic flowers.

The lieutenant governor looked exhausted, but his eyes glittered brightly. Clearly, he was at a critical moment in the mixing process. Keeping his attention focused, he added one bottle of medicinal liquid after another into the mix. After finishing, he took the mixture to a pot with a climbing osmanthus plant in it. Very carefully, he poured the mixture into the pot. There was something wrong with the mixture, though, as the plant quickly withered and died.

“Ai.” The lieutenant governor sighed. Massaging the bridge of his nose, he turned to Xu Qing and was about to say something when his transmission jade slip vibrated. Taking it out, he looked at it for a moment, whereupon his expression turned serious.

“Xu Qing, the governor just requested my presence. I don’t think I’ll be able to talk with you about immortal puppets after all. But I can give you this.” He took out a jade slip. “This contains some of my research notes. Take some time to study it, then later on you can ask me about any parts you don’t understand.”

After handing the jade slip to Xu Qing, he straightened up his robe. Then he gave some more instructions to his assistants regarding the medicinal mixtures. Finally, he gave another apology to Xu Qing before hurrying away.

Xu Qing clasped hands gratefully and watched him go.

The assistants were already hard at work on a new medicinal mixture. Knowing it wouldn’t be appropriate for him to stand around watching, Xu Qing said farewell and left the Lieutenant Governor’s Mansion.

On the way back through the bustling city, the shops were all open, but many of the street food carts were starting to pack up for the night. As Xu Qing walked along, he noticed one vendor selling candied fruit on a stick that was about to close. The colorful candied fruit caught his eye, so after a moment of consideration, he bought a skewer.

When he took a bite, his eyebrows shot up, and he looked more closely at the candied fruit. The flavor was amazing, and was definitely superior to the candied fruit back in Seven Blood Eyes. The sweetness and tartness was perfectly balanced. Coupled with the icy cold of the fruit, it made Xu Qing think back to his youth in Peerless City. He turned back to look at the vendor, but he had already packed up and left. [1]

“I should have bought a few more,” he murmured, taking another bite.

The flavor really was good.

And thus, Xu Qing walked along enjoying the candied fruit beneath the moonlight, and scanning the information about immortal puppets from the lieutenant governor’s jade slip. The information was very detailed, and included images. Clearly, the lieutenant governor had done very deep research. Xu Qing couldn’t help but admire the lieutenant governor’s breadth of knowledge. As he walked along the street, his expression suddenly flickered.

Turning, he saw a middle-aged cultivator in a black robe barreling around the corner of a nearby building. As he ran, he scattered poison powder around him.

The poison was so strong it caused the surrounding plants to wilt. It also filled the area with a noxious odor.

Someone was chasing the black-robed cultivator.

It was a young woman in a swordswoman uniform. She wore a mask on her face, and had a massive evil ghost scythe slung over her shoulders. It was none other than Qing Qiu. Her eyes burned with killing intent, and a baleful aura surrounded her as she chased the black-robed cultivator.

However, this man was just like her in that he had five-palace battle prowess. That, coupled with his poison, made it impossible for Qing Qiu to close the distance.

Considering how much work Xu Qing had done on missions recently, it only took a glance for him to identify the black-garbed man as someone from the wanted list. In fact, Xu Qing even knew his nickname. This man was called the Kid.

Because Qing Qiu was already chasing him, Xu Qing had no intention of interfering. Instead, he prepared to turn and leave.

However, that was when a gust of wind sent some poison floating toward him.

That poison couldn't possibly bother Xu Qing himself. However, when it landed on his candied fruit, the fruit turned black and started emanating a noxious stench.

Xu Qing's expression turned dark, and he looked up coldly at the fleeing black-garbed man. Then his right hand flashed, and the bamboo skewer from the candied fruit flew forth.

It whistled loudly through the air toward the man in black. Then a thump rang out as the skewer stabbed into the man's head and came out the other side. As the black, stinking candied fruits popped off the skewer, the black-garbed man's eyes went wide, and then he flopped to his face, dead.

Chapter 432: Those Who Use the Name of the Kid in Vain, Die!

Xu Qing wasn't very happy. That candied fruit was delicious, and it really brought back good memories from Peerless City. That was why he had been eating slowly, to savor the flavor. But then that poison wind came along and destroyed the entire skewer of fruit. [1]

With the kill done, Xu Qing looked coldly at Qing Qiu as she rushed up. He still didn't have a good impression of her, but considering this was her mission, he coldly said, "I'm not trying to take your military credits."

Then he turned to leave. Before he could, Qing Qiu spoke in a voice as cold as ice.

"Who cares about military credits??"

Striding forward, she completely ignored Xu Qing and stopped to loom over the black-garbed man. She didn't take his bag of holding. Instead, she stomped her foot down onto his head. The bamboo skewer had already stabbed through it, yet she stomped down with such force that the head exploded with a pop.

When the sound reached Xu Qing's ears, he stopped and looked back.

Qing Qiu clearly wasn't satiated, as she kept stomping down on the corpse, grinding the entire thing into a paste. The brutality of it was a surprise even to Xu Qing, and he could only speculate that this person had deeply offended Qing Qiu in some way. Looking away, he continued on his way back to his sword pavilion.

During the entire time, Qing Qiu didn't even look at Xu Qing. After she stomped the black-garbed man to a pulp, she finally pulled his bag of holding out of the gore. Then she glanced down in disgust at the pulverized flesh.

You think you deserve to be called the Kid? You besmirch the name! Thus, I kill you and don't even leave a corpse behind!

She hadn't been on a mission to track down this criminal. Instead, she had simply noticed that there was someone called the Kid on the bounty list. That had been more than enough to make her want to kill him. In Qing Qiu's heart, the term 'Kid' was unsurpassably holy. To her, it represented beauty and happiness. She couldn't ever let anyone sully that specific name.

After the evil ghost was absolutely sure Xu Qing was gone, he shouted into Qing Qiu's mind, "Yeah! Oh yeah! Kill him! End things in mutual destruction!!"

"Enough," Qing Qiu replied coldly. "Did you find out the details of that matter I asked you to look into?"

The evil ghost immediately responded, "Absolutely. In four months, the Holytides will be here to purchase cloudmother stones. Chances are, the caravan will go through Skymoon Ravine on their way back to their people. However, that's not an ideal location for an ambush. Are you really sure you want to take the risk?" [2]

Qing Qiu didn't say anything. She just turned and walked away under the moonlight.

Sounding a bit hesitant, the evil ghost continued, "If you're dead set on doing this, then I think we really need to be prepared to end things in mutual destruction with them. Although I've personally been waiting a long time for that day to come, I think you should give it some serious thought."

"I need more military credits if I want more time off from my post," Qing Qiu said. "I have to steal those resources to get military credits!"

"Is it really worth it? We're talking about three years, that's not so long is it? It's already been half a year!" The evil ghost sighed. It wanted to end things in mutual destruction with an enemy, but not some random, meaningless enemy. "Actually, the one most worthy of an end in mutual destruction is Mad Dog...."

Qing Qiu ignored the evil ghost and continued, "I can't wait three years. I need to get back to South Phoenix as quickly as possible."

"Maybe you should stop worrying about it. Three years isn't a big deal. Considering how much time has already passed, who cares if another three years go by?"

"Absolutely not! Don't you realize how I'm constantly worrying about this? Big Bro Kid could be in grave danger back in South Phoenix. I can't wait any longer. Now that I'm strong enough to protect him, I absolutely have to go find him. I owe him my life!"

As she walked through the night, she rubbed the tiny crystal she kept under her garment. Her eyes gleamed with determination.

Xu Qing was already back in his sword pavilion.

After sitting down cross-legged, he started carefully studying the jade slip from the lieutenant governor. Time passed. Just as the light of dawn was starting to spread through the sky, Xu Qing looked up, and his eyes flickered thoughtfully.

Immortal puppets are made from living subjects. And they have to be willing participants....

He had already gone through all of the information several times over, and now felt that he knew quite a bit about how the Demi-Immortals created their immortal puppets. Unfortunately, the creation process was considered top secret by the Demi-Immortals, so there was no way that even the lieutenant governor could uncover the most profound aspects. That said, the information in the jade slip was good enough for Xu Qing.

Whether it's a secret magic or some transformation technique, or the 'Demi-Immortal Nine Refinements' it mentions... none of that is really important. The important thing is that they require willing participants from their own species.

Eyes narrowing, Xu Qing thought back to the Demi-Immortals he'd seen in the prison world.

Is it possible that the Demi-Immortals have an ulterior motive for wanting that ten-year imprisonment clause in the three-species treaty? For example... what if the inmates get turned into immortal puppets after they're released?

Normally speaking, the inmates in the prison world end up dying over and over again until their memories are wiped out. Maybe that's part of what makes the subjects willing to become immortal puppets.

Xu Qing's eyes glittered as he thought about what Ghost Hand mentioned about the governor's order from three hundred years ago.

Senior Ghost Hand said that, in the interests of continuing our friendship with the Demi-Immortals, the governor issued orders prohibiting us from tampering with Demi-Immortal memories. This whole thing....

Although it seemed like it was the governor showing mercy, if Xu Qing's speculation was right, then it meant that the governor likely knew how immortal puppets were created. That seemed like the more likely reason for him to issue such orders. Because he had publicly said it was for the sake of friendship with the Demi-Immortals, they couldn't protest openly.

You can never judge a situation based on external factors.

That was something he had learned in Seven Blood Eyes, and had learned even more in the Eight Sect Coalition. Now that he was in the county capital, it was even more relevant.

If all of this is true, then what if I figure out a way to plant something onto the Demi-Immortal inmates? Something that will stay on them after they're released...?

He continued to think about how he might do that until the sun rose. Eyes glittering, he went to the Corrections Division. However, he didn't go to D-132 or Unit C. Instead he went to Level 9.

Given his authority as a Unit C jailer, he could now browse the information for all the Unit D inmates. He was hoping doing that might give him some more clues to work with. After all, not all Demi-Immortal inmates were in Unit C. In fact, there were about three hundred Demi-Immortals locked up in Unit D. Of that group, about seventeen were reaching the end of their ten-year sentence, meaning they would soon be returned to their people.

Some of that group of forty I saw in Unit C must also be nearing the end of their sentence.

Supposedly the minimum cultivation base for making an immortal puppet is Nascent Soul. That means the ones locked up in Unit D aren't strong enough. In turn, it's really hard to say what will happen to them after they're released.

After browsing the inmate files, Xu Qing left and went to D-027. He offered greetings to the jailer on duty, then asked if he could do some interrogations. Whether it was his status as a Unit C jailer, or the reputation he had earned in Unit D, it resulted in immediate agreement from the jailer. Moments later, the jailer led him into the cell block to the Demi-Immortal imprisoned inside.

The Demi-Immortal was middle-aged and pure white from head to toe. Despite being imprisoned, he seemed incredibly holy as he sat there cross-legged in meditation. Upon sensing that there were jailers nearing, his face remained expressionless, and he exuded a haughtiness that seemed to come from deep in his bones.

This jailer had been there to witness the bloodbath in D-001, so he said, "He's yours, Xu Qing. Just make sure not to kill him..."

Xu Qing nodded and clasped hands thankfully.

"Have fun." With a grin and a return salute, the jailer turned and left.

Xu Qing opened the cell door and stepped inside. The Demi-Immortal looked up, his eyes full of scorn.

"You—"

Before the Demi-Immortal could say anything else, Xu Qing stepped over and clamped his hand down onto the Demi-Immortal's head. Then he unleashed the power of his cultivation base, causing blood to spray out of the Demi-Immortal's face. He collapsed, unconscious.

Xu Qing didn't like to waste words, and wasn't interested in talking with this Demi-Immortal. Therefore he had just knocked him out.

With that, Xu Qing crouched and started studying the Demi-Immortal's body structure. Soon, a thoughtful look appeared in his eyes as he contemplated exactly how to do what he wanted to do. At the same time, he occasionally used a scalpel to slice open the Demi-Immortal's flesh.

Eventually, as Xu Qing was still studying the Demi-Immortal, it shivered as the pain began to drag it back to consciousness. Just before it opened its eyes, though, Xu Qing quietly said, "The person you killed was a good friend of mine!"

He slapped the Demi-Immortal unconscious again. A thump rang out as the Demi-Immortal, who had been just about to open its eyes, went out cold.

Time passed in that manner. On about twelve occasions the Demi-Immortal nearly regained consciousness, but every single time, Xu Qing would knock it out again. The Demi-Immortal's fury built until Xu Qing was finally done with his research. When it was over, the Demi-Immortal was covered with cuts and bruises.

I think the best strategy will be to put some of my mutagen in him. I doubt it will be discovered. My beetles... nah, forget about that. I can't afford to underestimate the Demi-Immortals. Mutagen will work perfectly, and probably won't attract any attention.

Having reached that decision, Xu Qing waved his hand, causing a concealing mist to build in the area. Then he tapped into his third heavenly palace and released, not poison, but a tiny scrap of his personal mutagen. That mutagen could invade any living thing, with Xu Qing as its source.

He very carefully sent the mutagen into the Demi-Immortal's body, hiding it in a location inside his kidney. He chose not to put in a heart. Demi-Immortals had five hearts, plus a very powerful regeneration ability that ensured you couldn't kill them even by destroying four of their hearts. As Ghost Hand had mentioned in his lecture, the kidneys were the Demi-Immortals' weak spot. [3]

After concealing the mutagen in the Demi-Immortal's kidney, Xu Qing dispersed the concealing mist around him, then left to find the second Demi-Immortal he wanted to study.

After he was gone, the battered and wounded Demi-Immortal woke up. His eyes burned with fury as he examined himself. After making sure his injuries were all superficial, he gritted his teeth. Thinking back to what the jailer said, he came to the conclusion this had been a bit of personal reprisal.

