

Timescape 441

Chapter 441: The Young Cow Runs Like Crazy

Xu Qing and the Captain were currently fleeing madly through the Inkpaint Mountains.

Their dark red armor was falling apart, and they had ghastly wounds all over their bodies. Many of those wounds were already rotting, and emitted very weak auras. Some of their injuries seemed potentially fatal. One of Xu Qing's arms wasn't working, and his belly had a gaping gash in it. The spot over his heart was a mass of mangled flesh, as if something had exploded there. He seemed to be barely clinging to life. The Captain was in similar shape. His worst injury other than the ragged hole near his kidney was a slash to his neck that looked like it had come close to severing his head.

Clearly, these Nightshades had strong life force; despite their injuries, they were running at top speed. As black blood splashed here and there, their eyes shone with cold determination. It was as if death didn't mean much to them.

They were being chased by Sir Mountain-River, Wang Chen, and Duskspirit.

Kong Xianglong had sped around in a different direction, so it would seem like he had come in response to the signal.

As Sir Mountain-River and the others gave chase, they pulsed with baleful auras and killing intent. Occasionally they would perform an incantation gesture, causing the fluctuations of magical techniques to roll out.

Booms rang out constantly. However, Xu Qing and the Captain were extraordinary in their own ways. The Captain's eyes suddenly flickered with cold light, and a plethora of spears appeared behind him, which shot backward.

That wasn't a human magical technique, but rather, a shocking Nightshade art.

Xu Qing fought back even more incisively. He looked over his shoulder, and his black eyes gleamed brightly. Suddenly, a large area behind him turned black, as if it had been blotted out from the sun. And then the darkness turned into the shape of a huge hand that shot toward Sir Mountain-River and the others. It was so dark it seemed capable of devouring sunlight. In the blink of an eye it was several hundred meters in size, and absolutely astonishing to behold.

Sir Mountain-River and the others were almost convinced they were dealing with real Nightshades.

The Captain was just as shaken. Truth be told, what Xu Qing was doing looked almost exactly like a real Nightshade technique.

Rumbling sounds echoed out as Sir Mountain-River and the others scattered, then tapped into all their strength to dispel the darkness. However, before they could recover their wits, Xu Qing pressed the attack.

Spinning, he glanced at Sir Mountain-River and the others, and then his black eyes glittered even more dazzlingly.

The huge black hand then shot toward the three swordsages. As the fingers closed, powerful psychic fluctuations rolled out. As a result, Xu Qing's simple move contained massive strength. What was more, this was not like the black hand from before. Instead, its goal was... to take control of the enemy!

All of a sudden, Sir Mountain-River shivered, and a look of struggle appeared in his eyes. However, that struggle quickly faded away, and then Sir Mountain-River turned to look at Wang Chen with a grim look.

As his blood energy erupted, he seemed to have lost control of his own body as he lunged toward Wang Chen and attacked him.

It happened so quickly that Wang Chen could only react with a shocked look. Duskspirit was similarly shaken.

With no time to do anything else, they rushed to intercept Sir Mountain-River. Duskspirit in her demonized form spat up a mouthful of blood, which transformed into a blood sword that she slashed down in front of Sir Mountain-River. It was a move specifically designed to deal with psychic control techniques. Duskspirit was currently thinking back to what Kong Xianglong had explained about Nightshade innate abilities. As the blood sword slashed down, rumbling sounds erupted as if numerous invisible strings had snapped.

Sir Mountain-River shivered as he recovered his wits. His expression was listless, though his eyes glittered with shock.

Meanwhile, Xu Qing's head spun as he coughed up a mouthful of blood, then fled looking extremely exhausted.

As he neared the Holytide caravan, he didn't hesitate for a moment to coldly reach his hand out and make a grasping gesture.

One of the fourleggers shivered as it was yanked into the air. Then it was seemingly crumpled into nothing. It collapsed into a haze of blood, whereupon its life force was extracted and flew over to Xu Qing.

As he absorbed it, the life force entered him and the exhaustion in his expression disappeared. Just as he was going to continue fleeing, Sir Mountain-River and the others arrived.

Snorting coldly, Xu Qing waved his hand, causing a few dozen shocked Holytide cultivators to rise into the air along with about seven fourleggers. Then Xu Qing flung all of them toward Sir Mountain-River. Their eyes shone with animosity, as though they couldn't stand to live as long as Sir Mountain-River and the others were alive.

Xu Qing, having accomplished that, sped onward.

The Captain was a bit taken aback. Xu Qing's performance had caught him by surprise, and didn't exactly fit with his plan. However, he recovered quickly from his surprise. Quelling his shock, he chased after Xu Qing. The two of them fled into the distance.

Meanwhile, the furious Sir Mountain-River, Wang Chen, and Duskspirit fiercely unleashed attacks onto the Holytides that had been thrown in their directions. The Holytides fell like dry weeds. Strangely, though, none of them screamed, and their eyes glittered with hatred before they died.

Down below, the caravan had been thrown into chaos by Xu Qing. The Holytide cultivators were astonished, and even the Gold Core cultivators were clearly very anxious.

The young man with six-palace battle prowess suddenly floated up into the air.

“Ladies and gentlemen from the Swordsage Palace, we’re a Holytide caravan from the duchy of Heaven Zenith. We have a travel permit from Marquis Yao in Sea-Sealing County!” The young man pulled out a jade slip and snapped it in two, causing a magical symbol to appear. It was the symbol of the Yao Clan, and it represented protection from them!

Having done that, the young man looked grimly at Sir Mountain-River, Wang Chen, and Duskspirit. The three swordsages looked at the symbol with unsightly expressions. Then they snorted coldly and, ignoring the caravan, continued their pursuit of Xu Qing and the Captain. After passing the caravan, the three of them exchanged glances. All three could see how confused and surprised the others were.

Chen Erniu’s performance had been in line with their expectations, but Xu Qing... had caught them by surprise. His two attacks really did seem like the work of a Nightshade, and were so terrifying that he seemed like someone extraordinary even among Nightshades. Yet again, if they hadn’t seen Xu Qing transform, and didn’t know about his 30,000-meter pillar of light, they might think that he was actually a Nightshade.

What was most shocking was that although it seemed like Sir Mountain-River was only being controlled in terms of his fleshly body, the reality was that both Duskspirit and Wang Chen could see that it wasn’t just his body that had been taken over. It was his mind as well.

It was the same with the Holytides. They couldn’t be sure of how exactly it worked, but based on their limited understanding of Nightshades, it left them feeling very fearful.

“This is just an act, but why does it feel so real...” Sir Mountain-River murmured with a bitter smile.

Duskspirit and Wang Chen wore similar smiles as they disappeared after Xu Qing and the Captain. Moments later, Kong Xianglong showed up, his expression grim as he started looking for clues.

Time passed and soon it was late in the night.

Somewhere in a cave in the Inkpaint Mountains, Xu Qing sat cross-legged in meditation, occasionally coughing up black blood thanks to his injuries.

The Captain sat next to him, unspeaking, his expression dour.

Some time passed, and then Xu Qing’s black eyes glittered. Looking up at the moon, he said, “There is no spirit in the moon here in the Holytide Region.”

The Captain didn’t say anything for a moment. He just looked at the moon and sighed.

“Exalted one, I miss home too,” he said softly.

Xu Qing looked at the Captain. The use of the term ‘exalted one’ wasn’t part of their original plan, but he didn’t betray any surprise to hear it.

“Do you still have that contact in the Garmentfolk? We need to get a shadeheaven demonmoon pill as quickly as possible so that we can change into human form.”

“The Garmentfolk—hey, what’s that?” Expression flickering, the Captain looked coldly toward the mouth of the cave.

All of a sudden, an anxious-sounding voice reached their ears.

“I’m a nobody from the inferior species’ Heaven Zenith duchy. I hereby request an audience with the two exalted members of the superior species.”

The Captain’s eyes glittered coldly, and he was about to launch an attack when Xu Qing waved his right hand.

“Come in,” he said coolly. As the words left his mouth, a figure cautiously entered the cave. It was none other than the young Holytide man from the caravan with the six-palace battle prowess.

The Captain’s eyes narrowed, and he quickly edged closer to Xu Qing, putting himself between Xu Qing and the young man.

When the young Holytide man laid eyes on Xu Qing and the captain, he inhaled deeply and then dropped to his knees to kowtow.

“Greetings, oh members of the superior species!”

“How did you find us?” the Captain said, his black eyes glittering with cold light.

“Sir,” he said quietly, “your humble servant happens to have a rare spirit pet that can track the aura of someone’s blood.... After seeing the two of you, then finding some of your blood splattered on the ground, I was able to find you.”

Xu Qing said nothing. He just looked calmly at the young man.

“What are you doing here?” the Captain said gruffly.

“Sirs, that group of swordsages is still out there looking for you. Whatever you have planned, it’s not going to be easy to carry it out. So how about... the two of you let us escort you back to Holytide territory? And if you have any other needs, the duchy of Heaven Zenith will hold nothing back to fulfill them.

“If you’re pleased with my service, I only hope that you can bestow upon me a Nightshade blessing!” The young Holytide’s eyes shone with fanaticism as he looked at Xu Qing and the Captain.

The night passed without incident.

The following morning at dawn, the hooves of the red-skinned fourleggers caused thunderous rumbling as they sped away from the Inkpaint Mountains. The carts they pulled were all laden with cloudmother stones. Not one was missing. However, it was only the curses and whips of the Holytide cultivators that got the fourleggers moving.

As the caravan moved along, it kicked up dust that the wind blew this way and that. From a distance, the dust almost looked like a tempest, making the caravan difficult to see clearly. Even at around noon, when the sun was the strongest, the sunlight couldn't quite penetrate the dust.

However... before long, the sound of cracking whips rang out, and the cries of the beasts grew louder as they slowed to a halt.

Slowly, the tempest of dust settled. Gradually, the hundreds of fourleggers were revealed, as well as the vigilant Holytide cultivators atop them.

“What’s the meaning of this, human swordsages?” The angry voice came from atop the ninth fourlegger in the caravan train.

It was the young man with six-palace battle prowess and an extraordinary bloodline. As he looked ahead of the caravan, the air there rippled and distorted, and four figures became visible.

In the lead position was Kong Xianglong, his expression grim and his eyes shining with ferocity as he scanned the various fourleggers. Sir Mountain-River, Wang Chen, and Duskspirit scattered and started inspecting the fourleggers.

“We have a travel permit from Marquis Yao!” the young Holytide said, his expression flickering.

“Pipe down!” Kong Xianglong said. His hand flew out, smacking the young Holytide in the side of the face. Blood sprayed from the young man’s mouth as he flew several hundred meters to the side, until he slammed into a boulder.

“Inspect everything!” Kong Xianglong said calmly, not sparing a glance for the young Holytide.

Sir Mountain-River and the others quickly started moving through the caravan, inspecting all of the fourleggers, as well as the individual cultivators. In the end, they found nothing.

Kong Xianglong snorted coldly and flew off to search another area. Sir Mountain-River and the others followed him.

When they were gone, the young Holytide got back up and returned to the ninth fourlegger. Wiping the blood from his mouth, he said, “Keep moving.”

Before long, the rumbling and the dust was back as the caravan proceeded on its way.

About two hours later, the young man stood atop the fourlegger and performed an incantation gesture with his right hand. Instantly, he started shrinking, until he became so small he disappeared.

Meanwhile, the red-furred fourlegger grew larger before his eyes, until it became like a huge red land mass around him.

The wrinkles in the beast’s skin were ravines, and its countless semitransparent hairs were like enormous trees or pillars, except flexible.

One of those enormous hairs was bent to provide shade from the sun. And in that shade sat Xu Qing and the Captain, doing breathing exercises.

Hurrying over, the young man knelt in front of Xu Qing and the Captain. Eyes burning with zealous fanaticism, he said, "Greetings, oh members of the superior species. You can rest easy, exalted ones. The swordsages are gone."

Chapter 442: A Chance Encounter

Xu Qing looked at the young man for a moment, then gave a curt nod.

The previous night, he and the Captain had rebuffed the young Holytide's pleadings. For a time. In the end, they agreed to his proposal. The plan was to slip through the swordsage dragnet by hiding in the Holytide caravan.

Xu Qing didn't ask whether or not the caravan would actually end up in the duchy of Heaven Zenith.

Their hiding spot in the caravan was on the surface of one of the fourleggers. It was a clever technique that masked auras; clearly the Holytides were skilled in such concealment arts.

"Your humble servant is here to handle all your needs. Now that we've successfully slipped past the swordsages, the rest of the journey should be much less eventful. In a month, we'll reach Holytide territory."

With that, the young Holytide took out two lotus leaves from his bag of holding, which he respectfully lifted over his head.

"Your humble servant has only seen members of the supervisory species twice before. In both cases it was from a distance. My father has told me a lot about your customs and way of life, but truth be told I'm mostly ignorant. That said, I've heard you enjoy moonlight-touched dew harvested just before the break of dawn. So I sent a few of my people out to collect some."

Xu Qing's facial expression was the same as ever, but inside, his heart skipped a beat. Though he knew a bit about Nightshades, that knowledge was very superficial. For instance, he had never heard anything about them liking moonlight-touched dew.

The young Holytide's tone of voice seemed a touch ambiguous. On the surface, he appeared to be speaking casually, but at the same time, Xu Qing got the sense he was probing them a bit. That was one reason why he wasn't yet convinced that Nightshades actually liked moonlight-touched dew.

As a result, he said nothing.