I've killed a lot of people, how am I supposed to know which one was your friend? I guess it's not important. I'm going to be released soon. Once I'm free, I'll make sure to revisit this torment back on you many times over!

As that initial Demi-Immortal's fury simmered, Xu Qing spent time in the following days doing the same thing with all of the Demi-Immortals in Unit D who were on the verge of being released.

He made sure to change his appearance each time, and also come up with a cover story suited to each inmate's specific crimes. Everything was done in a way to make sure the Demi-Immortals didn't realize what he was actually doing. Given that the inmates didn't have any access to outside information, he wanted them to think that they were just the victims of revenge.

After he was done, he left Unit D and went to Unit C.

There were two Demi-Immortals here that met his needs. However, though he could sustain the laws of the minor world for a short time, it was difficult. Doing so left him very limited, and there was a time limit involved.

For the time being, those two Demi-Immortals were going to get off.

That meant that the best thing to do was focus his attention on getting used to the natural and magical laws. Every time he entered the minor world, he would take time to acclimate to the intense pain. He couldn't last more than about three hundred breaths of time, which definitely wasn't long enough to insert some mutagen into those Demi-Immortals.

I would need to be able to last for 2,000 breaths of time to do that.

All he could do was work harder.

Every time he visited, he would bring a flagon of alcohol for Ghost Hand, since he knew the jailer liked to drink.

After having done that several times, he took advantage of a moment in which Ghost Hand was drinking to ask if there was some trick to being able to stand up to the laws of the minor worlds. He figured there must be something like that. At first, Ghost Hand didn't even answer the question. But

after Xu Qing had plied him with alcohol so many times, causing his approval of him to deepen, he finally revealed the secret.

Xu Qing listened carefully. After that, he did more tests in the minor world. More training. He started making better progress after that. The amount of time he could stand up to the laws was increased. A month later, he went from three hundred breaths of time to a thousand.

During that time, something big happened in Sea-Sealing County.

Nightshade cultivators were spotted in the county. The Swordsage Palace dispatched some top experts who tracked down the Nightshades and arrested them, then brought them back to Unit C for questioning. The matter was kept top secret from the public. However, being a Unit C jailer, Xu Qing learned about it.

The day the Nightshades were brought in, he was reporting in for his shift. He had just arrived at Level 90 when he saw Ghost Hand and a group of other World 1 jailers handling the prisoner transfer.

That was Xu Qing's first time seeing Nightshades.

If there was one moment in time that could be pointed to as the moment when humanity began to decline, it was the war with the Firemoon Darkheaven people. However, the Nightshades were the vicious killers who took advantage of humanity's moment of weakness to brutally cut them down further. [4]

It was around that same time that the Holytide people chose to join forces with the Nightshades. From a historical standpoint, the betrayal of Grand Duke Holytide was a shocking twist. However, perspectives change with the passing of time. Nowadays, few people knew the truth of what happened.

Xu Qing didn't know very much about those matters. But he had learned a bit about history during his swordsage training, and the lesson had been taught by the lieutenant governor. He knew that the Nightshades didn't like sunlight. Because of that, they destroyed the sun which shone over their lands, causing it to perish.

After that, the Nightshade people only had a moon overhead.

Chapter 433: The Biggest Meat Shield Ever!

That alone went to show how formidable the Nightshades were.

And now, Xu Qing finally got a chance to see a Nightshade in person. There were a total of four who were being sent into Unit C.

They didn't look at all like humans. Nightshades were thin and small. In most cases they were about the same height and size as a twelve- or thirteen-year-old human. Their skin was gray, and they had large heads with large, lidless eyes that were as black as night. Their hair came in the form of spikes that stuck out of their heads like weapons. In the darkness of Level 90, the spikes emanated a faint glow. They were heavily bound and looked weak and dispirited. They bore the scars of the heavy interrogation they had endured, many wounds being so deep they revealed bone. Each one had a long, black needle stabbed into its head that was covered with countless tiny magical symbols.

As Xu Qing took in the scene, Ghost Hand made some final arrangements with the swordsages who had brought the Nightshades in. Seeing Xu Qing looking on, he glanced at the four Nightshades, his eyes flickering with killing intent.

“You don’t see Nightshades in Sea-Sealing County very often,” he said.

With that, he had the Unit C jailers take three of the Nightshades into the minor world.

The grim smiles on the faces of the Unit C jailers made it clear that they were going to have some fun with these rarely seen inmates.

“Remember not to kill them,” Ghost Hand said harshly. “Leave them alive so everybody can have a chance to train on them. Don’t just keep them to yourselves.” The Unit C jailers didn’t mind Ghost Hand’s harsh tone. Grinning, they took away the three other Nightshades.

Soon enough, only Xu Qing, Ghost Hand and that one Nightshade were left behind on Level 90.

“Come, Xu Qing. We didn’t have a specimen during my training lecture. So now we’re going to have a little makeshift class.”

Ghost Hand licked his lips as he glared at the Nightshade gasping for breath. Walking over, he picked it up.

“Nightshades don’t like sunlight. That’s their fatal weakness. However, don’t be fooled by that common assessment. It doesn’t mean that they’ll literally die if light touches them. After all, Nightshade lands have a moon. The reality is that if you want to kill them, you need to have very strong, very pure sunlight. Otherwise all that happens is you make them uncomfortable.”

Eyes glitter maliciously, Ghost Hand continued, “Note the Nightshade’s eyes. Countless sealing marks converge in those eyes, as their eyes are important to their cultivation method. Their signature cultivation art relates to enslavement.”

As Xu Qing watched, Ghost Hand jabbed his fingers into the Nightshade cultivator’s eye and ripped it out of its socket.

As the Nightshade screamed, black blood splashed everywhere. Ghost Hand tossed the eyeball to Xu Qing.

Xu Qing’s expression was the same as ever as he caught the eyeball and examined it. Sure enough, he could see innumerable magical symbols in the eye, densely packed into what appeared to be a spell formation.

“That thing can be considered a weapon. Keep it as a souvenir.”

Realizing that it was a precious item, Xu Qing put it away and then clasped hands thankfully.

“Now, let’s continue with the class,” Ghost Hand said, roughly shaking the Nightshade he held in his hand. “Because of the Nightshade’s cultivation and also their innate abilities, they have some of the best divine sense of all the species. In fact, their

divine sense is so strong they can use it to kill someone without leaving behind any evidence. They can use it to control all physical matter, and it's one of the ways they've enslaved so many countless species.

“The strongest Nightshade experts can ‘create something from nothing,’ and materialize corporeal objects out of thin air. Inside of each Nightshade’s head is a growth we call a brain crystal. It’s very valuable. Brain crystals are key to this species’ ability to absorb mutagen and use it in cultivation. In the past, there were humans who tried to take them, absorb them, and use them in cultivation. Such efforts failed.

“What I’ve explained so far are the most basic features of this species. Nightshades are a prolific species, so as you might expect, they have all sorts of sects, clans, factions, and the like. And of course, their magical techniques are just as varied and complex.

“By the way, their hair is their most basic weapon. It contains a poison capable of wiping out souls. If you ever run into Nightshades, be wary of their hair.”

Ghost Hand was about to continue when Xu Qing hesitantly said, “Senior, can I keep one of those hairs as a souvenir?”

Hearing that, Ghost Hand laughed heartily. Plucking out three of the spike-like hairs, he tossed them to Xu Qing. Then he went on to explain more details about the Nightshades, being very explicit and comprehensive.

Toward the end, he cut open the Nightshade to reveal its internal workings. It was very brutal.

Xu Qing’s expression never changed, and he watched until the very end. He had no sympathy for this Nightshade. He knew that if he was captured by their species, he would go through similar torment. The animosity between the two species was well-known throughout Revered Ancient.

That said, Xu Qing started to get the feeling that Ghost Hand wasn’t just teaching a class. It was more like he was using the pretext of a class to indulge in his own hobbies.

Pretending not to have realized that, Xu Qing just paid close attention.

About two hours later, Ghost Hand was done, and he wrapped up the lecture. “It’s too bad we don’t have more specimens to work with. Hopefully next time we can go into much further detail.”

Licking his lips, he took a big swig of alcohol, then hummed a little tune as he entered the minor world.

As of now, there weren’t four Nightshades in Unit C. There were three.

Xu Qing clasped hands and bowed as he left.

The arrival of the Nightshade inmates didn’t change his day-to-day life. Everything remained the same as usual. During the days, he would check in at D-132 and then spend time getting used to the natural laws in the prison world. Eventually, his hard work ensured that he went from a limit of 1,000 breaths of time to 1,500 breaths of time. He was rapidly approaching the goal he had set for himself.

One day after what seemed like a very long period without any communication, the Captain messaged him.

“Hey hey, little Junior Brother. You at your sword pavilion?”

Xu Qing had just ended his shift and returned to his sword pavilion. Considering the form of address the Captain used, one of two things was obvious: either the Captain was with someone else, or he had something very important to talk about.

“Yeah, I’m here,” Xu Qing replied.

After enough time had passed for an incense stick to burn, the Captain showed up with a decidedly uncomfortable Ning Yan. [1]

As soon as they were inside, the Captain shoved Ning Yan forward, and then gave a meaningful look to Xu Qing as he laughed heartily.

“Little Junior Brother, this fellow wanted to ask for something, but didn’t dare come here and thus begged me to act as the middle-man.”

Xu Qing clasped hands in greeting to the Captain, then just looked coldly at Ning Yan.

Ning Yan shivered and his face turned a bit ashen. The truth was that he had no other option than to ask Chen Erniu for help getting in touch with Xu Qing.

“Elder Brother Xu Qing...” Ning Yan said, clasping hands in greeting.

Xu Qing ignored him and looked back at the Captain.

Inwardly, the Captain was delighted, and couldn’t have been happier to be back around Xu Qing. All it took was a single word, and Xu Qing knew what he was thinking. Clearly, the way he had clasped hands in greeting had been intended to give the Captain face.

“Remember how this brat didn’t actually become a full swordsage back in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture? He had to take the test again here in the county capital. Well guess what? He passed! However, the final segment requires a personal endorsement from another new swordsage from the same prefecture. Sadly, Ning Yan doesn’t know a lot of people. Qing Qiu ignored his requests, and though I offered to step in, he refused. Therefore, what do you think about stepping in as the one to help him?”

The Captain looked at him and blinked a few times.

All it took was a glance for Xu Qing to realize that the Captain was either taking advantage of Ning Yan, or needed him for some plan of his. After all, there was no way the Captain would go to all this trouble if it didn’t benefit him.

Xu Qing thought about it. If Ning Yan had come with this request, he would have refused. But since it came from his Elder Brother, he mulled it over for a bit and then nodded in agreement.

Seeing that, Ning Yan’s face lit up with joy. A lot of people had told him that Chen Erniu wasn’t reliable, but now he could see the rumors weren’t true. Chen Erniu had insisted that he could get Xu Qing to agree to help, and now it was actually happening. Ning Yan was very impressed. He quickly

offered profound thanks. Then Xu Qing agreed to meet up in seven days at the Archives Branch to go through the formalities. Clasp hands, Ning Yan left.

The Captain stayed. Once they were alone, he sat down across from Xu Qing, pulled out an apple to eat, and chuckled. "Little Ah Qing, this Ning Yan isn't a bad person for the most part. Don't worry about recommending him."

"What do you need him for, Captain?" Xu Qing asked.

"He has some special techniques. Remember how Qingqin had captured him yet he didn't get hurt...?" The Captain's eyes glittered, and he lowered his voice as he continued, "I secretly tried to take a bite out of him, and turns out it didn't work! No matter how hard I tried to bite down, nothing happened! Something is seriously off about him."

Xu Qing gave the Captain an odd look. The Captain pretended not to notice.

"He said something about a bloodline ancestral awakening, but I don't believe him. Ning Yan is definitely keeping some big secrets. As for what exactly they are, I don't think it matters. The point is he has some very tough skin that will be a massive advantage to us when we accomplish our next big job."

"Think about it. In all previous scenarios, whenever we faced danger, we had to flee for our lives. When some serious magical technique was about to blast into us, not only would we be forced to risk death, but also, all the good loot around us would get destroyed. But Ning Yan... can totally resolve that issue!"

The Captain blinked a few times. Xu Qing blinked back at him.

"Trust me, my little Ah Qing. I'm not wrong about this. Ning Yan is obviously a genius, so I'm just setting the stage early. If we wait until we actually need him, we won't have time to subtly get him on our side."

As the Captain sat there looking very much like a master strategist, Xu Qing asked a single question.

"Is Wu Jianwu also a genius?"

"Don't even mention him..." the Captain said, taking a vicious yet depressed bite out of his apple. Then he suddenly looked somehow wily and mysterious as he changed the subject. "Little Ah Qing, is it true that they brought some Nightshades to the Corrections Division recently?"

The Captain's eyes shone as he waited in anticipation for Xu Qing's answer.

Xu Qing knew that the Captain excelled at being in the know about things. But the Nightshade situation was supposed to be top secret. Xu Qing only knew because of his status as a jailer. As a result, the Captain's questions caused a look of surprise to appear on his face.

That expression told the Captain everything he needed to know. Eyes glittering victoriously, he licked his lips and said, “You need to think of a way to lay eyes on those Nightshades. Ideally, take some image recordings. Make sure you note their way of speech, mannerisms, and physical appearance. Everything. The more detailed the information, the better. Once you have everything written down, get it to me. I can make very good use of it! Trust me, little Ah Qing, the time is almost here to go on our next really big job!”