Meanwhile, the Captain chuckled and waved his right hand, causing the two lotus leaves to fly over to him. Without hesitation, he drank some of the dew. Then he dipped his fingers into it and wiped the dew onto his black eyes.

The dew immediately caused a thin film to appear on the Captain's eyes, covering them. He sighed contentedly.

"Very considerate of you. You're dismissed."

The young Holytide's expression didn't reveal any suspicion, only fanaticism. He bowed low and respectfully backed up nine paces, then straightened and left. After flying off of the fourlegger, he returned to his usual size. When he sat atop the beast, his expression seemed completely normal.

Half a month passed.

During that time, the young Holytide was very circumspect. For the most part, he left Xu Qing and the Captain alone. Only occasionally would he request an audience. When he did, he would stay a good distance away, and would only approach when he had permission.

None of his words or actions betrayed any sense of suspicion. It seemed that he really was just acting like the subsidiary species, and was escorting them down the road.

However, he would occasionally ask some very delicately worded and clever questions about Nightshade customs. Whenever he did, his expression was one of rapt attention.

Xu Qing didn't know much about that topic, so he never said anything. The Captain handled it all. The Captain had obviously taken the responsibility seriously. He knew far more about Nightshades than Xu Qing, so much so that on two occasions he pointed out mistakes in what the young man said.

"Who told you Nightshade Mountain is all about sacrifices? Moonfall orchids bloom there, and a god once set foot on that spot, which is where the temple exists to this day."

"The city of Crowscale? At the foot of the mountain? Sadly, the broken face of the god looked at it about a sixty-year-cycle ago. It's gone, though few outsiders know about that."

The Captain seemed authentic in every facial expression and choice of words. To Xu Qing, it almost seemed like the Captain had actually lived as a Nightshade for a good period of time.

Meanwhile, the zeal in the young Holytide's face grew more evident. That said, he never ceased with the probing. Then one day, when the noon sun was at its brightest, the canopy of hair overhead shifted, allowing sunlight to land on Xu Qing.

Frowning, Xu Qing waved his hand, which caused the hairs overhead to shift back into place and block the sun.

Small things like that happened with enough regularity to be concerning. But Xu Qing and the Captain handled them all smoothly. Toward the end of the half-month period of travel, they ceased.

One day, after they had crossed the border into Tidefall Prefecture, the Holytide caravan approached Skymoon Ravine.

Skymoon Ravine was so huge that, given the caravan's rate of travel, it would take three days to pass through it. After coming out the other side of the ravine, it would take another week to reach the border.

Because Tidefall Prefecture bordered Holytide territory, once the caravan reached the ravine, the Holytide cultivators breathed sighs of relief, and finally started to relax. They spent the first night

uneventfully in the ravine, then woke at dawn to continue speeding on their way. The next day passed quickly.

By evening, they were about halfway through the ravine. On either side of them, craggy boulders rose high, blocking the sunlight and filling the ravine with shadows.

Some distance away, hidden in a cliff side cave, was a young woman dressed in red, sitting in meditation. When she opened her eyes, they glittered coldly. The young woman wore a mask and had an evil ghost scythe lying next to her. She was none other than Qing Qiu. She had been camping in this spot for about half a month, specifically waiting for this caravan returning with cloudmother stones.

There were big caravans and small ones. In order to avoid beating the grass and startling the snake, she had already let several smaller caravans pass, all to make sure she had a shot at this, the largest of them all.

“It’s here. It’s here!!” the evil ghost said into her mind. “This is the caravan you wanted me to look into. They’re from the duchy of Heaven Zenith in Eastern Wasteland County. It’s a small nation, but they always get the biggest haul of cloudmother stones. I just scanned them and found over a hundred Holytide cultivators. There aren’t many in Gold Core, and the strongest among those has six palaces. But that’s more than enough. A six-palace cultivator would be perfect for us to end things in mutual destruction!”

In response to the evil ghost, Qing Qiu’s eyes glittered coldly and her cultivation base stirred. Red light glowed all around her as she tapped into a secret magic, as well as six-palace battle prowess. Over the past few months, her cultivation base had advanced dramatically. With her four heavenly palaces, her imperial-class technique, and her secret magic, she had already reached the level of six-palace battle prowess.

“Given their speed, they’ll be here in the time it takes an incense stick to burn!”

The excited evil ghost clearly hadn’t detected Xu Qing and the Captain. And there was no way Qing Qiu could have possibly anticipated running into them in this caravan. A moment later, she licked her lips, and her eyes shone with even greater coldness.

Around that time, Xu Qing looked off into the distance. Only a moment ago, Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior had projected a message to him.

“Milord, I just sensed the divine will of a spirit automaton. It’s that girl in red with the evil ghost scythe.”

Xu Qing’s eyebrows shot up.

Off to the side, the Captain suddenly looked off in the same direction, seemingly surprised. Obviously he had similar means of detecting such things.

“Very interesting,” he said with a smile. He looked at Xu Qing. “You sense it, too?”

Xu Qing wasn't surprised at all at the Captain's ability. After a moment of thought, he replied, “If she's not after the caravan, we should just ignore her and keep moving.”

“And if she is after the caravan?” the Captain asked with a mysterious smile.

“If we killed her in Sea-Sealing County,” Xu Qing said calmly, “people would find out. So we take her captive into Holytide territory and put her to death there.”

“You're really going to put her to death? Hahaha! Alright. Before she dies we should take that mask off and see what she really looks like. Why's she always wearing that thing?” The Captain grinned humorously at Xu Qing.

Xu Qing looked back at him with a surprised frown.

That evening when the afterglow of the sun was still spread out over the lands, the depths of the ravine were already as dark as night.

As the several hundred fourleggers caused intense rumbling sounds to fill the ravine, the area in front of the caravan suddenly exploded. Rocks and pebbles erupted in all directions while magical symbols descended from above, creating a spell formation like a huge net. A blood-colored glow spread out, like a blood sea, filling the ravine with crimson.

As the caravan was thrown into chaos, a petite figure flew out of the evening sky, clad in red, with a white mask and a huge evil ghost scythe.

The moment the figure appeared, an ancient voice echoed out into heaven and earth.

“Acknowledge the call of Departure; Dao lineaments are evasive; I am the Emperor, Dark Serenity; I bless this individual; let the battle soul descend on them; help the adherents who show faith in me; let the departure begin!”

The power of the voice instantly affected the surroundings, causing a vile wind to spring up in the ravine. As it swept about, the Holytide cultivators it touched shivered as they felt frigid coldness piercing into them.

The wind converged on the young woman in red with her evil ghost scythe. The evil ghost's eyes glittered with scarlet light as it opened its mouth in the direction of the young woman's arm, then took a bite. A tremor passed through her, and then another image superimposed over her, almost as if she had fused with a battle soul.

Standing just behind the girl in red was a semitransparent female general in a suit of armor that gave her additional cultivation base power. It made this young woman in red seem like the ambassador of death, out to harvest the lives of all living things.

But there was more. A red glow pulsed out from her, making her the source of the blood-colored light that filled the valley. It was the blood will domain from the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society!

When that happened, another personality would take over Qing Qiu. A gruish smile suddenly appeared on her face.

“Heh heh heh.”

Her laughter seemed to contain boundless insanity as she suddenly burst into motion, bringing the blood-colored light with her as she charged the Holytide caravan. Her evil ghost scythe slashed through the air, its sharp edge slicing through everything it encountered. There was no one here who could stop this.

When the extraordinary young man shot out to defend the caravan, not even his six-palace battle prowess gave him the speed to match Qing Qiu. After all, they were just caravan operators, not the Black Guard who lived for slaughter.

Qing Qiu easily evaded him, then erupted with gruish laughter and killing intent.

“Heh heh heh heh.”

The Holytide cultivators had no way to escape her. Her scythe slashed, instantly cutting them to pieces.

Qing Qiu attacked ruthlessly, and nothing could stand in her way. She was obviously ready to slaughter everyone present. Blood sprayed everywhere, getting onto her clothes and her face. That just made the blood-colored light in her eyes grow stronger. And when she licked the blood off her lips, the insanity in her eyes skyrocketed.

This version of Qing Qiu was just like the one Xu Qing had faced when he first met her. This was why he had taken to calling her Girl in Red.

If Xu Qing and the Captain weren't around, and the caravan didn't have some powerful trump card to use, then Qing Qiu's ambush would have worked.

And even if the caravan did have a secret trump card, given Qing Qiu's current speed and battle prowess, she still would have been able to take the cloudmother stones.

Except... Xu Qing and the Captain couldn't just stand by while Qing Qiu slaughtered the caravan. It wasn't that they cared about the Holytide cultivators. Rather, they couldn't just let them all be killed.

As the six-palace Holytide backed away, Qing Qiu's scythe sliced another Gold Core cultivator in half. As she closed in, cutting down three of the fourleggers, she pulled her scythe back to make another attack. That was when the Captain made his move.

He flew out from the ninth fourlegger, suddenly reverting to his normal size. However, he still looked like a Nightshade. Eyes glittering, he gave a cold harrumph.

“Impudent human!”

Chapter 443: Scratched Off of the Bamboo Slip

“Humans!” the Captain said, scorn in his eyes as he lifted his slender gray hand and pushed toward Qing Qiu.

The air around Qing Qiu rippled, then sank down to crush her.

“Nightshade!” Qing Qiu murmured, her eyes narrowing as she lurched in the opposite direction. She was too slow.

The Captain's move caused the battle soul she'd summoned to distort as if it might collapse.

Of course, Qing Qiu was also an extraordinary individual. In that moment of crisis, her eyes glittered with red light as she hurled her scythe at the Captain.

The scythe screamed through the air, spinning like a wheel, moving with shocking speed and unstoppable momentum toward the Captain. Simultaneously, Qing Qiu's hands flashed in a double-handed incantation gesture, and her eyes shone with insanity. Then she shrieked in the Captain's direction, causing the collapsing battle soul to lunge toward the Captain with its mouth wide open and teeth bared.

The Captain's eyes narrowed, but he didn't make an evasive move. The evil ghost scythe sliced into his forehead, causing black blood to spray everywhere as his entire body was cut in half.

Then the scythe continued slashing into the fourlegger he'd been standing on. At the same time, the two halves of the Captain's body gruesomely stitched back together.

He also opened his mouth and lunged toward the incoming battle soul as if to devour it.

Then a cracking sound rang out as a 300-meter Nightshade mouth appeared in front of the Captain. Opening wide, it easily devoured the battle soul like a chunk of fresh meat. As the Captain chewed, he continued advancing until he was right in front of the visibly surprised Qing Qiu. He waved his right hand, and over a hundred spears popped out of nowhere and stabbed toward her.

That was when Xu Qing's voice finally echoed out.

"I want that one alive."

"Yes, sir!" the Captain called back. Of course, this was all going according to the plan they'd devised earlier. With another wave of his hand, the Captain turned all of the spears into long hairs which shot forward, wrapped around Qing Qiu, and bound her securely.

She struggled, her eyes burning with defiance. She even tried to use a secret magic. But then the Captain's fist slammed into her mask, and she lapsed into unconsciousness.

Because of the force of the blow, her mask cracked, and one piece fell off, revealing part of a delicate, pretty face.

Ignoring her facial features, the Captain grabbed Qing Qiu by her restraints and then glared around with cold displeasure at the surrounding Holytides.

The young Holytide hurried over, an appreciative expression on his face as he dropped to his knees to kowtow.

"Many thanks for stepping in, sir."

"Start moving immediately," the Captain said coldly. "We need to be out of Sea-Sealing County within three days!" Then he returned to the ninth fourlegger, shrinking down until he was out of sight.

The young Holytide watched him disappear, his face full of gratitude and fervor. Then he started barking orders at his fearful and uncertain subordinates.

Shortly after, the caravan was moving again, this time a lot faster than before.

Back in concealment on the fourlegger, the Captain tossed the unconscious Qing Qiu off to the side. More of her mask fell off, revealing more of her face.

“Since you don’t like her much, I’ll leave her to you,” the Captain said. Then he sat off to the side fiddling with the scythe. The scythe trembled, and the evil ghost face on it had a fawning expression.

Xu Qing nodded, then looked coldly at Qing Qiu, especially her face.

She was extremely pretty, with fair skin, a small cute nose, and lips like a cherry blossom. She appeared to be about sixteen or seventeen. She seemed very much like a ‘girl next door,’ especially as she lay there unconscious and defenseless. There was no malice or ferocity on her face, just a natural delicacy. It made Qing Qiu look very different than she normally did. In a brutal world, delicacy like that was bound to lead to vicious bullying.

Xu Qing looked her over, then was about to turn away when he realized something about her seemed familiar. He studied her closer, then frowned. Standing, he walked up to her.

The Captain smiled enigmatically as he looked on, all the while fiddling with the scythe. Suddenly, the evil ghost shrieked and passed out.

Xu Qing wasn’t paying attention to the Captain. Standing over Qing Qiu, he examined her again, and a sudden expression of confused nostalgia flickered in his eyes. However, he still wasn’t sure what was going on, so he grabbed her bag of holding and rummaged through it. Then he noticed a small crystal she had on a necklace.

When Xu Qing saw that stone, his heart flip-flopped, and he suddenly felt like he was in a daze.

Memories rose up within his mind.