Xu Qing’s pupils constricted. He was really dying to get more military credits. And though the Captain’s plans never really went as he said they would go, the results... usually made them worth it. They tended to involve great danger. But as far as Xu Qing was concerned, life in this world involved danger anyway. In that case... if the rewards were worth it, then the danger was worth it. That was especially true considering he had already invested some spirit stones in this endeavor.

After some more thought, he looked at the Captain and asked, “The plan has to do with the Nightshades?”

The Captain plastered a very mysterious look onto his face. Taking a bite out of his apple, he smiled complacently at Xu Qing.

“Like I said before, little Ah Qing, the Swordsage Palace obviously values me a lot, otherwise they wouldn’t have assigned such an important post in the Credit Auditing Branch.

“In the time that’s passed so far, I’ve come to a thorough and exhaustive understanding of the Credit Auditing Branch. I know the activities and arrangements made by every single swordsage in the Swordsage Palace, from the most important to the least important.

“Unless someone doesn’t keep a record of their military credits, then this pair of extremely sharp eyes of mine will be able to see everything about them.”

The Captain’s proud tone of voice made it seem like he was explaining some of the most complex societal issues.

Xu Qing sighed inwardly, and couldn’t help but feel some deep admiration for the Captain. After all... he was able to take a very unremarkable assignment and do some amazing things with it. That seemed to indicate without a doubt that the Captain was much more of a genius than Ning Yan.

“And therefore, little Ah Qing, I think it goes to show that you still lack experience. You need to learn a thing or two from me, don’t you see? Don’t go charging around like random with those spoiled brats. What the hell good will that do? Going on outside missions all the time will wear you out, and you won’t even get much military credits.

“Speaking of which, I really have to offer you some constructive criticism. This whole time, I’m the only one who’s been taking care of business!”

Xu Qing blinked a few times. He could tell the Captain was a bit peeved about something, as this was the third time he had mentioned something along these lines. Xu Qing quickly decided to make

sure the admiration he felt showed prominently on his face. He also took out a very large apple and gave it to the Captain.

The Captain instinctively felt that he shouldn't take it, but at the same time, instinctively took it. Glancing at Xu Qing, he prepared to continue speaking, except Xu Qing beat him to the punch.

"Eldest Brother," he said softly, "not too long ago Arch-Immortal Plumdark took me to meet her best friends here in the county capital. One of them is named Li Shitao...."

Chapter 434: I Will Sacrifice Myself to Hell

"Hmm?" The Captain was so taken aback he didn't really understand what Xu Qing was getting at. "What does that have to do with me? Are you trying to show off, little Ah Qing? If it weren't for that letter of mine...."

Xu Qing looked at the Captain.

The Captain cleared his throat. "If it weren't for that letter of yours..." The Captain suddenly looked very serious. "Speaking of that, I have to give you some more constructive criticism. Truth be told, I've been telling you this same thing for a long time. We cultivators should live alone in the world. That's the only way for us to develop an iron will. That's the only way for us to develop true self-confidence. That's the only way for us to confidently face life's difficulties! Women? Hah! Could they possibly be as good as apples?" The Captain viciously took a bite of his apple, his eyes glittering with scorn.

"Women are like boulders blocking our path forward. Mountains! They're like fetters preventing us from wielding our swords. No, they're like hells! You really need to be careful in this matter. Don't be like Third Sib. I mean, come on. All my advice earlier about Arch-Immortal Plumdark was mostly just harmless banter."

Xu Qing listened thoughtfully to the Captain's assessment, and had to admit that what he said made sense. Finally, he nodded. "You're right, Eldest Brother. In that case, I guess I won't introduce you to Arch-Immortal Plumdark's friend."

The Captain was so stunned his eyes went wide and he stopped eating his apple. "What'd you just say? Introduce me?"

Xu Qing nodded apologetically. "That was my mistake, Eldest Brother. Not long ago, Senior Li, in other words Li Shitao from the Administration Palace, wanted me to introduce a male friend to her. Due to my lack of experience in life, I almost introduced you. It's a good thing I didn't do anything to influence your iron will and self-confidence."

"Li Shitao? That's a nice-sounding name. Um... is she hot?"

Looking surprised, Xu Qing nodded and said, "She's alright."

The Captain's eyes lit up, but he quickly got them under control. Standing, he clasped his hands behind his back and sighed. "Little Junior Brother... as your Eldest Brother, I've already lived alone in the world for twenty-six years now, which is a bit excessive." He turned and looked at Xu Qing.

Xu Qing hesitated. "We cultivators really should live alone in the world."

Sounding very somber, the Captain said, “We cultivators should live according to the following maxim: between love, law, wealth, and land, the wise view love as supremely grand!”

Xu Qing was doubtful. “Not a boulder blocking our path forward? A mountain?”

“If you don’t understand that mountain, how can you ever scale it?” the Captain replied confidently.

“Not a fetter preventing us from wielding our sword? A hell?” Xu Qing looked at the Captain.

Looking very wistful, the Captain gazed through the window of the sword pavilion at the world outside. He sighed softly. “I will sacrifice myself to hell to spare everyone else that torment.”

Xu Qing looked at the Captain and noted his complete lack of embarrassment.

A long moment passed, and then Xu Qing sighed and nodded.

“Captain, you really do need to start eating more grapefruit.” [1]

The Captain’s face lit up. Seemingly unconcerned at all about Xu Qing yet again mentioning grapefruit, he hurried to Xu Qing’s side. Eyebrows dancing up and down, he handed him three big apples.

“My love for you has not been in vain, little Junior Brother. Ahem. So, I’ll wait for an update.” With that, the Captain hurried away looking thrilled.

Xu Qing watched thoughtfully as he left. Though the Captain ended up completely contradicting himself, Xu Qing actually thought that his initial assessment had a lot of merit.

“Only with a calm heart can one be truly strong.” Closing his eyes, he completely cleared his heart of extraneous thoughts and started meditating.

In the blink of an eye, four days passed.

During that time, Xu Qing worked hard to purify his thoughts. He purged himself of anything that would disturb his calmness, and got himself back into the same mindset as when he first arrived in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. He also immersed himself in getting used to the natural and magical laws of the minor world. Late at night on the fourth day, he successfully reached the point of being able to last for 2,000 breaths of time.

Now I can give it a shot.

He didn’t end his shift and go home. Instead, he rested for a short time on Level 90, then once again entered the world in the mural. Once in the void, he followed the familiar path to the dome, then passed through it to appear above the clouds in the minor world. Immense pressure weighed down on him, like an entire mountain range crushing down from above.

He shivered as cracking and popping sounds echoed out from inside. However, his facial expression didn’t change. This was exactly the same way he normally trained here. He was already completely familiar with the mountain-like weight of the natural laws. He moved forward without hesitation, carrying the weight of mountains with him. With every step he took, intense rumbling sounds

echoed out, like boulders falling down a mountain. Wild colors flashed in heaven and earth, and intense winds swept back and forth.

It was a shocking scene. The reason for it was that Xu Qing wasn't able to lift something heavy as if it were light. Because he bore the laws of the world, his every movement would cause dramatic transformations around him.

When he passed, lightning crashed and the clouds seethed in dramatic fashion. As he proceeded, the nonhumans hidden in the area looked out in shock.

Though they knew that it was because he couldn't lift something heavy as if it were light, that just illustrated how exceedingly dangerous he was. After all, considering he couldn't control the laws, it meant their effects would spread uncontrollably....

That was exactly what was happening. The moment he appeared in the air, the weather around him fluctuated dramatically. Sometimes there was acid rain, sometimes lightning, sometimes tempests.... The earth beneath his feet was also affected. Sometimes plains became mountains, or mountains became rivers. Everything was completely unstable, and only went back to normal after he was gone. The inmates who got caught up in it all... were very unlucky.

Looking down, Xu Qing noticed hordes of inmates pouring out of hiding places, terror on their faces as they fled this way and that.

Some, who had already lost too many memories by dying too many times, actually ran in his direction in the hope of being killed directly by the natural laws. If they were killed in that way, they wouldn't experience the Reset. Because of that, they thought of that type of death as a release.

Frowning, Xu Qing waved his hand and coolly said, "I hereby lock down the land and airspace in this part of the world."

In response, the laws he was sustaining shivered, and then cracking sounds filled heaven and earth around him. Then, streams of natural laws swept out from the living things in the area, and then stitched together around Xu Qing as they created new natural laws.

The people who had been rushing in his direction to kill themselves were repelled, and had no chance to run or fly closer.

When Xu Qing left the area, everything went back to normal. Having done that, Xu Qing calculated the time. Realizing he couldn't afford any unnecessary delays, he gritted his teeth and rushed forward. As he moved, more cracking sounds emanated from within him. Also, the laws around him caused the ground below to seemingly shrink, allowing him to move even faster.

Before long, he reached the vast plain where the Demi-Immortals were located.

This was the first task he had planned for this trip into the minor world.

Upon arriving, he immediately changed the natural laws in the area. Then he made a grasping gesture, causing two of the Nascent Soul Demi-Immortals to fly up into the air to him. Then he sped off into the distance.

After finding a location with no one else present, he used the same tactics he used on the Unit D Demi-Immortal inmates. After he'd inserted mutagen into both of them, he paused for thought.

If their memories aren't erased, then it means their chances of being turned into immortal puppets are reduced.... That said, Demi-Immortals aren't idiots. If some of their people suddenly show up with no memories after three hundred years of that never happening, they'll be suspicious. I can't push it too far, or be too dramatic.

After some more thought, he took one of the unconscious Demi-Immortals back to the plain. The other, he tossed into the wilderness some distance away.

I'll come back frequently to keep an eye on them. If the Demi-Immortal in the other location ends up losing memories, I can bring him back. That way he'll only experience a bit of memory loss.

He was just about to move on to the second task he had in mind when, all of a sudden, he looked over his shoulder.

Someone had suddenly appeared about 1,500 meters behind him! From his uniform, he was obviously a Unit C jailer. He looked coldly at Xu Qing, and then at the Demi-Immortal down in the wilderness. His eyes shone with mysterious light.

"What are you doing?"

Based on the cultivation base fluctuations coming from this Unit C jailer, Xu Qing could tell that he was in the Nascent Soul level. He remembered seeing this jailer before, though he'd never spoken to him. In response to the question, Xu Qing looked down at the wilderness below, then put an apologetic look onto his face.

"It's a little experiment."

The jailer looked coldly at Xu Qing for a long moment, then back down at the Demi-Immortal, who was about to regain consciousness.

"I'm in charge of this land here. You should have said something to me ahead of time. The governor's orders state that Demi-Immortals are exempt from the pain of memory loss.... this has to be a one-time thing."

With that, he turned and left. He did nothing to interfere.

He and Xu Qing were both jailers. And though Xu Qing wasn't in the Nascent Soul level, he had the same level of authority. What he was doing was something of a rules violation, but he wasn't doing anything excessive, and even went to the trouble of being visibly apologetic. As a result, the other jailer wasn't inclined to do anything further.

Xu Qing knew he had been careless, and that he really had no justification for his actions. Normally speaking, he would never have made such a mistake. After all, he had never slipped up in Unit D. But this was his first time on patrol, and he was working on a severe time limit. Because of that, it had skipped his mind to check who was in charge of this part of the minor world.

"Guilty as charged," Xu Qing said to the jailer, clasping his hands respectfully.

The jailer didn't look back, but he waved his hand dismissively. He obviously wasn't as annoyed as he was before.

When he was gone, Xu Qing also left. The second task he had in mind was to find the three Nightshades, both to observe them and also leave his mark on them. However, now he had something else in mind. Flying back up into the sky, he left the minor world.

After he was free from the laws, he breathed a long sigh of relief. Then he went back into the Corrections Division. The first thing he did was go find Ghost Hand, to report about how he'd dealt with the natural laws and gone on patrol.

In one corner of Level 90, Ghost Hand sat in a rocking chair, a jug of alcohol in hand. When he heard Xu Qing's report he looked up and said, "That fast?"

Ghost Hand didn't hide his surprise. He quickly performed an incantation gesture and pointed out, causing the mural to shine with soft light. Then the images shifted, changing to Xu Qing on patrol. It was in the moment he had just arrived, and not when he was dealing with the Demi-Immortals.

"Not bad, boy. Good job!" Ghost Hand waved his hand and the mural went back to normal. Then he tossed an identity medallion to Xu Qing. "You'll be in charge of East District 13."

"Yes, sir," Xu Qing said. After a moment of thought, he quietly continued, "Your humble servant needs to report something. I moved one of the Demi-Immortals to a different location in the minor world. It's an experiment I need to run...."

"That's not a big deal," Ghost Hand said, chuckling sarcastically. Obviously, Ghost Hand was already aware of the situation. Being in charge, he knew exactly what happened in the minor world. What was more, he knew that the jailers under his command weren't naive fools, and would occasionally engage in personal projects and matters. But when all was said and done, they were all swordsages, and they wouldn't do anything outright evil. As a result, he would usually look the other way in such circumstances.

After all, even he was no exception. What was more, he was clearly pleased that Xu Qing had taken the initiative to explain himself.

Seeing that, Xu Qing knew he had made the right decision. There were some things that weren't worth trying to hide, and if you did, would result in more unwanted scrutiny. With that thought in mind, he said one more thing.

"Senior, I really want to observe those other Nightshades."

Ghost Hand laughed heartily. Pointing to the identity medallion he'd just given, he said, "Back during the lecture, I could tell you were interested. You can feel free to observe anything in the area you oversee."

Surprised, Xu Qing clasped hands and bowed deeply to Ghost Hand. Then he left.

Ghost Hand sipped some alcohol as he watched Xu Qing leaving. He really did approve of Xu Qing. Whether it was the way he'd poisoned Ailing Ghost, the extent of his powers of understanding, or his politeness, all were unusual. What was more, he was only in the Gold Core level, yet qualified to go on patrol alone. All of that went to show how extraordinary Xu Qing was.