He was in a townhouse, and there was a little girl with a scar on her face, huddled in the corner, shivering and looking around vigilantly. The scene changed. The girl stood outside a beast arena, clutching a bamboo stick, upon which were the words ‘giant horned anaconda.’ The despair in the girl’s eyes was clear. The scene shifted again. Moonlight shone down onto a door. The girl stubbornly said that she would repay him one day. Then she staggered off into the night. There were more scenes. He saw her selling him white boluses, sweeping snow outside the shop, and running after him to give him some candy. The memories ended with a sunset scene in which the girl’s big brother took her hand, and they walked off into the distance, her looking over her shoulder the whole time. In some of those scenes, he heard the girl’s voice.

“Whenever I’m sad, my momma would always give me some candy. I just had to eat it, and I’d feel better. This is the last piece of candy and... I want you to have it. Feel better, Big Bro Kid!”

“My big brother came to get me!” she said. Anticipation gleaming in her eyes, she continued, “Big Bro Kid, do you want to come with us?”

“That’s okay. When I grow up, I’ll come back and see you. I told you I was going to pay you back for saving my life, Big Bro Kid. And I will.”

“I have to go now... Big Bro Kid.”

As that voice echoed in his mind... Xu Qing finally sighed. It was a sigh that contained reminiscence, sorrow, and resignation. He looked down at Qing Qiu's face, and her good looks slowly merged with his memories of that young girl from the scavenger basecamp.

Of course. She's from the Church of Departure. And she had no way of recognizing me. After all... I've changed almost completely.

He sighed. Back when he knew the girl in the scavenger basecamp, he hadn't washed his face for years. Beyond that, he'd grown a lot in the past few years. He was no longer that scrawny boy from years ago. He'd matured.

Still reeling a bit, Xu Qing looked at the scar-removing crystal and noted how worn it was. Obviously it had seen a lot of use.

After a moment, he put the crystal back where he'd found it, but kept the bag of holding. Then he sat down cross-legged next to her.

It didn't make sense to reveal himself to her while he was disguised as a Nightshade. Besides, he had no idea of knowing if she was even really the same person after all these years. For now, he would keep his true identity a secret.

Whether she remembered him or not didn't matter to him. In fact, he found himself thinking back to the last words he'd spoken when they parted. "Please. Stay safe."

"As long as she's safe, that's all that matters," he murmured quietly. Taking out his bamboo slip, he scratched out the name Girl in Red. He looked over at the Captain, and then thought about the Captain's odd look from before. Obviously, the Captain already knew Qing Qiu's true identity.

"The old man told me," the Captain explained. "I did some of my own investigation as well, heh heh. I found out just before we left. I was hoping to surprise you later." The Captain cleared his throat and blinked a few times.

Xu Qing closed his eyes.

The next day, Qing Qiu regained consciousness.

However, she didn't immediately open her eyes. Instead, she regulated her heartbeat and aura to make it seem like she was still unconscious. Then she studied her surroundings. She could tell that her cultivation base was sealed, and that she had no hope of unsealing it. That caused her heart to sink. Worse, there was no evil ghost voice in her head, which meant her scythe had been taken away. Either that or it was sealed just like she was. She also couldn't find her bag of holding.

Those realizations emphasized to her the direness of her situation. The upside was that she wasn't injured. Nor was she bound. At least the little crystal still lay against her chest, a slight blessing amidst so much misfortune. Just as Qing Qiu was going to start trying to unseal her cultivation base, Xu Qing's cold voice reached her ears.

"You're awake. There's no need to pretend you're not."

Qing Qiu remained calm and on guard.

Xu Qing looked at her, but didn't say anything further.

Off to the side, the Captain perked up and looked at them with a playful grin.

The next day, Qing Qiu had no choice other than to open her eyes. She could sense from the astonishing nature of the seal on her cultivation base that it wasn't the work of humans. It was a psychic sealing that was most likely put in place by a Nightshade. Given her current level of strength, there was no way she could dispel it. By now, she had also come to the realization that she had been shrunk down, and was now on the back of one of the fourleggers.

Seeing no reason to pretend to be unconscious, she opened her eyes and stood up, her eyes as cold as ice as she looked at the two Nightshades. It was her first time being around Nightshades, and she understood full well that their presence in this Holytide caravan was a huge deal.

Feeling very anxious, she looked around and saw her evil ghost scythe in the hands of the very same Nightshade that had knocked her out. The evil ghost seemed to be asleep.

"Why didn't you kill me?" she asked.

The Captain smiled enigmatically at her, but didn't say anything. As for Xu Qing, he held his tongue for a short time, then coolly said, "Keep quiet and I'll let you go in three months."

Qing Qiu laughed coldly. She didn't believe this Nightshade at all.

Xu Qing was about to continue speaking, but before he could, the Captain jumped into the conversation. "I've had some dealings with your Church of Departure. That's why you're not dead."

Xu Qing looked at the Captain.

So did Qing Qiu. She knew that talking back wasn't going to do any good, so she decided she would just pretend to cooperate. Then, as time passed, she would find an opportunity to escape.

Voice cold, the Captain continued, "You care a lot about that crystal, don't you? That's why I didn't take it." There was a bit of a threat in his words.

Hearing that, Xu Qing frowned slightly.

Qing Qiu's expression remained the same as ever, but her heart was pounding. Though it took effort, she didn't let her consternation show on her face. That would simply help her enemies.

"We'll let you go in three months," the Captain went on. "We'll also return your scythe to you. But if you try to pull any tricks, I'll smash that little crystal of yours. One bit at a time." The Captain's raspy voice truly made him seem villainous. Then he reached out and slowly tapped on the shaft of the scythe.

The sleeping evil ghost shivered.

Qing Qiu glared at the Captain, but finally gritted her teeth and nodded.

Time passed. The next day the caravan reached the border of Tidefall Prefecture, thus entering the Holytide-controlled Eastern Wasteland County. At that point, the young Holytide leading the caravan finally breathed a sigh of relief. So did all of the other Holytides. As of now, there was very little chance of them facing any danger from humans.

At the invitation of the young man, Xu Qing and the Captain finally came out of hiding.

Qing Qiu looked at the strange lands around them, then glanced back in the direction of Sea-Sealing County. She had a deep sense of foreboding within her, as she knew that there was no hope of her making an escape anytime soon.

“Sirs, now that we’re here, you’re safe,” said the young Holytide, clasping hands to Xu Qing and the Captain, his expression just as zealous and fanatical as ever.

Chapter 444: A Shocking Kowtow

It was noon, and the sun was very bright. A north wind blew, stirring the hair of everyone present.

As Xu Qing stood on the unfamiliar soil, he did the same as Qing Qiu and glanced back at Sea-Sealing County. After a moment, he looked away and studied his surroundings. It was an instinct for him now. Whenever he ended up in an unfamiliar setting, he would always familiarize himself with his surroundings as quickly as possible.

The soil was made of brown sand, and there were mountains in the distance. There wasn’t much in the way of greenery, with melting white snow visible in many places. Truth be told, there wasn’t much difference compared to what Xu Qing was used to. After all, Holytides and humans were fundamentally very similar, with the main difference being the Nightshade blood in the Holytides.

As Xu Qing scanned the surroundings, the Captain nodded in response to the young Holytide.

The young Holytide looked more fanatical than ever. With a very serious facial expression, he looked at Xu Qing and the Captain and said, “It was a true honor to be of some help to the two of you. Without you, I wouldn’t have survived the return trip. Your humble servant can only beg that the two of you deign to come with me to the duchy of Heaven Zenith and let me show you the true hospitality of a lesser species.

“My hometown is by the Ten Entrails Tree, which is about to bear dao fruit. The coming months are going to be very exciting, full of supernatural phenomena. Granted, it can’t compare to anything from your superior species, but it’s still one of the most fantastic events in the Holytide Region. Whatever things you need once we reach Heaven Zenith, our duke can definitely arrange to get them for you.”

With that, the young Holytide stepped back a few paces, then clasped hands and bowed.

Xu Qing seemed to be mulling over the proposition, as was the Captain. The Captain narrowed his eyes and looked deeply at the young Holytide.

Xu Qing did the same, then coolly said, “Alright.”

The young Holytide looked absolutely delighted, and quickly yelled out for the caravan to start moving again. Soon the sounds of cracking whips filled the air as the caravan sped along.

Now that Xu Qing and the Captain didn’t need to stay in hiding, they rode on the fourleggers. In order to stay out of the sunlight, they both put on voluminous black robes. Qing Qiu was like their servant, behind them, her head bowed as she struggled to keep her killing intent buried in her heart.

In human lands, the Holytides weren’t allowed to use teleportation portals, which meant that journeys there took a long time. But in their own lands, things were different. Before long, they had reached a public teleportation portal complex.

There, the Heaven Zenith caravan began teleporting to its next destination. It took about an hour for the entire caravan to reach the western part of Eastern Wasteland County. This was the location of Ten Entrails of the True Immortal, and also the thirty-six city-states.

Once they materialized, Xu Qing looked to the west. It was dark there.

He could just barely make out a huge tree with trunk-like branches that resembled entrails, stretching high into the sky. The branches intertwined, creating a huge canopy over the lands that resembled an umbrella. It filled the greater part of the sky, and was boundlessly majestic. That canopy was so thick the sunlight couldn't penetrate it, therefore, there were humanoid-shaped lanterns beneath it that cast light. It was a very astonishing scene.

The area lit by the lanterns was massive. It contained a vast jungle, at the edge of which were numerous walled cities built in a roughly circular configuration around the massive tree. Every city had its own color scheme. Some were monochrome, others were multicolored. It created a very exotic atmosphere. At the same time, astonishing pressure from the giant tree weighed down everywhere.

“Exalted ones, this is Ten Entrails of the True Immortal, where the duchy of Heaven Zenith lies. See the pure white city up ahead? That's Heaven Zenith. I've already notified the duke of your impending arrival, and he was delighted. They should already be preparing a welcoming banquet. After you, exalted ones.”

The fanaticism in the Holytide's eyes hadn't changed one bit. As he led Xu Qing and the Captain along, he enthusiastically offered a more detailed introduction.

“Exalted ones, the Ten Entrails Tree is said to be the embodiment of the last pureblooded Woe-Immortal to reach immortal ascension. It was a very, very long time ago.... Every hundred years, the tree will produce a huge crop of fruit. That's why we had to bring this shipment of cloudmother stones here. The fruits are amazing, and they're considered one of the most marvelous materials you can use in equipment forging....”

As he went on with the introduction, the caravan got closer and closer to the white city.

Though it was only considered a small nation, the city itself was quite large, similar in scale to the Seven Blood Eyes capital city.

There were quite a few cultivators waiting outside of the city. They numbered in the hundreds, with Gold Core cultivators present and even Nascent Soul experts as well. Toward the front there was even a middle-aged man in a royal robe who had three secret troves on display, as well as shocking cultivation base fluctuations.

Qing Qiu struggled to breathe steadily as her mood got worse and worse. She knew that, as of now, she had almost no hope of escaping.

Xu Qing and the Captain showed no visible reaction. As for the young Holytide, he looked at his hometown with a mix of sorrow and familiarity. As he led the way, he continued to offer introductions.

“Exalted ones, because the dao fruits of my hometown are so valuable, we usually get a lot of foreign rats who try to sneak in here around this time. Of course, humans make up the majority of such infiltrators. Sometimes they just sneak in. Other times they disguise themselves as nonhumans. They’ve even been known to come in looking like Holytides.

“The thirty-six city-states here keep records about such things. Over the years, there have been more than nine hundred occasions in which our enemies disguised themselves as Holytides. And there have been over seven hundred instances in which they just snuck inside. Foreigners will use just about any means necessary to try to steal those fruits.

“By the way, exalted ones, I’m not sure if you’re aware of it, but there have been more than thirty times when a foreigner has snuck into one of the city-states here disguised as a Nightshade.”

All of a sudden, the young Holytide snapped a jade slip. He vanished, only to reappear a moment later just outside the duchy of Heaven Zenith, right in front of the Spirit Trove duke.

He was still smiling, but instead of reverence, his expression was one of derision. Grinning at Xu Qing and the Captain, he said, “Oh two exalted members of the greater species, I welcome you to our kingdom of Heaven Zenith. So... are you humans dressed up as Nightshades? Or are you from some other species?”

“I could tell there was something wrong about you two from the first moment I saw you. It was too coincidental. As it happened, I was aware that there were Nightshades operating in human territory. Then lo-and-behold, we ‘just so happened’ to run into two Nightshades being chased by swordsages.

“You wanted to trick us into bringing you into Holytide territory. As a humble member of a lesser species, it was only natural that I would volunteer to help. And despite a few unexpected situations, I managed to completely fool you. It was not in vain that an earl like myself went on this journey. Father, would you say this counts as a big service on my part?”

The young Holytide earl was grinning from ear to ear. Many of the other surrounding Holytides from Heaven Zenith were also looking at Xu Qing and the Captain with mocking grins. The Spirit Trove duke gave a hearty laugh and shot a look of praise in his son’s direction.

The sudden development caught Qing Qiu by surprise. Eyes narrowing, she looked suspiciously at the two ‘Nightshades’ in front of her. She had assumed all along that the two of them were real Nightshades. But now everything had turned around, and it was beyond her ability to predict. And yet, she quickly came to realize that the two Nightshades hadn’t reacted at all to the development. That was yet another shock.

Qing Qiu’s observation was astute. Xu Qing hadn’t reacted in even the slightest way.

The Captain's expression was steely, yet he also hadn't reacted at all. Looking coldly at the duchy of Heaven Zenith, he said, "You Holytides have really got some gall. Bring your ducal preceptor out right now to be sacrificed!"

In response, the Holytides continued to smile coldly. The duke narrowed his eyes.

As for the young earl, he grinned and said, "Exalted ones, the two of you are apparently a bit forgetful. Don't you remember what I just told you? From ancient times until now, our thirty-six city-states have recorded over thirty instances in which we caught enemies disguised as Nightshades. Did you really think we wouldn't be able to tell? Since you're refusing to admit to the truth, I guess I'll just force you to reveal your true form! I'd originally planned to give you a bit of face due to the friendship we struck up on the road. But now, I take that back!"

Looking like he was having the time of his life, the earl waved his hand, instantly causing the white city behind him to vibrate.

A huge black statue rose up from the middle of the city. It was more than ninety meters tall, and looked exactly like a Nightshade. It wore a suit of armor, had its arms crossed over its chest, and had a moon tattoo on its forehead. What was more, it emanated stupefying fluctuations. After it rose into the air above the city, it floated past the walls, pulsing with immense pressure.

"Please, oh great Nightshade divine likeness, check the identity of this individual!"
The earl of Heaven Zenith grinned viciously as he pointed at the Captain.

In response, the huge statue emanated dazzling black light, as it shifted to look coldly at the Captain.

Its gaze caused the Captain to shiver. Then the statue spoke in a voice that boomed like thunder.

"Weak faith. Mixed bloodline. Not a Nightshade!"

All of the Holytide cultivators erupted with killing intent. Then, the earl cackled complacently.

"Still not going to admit it?" he asked scornfully. "And you! Please, oh great Nightshade divine likeness, please check this individual!" He pointed contemptuously at Xu Qing.

The huge Nightshade statue solemnly looked down at Xu Qing. And then... to the shock of everyone present, it started trembling. The trembling grew more intense, until it affected the black light shining off the statue. It made it more intense! In the shortest of moments, the black light expanded so dramatically that it became a pitch black sea. Heaven and earth distorted in all directions.

Next, the consummately majestic statue suddenly dropped to the ground.

To the shock of the surrounding Holytides, the statue strode over to Xu Qing, fell to its knees, and kowtowed. Eyes filled with incomparable fanaticism, it cried out, "My respects, Your Majesty!!"

Chapter 445: The Personhood of a God

Outside the main gate of the duchy of Heaven Zenith, everything was absolutely silent. The Holytide cultivators all stared with eyes that were initially blank with confusion, then wide with shock. It didn't matter what level of cultivation base was involved. It didn't matter how much they

had suspected Xu Qing and Chen Erniu. All of them could see their Nightshade divine likeness on its knees trembling, and they all heard what it called out. Massive waves of shock smashed into their minds, causing many jaws to drop.

The Spirit Trove duke stood there with his head spinning. He felt like he had a tempest in his heart, sweeping over his sea of consciousness, and even causing his three secret troves to twist and distort.

Most flabbergasted of all was the young Holytide who had escorted Xu Qing and Chen Erniu on their journey. As an earl of the duchy of Heaven Zenith, he had always taken pride in his own wisdom, and had intentionally pretended to be foolish while on the road. He had been very proud of how he turned the tables on these two scam artists. But then everything got switched around, and he still didn't know how to react. His eyes were the widest of all, and his brain felt like it was being struck by millions of bolts of lightning.

“Th-that... that.... That's not possible! That's our... Nightshade divine likeness!”

As he stood there trembling, he was struck with the intense sensation that none of what was happening was real.

Not every one of the thirty-six city-states qualified to be sent a divine likeness from the royal dynasty above. There were only four who had statues like that, and each was a representative of one of the four royal dynasties of the Holytides that administered this region. As such, it was a given that this young earl knew exactly what the Nightshade divine likeness represented. It represented the Nightshade species as a whole! And if a divine likeness that represented the Nightshades actually dropped to its knees, that alone would have been outrageously shocking, much less the title used by the statue....

Titles like that were similar to magical laws or heavenly daos. And as the sound of the statue's voice continued to echo out, it seemed like all heaven and earth would transform as a result.

Qing Qiu was also deeply shaken as her previous line of thinking was thrown into chaos. At first, having the two Nightshades exposed seemed to indicate that they were humans in disguise. That would have explained with about eighty to ninety percent accuracy why they didn't kill her. Yet before she could even wrap her mind around that theory, everything changed again. And it wasn't some minor shift in the situation. It was a heaven-shaking, earth-shattering transformation that changed everything.

The words “Your Majesty” were deeply meaningful, and just thinking about them would cause someone to reel in shock.

All eyes had come to focus on Xu Qing, who stood there expressionlessly. Those eyes abounded with amazement, confusion, astonishment, and complete disbelief.

Even the Captain, who had planned things out in a fair amount of detail with Xu Qing while they were traveling, was completely taken aback by the seemingly outrageous development.

Only Xu Qing remained completely unfazed. Of course, no one present had any idea what was going on in his heart and mind. After all, he had long since developed the ability to keep a calm facial expression no matter what happened.

It didn't take much time on the road for him and the Captain to realize that something was going on with the young Holytide. Considering how weak his cultivation base was, it seemed strange that he

would be so willing to probe them for information. After all, even if he managed to expose them as imposters, it would have ultimately resulted in his death. Even more so, the fact that he came from a 'lesser species' just further emphasized how unreasonable his actions were. On the other hand, if he had just immediately believed their story, that would also have seemed fake.

That was why the young Holytide had dug for information. It wasn't because he wanted to find out the truth, but rather, because he was worried it would be strange if he didn't. It was essentially reverse psychology.

Xu Qing and the Captain had picked up the clues and realized what he was doing. Xu Qing was the one who came up with a contingency plan.

During the three days in which he studied that Nightshade eyeball, he didn't just learn about Nightshade magical techniques. He also saw the influence his violet moon heavenly palace had on the eyeball. That was when he came to the realization that after he disguised himself as a Nightshade, he had something that even real Nightshades would show great respect to. That was because the Nightshades exercised faith in the red moon. And the violet moon in Xu Qing's fourth heavenly palace was originally an embodiment of the power of the red moon. In other words, it had the personhood of a god in it. In some respects, Xu Qing and the red moon were the same.

That was why this Nightshade divine likeness addressed him as 'Your Majesty.'

Even cultivators who were very pious in their devotion to the red moon would have a hard time noticing any difference. The reason was that the source of Xu Qing's power really did have the personhood of a god in it. Only the red moon itself would be able to tell the difference.

As everyone reeled in shocked silence, anger crept onto the Captain's face. Voice cold, he said, "You Holytides really have a lot of gall! Who do you people think you are? What makes you think you qualify to test a godchild of the Nightshades? If you end up spoiling the plans of our greater species, then not even death will be a sufficient punishment!" [1]

In response to the Captain's words, the kneeling Nightshade statue erupted with black light, as well as a shocking baleful aura. Turning, it looked at the people from the duchy of Heaven Zenith.

Xu Qing's eyes narrowed slightly as he realized that he could actually give orders to this statue, and it would obey.

As the Captain spoke and the statue emitted its baleful aura, gasps rang out from the duchy of Heaven Zenith. Then the duke hurried forward, clasped hands, and bowed deeply to Xu Qing.

"Oh greater species, please accept the greetings of a lesser species cultivator!"

Still reeling with shock, the other cultivators gathered at the main gate also clasped hands and bowed. "Greetings, oh members of the greater species!"

The young earl flopped to the ground, trembling. "Greetings, oh members of the greater species!"

He was so flabbergasted he wondered if he was dreaming.

When Qing Qiu saw all of this happening, she was also left reeling. At the same time, intense killing intent filled her heart as she realized how important this specific Nightshade was that stood in front of her.

If I could kill him.... She bowed her head so that no killing intent could be revealed in her eyes.

Xu Qing strode forward to the divine likeness. Hopping onto its head, he sat down cross-legged.

“You guessed correctly. I really am in disguise.”

As his words echoed out, the gathered cultivators bowed their heads.

“I’m disguised as... an ordinary Nightshade.”

As he spoke, his fourth heavenly palace pulsed, causing the divine likeness to rise from its kneeling position. As it emanated shocking might and a black glow, winds screamed in the area.

The Captain also stepped forward and then flew onto the statue’s head, where he stood behind Xu Qing, glaring down.

Next, the statue flew into the air, where it stared down at everything below with a tyrannical glare. It became hard to see Xu Qing and the Captain clearly, as if they were part of the night darkness beneath the giant overhead canopy.

Down below, the Holytide cultivators were all shaken. As for the duke, he was slightly hesitant, but at the same time, knew he had no choice but to offer obeisance.

“Greetings, Godchild!”

All of the Holytides bowed in unison.

Loudest of all was the young earl, whose eyes shone with fanaticism. He was a Holytide, a species that had once been human. Because of that, this young earl of Heaven Zenith had some bit of humanity left in him. And it was a common human trait to transform negated suspicion into deep faith.

Xu Qing and the Captain didn’t leave Heaven Zenith. The duke invited them to stay. They didn’t feel the need to go into detail about the ‘misunderstanding,’ and the Holytides didn’t dare to ask them about it.

On the way into the city, the Captain asked some questions about Ten Entrails of the True Immortal, which was when they found out there were nine more days until the harvest began.

Eventually they reached the ducal palace complex, where Xu Qing and the Captain were given residences. The divine likeness didn’t leave. Instead, it hovered in the air above Xu Qing’s palace residence, obviously standing guard.

The Captain demanded that Qing Qiu dress like a handmaiden and serve in that role. Qing Qiu gritted her teeth but had no choice other than to comply.

There was no way to hide the fact that a Nightshade godchild had come. It was too momentous of a situation. The other city-states soon caught wind of what was going on, and though they were shocked, they couldn’t help but be a bit suspicious.

Thus, three days passed.

During that time, Xu Qing focused his energy on studying the divine likeness. Of course, the Captain couldn’t hold back from asking what exactly was going on with the statue kowtowing to Xu Qing. When they were planning things along the way, Xu Qing had mentioned something about the aura of the red moon, but had not explained about his violet moon.

“Hey, I have some of that red moon aura,” the Captain said, sounding a bit disgruntled. “Hold on, why didn’t that thing kowtow to me? It even said my faith is weak and I have a mixed bloodline. What nonsense!”

After a moment of thought, Xu Qing explained about the symbol Arch-Immortal Plumdark had given him.

The Captain sighed enviously, then reflexively pulled out a peach and started eating it.

Qing Qiu couldn’t hear what the two of them were talking about, but she could see the peach, and it caused her eyes to go wide. Before she could look any closer, the peach vanished, and the Captain looked somberly toward the outside of the hall.

The duke had come with his son to pay a formal visit.

“Oh exalted Godchild, the thirty-six city-states would like to invite you to a banquet.”

“The exalted godchild isn’t interested!” the Captain replied coolly as Xu Qing sat cross-legged next to him, not saying a word.

Hearing that, Duke Heaven Zenith bowed his head to hide his reaction. Then he respectfully continued, “Your humble servant shouldn’t have been so rash as to presume you would be interested. I’ll notify the other city-states. Incidentally, the ducal preceptor has returned and has requested an audience.”

“Request denied,” the Captain said.

The duke kept his head bowed as he stood there for a long moment. Then he spoke again. “My wayward son Mu Ye offended you, oh exalted one. Your humble servant has already punished him, but what further orders might you have, exalted one?” [2]

Inside the hall, the Captain’s eyes narrowed at the hidden meaning in the words. He looked at Xu Qing.

Xu Qing’s expression remained calm as he looked outside the hall toward the kneeling duke, and his son the earl, who had kept his head bowed the entire time.

“Mu Ye,” said Xu Qing, “didn’t you mention wanting a Nightshade blessing?”

The young earl looked up, his eyes burning with zeal. Then he quickly kowtowed. Duke Heaven Zenith kept his head bowed so as not to reveal any reaction.

Xu Qing didn’t feel like beating around the bush, so he just directly stated his demands. “To compensate for my blessing, I want two shadeheaven demonmoon pills and 10,000 dao fruits from the Ten Entrails of the True Immortal Tree.”

He knew he had to maintain his act perfectly. If he pushed things too far, it could be bad. That said, there were always going to be twists and turns to deal with. One thing was certain: he couldn’t afford to underestimate anyone. This young earl had already shown he was a schemer. And there was little need to mention the duke or the other cultivators from the duchy of Heaven Zenith.

Xu Qing knew that directly telling these people what he wanted, coupled with his outright rejection of the banquet invitation, would result in a lot of speculation. And that was exactly what he wanted.

As Ghost Hand had taught him, all matters had to be handled with nuance. Intentionally leading people to the wrong conclusion would sometimes make your story a lot more believable.

Thus, as the duke frowned very slightly, Xu Qing continued speaking. “Mu Ye, step forward.”

The duke was shocked. As for Mu Ye himself, he struggled to control his breathing. Eyes shining with zeal, he humbly stepped into the hall and knelt in front of Xu Qing.

“Godchild!” he said loudly.

Xu Qing extended his hand, and his fourth heavenly palace trembled as a stream of unique mutagen from his violet moon converged on his index finger. Then he touched the young earl’s forehead.

A tremor passed through Mu Ye, and his cultivation base surged. A violet glimmer appeared in his eyes, and an aura that was extremely similar to that of the red moon erupted around him.

There was also something holy about it. As a result, Mu Ye no longer looked at Xu Qing with fanaticism. Instead, there was raw piety in his eyes as he prostrated himself on the ground.

“Your Majesty!”

The sight of this happening filled the duke with shock, and his expression flickered wildly.