Beyond all that, there was his 30,000-meter pillar of light and the fact that he was assigned to D-132. The latter... was the most significant of all. That was why Ghost Hand put the Nightshades into the area that Xu Qing was in charge of. If he'd put the Nightshades in with another jailer, all the other jailers would have started speculating about his choice. After all, Nightshades were rare enough that everyone was interested in them.

But giving them to someone with a 30,000-meter pillar of light would forestall much of that speculation. What was more, it would help ensure that Xu Qing became well-known among the other jailers.

You need to work hard, boy. East District 13 really got lucky today. Taking a swig of alcohol, he rocked in the chair and hummed a little tune.

Chapter 435: The Original Saber of Supreme Vastness

Xu Qing once again entered the world inside the mural. As the laws weighed down on him, he took a deep breath and used the command medallion to find the way to East District 13. It was a rather large district that Ghost Hand had taken him through on his first tour. It didn't take long to find. The terrain was volcanic, with lava flows crisscrossing the lands.

The three Nightshades were imprisoned in three different volcanoes. The light cast by the fiery volcanoes was similar enough to sunlight that the Nightshades experienced the same torment they would from being outside during the day.

Xu Qing flew past all three of them to get the lay of the land, then took one of the Nightshades out of the volcano to study. After about five hundred breaths of time had passed, his eyes glittered.

The aura of the red moon is much stronger on them compared to the Holytides....

As a matter of fact, back when Ghost Hand had given him private instruction on the Nightshades, Xu Qing had noticed that red moon aura in them. It came from their black blood. Today, he was finally able to confirm his previous observations.

That's why the Holytides have the same aura. It's because they have some of the Nightshades' black blood flowing in their veins. Given this, I guess it means that the Nightshades worship that evil god with the hands covering the eyes, the same one I saw in the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture.

He felt more on guard than ever, especially considering that the violet moon in his fourth heavenly palace had been formed by some of the aura he had stolen from that red moon.

"Nightshades...." he murmured. He felt confident in his suppositions so far, especially given what he knew about the Nightshades living in a land with no sun and only a moon.

Eventually, he settled his thoughts. Sending a divine will command to his shadow, he had it leave some shadow eyes on them for observation. At the same time, he also took some images and stored them on a jade slip. After some more thought, he decided it would be best if he allowed the Nightshades to communicate with each other. That might give him the chance to get more details from them. Therefore, he deposited all three Nightshades into the same volcano.

Next, he found a nonhuman inmate to test his Gruegloom Daoseizing Art on. He wanted to see if devouring nonhumans could improve his cultivation base. Unfortunately, though Xu Qing had more than enough battle prowess, because his fundamental cultivation base level was different, the Gruegloom Daoseizing Art wasn't very effective.

In his mind, he realized it made sense to liken gold cores to candied fruits. It didn't matter if the candied fruits were hard, because the outer layer was just crystallized sugar. Once that external coating melted, he could digest the fruit inside. But nascent souls were like fruits coated in iron. Obviously, that iron coating would make them much more difficult to digest.

It made sense to Xu Qing. After all, no matter how weak a Nascent Soul cultivator was, they were on a fundamentally higher level. A Gold Core technique simply wasn't going to work very well under those circumstances.

It wasn't as if there was literally no way to make it work. But the complications made it so that devouring gold cores just made more sense considering how convenient and fast the process was. Another possibility was that he was doing it the wrong way. Therefore, he decided that after he was able to stay in the minor world for longer, he would do some tests and see if changing his specific methods would yield better results.

At the moment, he had already reached his time limit and was preparing to leave. This was his second time in the minor world today, and he could only bear the massive weight of the natural laws for so long. Just as he was about to leave, wild colors flashed in heaven and earth off in the distance. The clouds transformed, becoming dark and oppressive. Thunder boomed, making it seem like there was a heavenly tribulation underway. A series of lightning bolts smashed into the ground, exploding the dirt and rock in a wide area.

Xu Qing's eyes narrowed, as he didn't see any natural laws at work.

Don't tell me it's the work of one of the other jailers.

He started moving, heading in the direction of the affected area.

From a distance, it looked like a massive storm swirling in the sky. As he got closer, he saw a figure in motion beneath the heavenly tribulation. It was a tall, burly nonhuman with blue skin and a solitary horn. He had one eye, and massive arms with nine fingers on each hand. His expression was one of anxiety and madness as he flew up toward the tribulation clouds. He really was trying to pass a tribulation!

All it took was a glance for Xu Qing to understand what was going on. There were no other jailers in the area, which meant that this dramatic event was being caused by the nonhuman.

He was obviously an extraordinary individual who had managed to push his cultivation base to the breakthrough point even while in this minor world. As a result, the natural laws of the minor world transformed into a crushing heavenly tribulation. It wasn't something commonly seen in a minor world like this. What was more, based on everything he understood about this prison world, he was certain... that this nonhuman wouldn't pass the tribulation.

If the laws of this place weren't under the control of the Swordsage Palace, then he might have had a chance. But though Xu Qing had never personally witnessed a heavenly tribulation here, he knew that it would be mighty enough to shake heaven and earth. It seemed likely the nonhuman had

picked this location because of the lack of any guards. And the inmate had obviously not anticipated Xu Qing showing up.

Senior Ghost Hand sent me here, so surely he knows what's going on, right? As he pondered the situation, intense rumbling echoed out from the tribulation clouds.

Then, numerous bolts of lightning gathered, and instead of dropping onto the nonhuman, they converged above him. There beneath the clouds, the lightning bolts merged together into the shape of a saber. The blade of lightning flickered dazzlingly, and emitted rumbling sounds that filled heaven and earth.

A consummately mighty force appeared, filled with the natural laws of the minor world, the magical laws of heaven and earth, and the power of the dao of heaven. It was pulsing with a visible dao resonance!

A blade nimbus shimmered around it with blinding brightness, causing the rest of the world to grow dark, as if only this blade light existed in heaven and earth! A boundless might erupted, accompanied by an intense sound that pierced through the air, as the saber dropped toward the nonhuman. This was a true heavenly saber!

And it was slashing, not the body, but the dao!

The saber descended, slashing right through the nonhuman.

The blue-skinned nonhuman trembled, then let loose a howl of grief and anguish. Blood sprayed out of his mouth, as his Nascent Soul cultivation base couldn't sustain the force, and directly exploded! His nascent soul was reduced to ashes. His heavenly palaces shattered. His life flames went out. His dao foundation crumbled. Every aspect of his cultivation base was destroyed!

"I refuse to accept this!!" he howled. Sadly, this was a minor world where the natural and magical laws limited his power. All he could do was fall to the ground as a mortal, having lost all of his cultivation.

Xu Qing wasn't paying attention to the nonhuman or his howl of defiance. Instead, he landed on a nearby mountaintop and looked up into the heavenly lightning, his mind reeling. What he was staring at was the convergence of countless lightning bolts, shaped like a heavenly saber. The sight of that saber caused his mind to focus on one specific thing.

"That saber... that saber..." he murmured, shivering down to his core.

The change to his mental state caused transformations to the surroundings because of the natural laws. Clouds sprang into being above him, dropping acid rain, magnetic fields, and lightning bolts. It was the same in all the surrounding mountains. Everything beyond the mountains blurred as the surrounding terrain shifted between seas, plains, deserts, and volcanoes.

As for the nonhuman cultivator who had failed the tribulation, he was gone, whether dead or run away, it was impossible to say.

Xu Qing wasn't paying attention to that. His full attention was focused on the saber formed by the heavenly tribulation. Though the saber had already faded from existence, Xu Qing could still see it clearly in his mind's eye. That saber left him with the same feeling he experienced when he watched

that statue in the Supreme Vastness daoist temple outside the scavenger basecamp in South Phoenix. The thought made him shiver from head to toe.

“Don’t tell me....”

It made complete sense to him that whatever consummate expert had originally created the Supreme Vastness Solitary Saber... might have done so after personally witnessing a dao-severing heavenly saber.

Of course, there were some differences.

The Supreme Vastness Solitary Saber was something cultivators could use. The saber he had just seen was a saber from a heavenly tribulation. On the one hand, they seemed like they had a shared origin. On the other hand, the tribulation saber had a dao resonance, and furthermore, had a different function. One could kill the body, the other could sever the dao.

If I could gain enlightenment of it, then combine it with my Supreme Vastness Solitary Saber....

Xu Qing’s eyes glittered.

He instinctively raised his right hand and mentally conjured the image he had just seen. Then he waved his right hand in the hopes of copying the dao-severing saber he had just seen formed from the natural laws of this minor world.

Unfortunately, even though Xu Qing had spectacular powers of understanding, there was no way he could succeed at something like that having only witnessed the event one time.

After a few dozen breaths of time passed, and the saber of lightning was completely gone, Xu Qing found the image of the saber in his mind fading away. Eventually, no matter how much he resisted the effects, the image vanished. He tried using his limited level of control to get the saber to appear again, but it didn’t work. Obviously that heavenly tribulation was beyond his authority and control.

However, Xu Qing was not the type of person to give up easily, so he closed his eyes to think deeply about the situation. It was similar to the time when he sought enlightenment of the Ghost Emperor mountain. He slowly tried to form the image of the saber in his mind and commit it to memory.

A few hundred breaths of time passed.

Xu Qing opened his eyes. They were bloodshot as he looked up to the clouds in what was now an ordinary sky. He sighed.

He had sought enlightenment... and had failed. One reason was that the heavenly saber only appeared for a moment. Another had to do with the effects of the minor world, which created a less-than-ideal environment. And then there was the high-level personhood of the heavenly saber. In some respects, it was like the original version of the Supreme Vastness Solitary Saber. Because of all those reasons, it just wasn’t possible for Xu Qing to succeed.

I was also rushing it too much.

After analyzing all the reasons for his failure, he had no choice but to sigh and leave the minor world.

Once outside, he slumped as a feeling of exhaustion swept over him. He always experienced that feeling when leaving the minor world. The reason was that his cultivation base really wasn't up to task, and thus, sustaining the natural laws was a huge burden. He wasn't thinking about that, though. Instead, his eyes glittered as he continued to analyze the situation.

If I want to gain enlightenment of that saber, I'm going to need to see it a few more times.... And I'll need to do it in a more relaxed, but also completely focused, state. That's the only way I'll have a shot at gaining enlightenment.

He looked back down thoughtfully at the minor world.

I've currently mastered two saber moves from the Supreme Vastness Solitary Saber. If I can succeed with that dao-severing heavenly saber, then it could count as my third saber move.

Xu Qing thought about how he hadn't really left the county capital since he arrived. He had not gone to search for any Supreme Vastness daoist temples, and thus, had not improved his Supreme Vastness Solitary Saber. As he knew, the vast majority of Supreme Vastness daoist temples actually wouldn't help with enlightenment. After all, once someone succeeded in gaining enlightenment, the temple would need to sit idle for half of a sixty-year-cycle before new enlightenment could be gained from it.

That ensured that it was very difficult to build up multiple saber moves. You needed the right destined opportunity to find a time to gain enlightenment, either that, or find a temple where someone who had already gained enlightenment was dying.

Xu Qing thought about the matter all the way back to the Corrections Division.

I'm not going back to my sword pavilion yet!

Emerging from the mural, he looked back at the image of the minor world. Eyes flickering thoughtfully, he went into a far corner of Level 90 to do some breathing exercises.

Four hours later, after a number of jailers had come and gone in the minor world, Xu Qing's violet crystal got him back to normal. Without any hesitation, he went back into the minor world yet again.

Chapter 436: Acquiring the Dao; Bluegreen Dragon Rises (part 1)

As the laws settled over him, Xu Qing flew to his assigned district and looked for appropriate inmates by filtering through the name list on his jade slip. Specifically, he was looking for cultivators who were in the great circle of the Nascent Soul level, just on the verge of provoking heavenly tribulation. He soon identified four.

Performing an incantation gesture to tap into the natural laws, he found the first on the list, who was a Wingflyer. Currently, he was hiding in a subterranean cave, seated cross-legged in meditation. A moment later, the ground around him collapsed, opening up his hiding spot. The Wingflyer looked up in shock. Though he reacted quickly, the power weighing down on him made his resistance useless. A massive force locked on to him and dragged him up into the air. There was no point in trying to refuse or fight back.

With the laws at Xu Qing's command, plus his cultivation base and battle prowess, he could easily smash any inmate.

Outside of the prison world, this Wingflyer could crush Xu Qing to death with one swat of his hand. But now, Xu Qing had him by the neck.

“Exalted one.”

Inwardly, the Wingflyer cultivator felt deeply vexed. However, he was careful to plaster a fawning expression onto his face.

Xu Qing didn't respond. Eyes as cold as ice, he inspected the Wingflyer, then tossed him down. Next, he tossed some medicinal pills onto the ground in front of him. Those medicinal pills all contained immense amounts of spirit energy. On the outside, they would be considered good pills. But in the prison world, they were vastly more precious. When the Wingflyer saw them, he was stunned. That said, his eyes flickered with a mixture of pleasure and hesitancy. He knew full well that when unexpected things happened, there was usually a catch. He looked nervously at Xu Qing.

“Exalted one, this....”

“Either you eat them,” Xu Qing said calmly, “or I beat you to a pulp and force them down your throat.”

Perverse energy surged within the Wingflyer, yet he forced it under control. He knew what would happen if he didn't obey orders. Gritting his teeth, he picked up the pills and put them in his mouth. That said, he tried to play things safe by consuming them slowly, one at a time.

Frowning, Xu Qing thrust out his palm, causing a rumbling sound. When the force hit the Wingflyer, he screamed as his body nearly collapsed, and he fell to the ground, panting.

That was just a weakness on the part of his fleshly body. When the spirit energy from the pills poured into him, he quickly recovered. However, Xu Qing could tell it wasn't enough, so he threw a few more pills into his mouth.

As the pills dissolved, powerful fluctuations started rolling off of the Wingflyer.

This inmate had been convicted when he was already at the limit of Nascent Soul. In the years since then, he had hovered on the brink of a breakthrough. Unfortunately, reaching the Spirit Trove level required a heavenly dao, which he did not have access to, and therefore, could not achieve a breakthrough.

However... whether one was going to succeed or fail, the natural laws of heaven and earth would still form a heavenly tribulation.

The Wingflyer cultivator was surprised at the fluctuations, and by now, he could guess what Xu Qing was doing. He was about to open his mouth to speak when winds screamed in the dome of heaven, and tribulation clouds began to build up. The Wingflyer shrieked, jumped to his feet, and fled, all the while viciously trying to suppress his cultivation base in the hopes of getting rid of the heavenly tribulation. Before he could do much, a tremor passed through him and he stopped moving. His facial expression became one of exaggerated devotion, while his eyes glittered with terror.

Lurching around, he dropped down and kowtowed to Xu Qing. “Milord... I'm willing... to... die!”

The lack of smooth speech confirmed that the shadow didn't have complete control over him. The Wingflyer was obviously fighting back, until that look of devotion faded away. As his expression twisted and distorted, and looked like he was about to break free.

That was when booming thunder filled the sky as countless lightning bolts formed a dao-severing heavenly saber that dropped toward the nonhuman.

The moment before it hit, the shadow fled. The Wingflyer went back to normal, but by this time, there was no way it could evade the tribulation. A scream escaped its mouth as the heavenly saber chopped down. A huge boom echoed out.

Xu Qing sat down cross-legged where he stood. Ignoring the Wingflyer, he focused on seeking enlightenment of the heavenly saber.

After three hundred breaths of time passed, it was over. The tribulation clouds dispersed, the heavenly saber faded away, and a thoughtful look appeared in Xu Qing's eyes. A short time later, he got to his feet and went to a different part of the district to find the next cultivator on his list.

In that manner, days passed.

Xu Qing sought enlightenment over and over again until he finally reached the day when he had his appointment with Ning Yan.

It was evening outside, and the dome of heaven shone with orange light that flowed like water onto the rooftops and open squares of the Swordsage Palace's Archives Branch. There were quite a few swordsages lined up there. All of them were adjunct swordsages from various prefectures.

Each and every one looked very nervous as they waited, including Ning Yan. He kept looking off into the distance, clearly worried about how everything would turn out. He had been waiting for quite a long time already.

Behind a wide table at the front of the line was a middle-aged swordsage with a somber expression on his face. He had a Gold Core cultivation base, and eyes that shone like lightning, revealing that he was originally from the Supreme Ancient Lightning Order. After looking over the eight adjunct swordsages, he said, "The other adjunct swordsages already filed their recommendations. You're the only ones left. Do the lot of you actually have people from your home prefecture willing to vouch for you?"

The adjunct swordsages all had bitter expressions on their faces. Some seemed like they wanted to speak, others held their tongue.

As for Ning Yan, he anxiously nodded, clasped hands to the middle-aged swordsage, and said, "If possible, could you wait just a moment? My guarantor should be here shortly."

The middle-aged swordsage frowned. "Oh? Who is it?"

Ning Yan held back from saying Xu Qing's name. All of a sudden, he was wondering if Xu Qing had been serious. If he mentioned Xu Qing's name, but then he didn't show up, Ning Yan would definitely become a laughingstock. During the event to fill the vacant swordsage spots, he had been competing with other adjunct swordsages from other prefectures. Of course, there had been some fierce competition to take the first place spot, which had resulted in some friction.

Gathered alongside Ning Yan were three young men who he'd had problems with. When they saw him holding back from mentioning his guarantor's name, their eyes flickered with scorn. Though it wasn't very obvious, Ning Yan could see it. It was something he couldn't easily accept.

One of that group of young men even chuckled under his breath and quietly said, "He took first place, yet nobody will vouch for him. That alone tells you what kind of person he is."

Ning Yan said nothing.

The middle-aged swordsage didn't react. Impetuous talk among youngsters wasn't anything surprising. After all, all sorts of personalities could be found among new swordsages, including the silent type and the direct type. After they became swordsages, their personalities would change some.

Flipping through Ning Yan's paperwork, he noticed that he was from Emperor-Receiving Prefecture, which caused him to look up.

"Aren't you from the same prefecture as Xu Qing?"

Ning Yan nodded.

The three swordsages who had it out for Ning Yang heard that and laughed softly.

"Big Bro Xu Qing got a 30,000-meter pillar of light, so if he won't vouch for this guy, it just shows he's got some major problems."

"He worked so hard to take first place. For what?"

"Do you people have a death wish?" Ning Yan growled. The provocation from these three, coupled with the anxiety of the situation in general, made it difficult to suppress the perverse energy building within him.

"What, you want to have a duel right here and now?" one of them said. The three young men clearly bore some ill will as they glared at Ning Yan. They were obviously trying to get a rise out of him.

Ning Yan gritted his teeth as that perverse energy started to pulse in his eyes.

The middle-aged swordsage from the Archives Branch just looked at them. Whenever the adjunct swordsages got their assignments, things like this happened. It was only natural for events like this to occur in places where lots of humans gathered.

"If you have a problem with each other," he said coolly, "you can get the hell out of here and not come back till you've solved it."

The three young men immediately flew up into the air. One of them pointed down at Ning Yan and said, "You won the top spot, didn't you? What, scared to fight?"

"That's not it," another of them said. "Ning Yan wouldn't dare to back down from a fight. He's just waiting for his guarantor to show up. That's why he won't fight us. Isn't that right, Ning Yan? See, I already came up with a good excuse for you."

Ning Yan's eyes flickered with cold light, and he was just about to fly up into the air when a calm voice echoed out.

"I got wrapped up in something, Ning Yan. Sorry for being late."

Along with the voice, a figure appeared above, flying toward them at high speed. The evening sun shone down on long, flowing hair and a white uniform that perfectly complimented his good looks, making everyone present look at him. It was none other than Xu Qing. Xu Qing didn't make promises lightly, and when he made one, he would follow through. Since he had agreed to vouch for Ning Yan, he would vouch for him. And he hadn't intentionally delayed things. The truth was that he had been so focused on gaining enlightenment of that dao-severing saber that he accidentally came late.

There were some things about Ning Yan that he didn't like very much. However, since the Captain needed Ning Yan, then Xu Qing was to give him another shot based on how he acted going forward.

Xu Qing's arrival caused the other adjunct swordsages to shiver. Eyes glittering with respect and admiration, they clasped hands and bowed in greeting. The three young men who had been causing trouble for Ning Yan similarly bowed their heads and didn't dare run their mouths any further. The truth was that Xu Qing was already quite well-known in the Swordsage Palace. People said he was one of the freakish hellions of the latest batch of new swordsages. What was more, he was friends with all the other people who were also considered freakish hellions. Provoking one member of that group would be the same as provoking the entire group.

Considering that all of them had been assigned important posts, there wasn't anybody who would dare to offend them.

Meanwhile, the swordsage from the Archives Branch laughed heartily and rose to his feet to welcome Xu Qing.

This man had been present when Xu Qing, Kong Xianglong, and the others went to lock horns with the Yao Clan at the Swordsage Palace. Given the connection he had to Xu Qing, and also based on other things he had heard about Xu Qing and his friends, he admired him greatly.

Ning Yan was fairly bursting with excitement as he stepped forward. Nothing could have sounded more beautiful to Ning Yan in that moment than Xu Qing's voice. His heart overflowed with gratitude.

Xu Qing looked at Ning Yan and nodded. Then he turned to the middle-aged swordsage and clasped hands respectfully.

"Sorry for any trouble I caused, Big Bro Zhou. I'm here to vouch for Ning Yan."

The swordsage surnamed Zhou noted that Xu Qing had called him by his surname, and it caused his eyes to shine brightly. There's more than one reason Kong Xianglong and his friends accepted Xu Qing. One factor is the 30,000-meter pillar of light. The other factor is the way he conducts himself.

After all, there had been quite a few swordsages who showed up at the Hall of Regulations that day. Though this swordsage had run into Xu Qing on a subsequent occasion, and had also been introduced to the entire group, there hadn't been much time. The fact that Xu Qing remembered his surname despite all that was very impressive.

Laughing heartily, he said, "Brother Xu Qing's recommendation confirms that Ning Yan has an upright temperament and good moral character." With that, he formally approved Ning Yan's application. Eyes flashing, he looked at Ning Yan. "Ning Yan, I hope that after you become a true swordsage, you show loyalty to the very end. Do not do anything to lose face for Brother Xu Qing."

"Yes, sir," Ning Yan said.

Xu Qing didn't stay for long. He exchanged a few more words with the swordsage surnamed Zhou, then took his leave. He was going back to the Corrections Division to continue seeking enlightenment.

When he was back, it was as he was passing Level 9 that he heard the voice of the palace lord some distance away.

"Just because people call you an amazing chosen doesn't mean you have the right to get cocky. As far as I'm concerned, Kong Xianglong, you're nothing but a new swordsage, still wet behind the ears!"

Chapter 437: Bluegreen Dragon Becomes Heavenly Dao!

Having reached the conclusion that this was definitely the best idea, it was without any hesitation that Xu Qing once again entered the minor world and found a volcano in East District 13.

After sitting down cross-legged, he looked up into the sky, then closed his eyes and sensed his life essence bluegreen dragon. Drawn out by the energy fluctuations, the bluegreen dragon appeared in his mind, looking at him.

Xu Qing had formed this life essence bluegreen dragon back when he was in the eighth level of Qi Condensation. Originally it was called a Forbidden Sea dragonwhale. But later, as he gained further understanding of the living things in the Forbidden Sea, its form had changed. In the end, it came to look like a bluegreen dragon. [1]

When in Foundation Establishment, the dragon became part of his dharma apertures. Later when forming heavenly palaces, he had pushed off using the bluegreen dragon in favor of the taboo poison pill, the violet moon, and then his imperial-class technique.

But today....

I guess my life essence bluegreen dragon is going to bear the weight of the dao-severing magical laws!

Expression shining with determination, he waved his hand, causing a distant mountain to rumble as a nonhuman was ripped out into the open. This was the very last inmate he had acquired in trade from one of the other jailers. Furthermore... the other jailers had indicated they didn't want to do any more trading.

"Should be enough," he murmured.

The trembling inmate looked at Xu Qing with eyes full of terror. Knowing the fate that was coming, he said, "Exalted one, I can willingly face that saber of heavenly tribulation. Given my crimes, I know that I'll never be set free. I just hope that, once you finish, exalted one, you wipe me out of existence. I don't want to experience utter loss of memory."

Xu Qing said nothing as he put the inmate down and tossed him some medicinal pills.

The inmate gritted his teeth, took the medicinal pills, and then flew a short distance away. Eyes shining with determination, he swallowed the pills, tapped into his cultivation base, and started the breakthrough process.

A moment later, rumbling filled the sky and clouds gathered. Lightning converged, and soon enough countless lightning bolts had formed a dao-severing heavenly saber of magical laws. All of it was plainly visible to Xu Qing. Saber light glittered, shining into Xu Qing's mind. Expression somber, he began the process of imprinting it onto himself.

This time, he didn't plan to put the image of the saber into his sea of consciousness. Instead, he planned to put it into his life essence bluegreen dragon. A moment later, a roar echoed out from inside of him, then the bluegreen dragon suddenly appeared outside of his body.

Remaining completely focused, he lifted his right hand and started painting.

Using the bluegreen dragon as the canvas, his memories as the paint, and his senses as the paint brush, he began to draw the dao-severing saber onto the bluegreen dragon, stroke by stroke.

As time passed, the saber fell from the sky. The nonhuman inmate laughed bitterly as his cultivation base exploded, and he was flung to the ground panting for breath.

Xu Qing didn't stop drawing. He wasn't finished yet. However... the canvas that was his bluegreen dragon was having trouble sustaining all the magical laws, and was starting to tremble on the verge of collapse. Cracks spread out across it, to the point where it looked like it might fall apart at any moment.

A mournful wail drifted out of the dragon's mouth. Xu Qing frowned and looked at it. Clearly the problem was that the bluegreen dragon's level was too low. And yet, nothing else would work for Xu Qing's purposes. After some thought, he sent out his two life lamp umbrellas and sent them crushing down onto the dragon. The dragon shivered, but with the life lamps protecting it, it seemed more stable. Yet that still wasn't enough.

After more thought, Xu Qing tapped into his third heavenly palace. Mutagen erupted from his taboo poison core, entering the bluegreen dragon and bolstering it. Because of Xu Qing controlling it properly, the mutagen didn't fully invade the bluegreen dragon.

A day passed. Two days. Three days....

Xu Qing was fully immersed in the process, to the point where he had almost forgotten himself. His attention was completely focused on the dao-severing saber. Two thousand breaths of time had long since passed, but he wasn't paying attention to that.

Yet at the same time, the weight of the natural and magical laws wasn't crushing him out of existence. And that was because... as Xu Qing continued painting, the magical and natural laws continued to be branded onto his bluegreen dragon. The bluegreen dragon was bearing the burden.

Now, those two months of consistent failures were actually bringing some benefits. They were like nutrients that made the branding process smoother. Whenever it seemed like the bluegreen dragon was about to collapse, Xu Qing would bless it with his imperial-class techniques.