Given the level of his cultivation base, he wasn’t able to see deeply into Xu Qing. But he could see into his own son. And when he sensed that his son had been filled with a Nightshade aura, his spirits lifted. When that aura entered the flesh and became part of the cultivation base, it would bless the subject with a portion of Nightshade innate abilities. He had heard of some members of the nobility receiving such blessings in the royal dynasty above. Except, this blessing... seemed superior!

Among the Holytides, who had a caste-based society, the blessing of that aura indicated a massive rise in status and position!

As the duke looked at Xu Qing in absolute astonishment, Xu Qing looked back at him.

Xu Qing said nothing, but his actions spoke volumes. His refusal of the invitation showed what he wanted. And his request for those items had been an order! This was how the Nightshades did things. The act had not been pushed too far.

Chapter 446: Meeting An Old Friend in a Distant Land

The Holytide species got its start when Grand Duke Holytide rebelled against humankind. But they retained many aspects of humanity, including the human way of thinking, and their custom of living according to hierarchies. [1]

Whether it was Sea-Sealing County or other counties, they were simply administrative satellites, and thus, their hierarchical systems weren’t as clear cut. But in the imperial capital, things were different.

As for the Holytide species, they were relatively united, and maintained the same hierarchies wherever they ruled. And such things were ingrained into the very fabric of Holytide being.

Holytide society operated in a caste system with six levels. The top two levels were the nobility, the middle two levels were the warriors, and the bottom two levels were the slaves.

Duke Heaven Zenith was in the fourth level, meaning he was in the warrior caste. It was the same with his son.

One's place in the caste system was very important to Holytides. Only people with absolutely heaven-defying cultivation bases could ever change their place. After all, people in the noble caste had better bloodlines and more opportunities, resources, and the like. Most of the top experts among Holytides came from that caste.

To have the power to change the castes of others involved having power over the very heart of the Holytide species. And the only ones with that power... were from the Nightshade Cathedral.

Every Holytide royal dynasty had a Nightshade Cathedral in it. The Nightshade divine likenesses were bestowed by those cathedrals. And the ability to change caste level was a blessing from the Nightshades. Someone who had been blessed in that way would have an aura that was much closer to that of the Nightshades.

Over countless years, it was thanks to the secret influence of the Nightshades that the Holytides as a species had become obsessed with the idea of rising through the caste system.

It was for that reason that Duke Heaven Zenith was currently reeling from shock. Up to this point, he had still had secret reservations about these two Nightshades. But when he saw his own son receiving that blessing, he couldn't have been more astonished.

That aura was true and authentic. And as the duke knew, not every Nightshade was capable of bestowing such a blessing. Only top experts among the Nightshades could do so. Either that or... cultivators from the Nightshade Cathedral.

Nightshades had a god of their own, that much the Holytides knew for certain. And though other species also knew the truth, most were unwilling to admit to it. But that was the reality of the situation. The Nightshades' god slept in the red moon, and had been worshiped by them for generations upon generations. Because of the protection of that god, a group of godly custodians had come to exist among the Nightshades. They were the Nightshade Cathedral. They were the true imperial lords of the Nightshade species, and occupied the highest tier of power. [2]

As thoughts about those things flashed through Duke Heaven Zenith's mind, he took a deep breath and bowed even more deeply. After leaving, he immediately passed down orders to find some shadeheaven demonmoon pills. And he sent words to the other city-states to compile detailed information about the Ten Entrails of the True Immortal dao fruits.

Unfortunately, things didn't go very smoothly. There were four or five city-states who weren't convinced of his story. After all, it was a very difficult story to believe. For countless years, this location had been forced to deal with many fake Nightshades, and never once had a real Nightshade ever visited.

In fact, it was for that reason that Duke Heaven Zenith didn't immediately report the matter to the royal dynasty above him. He wanted to get input from the other city-states beforehand.

After all... though he was ninety-nine percent certain that these Nightshades were real, there was still that one percent bit of doubt. If it turned out that there really was something fishy with these Nightshades, and he never reported it, then he would deal with the situation however he saw fit. But once he reported it, he would be implicated in anything that happened.

And thus, seven days passed slowly but surely.

Although there were still two more days left until the dao fruits were ripe, the reality was that there were already fruits being harvested on the edges of the Ten Entrails of the True Immortal Jungle. Various foreign species were already using a variety of methods to sneak in and take some of the dao fruits. Some succeeded. Some failed. On a daily basis, the thirty-six city-states sent people out on patrol to look for infiltrators. Those who were caught suffered different fates. Some were killed, and their corpses hung from the tree canopy as a warning. Others were rebuked and sent away. Yet others were locked up. Because of how incredibly valuable the dao fruits were, there was no shortage of cultivators trying to sneak in.

When the Captain realized that some of the dao fruits were already ripe, he couldn't suppress his anticipation. After talking things over with Xu Qing, he decided to take action.

Xu Qing agreed with the plan.

Although they seemed to be in a safe position in the ducal palace, the reality was that they were in extreme danger. Although Xu Qing was certain his disguise had not been penetrated, he knew that if someone strong enough came along, they would be able to see the truth. After all, nothing is absolute. Besides, his magical symbol of concealment was already starting to fade. Time was going to be a very important factor on this job.

On the morning of the eighth day, Xu Qing and the Captain left the palace complex and had the young earl Mu Ye lead them to the periphery of the Ten Entrails of the True Immortal Jungle, accompanied by a contingent of guards.

Standing outside the jungle, Mu Ye's eyes glittered piously as he said, "Your Majesty, this is the Ten Entrails of the True Immortal Jungle. The fruits in the depths are not ripe, so we can't go there. The jungle is filled with terrifying pressure that makes it difficult to traverse. The only time that pressure is reduced is when the fruits become ripe."

Mu Ye had taken to visiting Xu Qing's palace on a daily basis, and was always ready to explain anything necessary. As of right now, Xu Qing didn't have a more devoted follower in Heaven Zenith than Mu Ye.

One reason was the blessing Xu Qing had given him. Another was that the mutagen in him came from Xu Qing. As such, it was appropriate for him to use the address Your Majesty.

Sensing the familiar mutagen in him, Xu Qing nodded, then looked out at the dark, endless jungle. Then he looked up and noted the massive tree with the ten branches that wriggled up like entrails.

Even now he found it hard to imagine that the tree was actually the embodiment of the entrails of a Woe-Immortal who achieved immortal ascension.

"Your Majesty, over the course of the following days, you should avoid casting your senses out during the night. In the time period after the dao fruits become ripe, there's a very special aura here. If you make contact with it, it will invade you and harm you."

Upon hearing that, the Captain curiously asked, "What kind of harm?"

“It will cause powerful hallucinations, exalted one,” Mu Ye replied respectfully. “In the past, someone was able to see the Woe-Immortal reaching immortal ascension. That person subsequently went insane, and ended up disemboweling themselves in imitation of what they saw. They ultimately died.”

The Captain’s eyes glittered with interest. Noticing a fruit hanging from a nearby tree that resembled an eyeball, he plucked it off and put it in his bag of holding.

They were currently on the outskirts of Ten Entrails of the True Immortal, and there were quite a few fruits hanging from the trees. They all resembled eyes, though some were open and others were closed.

“The fruits with the eyes opened are ready to be harvested,” Mu Ye continued.

As the Captain continued to pick the fruits, Xu Qing clasped his hands behind his back and asked, “How many dao fruits usually get harvested?”

“Your Majesty, when the dao fruits ripen every hundred years, there are usually about 300,000 that get harvested.”

Surprised, Xu Qing did some calculations. After all, only one fruit was worth 10,000 military credits. Qing Qiu was with them, and she was similarly astonished at how much wealth was available.

“Mu Ye, have your people harvest some of the fruits for me,” Xu Qing said.

“Yes, sir,” Mu Ye replied, and he immediately yelled at some of his attendants to go start plucking off the fruits that were fully opened. Though he didn’t have a lot of attendants, they were very spirited, and before long, had harvested a few dozen fruits. Just looking at them, Xu Qing felt his heart racing. He was essentially looking at hundreds of thousands of military credits!

Noticing the longing in Qing Qiu’s eyes, Xu Qing suppressed his excitement and coolly said, “You go harvest some too.”

Qing Qiu immediately rushed toward the fruits.

Xu Qing had unsealed her cultivation base a few days ago. However, concerned she might do something drastic, he hadn’t returned her bag of holding. Instead he gave her an empty bag to use temporarily.

The sight of Qing Qiu rushing off caused a smile to appear on Xu Qing’s face, but he quickly wiped it away and looked at the Captain.

The Captain couldn’t stop his eyes from glittering as he quickly worked to harvest one dao fruit after another, all the while muttering something indecipherable.

Xu Qing could tell what he was doing. He was tallying his military credit.

Eldest Brother doesn’t have enough willpower. What’s the point in counting things up now? He shook his head inwardly.

Before going much further into the jungle, Mu Ye brought over twenty-five dao fruits that had been harvested. He offered them to Xu Qing, who took them and put them into his bag of holding.

250,000 military credits!

Then he watched as Mu Ye went back to continue the harvest with the other Holytide cultivators.

“Twenty-six. Twenty-eight. Thirty-one....”

Xu Qing wasn't paying much attention to the Captain and whether he was working hard enough to keep their cover intact. About an hour later, they had cleared the area of fruit.

They had harvested over a hundred, and were just considering moving to another part of the jungle when they heard a commotion nearby.

Mu Ye instantly went on guard, and was the first to stand protectively in front of Xu Qing. Meanwhile, his subordinate guards went ahead to see what was going on. Shortly after, one of them returned with a report.

“Exalted ones, it's a patrol from the duchy of Cloudsquire. They caught a few foreign infiltrators, one of whom claims to be a descendant of the Woe-Immortals. The patrol had to surround them before taking them captive.”

“A descendant of the Woe-Immortals?” Xu Qing clearly remembered what he had heard from the Captain and others, that the Ten Entrails Tree was the embodiment of the last Woe-Immortal who achieved immortal ascension.

“Your Majesty, no one in existence has a pure Woe-Immortal bloodline. But there are plenty of descendants in Holytide territory who have bits of that bloodline. Cultivators like that are difficult to kill. And in most cases, they're imprisoned until after the fruit harvest is over.”

Around this time, they heard footsteps and a lot of yelling.

“How dare you take me captive! I'm a descendant of the Woe-Immortals! This is where my patriarch achieved immortal ascension! I just came here to get some of my patriarch's dao fruits. What right do you have to stop me? I wasn't going to take very many. Only about thirty! What gall you have to touch me! If I die, then you'll see. If my blood is spilled on my patriarch, then he'll definitely awaken and vent his fury on you!”

As the voice reached them, the Captain's eyes went wide, and Xu Qing's pupils glittered.

A moment later, a group of Holytide cultivators arrived who obviously weren't from Heaven Zenith. They had seven or eight infiltrating cultivators captive.

When the Holytide cultivators saw Xu Qing and the Captain, their expressions flickered wildly. Obviously they had heard stories about these two. They quickly clasped hands and bowed.

Among the group of cultivators they had taken captive was one young man whose aura was different from the others. Especially noteworthy was the totem tattoo on his forehead, which

resembled a wriggling snake that almost looked like an intestine. This was the person who had been yelling, and he looked very indignant. However, when he saw Xu Qing and the Captain, his eyes widened. Then he noticed Qing Qiu, and a tremor passed through him. He recovered quickly, whereupon he went back to cursing. However he walked a bit more quickly now.

Qing Qiu looked away from him, her expression indifferent, as though she didn't know him.

The Captain snorted coldly in his heart, and his eyes narrowed.

Xu Qing meanwhile, was thinking,

How did you end up here, Ning Yan?

Chapter 447: The Act Snowballs (part 1)

The person claiming to be a descendant of the Woe-Immortals was none other than Ning Yan. Xu Qing remembered the Captain mentioning that after passing his assessment, Ning Yan had seemingly vanished. The Captain hadn't been able to track him down anywhere. And originally, the Captain had intended to bring Ning Yan on this job, primarily to use him as a meat shield in dangerous circumstances. But now, it was obvious the little punk had actually snuck his way into Ten Entrails of the True Immortal....

Could it be that the bloodline he awakened was that of the Woe-Immortal species? Or is that just a disguise he's using? Though Xu Qing's mind was racing, he didn't reveal that via his facial expression. He just coldly examined Ning Yan.

Meanwhile, Chen Erniu was smiling broadly, while Qing Qiu pretended not to recognize Ning Yan.

Ning Yan... was deeply shaken. He didn't recognize the two Nightshades, but they caused a chill to run down his spine. That was especially true when he saw one of them smiling at him. He suddenly felt very alarmed.

What's that one smiling at me for? he thought nervously. Then he looked at Qing Qiu. They were both from the Emperor-Receiving Prefecture, and had participated in the same recruitment event, giving him plenty of time to get familiar with her. Though she didn't have her mask on, and was also wearing different clothing, her aura was the same, so all it took was a glance for him to recognize her.

At the moment, he didn't even want to know what Qing Qiu was doing here. Instead, he was inwardly cursing at how he hadn't done anything to change his appearance.

That said, it wasn't how he'd hoped to do things. Because of some unique circumstances, he actually couldn't do anything to change his appearance and aura. He had been forced to use a magical device to accomplish that, except that when he was captured, that device was taken away from him. Right now, the main thing he wanted to do was get away from here. After all, he was getting a very unsettling feeling.

As the other Holytides led Ning Yan and the others away, the Captain suddenly said, "Woe-Immortals? Sounds interesting. I want that one."

The Captain pointed at Ning Yan.

Ning Yan felt like his scalp was about to explode, and his heart suddenly started racing.