Seven days. Ten days....

The bluegreen dragon trembled and howled. Every brush stroke made it turn blurry, but at the same time, bolstered it. It was now at its limit.

Xu Qing knew that if he allowed the life essence bluegreen dragon to be destroyed, the harm would extend to him as well. But Xu Qing was a vicious person in general. Eyes shining, he tapped into his fourth heavenly palace, and the power of the violet moon emerged. This time, he was adding godly power into the bluegreen dragon. The dragon shivered, and Xu Qing made another brush stroke.

Eventually, half a month had passed. The bluegreen dragon had really reached its limit. But that was when Xu Qing finished with the final brush stroke.

The moment he finished, he spat out a huge mouthful of blood onto the bluegreen dragon. It was just like the idiom bringing a painted dragon to life by adding the eyes. A tremor passed through the dragon, and then it glowed with the color of blood, as if it had been enchanted.

Xu Qing immediately sagged in place, looking very weak. The half month had been unprecedentedly draining to Xu Qing. However, his eyes were shining brightly.

The dragon had changed quite a bit. It now had countless glittering designs running up and down its body like threads. And the way they glittered made it seem like they contained natural laws. With every breath it took, those countless threads would glitter. In addition, it had a host of magical symbols branded onto it, which emanated ancient auras. There were big ones and small ones, bright ones and dark ones. They were all different.

Because of all that, the bluegreen dragon... now emanated the same type of aura as the four heavenly daos outside the minor world. Though it was only a bit, anyone who sensed it would be absolutely shocked.

Finally got it to work!

Xu Qing took a deep breath. There were simply too many magical laws packed into that dao-severing saber. Even though he had astonishing powers of understanding, the reality was his cultivation base was still too low. As a result, he could only brand about ten percent of the saber.

But even that ten percent vastly surpassed any of his other divine abilities and magical techniques. After all, it was made from magical laws.

This is my third Supreme Vastness saber move. And it's also my heavenly dao saber. Supporting himself on a boulder, he pushed himself into a standing position and then pointed at his life essence bluegreen dragon.

The bluegreen dragon threw its head back and roared, then shot up into the sky. As it undulated overhead, its mere passing caused countless lightning bolts to form around it, making its magical laws very evident. Transformations to heaven and earth were also visible, as a sun and moon appeared overhead.

The four heavenly daos outside the minor world were looking on. And they were looking at the bluegreen dragon. They were almost like elderly folk looking at a baby.

The dragon could sense it. Looking up, it let loose another roar.

The world trembled. Auspicious clouds appeared in the sky as evening sunlight spread out. Those things happening in the sky attracted the attention of the other jailers in the minor world, as well as many inmates.

“An auspicious omen!”

“The natural laws are changing!”

“What exactly happened?”

Nearby Xu Qing was that nonhuman inmate who had lost his cultivation base. He had stayed the entire time, watching the astonishing events play out in almost complete disbelief. He looked at the dragon, then at Xu Qing, and he felt like he was being struck by heavenly lightning bolts.

A Gold Core cultivation base... can create an embryonic heavenly dao?? It's only a bit, but it's still there! A heavenly dao!!

He wasn't the only one to react in such a way. The other jailers were being battered by waves of shock, and many of them rushed over to see what was happening.

Outside of the minor world on Level 90 of the Corrections Division, Ghost Hand sat in his spot drinking alcohol. Just when he was about to take a swig, his eyes opened wide and he looked over at the minor world.

“What's going on?”

I told him to go to East District 13 because a saber of heavenly tribulation was about to appear there. I thought he might gain a bit of enlightenment, and thus understand how to use a heavenly saber to sever body and soul. But he... he....

Ghost Hand looked shaken to the core, to the point where alcohol was spilling out of his flagon and onto the ground.

He actually created an embryonic heavenly dao?? How is that even possible? How can someone with a Gold Core cultivation base make an embryonic heavenly dao? And what the hell is that bluegreen dragon??

Back in the minor world, people were gathering in East District 13 because of the auspicious clouds in the sky. Looking around vigilantly, Xu Qing waved his hand and withdrew his bluegreen dragon. Once it was gone, everything went back to normal.

Xu Qing then looked at the inmate nearby, who was looking at him with pleading eyes. Of course, he wasn't pleading to be spared, but rather, to be killed.

Xu Qing nodded. Waving his hand, he used the natural laws to wipe the inmate out of existence. Then he flew over to where the Nightshades were imprisoned. Taking away the shadow eyes and jade slips, he flew up into the sky, left the minor world, and went back to the Corrections Division.

As soon as he was out on Level 90, he saw Ghost Hand.

Ghost Hand was no longer in his rocking chair. Instead he was right in front of the mural, and was now peering at Xu Qing.

“What happened in there?” Ghost Hand asked with a smile, forcing his astonishment down into his heart.

Xu Qing blinked a few times. There was probably no need to hide the truth. However, there were also never any absolutes. Therefore... even though it was likely people would be able to guess what happened, he still felt the need for caution.

Plastering a confused look onto his face, he shook his head.

Ghost Hand looked at him, smiled enigmatically, then said, “Not bad, ya little punk. It’s good to be so vigilant.”

Ghost Hand lifted his flagon and took a big drink. Humming a little tune, he went back to his rocking chair and sat down. Obviously he was in a good mood. “But you’re being too obvious. If something like this happens again in the future, you can’t just outright deny that something happened. You have to give some sort of explanation. For example, you could claim that you gained enlightenment of a saber move that can sever body from soul.”

Xu Qing thought about it and realized that what Ghost Hand said made sense. He committed the advice to heart, then clasped hands respectfully and left.

As he was leaving the Corrections Division, he sent a voice message to the Captain.

“Eldest Brother, I have some images of the Nightshades. By the way, I have some free time now... when are we going to set out?”

The Captain’s response started with a resentful sigh. “So you’re finally getting back to me. Little Ah Qing, it’s been two months! What happened to my Taotao?”

“Taotao?” Xu Qing said, surprised.

“Yeah. Weren’t you going to introduce me to Li Taotao?”

Xu Qing didn’t respond at first. What was more, her name was Li Shitao....

The Captain again sighed bitterly. “You’ve really picked up some bad habits. You went and made a huge deal about this, then made me stew for two months!”

Hearing the Captain’s bitterness reminded Xu Qing of the matter of making that introduction. He’d completely forgotten about it. “I’ve been busy....”

“Little Ah Qing, all the happiness in your Eldest Brother’s life is now in your hands. I managed to infiltrate the Administration Palace recently to sneak a peek at my Taotao. Ahem. Not bad at all.” The Captain cleared his throat.

Xu Qing took the words to heart. “Alright. Once we’re done with our big job, I’ll make the introduction. Eldest Brother, you can come over and get the Nightshade recordings whenever you want.”

Having acquired that promise from Xu Qing, the Captain was already shivering with anticipation. However, he knew that their big job was more important. So on that very night, he hurried over to get the recordings. Before leaving, he said one thing.

“Get ready, little Ah Qing. This is the only missing piece. In three days, I’ll come get you and explain the whole plan!”

Chapter 438: Ten Entrails of the True Immortal

Xu Qing quietly watched the Captain leave.

Although he wasn’t sure about the details of the Captain’s next big plan, he was confident he knew the general idea. And that led him to the conclusion that this wasn’t going to be a quick job.

Therefore, he requested a leave of absence from his post, effective immediately. For the next three days, he spent time in the county capital shopping for various items he would need. After all the shopping was done, he spent time in his sword pavilion studying the Nightshade eye that Ghost Hand gave to him. It was a truly miraculous object that had the ability to boost psychic powers. And when he tapped into the power of his violet moon heavenly palace, he could purge it, causing it to transform in unusual ways.

The three days passed in a flash.

The evening sky over the county capital looked different for those three days, perhaps because of the change of seasons. Instead of the evening sky being a deep yellow color, it was crimson. That color spread out to cover everything, making it as bright red as blood. It was hard to say whether it was an auspicious omen or an ill one. The sky was the same for all three days.

On the last day, Xu Qing stood in his sword pavilion looking out at the sky, and a strange feeling filled him. It was a sudden feeling of unease. He quickly dispelled it. His eyes flickered with suspicion. He had never experienced anything like that before, and after some consideration, he could only conclude that it had something to do with his life essence bluegreen dragon. As he thought about it, someone approached within the red of evening.

It was none other than the Captain.

He looked to be in very high spirits as he rushed over. Upon seeing Xu Qing, he chuckled and performed an incantation gesture to put a spell formation in place. Then he had Xu Qing activate the sword pavilion’s formations as well, ensuring that they had complete and utter privacy.

“Everything’s ready, little Ah Qing. It’s just going to be you and me this time. Nobody else. I originally wanted Ning Yan to come along, but once that little brat passed his assessment, he vanished. I looked everywhere but couldn’t find him. I wonder if he realized I wanted to use him as a meat shield.”

The Captain sighed as thoroughly as if he’d seen a roasted pigeon suddenly fly off into the night.

Xu Qing was actually surprised by the development. After some thought, he asked, “Is it going to change things now that he’s not coming along?”

“It’ll definitely change things,” the Captain replied, eyes glittering. “Thankfully, you gave me that Nightshade jade slip, therefore, it won’t be a huge deal that we don’t have Ning Yan. This time around, little Ah Qing, we’re not going to be rushing into things impulsively. We have to rely on our smarts. And that’s because I’m taking you... into Holytide territory!”

Xu Qing thought about it for a moment. “And we’re going in disguised as Nightshades?”

The Captain laughed heartily, his eyebrows dancing up and down. “You’re the only person who truly understands me, little Ah Qing. You’re completely right. We’re going to disguise ourselves as Nightshades and sneak into Holytide territory. Think about it! The Holytides are enslaved to the Nightshades. If we disguise ourselves as their masters, then we’ll basically be able to do anything we want.”

Xu Qing nodded. Of course, there were many details that needed to be handled, but the Captain was innately skilled at disguise, so Xu Qing wasn’t worried about all that. Given the general idea of what they were going to do, he was confident that they could succeed.

“What do you mean when you say Holytide territory?” Xu Qing asked. “Where, exactly?”

“Eastern Wasteland County!” the Captain replied, keeping his voice low. “There are fourteen counties in the Holytide region. Eastern Wasteland County actually borders Sea-Sealing County, and it has a very strange area within it called Ten Entrails of the True Immortal!”

Xu Qing’s eyes narrowed slightly. He didn’t know a lot about the Holytides, but that name seemed extremely unusual, and didn’t leave him with a good feeling.

Noticing Xu Qing’s facial expression, the Captain continued, “It’s a bizarre name, right? Ten Entrails of the True Immortal. The name refers to a tree with ten trunks that resemble entrails as they twist and turn their way up into the sky.

“The Ten Entrails Tree actually has a very long history. Before the arrival of the broken face of the god, it grew over more than half of the entire region, and was worshiped by countless species.

“People say that, back then, all eyes were drawn to the branches of the tree, which were festooned with countless corpses, all of which were sacrificed to hīm. Supposedly, such sacrifices would bring blessings, and not even Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity did anything to stop the custom. And that’s because there’s another legend associated with the Ten Entrails of the True Immortal.”

The Captain’s eyes shone brightly.

“Legend has it that the Ten Entrails Tree is the embodiment of the last member of the Woe-Immortal species who, countless years in the past, actually became an immortal!” [1]

Xu Qing’s eyes narrowed.

The Captain took out an apple and a peach. After tossing the apple to Xu Qing, he took a bite from the peach and continued, “The Woe-Immortal species is mysterious and unfathomable. They believed that the entrails were like a wheel that was integral to one’s life force. They viewed the entrails as the source of everything. To them, immortal ascension involved cutting open one’s body

and using it as the vehicle to become an immortal. By extracting their 'spirit entrails' and planting them into the ground, they could absorb the nutrients of the world itself.

"According to the story, this one particular Woe-Immortal succeeded, becoming the only true immortal in the Revered Ancient mainland. As for Ten Entrails Tree, that's the original body of that immortal. However.. when the broken face of the god arrived, that immortal was imprisoned and is still asleep."

"That's what a true immortal is like?" Xu Qing asked. The Captain's description definitely didn't match up to what he imagined an immortal to be like.

"Never thought it would be like that, did ya?" the Captain said, looking very pleased with himself. He took another bite of his peach. "But yeah, that's what true immortals are like, little Ah Qing. You see, you just don't know enough about the world we live in. Later on, you really need to learn a thing or two from your Eldest Brother."

Xu Qing thought about it and came to the conclusion that what the Captain said was right, so he nodded earnestly.

Looking even more pleased than before, the Captain quietly went on. "What did you think immortals were like? We humans use various expressions to describe them, such as: the demeanor of a transcendent being; surpassing the world and transcending the mortal; as unrestrained as wind and mist.

"But the truth is that different species have different understandings of immortals. The Woe-Immortals thought of the ten entrails as being an immortal. And other nonhuman species have their own myths and legends describing what immortals are like. In the future, we're going to travel to all sorts of interesting places with their own strange stories. What a fun and interesting world."

The Captain smiled.

Xu Qing felt a bit dazed.

"Surrounding the Ten Entrails Tree is an endless jungle. And that's where we're going! Every hundred years, that jungle produces a huge crop of 'true immortal dao fruits.' As you can imagine, the fruits are extremely gruish in appearance. They look like eyes.

"What's more, you can't eat them. If you do, you go insane and develop multiple personalities. I mean, even people from the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society, whose techniques require them to have multiple personalities, wouldn't dare to eat them.

"That said, the true immortal dao fruits are a rare material that can be used in equipment forging. They can be used to make all sorts of magical devices and treasures. They're very formidable, and as you can imagine, very valuable. Because of

the official trade embargo with the Holytides, the county capital will often put out missions to get those dao fruits. And guess, what? A single one is worth 10,000 military credits!

“If we can get a few hundred dao fruits, then we would have a few million military credits, right?”

“And thus, little Ah Qing, we see how absolutely incredible your Eldest Brother is. I dug around in the Credit Auditing Branch for a long time before I uncovered this extremely profitable opportunity. Of course, the dao fruits are only the first goal of the mission. There’s more later...”

Grinning complacently, the Captain finished his peach, then took out another one. He took a bite. Xu Qing instinctively plastered a look of admiration onto his face, but his eyes flickered with a thoughtful look.

“Little Junior Brother, could you please be a little more sincere? Your facial expression is too forced. Do I need to give you a lesson...?”

Xu Qing nodded, then opened his eyes very wide to make himself look incredulous. “Eldest Brother, does Ten Entrails of the True Immortal have anything dangerous other than the tree itself? Furthermore, considering how valuable those dao fruits are, won’t the Holytides also be harvesting them?”

It was a bit hard for the Captain to accept Xu Qing’s new facial expression, but he did. Continuing to eat his peach, he went on to further explain his plan.

“Ten Entrails of the True Immortal is an inherently dangerous place. However, hē is sleeping, after all.

“The jungle surrounding the Ten Entrails Tree has grown dao fruits for countless years, and as a result, a number of city-states have popped up there. Those city-states all pay fealty to one of the four great royal dynasties of the Holytide region. Whenever the dao fruits ripen, those city-states are responsible for harvesting them and offering them as tribute to the dynasties.

“There will be danger there, of course. But since we’ll be there as Nightshades, then as long as we handle ourselves with care, we won’t run into any trouble!”

The Captain licked his lips as his eyes glittered with a crazy look.

“I think the biggest question is how we’ll get there,” Xu Qing said. “We can’t just show up as Nightshades. That would be too suspicious.”

The Captain had apparently already planned out that part of the job.

“When the dao fruits ripen, they need to be fertilized with a special object called a cloudmother stone. Cloudmother stones are very common in other places, but guess where they grow in great numbers? In Daybreak Prefecture of Sea-Sealing County!

“Whenever the dao fruit harvest approaches, Holytide caravans will sneak in to smuggle cloudmother stones out. And though there’s technically a trade embargo with the Holytides, as we all know, the Yao Clan are actually pro-Holytide. This whole event is a huge source of income for the Yao Clan.” The Captain looked over at Xu Qing. “Get what I mean, little Ah Qing?”

Xu Qing’s eyes shone with a strange light. “We’re going to use one of those caravans to get us into Holytide territory?”

The Captain burst out laughing. “Exactly! I’ve planned it all out down to the last detail. That’s why I asked you for recordings of those Nightshades. With those recordings, I’m confident that I can perfectly disguise us.

“Although it’s not public knowledge that the Swordsage Palace captured some Nightshades, I secretly leaked the information to the caravan we’ll be targeting. They know the general situation, although they don’t know how many Nightshades were arrested.

“Therefore, we’re going to have to put on a little show. And to do that, we’ll need the help of some swordsages.... You’re close with Kong Xianglong, right? Maybe he can handle it.”

Xu Qing considered it, then nodded.

“Well then, everything’s set. We’ll head out tomorrow!” The Captain took a deep breath, and his eyes shone with anticipation. Gulping down the rest of his peach, he said, “We’re going to get rich, little Ah Qing. And we won’t run into any dangerous situations. We’re going into this scenario disguised as the masters!”

Xu Qing understood completely. The job would be extremely dangerous. That said, he was prepared. Besides, there was an astonishing amount of military credits up for grabs, and it caused his eyes to shine with anticipation.

The one thing Xu Qing didn’t ask about was how they were supposed to get back to the county capital once the job was done. That said, he and the Captain had worked on enough jobs together that he wasn’t worried about a detail like that. In all likelihood, it would come down to luck.

After seeing the Captain off, Xu Qing took out his transmission jade slip and sent Kong Xianglong a voice message. After explaining the situation, he asked for help.

Kong Xianglong laughed heartily. “A Nightshade disguise? That’s smart! How about I join you?”

Xu Qing hesitated. “Well, my Eldest Brother and I...”

“Oh, got it. Well... maybe I won't join you after all. Xu Qing, I know you don't want to hear this, but I really need to remind you to be careful around that Eldest Brother of yours. That one-meter light of his is very worrisome. Don't get scammed by him.”

Xu Qing smiled bitterly, then went on to exchange a few more messages with Kong Xianglong, ending with an agreement to meet first thing in the morning.

Seeing how late it was, Xu Qing organized his bag of holding. Then, after thinking about the fact that he had no idea exactly how long he would be gone, he sent a message to Arch-Immortal Plumdark letting her know that he was going out for a bit. Having done that, he sat down cross-legged to meditate until the morning.

However... before light could fill the sky, someone appeared outside of his sword pavilion.

It was none other than Arch-Immortal Plumdark.

When she stepped inside, the fragrance of her perfume filled the sword pavilion. Looking tenderly at Xu Qing, she said, “I'm not going to stop you from leaving. But you don't have enough protective items, so I'm going to give you one.”

As she stood in the doorway, the moonlight behind her cascaded down, causing her beautiful gown to glitter like silver. She seemed like she was standing in a river of moonlight, and her graceful expression and warm eyes were like lotuses floating on the river.

Chapter 439: “I'm Blind,” said Chen Erniu

Xu Qing looked at Arch-Immortal Plumdark and hesitated, all the while thinking back to what the Captain had said about mountains and fetters. Back then, what the Captain said had made a lot of sense. What was more, he had been so focused on seeking enlightenment that all he'd managed was to send Arch-Immortal Plumdark a few questions via voice message. He hadn't had any chance to chat or visit in person. Seeing her at his door, he clasped hands and bowed.

“Well met, Senior.”

Upon hearing the way he addressed her, Arch-Immortal Plumdark's eyebrows shot up. Looking him up and down briefly, she suddenly started wondering what exactly was going on. Something seemed off to her. Two months ago, she'd sensed that his mood was unstable. That seemed even more obvious to her now. After all, women are generally much more sensitive to such things than men.

Don't tell me it's that nitwit Chen Erniu, up to more shenanigans.

Arch-Immortal Plumdark quickly came to the conclusion that her speculation was correct. However, she didn't reveal that via her facial expression. Stepping into the sword pavilion, she waved her hand, causing the door to slam shut behind her.

A man and a woman together, with the door closed. In those circumstances, Arch-Immortal Plumdark gracefully sat down cross-legged and took out a medicinal bottle.

“Xu Qing, this trip you messaged me about, does it involve leaving Sea-Sealing County?”

Xu Qing nodded.

Looking straight at him, she said, "In that case, you really don't have enough in the way of defenses. Sit down."

Her gaze caused him to sigh inwardly. Walking over, he sat down opposite her. He was so close that her perfume swept completely over him, filling his nose and swirling around his heart and mind.

"Presumably you have some defensive items given to you by your Master. Given that you're leaving Sea-Sealing County, what you really need are some concealment magics." She carefully put the medicinal bottle off to the side.

"In that bottle is some blood. I collected it years ago when the emperor of the Spiritsound forbidden ground caused chaos in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. During that event, the prefectural sects joined with the Swordsage Court to crush Emperor Sword. And I managed to get some of his blood.

"I've gained a lot of enlightenment from that blood over the years. Today, I'll use what little is left, along with my personal dao, to paint some concealment symbols on your body.

"Because the paint itself will be the blood of Emperor Sword, it will temporarily increase your personhood and also hide all auras associated with you, ensuring that no one will have any idea who you are or what you really look like."

Shaken, Xu Qing looked at the bottle sitting next to Arch-Immortal Plumdark. He knew full well how valuable that blood was, and given what she was about to do, he was deeply moved.

"You'll be fine unless you tangle with someone in the fourth stage of Void Returning or higher. Entities like that usually occupy extremely high positions, so it's unlikely you would ever encounter one of them. That said, keep in mind that the blood symbols won't last long. At the very most, they'll be effective for three months."

Xu Qing opened his mouth but wasn't sure what to say. Before he could speak, Arch-Immortal Plumdark smiled.

"You don't need to say all the polite things required by etiquette. Now, take your robe off."

Xu Qing was very taken aback.

"What are you staring at? If I'm going to paint symbols on you, you have to take your uniform off." She blinked playfully a few times.

Xu Qing wouldn't have hesitated if it was someone else. But he always felt nervous around Arch-Immortal Plumdark. That said, he knew how important these concealment symbols were going to be, so he took a deep breath and removed his swordsage uniform robe, leaving him completely bare-chested. [1]

A faint flush appeared on Arch-Immortal Plumdark's face as she looked at him. Then she reached out and tapped his shoulder, causing him to spin around in place so his back was to her.

“Calm yourself,” she said, her voice as delicate as a feather drifting through his mind and heart, sending out faint ripples.

Xu Qing was deeply nervous. Never in his entire life had he done anything like this, and his heart was absolutely racing. As he sat there, he felt as stiff as a board. Behind him, Arch-Immortal Plumdark picked up the medicinal bottle, opened it, and poured out a single drop of golden blood. Her expression turned very serious.

“Xu Qing, these symbols are complicated. And they need to be completed without pausing.”

The skin of her hand was as fair as snow as she put it into the blood of Emperor Sword from the Spiritsound forbidden ground. Then she placed her finger onto the skin of his back and began gently painting the first magical symbol. Sometimes her finger slid slowly across his back. Other times, she moved it quickly. As the golden lines of blood created a pattern on his skin, he shivered.

All of the fine hairs on his body seemed to be standing on end.

The sensation of her finger on his back caused the hair on his head to feel like it was curling up. The feeling seeped from his skin to the depths of his heart, where it rippled through the rest of him until his scalp tingled. His heart beat faster and faster, and he couldn't stop himself from breathing heavily.

Finally, he gritted his teeth, took a few deep breaths, and then started mentally reciting the Classic of Plants and Vegetation.

That method seemed to work, as his heart began to calm.

In that matter, time slipped by slowly but surely.

By the time he'd mentally recited the Classic of Plants and Vegetation three times, it was dawn outside. Beads of sweat dripped down his forehead. At this point, Arch-Immortal Plumdark had completed the majority of the concealment symbols.

“Now your front,” she said, and this time her voice didn't sound the same as before. Before Xu Qing could even think about what that meant, she tapped him again, causing him to turn a half circle.

Now they were facing each other.

As her breath caressed his face, he noticed her eyelashes fluttering slightly, and saw a faint red flush creeping up her neck.

She's nervous too?

Xu Qing was very taken aback.

He'd never seen a facial expression like this on Arch-Immortal Plumdark's face. As that thought occurred to him, she cleared her throat. Though she was blushing and her eyelashes were fluttering, her eyes shone brightly as she put her finger onto his chest.

As she started painting, Xu Qing felt so shaken he had to close his eyes to settle his energy and mind. Then he started reciting the Classic of Plants and Vegetation again.

Her finger slid like water across his chest, making it very difficult to recite the text properly. As the golden lines appeared on him, the sensation sent waves of shock slamming into his mind.

After enough time had passed for an incense stick to burn, it was bright outside. Arch-Immortal Plumdark suddenly stopped moving her hand, leaving her finger touching his chest.

“Your heart’s racing, Xu Qing,” she said softly. The sword pavilion was so quiet that it felt like she was speaking right into his ear.

He inhaled deeply and opened his eyes to look at the blushing Arch-Immortal Plumdark.

Their eyes met, and when she spoke next, her voice trembled a bit. “Stay still. I’m almost done.”

Her finger moved again, sliding up his chest to his neck. Then it reached his chin, and finally his ear. That required her to lean a bit closer to him.

Xu Qing was so stiff he couldn’t move, and couldn’t even focus enough to remember a single word from the Classic of Plants and Vegetation. His eyes were blank and even glazed.

As Arch-Immortal Plumdark leaned closer to him, he suddenly heard the excited voice of the Captain outside the sword pavilion.

“Little Ah Qing! What’s going on? Are you coming out? We need to get moving. Our big job starts today! Hey, why do you have an extra layer of defenses up? What are you up to in there, little Ah Qing?”

Arch-Immortal Plumdark retracted her finger and got to her feet, looking a little bit unsettled. Normally she liked to tease Xu Qing. Toy with him a bit. However, this current situation was one that neither she nor Xu Qing had been in before. Face still flushed, she straightened her hair and forced herself to look calm.

Clearing her throat, she didn’t dare to look at Xu Qing as she said, “Have a safe journey, Xu Qing.”

Turning, she walked elegantly, yet at the same time a bit hurriedly, to the door of the sword pavilion. Pushing it open, she found herself right in front of the Captain, who had a quizzical expression on his face.

All it took was a moment for the Captain’s quizzical expression to turn into one of outright shock. Eyes wide, he stared at Arch-Immortal Plumdark, then looked past her at Xu Qing, who was putting his robe back on.

“I didn’t see anything!” he blurted, backing up a few paces. “I saw nothing. Absolutely nothing!”

Waves of astonishment smashed his heart. There’s no way the two of them actually—

“Chen Erniu,” Arch-Immortal Plumdark said coolly, before the Captain’s thoughts could run too wild.

“Here, ma’am!” the Captain replied, squeezing his eyes shut as tightly as possible.

“Last month I got a message from the Eight Sect Coalition. Apparently, the ancient snake skeleton has gotten a bit dirty.”

The Captain shivered as the implications of her words hit him. He tried to think of what mistake he'd made, and it didn't take long for him to come to a realization. He had interrupted a good moment... and he had seen something he shouldn't have seen.