Don't tell me he realized who I am? That's impossible! Ning Yan was suddenly terrified at the thought of all the stories he'd heard about the Nightshades. Of course, he had no say in the matter. The Holytides immediately acknowledged the orders, then dragged Ning Yan over to the Captain. Then they respectfully offered up the rope that bound Ning Yan.

The Captain gave a slight nod and took the rope. Then he pulled it, forcing Ning Yan to take a few steps closer to him.

Upon seeing the Captain's horrifying smile up close, Ning Yan quickly plastered a deferential expression onto his face.

"Your humble servant pays respects, oh exalted one."

"I'm very curious what Woe-Immortal entrails taste like," the Captain said, flashing his teeth and then licking his lips.

Ning Yan's heart pounded and his face fell, and he tried to back away only for the Captain to yank on the rope again. Being completely unable to free himself from the rope, Ning Yan shivered and said, "Exalted one, please, don't toy with me.... Your humble servant stinks from head to toe. I really wouldn't taste good."

When Qing Qiu saw all of this, she sighed inwardly. Before, she had neither liked nor disliked Ning Yan. He was a passerby, nothing more. But considering they were in a strange, distant land, the fact that he was in such distress, and in danger of being eaten, caused her heart to swell with pity. A look of sorrow even flickered across her face.

Noticing Qing Qiu's expression, Xu Qing looked at the Captain. "What do you want the Woe-Immortal for? You're interested in his entrails?"

"Of course not, oh exalted Godchild," the Captain said, clasping his hands respectfully.

Ning Yan secretly breathed a sigh of relief. Except, then the Captain kept talking.

"Sir, I've been experimenting lately with bloodline pills," the Captain said. "I've done experiments with just about every species imaginable, but not Woe-Immortals. I'm hoping to take him back and concoct a pill with his living flesh."

He looked Ning Yan up and down, even lifting his chin and checking his teeth. Then the Captain's eyes glittered with anticipation, as if he could already imagine Ning Yan as a medicinal pill. He licked his lips.

Ning Yan's mind was spinning. Moments ago he had felt relieved, but now he was trembling even harder. In fact, he was so terrified that tears leaked out of the corners of his eyes.

"Exalted one, I... I know where you can find a lot of other people from my species. Many of them have even stronger bloodlines than me! How about you switch me out for one of them?"

The Captain rubbed his chin and smiled enigmatically. However, he didn't respond in any way. He just kept examining Ning Yan.

Ning Yan's terror mounted, and grief filled his eyes.

Xu Qing looked away from the Captain and Ning Yan. Seeing that it was getting late, he continued deeper into the jungle while time was on their side. He soon realized that unripe fruits made up more than ninety percent of what was available in this area. And many were so small that it seemed unlikely they would be ripe within a day.

Turning to the obsequious Mu Ye, he said, "Will all the fruits be ripe tomorrow?"

Mu Ye hesitated for a moment, then replied, "Your Majesty, for the most part, they'll be ready tomorrow. But based on some of our ancient records, I'm fairly certain that the harvesting time for the dao fruits is an approximation. It's not supposed to be completely accurate. But even if the fruits aren't ripe tomorrow, they should be within the next week or so."

Xu Qing frowned slightly. He didn't want to stay in Holytide territory for any longer than necessary, with his main concern being his physical appearance. That said, he wasn't willing to leave just yet.

I can wait another seven days if necessary! Turning, he went back in the direction of Heaven Zenith.

Mu Ye hurried after him, followed by the rest of their group.

The Captain's expression was the same as ever as he tugged Ning Yan along with the rope. Ning Yan followed, feeling a mixture of numbness, grief, anger, terror, and regret. Absolutely nothing had gone according to plan for him. Originally, he had assumed that even if his plan failed, he wouldn't be in much danger. People with Woe-Immortal blood who got captured trying to steal dao fruits would usually just be imprisoned for a time, then released.

After all, the last Woe-Immortal reached immortal ascension here. And considering the Holytides lived in lands that had once belonged to the Woe-Immortals, there were actually a lot of people with Woe-Immortal blood in them. The Holytides were the newcomers, and therefore, they tried to avoid ratcheting up tension whenever possible. In fact, even if he got caught, he'd been fairly certain he would be sent on his way with one or two dao fruits. Given how much he could sell them for, even that would have been worth it. But how could he ever have guessed that he would run into some Nightshades....

As Ning Yan was dragged along in his indignation, he managed to look over at Qing Qiu and noticed that she seemed to have a facial expression remarkably similar to his own. And so the two of them sullenly followed Xu Qing and the Captain back to the palace complex in Heaven Zenith.

Once back, Xu Qing followed his usual routine of meditation in his palace residence. Qing Qiu sat next to him, grinding her teeth. She had not simply accepted that she needed to be a handmaiden, and was instead constantly looking for opportunities to escape.

In contrast, the Captain didn't follow his usual routine, and instead dragged Ning Yan into his own palace residence. Ning Yan was powerless to resist. His expression was one of deepening terror, and he was constantly begging for mercy.

Before long, the sound of Ning Yan's anguished cries rang out from the palace.

"Exalted one, w-w-what... what are you doing? Agggghhhh!"

The howls of grief quickly turned into screams of agony.

Qing Qiu shivered. She had no idea what was going on in there, and had no way of investigating. But she could sense from the anguish in the screams that something extremely disturbing was happening.

Looking over at Xu Qing and noticing his complete lack of expression, she suddenly felt like she understood a lot more about these brutal Nightshades.

You Nightshades all deserve to die. Especially you two!

Qing Qiu's heart and mind were in full turmoil.

Xu Qing wasn't paying attention to Qing Qiu. When the screaming started, it seemed obvious to him that the Captain had bitten Ning Yan.

Before, the Captain was a swordmage and couldn't just go around biting whatever he wanted. But now he has a different identity. Given his personality, he definitely wants to take this opportunity to learn something about Ning Yan's flesh and blood.

With that, Xu Qing cast his senses to the Nightshade divine likeness that hovered above his palace. That was what interested him most during this time of extended waiting.

If I could take this thing back to Sea-Sealing County with me....

The mere thought filled him with anticipation.

The statue wasn't ordinary in any way. It had the power of the red moon in abundance, and was constantly emitting mutagen. Though Xu Qing could give it orders, taking it away from this place didn't seem very plausible.

For one, he couldn't put it into a bag of holding. What was more, it was too eye-catching. Beyond that, if he ever came face to face with that red moon, then the statue would instantly turn against him. In other words, if he took it with him, it would just be a matter of time before it exploded out of control.

What if I could replace the power of the red moon with the power of my violet moon?

That was the direction of research he was now pursuing.

Eventually, evening fell, and the sky beyond the tree canopy went dark. Soon, the floating, human-shaped lanterns appeared everywhere.

Outside the palace complex in Heaven Zenith, on the altar where the Nightshade divine likeness had previously stood, a group of a few dozen Holytide cultivators had gathered. This place had long since been locked down, with spell formations set up to prevent anyone from sensing what was going on inside. There were a few dozen individuals present, most of whom were in the great circle of the Nascent Soul level. There were only five Spirit Trove experts.

One of them was Duke Heaven Zenith.

In front of the group was an old man in a black robe. He had red skin that made him look very unusual, and he pulsed with the terrifying pressure of four secret troves. This man was the ducal preceptor of the duchy of Heaven Zenith. Looking in the direction of the palace complex, then the cultivators gathered around him, he snorted coldly.

“This is absolutely preposterous! The lot of you are all dukes, yet you got fooled this easily? Don’t have even an ounce of common sense? You think some high-ranking Nightshades are going to show up on a caravan? And, by random chance, they happen to show up right during dao fruit harvesting season? Plus, one of them was said to have weak faith and a mixed bloodline? How could they possibly be real Nightshades?”

“And think about that handmaiden. She’s not just human, she’s also one of the new crop of swordsages. Her name is Qing Qiu. Even after learning that, didn’t any of you feel even slightly suspicious?”

Chapter 448: Seizing!

Xu Qing was feeling very nervous. Four days had passed since the spiritghost inspection. During that time, Xu Qing had collected a bit over a thousand dao fruits. And word had spread about the Captain going out and about to provide blessings that improved caste status. Thanks to the way the Captain operated, he had amassed quite a bit of valuable treasure.

But their true goal was the Ten Entrails Tree, which had not yet bloomed.

The more time that passed, the more uneasy Xu Qing felt. It was the same type of uneasy feeling he had experienced when he first arrived in the county capital. Both feelings came from his ‘heavenly dao bluegreen dragon.’

Another factor was that he hadn’t seen Mu Ye for quite some time. Based on what he could sense, Mu Ye was in a distant location.

They probably sent him to one of the royal dynasties.... Xu Qing checked the dao fruit he had harvested and calculated how much it would be worth in military credit. At that point, his desire to leave grew even stronger. But the Captain wasn’t ready to give up yet.

“Let’s just stay one more day, little Ah Qing! Tomorrow I have a big customer coming to get blessed. Besides, I heard that people have sensed fluctuations of change coming from the Ten Entrails Tree. I bet it’ll bloom tomorrow.

“If we wait just a bit longer, our big opportunity will definitely come along. Once we get into the depths of Ten Entrails of the True Immortal, this job will really pay off. I’ve been waiting for this day for a really long time.” The Captain looked at him with a crazy look in his eyes, licking his lips in anticipation.

“The dao fruits on the periphery can’t be eaten. But based on my research, little Ah Qing, the Ten Entrails Tree can be eaten. And believe me, it’s anything but ordinary. Every single bite contains an explosion of spirit energy. You want to speed up your cultivation too, right? Well I guarantee you’ll be able to.

"Most importantly, little Ah Qing... your Eldest Brother is preparing to give you a heaven-shaking, earth-shattering, absolutely consummate and spectacular bit of amazing good fortune! I can’t explain the details right now, as it’s too miraculous. You’ll have to see it to believe it. Trust me!

“Now, about making our getaway, I have it all planned out. I have a very amazing treasure that can teleport us all the way back to Sea-Sealing County. It’s ridiculously expensive to use, and that’s why I need to get to the Ten Entrails Tree before I can use it.”

Xu Qing took a moment to think about everything that had played out so far. Then he gritted his teeth and agreed to wait another day.

Eventually, night fell on the fourth day.

Late in that night, as Xu Qing was studying the Nightshade divine likeness, his expression flickered as he sensed something. He had vaguely felt something from the direction of the Ten Entrails of the True Immortal Tree. It was something sudden, like a burning flame that had just been ignited. By the time he looked in the direction of the tree, it was gone.

His eyes glittered brightly.

Was that what Mu Ye and the Captain mentioned? The supernatural phenomenon caused by the Ten Entrails Tree?

After peering out into the darkness for a short time, he closed his eyes.

Shortly thereafter, he again sensed that burning flame. This time, when Xu Qing looked over, he felt like he could see a figure in a white robe, undulating rhythmically as it rose up into the sky in the midst of the fire. No, it wasn’t a figure. There were many figures, all of them, rising into the sky as if dancing. Their movements were bizarre and full of mystery, as if this was some ceremony or rite designed to please heaven on high. As they danced, the flames climbed higher. They grew stronger.

Xu Qing heard pulsing sounds in his mind, sounds that seemed like they wanted to replace the thump of his heartbeat. There was chanting as ancient incantations were spoken in a tone of voice Xu Qing had never encountered before. Gradually, the sky in this vision split open. A huge rift appeared, within which was an unspeakable entity looking down at the lands below, as if waiting.

After some indeterminable period of time passed, an excited voice spoke, coming from the dancing figure in the middle of all the other figures. He shoved his right hand down, ripping open his belly and pulling out his own entrails, which writhed like snakes as he lifted them overhead. As he danced, and as the sound of drums thrummed, his entrails twisted and distorted. The other figures around him, all tore open their bellies, and more entrails whipped in the breeze. It was a horrendous sight.

The vision contained a bizarre power that influenced Xu Qing’s senses, and filled him with an unstoppable impulse to join them in ripping open his belly.

Just when he was about to do that, his third and fourth heavenly palaces vibrated. His poison core and the violet moon pulsed, causing his mind to shiver. Then the impulse to rip open his belly weakened.

Then he sensed that, in the direction of the Ten Entrails Tree, the sea of fire had expanded, becoming like a sea of blood that filled the world. Xu Qing shivered and opened his eyes. The vision was over.

It was light outside. As the sky beyond the canopy lit up, so did the human-shaped lanterns hanging beneath the canopy. At the same time, a burning smell swept out from the Ten Entrails Tree, filling everything underneath the canopy. Xu Qing could smell it. It reminded him of cooked flesh. It was pungent and acrid, at least when he smelled it. Then he took another breath, and it became sweet like incense.

Xu Qing's sixth heavenly palace was more than half complete thanks to the slaughter in Unit C. But now, thanks to this incense, he could sense it progressing more toward completion.

His eyes lit up.

The Captain also sensed the same thing, and he rushed out of his palace residence, his eyes shining with craziness and longing.

“The Ten Entrails Tree is blooming!”

As the words left his mouth, an intense boom echoed out from the direction of the huge tree. Then another, and another, until there had been twelve of them, each louder than the other.

Everything trembled.

Next, Xu Qing watched as the massive canopy overhead seemed to shrink, allowing sunlight to fall onto the area beneath, which had been hidden in shadow for a hundred years.

However, closer inspection revealed that the canopy wasn't actually shrinking. Instead, the twisting branches of the tree were separating from each other.

The process took about an hour. As the sky grew brighter outside, and more sunlight filtered down, the canopy... disappeared.