"Arch-Immortal," he said quickly, "last night I experienced some problems in my daily cultivation. As a result, I suddenly went blind."

Arch-Immortal Plumdark snorted coldly then continued, "Also, I have a very good friend by the name of Li Shitao. A few days ago she mentioned seeing a very shifty character sneaking around the Administration Palace, spying on her while eating peaches. Any chance that was you?" [2]

"It was definitely not me," the Captain said somberly. "I would never spy on anyone. Besides, I prefer apples!"

"Oh." After a few more perfunctory words of farewell, she left, her heart racing.

When the Captain was sure she was gone, he opened his eyes, looked around to confirm they were alone, then sauntered into the sword pavilion. Still looking surprised, he said, "What was going on just now?"

Xu Qing already had his uniform back on. Expression the same as ever, he said, "What's up?"

"Huh??" Stunned, the Captain looked Xu Qing up and down, then sidled a bit closer to him and quietly said, "Did you and Arch-Immortal Plumdark—"

"It's about time to leave, Eldest Brother," Xu Qing said, walking out of the sword pavilion.

The Captain looked in the direction Arch-Immortal Plumdark had left, and then back at Xu Qing. Then he pulled out a peach and took a bite. Chuckling, he hurried after Xu Qing.

There was no snow, but it was quite windy. It was also a very clear day, without a cloud in the sky. Because of that, the light of sunrise was particularly bright, illuminating the two of them and causing their shadows to stretch out.

The wind carried with it sarcastic chuckles. However, as the two of them made their way into the distance, the chuckles turned into quiet conversation.

"Little Junior Brother, you can tell the truth to your Eldest Brother. Last night, did you finally... grow up?"

"...."

"Why aren't you saying anything, little Junior Brother? Feeling a bit bashful, eh?"

"...."

"Aiya. Fine, fine, fine. I'm not going to tease you. However, my most dearest little Junior Brother, once we're back, you have to introduce me to my Taotao. I also want to... grow up."

"...."

Chapter 440: This is a Big Job. Take it Seriously!

It was afternoon, the time when the winter sun was most dazzling as it fell on the Inkpaint Mountains, which were a short distance from the county capital. The name of the mountains came from the monochrome landscape. Everything was either black or white. There was no vegetation here, and the only animal life came in the form of a snake called an inkpaint viper. The monochrome mountains, and the boulders that dotted them, really looked like an ink painting.

Atop a mountain in that 'ink painting' sat six people.

They had split up in a very clear manner. One sat alone up front. One sat in the middle. Four sat in the back. The person sitting up front was the Captain. He looked very pleased with himself as he looked back at Xu Qing, then the four other people further back. Those four were Kong Xianglong, Sir Mountain-River, Wang Chen, and Duskspirit. They seemed to be mostly ignoring the Captain, and were focusing primarily on Xu Qing. All had curious expressions on their faces.

This was the spot where Xu Qing and Kong Xianglong had agreed to meet. The latter was going to help out with the 'show' that Xu Qing and the Captain needed to put on.

"Alright, everybody ready to get started?" the Captain said coolly.

Xu Qing nodded.

The Captain tilted his chin up proudly as he produced two medicinal pill bottles. He gave one to Xu Qing.

"Each bottle has a single shadeheaven demonmoon tablet in it. After we consume them, our body structure will change, and even our flesh and blood will transform. Once we become Nightshades, it will be very difficult for anyone to see through the disguise."

The Captain's words caused Kong Xianglong's eyebrows to shoot up in surprise. Next to him, Sir Mountain-River inhaled sharply.

"Shadeheaven demonmoon tablets? Those are top-secret pills from the Garmentfolk. They're very expensive and extremely rare. I've heard that the primary ingredient for each pill is actually a Garmentfolk!"

Wang Chen and Duskspirit also looked in shock at Chen Erniu.

The Captain looked extremely casual as he said, "They're alright. I had something better in mind, but I happen to know a Garmentfolk who owes me a favor. Upon finding out what I needed, that Garmentfolk raced across multiple prefectures to meet me here in the county capital. After seven days and seven nights of pleading.... Ai. It's difficult to refuse generosity, so in the end, I agreed."

An odd expression could be seen on Xu Qing's face as he took the medicinal pill bottle. Glancing at Kong Xianglong and the others, he could tell that none of them believed the Captain's story.

The Captain shook his head and sighed, as if he wasn't inclined to go into further details. Then he took the pill out of the bottle. It emanated a dazzling, blinding redness, and emitted a fragrant aroma. Even just smelling the pill, Xu Qing felt like his flesh and blood was wriggling. This pill was clearly amazing.

As everyone watched, the Captain consumed the pill. A moment later, he shook from head to toe. At the same time, a garment spread out to cover him. It was completely gray, and it covered every inch of him. Then it shrank down tight over him, whereupon the Captain started to transform. His limbs became skinnier, he became shorter overall, his head got larger, his eyelids vanished, and his eyes grew bigger. His hair changed too, becoming a host of spines almost like a hedgehog.

A moment later, a Nightshade stood in front of the others.

The marvelous scene caused Kong Xianglong and the others to look on with shining eyes. Although they had all heard about that special Garmentfolk pill, it was absolutely astonishing to see it in action.

After Xu Qing was sure the Captain's transformation was complete, he consumed his own medicinal pill. Afterward, he felt his flesh and blood change rapidly, as if some of it had been extracted from within him and put on the outside like a garment that resembled a Nightshade.

To the eyes of Kong Xianglong and the others, Xu Qing simply transformed into a Nightshade. He had gray skin, a slim frame, a large head, and spiky hair. His clothes had also changed. Instead of his swordsmage uniform, he wore a dark red suit of armor that covered him from head to toe.

After seeing Xu Qing and Chen Erniu transform into Nightshades, Kong Xianglong had to suppress his desire to join them. "Nightshade blood is black," he reminded them. "And though your auras seem flawless, don't forget that Nightshades speak and act differently from humans. Furthermore, they have unique magical techniques."

"It goes without saying that I considered that in my preparations," the Captain said with a haughty smile. With that, he tossed a black rock to Xu Qing.

"That's a blackblood stone," he said. "Absorb that, and your blood will change color temporarily."

The Captain tossed a blackblood stone into his mouth, then took a bite out of his arm. The blood that flowed out was black. Combined with his aura, it made him seem exactly like a Nightshade.

"In terms of magical techniques...." The Captain's black eyes flashed as the air in front of him rippled and distorted. A long spear took shape. Grabbing it, he twirled it with a flourish. Instantly, a tremor passed through him, causing countless inkpainted vipers to crawl out into the open. As they gathered, they looked in the Captain's direction and bowed their heads, as if waiting for orders.

Sir Mountain-River shot to his feet. Wang Chen and Duskspirit gasped in shock. And Kong Xianglong's eyes glittered brightly. Truth be told... all of this was exactly what they knew Nightshades to be like. They could enslave countless species, and were known for being able to create something from nothing. In fact, if they hadn't personally witnessed the transformation just now, they would assume that Chen Erniu really was a Nightshade.

Xu Qing was similarly taken aback.

When the Captain saw their reaction, he flashed a profoundly enigmatic smile. Then he waved his hand to disperse the snakes and send the spear away.

“Little Junior Brother, this time, your Eldest Brother is taking you on a really, really big job. Going forward, don’t just randomly go on missions with anyone who invites you. Missions like that don’t give much military credits. When you accept missions, you really need to take note of who’s in charge.”

Kong Xianglong snorted coldly.

Smiling wryly, Xu Qing absorbed the blackblood stone, causing his blood to transform. He was curious about how the Captain had managed to employ Nightshade magical techniques. But then he thought about some of the Captain’s big secrets, and he realized it wasn’t so surprising after all.

“I think I’m good to go,” Xu Qing said, thinking about the research he had done on the Nightshade’s eye.

With a final glance at Kong Xianglong and the others, the Captain looked at Xu Qing and licked his lips. “Alright, little Junior Brother. Same old same old?”

Xu Qing knew exactly what he meant. Though his black eyes shone with a bit of hesitation, he finally nodded.

Meanwhile, Kong Xianglong and the others were confused, as they had no idea what Xu Qing and the Captain meant by ‘same old same old.’

Even as they puzzled about it, the Captain strode forward and produced an ice spear which he stabbed directly into Xu Qing’s chest. The spear exploded, creating countless ice blades that slashed into Xu Qing.

Instantly, black blood burst out of Xu Qing. And the Captain wasn’t done. Clenching his right hand into a fist, he punched Xu Qing’s shoulder, causing the crack of breaking bone to ring out. As Xu Qing gasped, the Captain lunged forward to bite him.

Eyes widening, Xu Qing backed up. “Hey, it’s my turn!”

The Captain laughed uncomfortably and said, “My bad, I just fell into old habits. Go ahead, it’s your turn.”

Ignoring the pain, and eyes shining malevolently, Xu Qing stalked up to the Captain and produced a black dagger. He immediately plunged it into the Captain’s abdomen.

The Captain screamed in pain.

Despite how the blood sprayed, Xu Qing didn’t pause for a moment. He pulled the dagger out, picked another spot, and plunged it in. After stabbing the Captain about seven or eight times, he looked up and slashed the blade through the Captain’s neck.

The wound was so deep the Captain’s head nearly fell off.

Eyes widening, the Captain backed up a bit.

“The swordsages chased us for long enough that we should definitely have some sword wounds!” The Captain pulled out his command sword and stabbed Xu Qing seven or eight times.

Gritting his teeth against the pain and ignoring the blood streaming down him, Xu Qing growled, "Considering how long they chased us, and the fact we couldn't rest, the wounds must be decaying!" He quickly scattered some poison, provoking an agonized shriek from the Captain as his wounds started rotting.

"Living a life on the run in a place without much spirit energy should leave us very weak!" The Captain launched some more blows.

"The Nightshades don't like sunlight. That just means the wounds will rot even worse!" Xu Qing unleashed a few more attacks.

And thus, the two of them went back and forth, tit for tat. Off to the side, Kong Xianglong, Sir Mountain-River, Wang Chen, and Duskspirit watched with slack jaws and wide eyes. Eventually, they inhaled sharply and exchanged glances.

"They take it that seriously?" Duskspirit said.

"Xu Qing mentioned that he and his Eldest Brother had gone through some life-or-death situations..." Sir Mountain-River said in a low tone.

Everyone was fully convinced of that now.

Sometime later, the Captain grabbed Xu Qing's wrist before he could stab him again with his dagger.

"Little Ah Qing," he said weakly, "we've... probably gone far enough. If we go much further we'll be done for."

Panting for breath, Xu Qing kept his hand on the Captain's wrist, preventing his ice blade from going any further. "Yeah, good enough I suppose."

They dropped their hands. The Captain looked up at the sky to check the time. It was already evening, and the red color spread out like blood. Meanwhile, it was possible to see a cloud of dust off in the distance. The ground trembled faintly, and they could pick up the sound of beasts.

"That's our caravan. Little Junior Brother, it's time for our show. Although we've planned things out, be ready to make adjustments as necessary!" With that, the Captain rose to his feet, clutched his abdomen, and started running.

Expression grave, Xu Qing looked at Kong Xianglong and the others. After clasping hands, he started running as fast as he could.

Kong Xianglong, Sir Mountain-River, Wang Chen, and Duskspirit were all in high spirits now. After personally witnessing the methods of Xu Qing and the Captain, they were moved, and felt deep admiration. That was especially true considering how the two of them didn't hold back in wounding each other. It really went to show how seriously Xu Qing and Chen Erniu were taking this, and that made them want to take it more seriously as well.

Expressions turning fierce, and baleful auras flaring, they started chasing after Xu Qing and the Captain.

"Humankind rules these lands! Where do you think you can escape to?"

“Your wounds are too serious! You won’t last for much longer!”

“Be careful, everyone. The Nightshades excel at enslavement arts. There must be a reason they’re fleeing in this direction!”

All four of them were working hard to make the situation as realistic as possible. At a certain point, Duskspirit pulled out a jade slip and crushed it, causing light to rocket up into the sky and explode to form the shape of a sword.

That was obviously a swordsage signal.

Meanwhile, about fifty kilometers away, a caravan was speeding along. It was made up of several hundred carts, each of which was at least three hundred meters long. They were covered with pitch black canvases and were being pulled along by enormous beasts of burden with red skin called ‘fourleggers.’

Atop each fourlegger was a Holytide cultivator. There were none in the Nascent Soul level, with the majority being in Foundation Establishment, and only a dozen or so in Gold Core. The Gold Core cultivators all seemed to have two or three heavenly palaces. There were only three who had four palaces, with the strongest being a young man in a fancy, brocaded robe. The black mark on his forehead was especially clear, revealing that he had an extraordinary bloodline. He had six-palace battle prowess.

This caravan was from the duchy of Heaven Zenith, which was one of the thirty-six city-states that surrounded Ten Entrails of the True Immortal in Eastern Wasteland County of the Holytide Region. [1]

They were in Sea-Sealing County because they’d been given a travel permit by the Yao Clan, and they were handling a shipment of cloudmother stones. The special nature of those stones made them impossible to put into bags of holding, thus, they needed to be transported by cart. The travel permit from the Yao Clan ensured that they would have safe passage through Sea-Sealing County. That said, because of the friction between the Holytides and humans, they couldn’t send very powerful cultivators lest they attract too much attention. In contrast, a less powerful group would be less of a threat.

Besides, their job was to transport goods, not do any fighting and killing. After they got the shipment of cloudmother stones, they would make haste to the border without pausing along the way.

As the caravan neared the Inkpaint Mountains and the swordsage signal lit up the sky, it caused a stir.

The good-looking young man with the extraordinary cultivation base looked coldly up into the sky.

“Swordsages?”