The ten tree branches all spread out in different directions, making them visible for all to see. Ten branches like ten entrails, swaying between heaven and earth! Countless fruits appeared on them, like innumerable eyes looking out.

Xu Qing stood. This was the moment they had been waiting for. He and the Captain looked at each other, and both could see the excitement in the other's eyes. Then, without the slightest hesitation, they burst into motion. Qing Qiu and Ning Yan were also stunned by the huge tree, but before either of them could do much, Xu Qing waved his hand for them to follow. The entire group was just about to fly up into the sky over Heaven Zenith when, all of a sudden, the duchy's teleportation portal shone with bright light. A host of figures in black garments appeared.

In the lead was a middle-aged man who, like Duke Heaven Zenith, had a Spirit Trove cultivation base. After stepping off the teleportation portal, he spotted Xu Qing and the Captain and flew straight toward them.

The other black-robed individuals flew in tight formation behind him, their expressions somber and desolate. There were a total of three hundred, with the weakest of them in the four-palace level. There were about forty who had seven- or eight-palace battle prowess, and there were ten in the Nascent Soul level.

The moment they appeared, Xu Qing and the Captain felt their hearts sink. Qing Qiu and Ning Yan inhaled sharply.

Their garments made them seem even more harsh and austere. After all, the black robes had ginkgo leaves embroidered on them, which all swordsages would recognize. They pegged these people as the swordsages' deadly counterpart in the Holytides. They were from... the Black Guard. Considering that their uniforms were all exactly the same, they were obviously a single unit.

Though the Captain had never encountered the middle-aged man in the Spirit Trove level, Xu Qing had.

The first time was when he and Kong Xianglong had killed that quasi-Nascent Soul Black Guard cultivator. This man had been there, enraged and unable to do anything. The second time was at the Swordsage Palace when the Yao Clan brought in Xu Qing and the others for questioning. Today was the third encounter! [1]

I can't believe it's him! Killing intent flickered in Xu Qing's heart as the man led his Black Guard subordinates in their direction.

As they neared, Xu Qing was able to get a close look at the entire group. As he scanned them, one person stood out. He was a young, handsome man with a spectacular cultivation base. He wasn't in the Nascent Soul, but he did have nine-palace battle prowess. His Black Guard robe had two silver ginkgo leaves on it, which was one more than all the other Gold Core cultivators, and the same number as the ten Nascent Soul experts. What jumped out to Xu Qing was that this young man had a life lamp in him. Because it had been turned into a heavenly palace, most people wouldn't notice it. But Xu Qing could tell that it was a blue stone lamp carved into the shape of a lantern.

As Xu Qing examined the young man, the middle-aged leader approached and clasped hands in greeting.

"I am Commandant Zhou Xingwu of the Heavengale Black Guard, here to receive you and provide an escort to the Heavengale Kingdom!" [2]

After Zhou Xingwu's introduction, the other Black Guard cultivators fanned out into an arc formation and also clasped hands in greeting.

Qing Qiu and Ning Yan looked on nervously.

As for Xu Qing, he remained calm and refrained from speaking. The Captain, meanwhile, lifted his chin and frowned slightly.

"You're dismissed. You don't get to decide whether or not we go to the kingdom of Heavengale."

Face completely expressionless, Zhou Xingwu ignored the Captain and looked at Xu Qing. "I come with royal authority and have been given a responsibility. Exalted one, I hope you don't make things difficult for me."

He was aware that Xu Qing was the one who was supposedly a godchild with an amazing bloodline. But he had his orders, and of course, as a Black Guard cultivator, he had his own ways of getting things done when necessary.

As such, he lifted his right hand. In response, the other Black Guard cultivators spread out, forming a complete circle. That said, they didn't unleash baleful auras. Instead, they kept their heads bowed respectfully and didn't even tap into their cultivation bases.

Seeing that, the Captain's eyes narrowed and he opened his mouth to speak. Except, that was when Xu Qing unexpectedly spoke.

“What's your name?”

Zhou Xingwu's eyes narrowed slightly. Following Xu Qing's line of sight, he realized that he was speaking to the son of the provincial governor, who was one of the cultivators under his command.

The young man stepped forward, his expression cold as he clasped his hands and said, “Exalted one, I am your humble servant Lin Yuandong.” [3]

Xu Qing nodded.

“Zhou Xingwu, extract his life lamp. I want it.”

Chapter 449: Godchild on the Move

Xu Qing's words were spoken very naturally. And they didn't come across like a mere order spoken by an officer to a subordinate. Rather, they were like a casually uttered command from a superior species to a lesser species, in which there wasn't even the slightest consideration offered to allow for refusal.

When the Captain heard those words, his heart swelled with surprise. He was extremely pleased with how Xu Qing was putting these Black Guard cultivators on challenge.

The Black Guard's previous attempt to force Xu Qing into a passive position had been a challenge. But Xu Qing's response was also a challenge.

The moment the words left Xu Qing's mouth, the surrounding Black Guard cultivators' expressions flickered dramatically.

Lin Yuandong shivered from head to toe, and despite his best efforts, began breathing heavily. His life lamp had already been turned into a heavenly palace, and was an integral part of him. If it was extracted now... one of his heavenly palaces would be destroyed and he would be left with a near-fatal wound. In fact, it was an injury he might never be able to recover from. In any other circumstance, he would have fought to the death before allowing that to happen. After all, from the time he was very young, Lin Yuandong had been a top chosen cultivator with spectacular natural talent, whether before he joined the Black Guard or after. His father was also extremely powerful. Because of all that, he had been rapidly rising through the ranks of the Black Guard. Being from the second caste, he was considered to have noble Holytide blood. That made him above most other Holytides, and filled him with a sense of superiority that seeped deep into his bones.

But now he felt like little more than a stray dog. He was overwhelmed with a sense of humiliation, and what made it all worse was how casually the words were spoken. Truth be told, it made sense for them to sound natural. It didn't matter what Lin Yuandong's status was among the Holytides. That wasn't relevant when dealing with Nightshades. Though the royal clan had some freedom of speech when dealing with Nightshades, if it was true that this particular Nightshade was a godchild, then not even someone from the royal clan could do anything to defy them.

After all, the Holytides existed because of the Nightshades. It was not a relationship of equals, it was a master-slave relationship!

There was someone else whose facial expression flickered dramatically, and that was Zhou Xingwu. No longer could he maintain the cold expression he had started out with. His eyes narrowed as he looked at Xu Qing, and a thousand thoughts spun in his mind.

The truth was that the royal edict hadn't specifically mentioned that the two Nightshades had to be brought back to the capital city. That had been his idea.

It just didn't occur to him that the response would be like this. In the blink of an eye, he was put into a lose-lose situation. He couldn't just follow a command to extract Lin Yuandong's life lamp. If he did that, his position in the Black Guard would instantly become untenable, and worse, it would involve deeply offending the provincial governor. After all, the governor wouldn't dare do anything to anger the Nightshades, but he could still punish Zhou Xingwu.

Unfortunately for Zhou Xingwu, if he didn't obey the command... then there was no way he could follow through with his threat disguised as an invitation.

Just as he was feeling like he had no options to pick from, Xu Qing's eyes glittered coldly.

"Hmm?"

Zhou Xingwu's brow was furrowed with anxiety, and the other Black Guard cultivators were looking at him nervously. They knew that if their commandant really followed through and extracted Lin Yuandong's life lamp, then all of their lives would be in the hands of the Nightshades.

Lin Yuandong's eyes were completely bloodshot as he looked at Zhou Xingwu.

In that heated moment, a gentle voice reached them from a short distance away.

"Exalted Godchild."

It was Duke Heaven Zenith, who hurried over and bowed respectfully to Xu Qing. Then he looked coldly at Zhou Xingwu. As far as he was concerned, this Nightshade godchild was authentic. He needed to be authentic. He had to be authentic. After all, if he was authentic, then it meant the duke's son really had been blessed into the first caste. Therefore... regardless of anything, until the Nightshade Cathedral made a final decision, he was treating the Nightshades as authentic.

Because of that, he was very displeased with Zhou Xingwu's actions. That said, because they were both members of the government, he had to do his best to smooth things over.

"Exalted Godchild, unfortunately, that life lamp has been sullied by the child. It's dirty. That said, the kingdom of Heavengale has other life lamps, unsullied ones, that would probably work well for you. What if you took one of those instead?"

Zhou Xingwu immediately nodded and clasped hands to Xu Qing. "Exalted one, I can get in touch with my superiors right away. The moment you arrive in Heavengale, the lamp can be presented to you."

Xu Qing's expression remained very calm. He seemed neither happy nor angry. And yet, that just made the atmosphere tenser.

Off to the side, the Captain looked extremely furious as he barked, "You impudent fools! You think our godchild is going to go on some big journey just for a trifling life lamp?"

Xu Qing had to marvel. The Captain's words had already crushed any notion about them going to the kingdom of Heavengale.

As for Duke Heaven Zenith, he looked at Zhou Xingwu and intentionally revealed the irritation he was feeling inside.

Zhou Xingwu sighed inwardly. It was now obvious that there was no way he would be able to force the Nightshades to go to the kingdom of Heavengale. At least, not unless he extracted Lin Yuandong's life lamp right then and there. If he pushed the issue, he would definitely offend the Nightshades. What was more, he could tell that Duke Heaven Zenith wasn't going to let him do that. That said, he was also a bit puzzled as to why the two Nightshades refused to go to Heavengale. It seemed a bit suspicious.

But in the end, it wasn't something he needed to worry about. If these Nightshades were imposters, his own superiors could decide what to do. And if they were authentic, then pushing things too far wouldn't end well for him.

Therefore, he clasped hands and bowed.

"Your humble servant wasn't thinking clearly. I'll send word about the life lamp to my superiors."

Xu Qing glanced at Lin Yuandong, then shook his head.

"I have a lot of life lamps, and not just from Holytides like you people. It's just that I really want this specific blue life lamp."

Lin Yuandong shivered, and his expression became one of grief and indignation. He clenched his hands into fists as feelings of anxiety and fury filled him. However, he didn't dare to vent such feelings. He didn't even dare to talk back. After all, he was fully aware that if he said something even slightly disrespectful, he would lose a lot more than his life lamp. The feeling of being humiliated by a superior species filled him with burning anger that only got more and more intense as the moments ticked by.

Zhou Xingwu's brows were furrowed, and his expression was extremely dour.

The Captain swallowed hard, musing that Xu Qing really was going absolutely crazy. If they pushed these people so far that they actually made a move, both of them would be done for.

Zhang San was absolutely right! Little Ah Qing... is way crazier than I am!

Everyone seemed to be standing there, minds reeling, as Xu Qing slowly walked toward Lin Yuandong. As he neared, the might and prestige imparted by the simple word 'Nightshade' filled the hearts of all the Holytide cultivators present. When Xu Qing stopped in front of Lin Yuandong, all that Zhou Xingwu could do was look on with eyes glittering coldly. It was impossible for anyone to tell what he was thinking.

Lin Yuandong stood there shivering, sweat dripping down his forehead. He felt fury, but also despair. And then... Xu Qing suddenly laughed.

It was a laughter that instantly cut through all the pressure that had built up.

Xu Qing reached out and gently patted Lin Yuandong's shoulder.

“Fear not. I was just joking.”

Lin Yuandong stood there, trembling slightly, his face a mask of blank surprise.

Xu Qing shook his head, laughed again, then turned and headed in the direction of the Ten Entrails Tree.

The Captain blinked a few times, then followed Xu Qing. Qing Qiu and Ning Yan were still reeling mentally, but they also followed. The Black Guard cultivators, who had essentially been blocking their way, parted and respectfully bowed as Xu Qing passed.

Once he was gone, the Black Guard cultivators all breathed sighs of relief. Mixed emotions could be seen on their faces. That was especially true of Lin Yuandong, who was still trying to breathe steadily. Moments before, he had felt intense fury and despair. But now everything had been turned around, and his disbelief was turning into gratitude. And within that gratitude was a bit of admiration for Xu Qing’s unpredictable temperament.

What were important people like? They definitely changed from person to person. But in the final analysis, all were people who could effortlessly wrench your mood between happiness and fury. When they were happy, you breathed a sigh of relief. When they were angry, you were terrified. With a word, they could determine both your mood, and your very life or death. That was what important people were like.

The Black Guard cultivators watched Xu Qing leaving, and they couldn’t help but think back to the lessons they had been taught from childhood, that Nightshades should never be spoken to disrespectfully. Previously, that had been head knowledge to them. Now they had experienced it personally. The simplest way to understand the Nightshade Cathedral was that it was so lofty they would never have dealings with it. As they looked at Xu Qing, their eyes filled with the same kind of reverence Lin Yuandong was feeling.

Then Xu Qing’s voice echoed back to them.

“Zhou Xingwu, I expect to see a life lamp in front of me by day’s end. By the way, what are the rest of you all standing around for? Come with me into the depths of Ten Entrails of the True Immortal. Duke Heaven Zenith, you come too.”

“Yes, sir!” Duke Heaven Zenith said. He was absolutely convinced about the authenticity of these Nightshades, and was certain that it meant plenty of glory for his son in the future.

Xu Qing obviously realized that. It was one reason why he had given that blessing. Sometimes, both honor and humiliation could be used to blind people’s loyalties.

“Your orders shall be followed,” Zhou Xingwu said, keeping his head bowed. He obviously felt a massive amount of pressure. After all, he could send a request to his superiors, but that didn’t mean that they were guaranteed to just provide a life lamp.

Regardless, he was deeply struck by the way Nightshades handled things. Therefore, he immediately took out a jade slip and recorded a message onto it. He gave it to one of his subordinates to teleport back to the kingdom of Heavengale to deliver it. Then he led the Black

Guard cultivators after Xu Qing and the others, where they took up guard positions. Lin Yuandong worked harder than any of the others, and personally took responsibility for Xu Qing's immediate area.

The Captain was feeling quite invigorated, and would occasionally glance back and forth between the Black Guard cultivators and the expressionless Xu Qing. As far as he was concerned, this event had been immensely satisfying. A swordsage had actually forced a group of Black Guard cultivators to lead the way and act as personal bodyguards.

Once we're in Ten Entrails of the True Immortal, any subsequent crises will be a lot easier to handle. Now that the first crisis is out of the way, and we have Black Guard cultivators escorting us, things should be much easier.

And thus, they slowly approached the Ten Entrails of the True Immortal Tree Jungle. It looked different compared to before. All of the 'eye' fruits were opened. And as the sunlight shone down, they glowed with mysterious light as they looked coldly at the people approaching.

From a distance, those ten dark-brown branches twisted and wound high into the sky, emanating a terrifying aura that made everyone below feel like ants. The imposing tree influenced the energy, blood, minds, and hearts of everyone who got close to it, filling their hearts with absolute dread.

Looking into the depths of the jungle, the duke said, "Exalted Godchild, when the Ten Entrails Tree blooms, there are many bizarre phenomena. Sir, you really shouldn't put yourself in danger. Please, safeguard your most godly self by refraining from going in too deep. If necessary, your humble servant and Commandant Zhou Xingwu can help you harvest fruits."

"What kind of bizarre phenomena?" Xu Qing asked calmly. "Tell me about them."

Duke Heaven Zenith clasped hands and respectfully replied, "Exalted Godchild, based on the records kept by the thirty-six city-states, when the tree blooms every hundred years, and the fruits ripen, the space-time in the depths of the tree is thrown into chaos.

"Most people who go in there disappear and rarely return. Occasionally, some people who escape will tell about entering a different space and time where they personally witness that Woe-Immortal reaching immortal ascension."

The duke could understand why the godchild wouldn't know about these things. After all, to Nightshades, the Eastern Wasteland County of the Holytide Region was a backward and insignificant place. Even if this Nightshade was well-educated and extremely knowledgeable, it made sense that he wouldn't know small details about places like this.

"In addition, the deeper you go in, the more you have to deal with the curse there. The records indicate that there have even been Void Returning experts who died there." Open fear could be seen on the duke's face.

Chapter 450: Exalted One, Here's Your Life Lamp!

Xu Qing's pupils constricted.

Meanwhile, Duke Heaven Zenith continued with his explanation. "At the same time, in the depths of Ten Entrails of the True Immortal, there exists a power that can drive people insane. Anyone

assailed by that power goes completely mad. They can't tell the difference between enemies and allies, and their personality changes so that they think they're a Woe-Immortal.

“Most bizarre of all, according to the records of the thirty-six city states, is that people who go into the depths and return alive never live long. What's more, they all die after their bellies are ripped open and their entrails fly out and dance around.

“In some cases, they rip open their own bellies. But sometimes... their entrails explode out from inside. Because of that, people say that the depths of the jungle contains a power that can cause a living being's entrails to come to life. Other times when people go into the depths, different things happen. Every time the tree blooms, new and different grisly phenomena appear. Because there's no set pattern, it makes it even more dangerous.

“That's why our thirty-six city-states don't go into the depths. We harvest dao fruits around the perimeter. Oh, right. There's actually another legend about True Immortal...”

Duke Heaven Zenith looked at Xu Qing, lowered his voice, and continued, “The descendants of the Woe-Immortals have a legend that all the dangers are designed to keep outsiders away. If you think of this place as a tomb, then all of these things are here to keep tomb raiders away.

“The reason why people die trying to go inside is that nobody knows the proper way to enter. The dangerous things fit together like a puzzle, therefore, the only way to get inside safely is to follow the right path. Even if that's true, the local people who descended from the Woe-Immortals don't know the correct way to enter. Therefore, the legend became nothing more than that: a true legend.”

Xu Qing glanced casually at the Captain and thought about what he'd said earlier about the 'heaven-shaking, earth-shattering, absolutely consummate and spectacular bit of amazing good fortune.'

Eldest Brother knows so much about this place that I have to wonder if he really got all his information from intelligence reports back in the county capital.

Xu Qing mulled everything over as they proceeded.

Time passed until the day was over and the sky started to turn dark. As evening fell, Xu Qing led the group from the periphery of Ten Entrails of the True Immortal to the spot that marked the border of its depths. It was a literal border that had been artificially created. Paint had been used to mark the ground at a certain distance around all of Ten Entrails of the True Immortal.

They stopped there.

As far as Xu Qing was concerned, he had benefited a lot on this day. Thanks to Duke Heaven Zenith leading the way, and having the Black Guard cultivators to harvest fruit, Xu Qing now had over 3,000 dao fruits in his collection. They had encountered quite a few dangerous situations, but the Black Guard cultivators had easily resolved them all. Especially noteworthy was Lin Yuandong,

who loyally stood guard in front of Xu Qing. All it took was a nod from Xu Qing to get him even more roused up.

Xu Qing stood on the border, looking off into the distance. Duke Heaven Zenith stood next to him.

“Exalted Godchild, this is probably far enough. This line has been maintained by the thirty-six city-states for generation after generation. It marks the spot where the true dangers begin.

“Your humble servant has already acquired the shadeheaven demonmoon pills you asked for. They’re currently being transported here from Heaven Zenith. As for the dao fruits you require, I’ve talked things over with the other city-states. In half a month, the city-states will pool their harvests to provide you what you need.”

Xu Qing exchanged a glance with the Captain, then calmly said, “Where’s my life lamp, Zhou Xingwu?”

Lin Yuandong heard that and shivered. Meanwhile, Zhou Xingwu grimly said, “Exalted one, voice messages here aren’t working well, so your humble servant has no way of knowing how things turned out. I imagine we’ll have an answer when we get back.”

Sitting down cross-legged, Xu Qing said, “You go back and check. Bring the life lamp back with you. I’ll wait here.”

Zhou Xingwu frowned slightly. Based on Xu Qing’s wording, it seemed clear that he wasn’t planning on returning to the duchy of Heaven Zenith, and was instead planning to enter the depths of Ten Entrails of the True Immortal.

Why does this godchild want a life lamp so badly? His eyes narrowed slightly as he tried to decide what to do.

Meanwhile, Duke Heaven Zenith looked deeply at Xu Qing and said, “Exalted Godchild, could it be that you have a secret magic which can tap into the bloodline in a life lamp to dispel some of the curses in Ten Entrails of the True Immortal? Is that how you plan to enter its depths?”

Xu Qing was somewhat surprised to hear that, and looked over at the duke.

However, the duke wasn’t looking at him, and was instead leaning over and whispering to Zhou Xingwu. “Exalted Zhou, the godchild issued a command! Why are you standing around?”

Zhou Xingwu thought it over for a moment, then suppressed any suspicions he had. This entire matter didn’t really have much to do with him personally, as long as he did his job. Therefore, he left some of the Black Guard cultivators behind, and took the rest with him as he went back toward Heaven Zenith.

After they were gone, things got quiet. The red of the evening sun slowly turned into deep darkness. Duke Heaven Zenith stood in place, occasionally looking back in the direction of his duchy, and occasionally looking beyond it, toward the kingdom of Heavengale and his son. As a result, his expression contained mixed emotions.

The Captain glanced at Xu Qing.

Xu Qing, meanwhile, had cast his senses out into the evening, and could sense some pressure that came from the Nightshade divine likeness. There was no way Xu Qing would just go into Ten Entrails of the True Immortal without being fully prepared. Although he hadn't fully supplanted the divine likeness with the power of the violet moon, he was still able to send it orders.

A moment later, as all the Black Guard cultivators were meditating, the duke turned to Xu Qing.

"Exalted godchild," he said softly, "how are my son's natural talents?"

"Mu Ye is extraordinarily wise," Xu Qing said calmly. "He had excellent talent. The Holytide caste system was doing nothing but holding him back from a good future."

The afterglow of sunset made it impossible for anyone to read the duke's facial expression.

"I'm in the fourth level," he said quietly. "The warrior caste. Unless a heaven-defying cultivator appeared among my descendants, they would all be in the same caste.... Luckily, you took a liking to Mu Ye, oh exalted Godchild. And you raised him to the highest caste level of all, the first."

"Exalted godchild, your true goal has always been to enter the depths of the jungle. Am I right? Sir, as a godchild of the Nightshades, it makes sense that the cathedral would send some Holytides to help you. Or perhaps since you're going into such a dangerous location, they would arrange for a dao protector..."

Xu Qing suddenly felt a sinking feeling. Meanwhile, the Captain edged a bit closer to him. And yet, they quickly realized that the surrounding Black Guard cultivators all had their eyes closed. It seemed they had unwittingly lost consciousness.

"I understand," the duke murmured. "Exalted Godchild, you likely have an enemy among the Nightshades, someone with a lot of power. Besides, you're not the only godchild, right? There must be fierce competition to deal with. That's why you came here alone, to acquire some unknown good fortune. It's similar to the succession wars that happen in the Heavengale Dynasty. That said, though you have enemies to deal with, dealing with nobodies like us, even changing our caste level, is hardly worth mentioning. At least, that's what makes the most logical sense."

The duke turned to look at Xu Qing with a profound expression on his face. "Exalted one, after you go into the depths of Ten Entrails of the True Immortal... will you return? Sir... you're not coming back, are you?"

The duke's murmurings moments ago had seemed more like self-consolation. After all, even though he was only in charge of a relatively small duchy, he was obviously an extraordinary individual. At this point, it didn't matter whether he was still suspicious of Xu Qing or not. The issue of changing Mu Ye's caste level had bound them together.

"I have other things to take care of," Xu Qing said. "So no, I won't be returning." He was actually being truthful, although there was nothing inherently dangerous about that.

Hearing the answer to his question, Duke Heaven Zenith had nothing further to say, so he sat down cross-legged and maintained silence.

At the same time, the surrounding Black Guard cultivators opened their eyes and looked around. Clearly, they had no idea that they had just been unconscious.

Thus, time passed. Late in the night, a piercing sound echoed out from the distant jungle. Duke Heaven Zenith's eyes glittered coldly as Zhou Xingwu and his subordinates flew in their direction.

Zhou Xingwu's expression was the same as ever, but his heart was pounding. And the reason for that was the life lamp he had brought with him! The Heavengale Dynasty really did have life lamps to dole out. The fact they had given one further cemented Xu Qing's identity into his heart. Upon arriving, he clasped hands and held out a crimson life lamp toward Xu Qing.

Despite Xu Qing's level of control over his reactions, when he saw that life lamp, he couldn't stop his heart from pounding. He extended his hand, and the red life lamp flew over to him. It resembled a red wing. Not a pair of wings. A single wing. It was carved to be extremely lifelike, and it emanated a bloody, baleful aura. One look at it made it obvious it was a life centered on slaughter. And its fluctuations were astonishingly extraordinary.

Xu Qing felt a bit dazed holding it. Truth be told, not even he had been convinced that his ruse would work. But this was a life lamp, just like the two life lamps he had already risked his life to acquire.

A third life lamp! Xu Qing suppressed his excitement. He couldn't just put a life lamp in his bag of holding, but at the same time, now wasn't a convenient moment to absorb it. After examining it carefully, he put it into the fold of his robe.

Qing Qiu and Ning Yan looked at that life lamp, and their minds spun.

Gritting her teeth, Qing Qiu cursed him inwardly. That dog-fucking Nightshade! I've worked myself to the bone but never managed to get even one life lamp. But this Nightshade just asks for one and gets it...?

Ning Yan was equally shaken.

Clasping hands respectfully, the duke said, "Exalted godchild, now that you have your life lamp, what do we do next?"

"Enter the depths!" Xu Qing replied. With that, he stepped over the border line.

The Captain followed close behind, his eyes glittering. Qing Qiu and Ning Yan had no choice but to also follow.

Zhou Xingwu, meanwhile, hesitated.

"Exalted Zhou," the duke said solemnly, "I'm responsible for guarding the godchild. The road forward will be very dangerous, so the two of us need to cooperate to make sure no harm comes to the godchild." With that, he strode over the border.

Zhou Xingwu frowned, but didn't say anything. He just led the Black Guard cultivators over the border. The moment they stepped across that border, something dramatic happened.

The very same dancing figure that had appeared in a vision to Xu Qing... now appeared again. The figure was surrounded by an illusory sea of flames that swayed and writhed along with the dancing. Gradually, more such figures appeared, and along with them came that ancient chanting.

The sight caused Xu Qing's heart to sink a bit.

The Captain's eyes glittered, and though no one was able to tell, deep in his eyes appeared faces that resembled his own. The faces opened their mouths and spoke, but no sound came out. However, based on the shape of the lips... they were chanting the same thing as that ancient voice.

A moment later, those faces vanished. The Captain blinked a few times, and then his mouth twitched into a strange smile.

Meanwhile, the surrounding Black Guard cultivators as well as Duke Heaven Zenith were looking into the depths of the jungle, serious expressions on their faces.

“Exalted Godchild, please be careful. Something seems off here. This isn't how this place usually is. Whether based on my personal experience or the historical records I've read, I can say confidently that this phenomenon is supposed to happen in the very depths, not right here!”