

Timescape 471

Chapter 471: Crazy Xu Qing

In a sky as dark as evening, clouds seethed as the might of a god pulsed down onto Xu Qing in mountainous waves. Rumbling sounds filled his mind as he trembled from head to toe. He could no longer fly, and was forced down onto the ground of rotten flesh.

When he landed, his organs wrenched with pain inside of him, and he coughed up a massive mouthful of blood. Blood seeped out of his eyes, ears, nose, and mouth, and his body, unable to sustain the force, started cracking apart. Blood oozed out everywhere. In the blink of an eye, his white swordsmage uniform became as red as blood. Intense pain filled him, and he struggled to lift his head and look off toward the horizon. He saw the sacrificial offering of hundreds of souls, and in addition, there were a dozen streams of green energy that looked like snakes or dragons.

It definitely appeared to be a rite or ceremony.

A sacrificial offering to a god....

This wasn't his first time seeing a god. And yet, he still felt himself trembling from facing a higher level of life.

It was a paramount level of will that couldn't be resisted. A godly might. It crushed down onto Xu Qing's mind and caused splitting pain to fill his soul. Not even being surrounded by the power of his taboo poison core did anything.

This was different from the type he saw with that god's eye in the ghastr hollow, or when he dealt with Chu Tianqun's god power. In those two situations, he had felt pressure that caused everything to twist and ripple. The world had grown blurry, and his flesh and blood had almost seemed to come alive, as if it wanted to rip away from him.

But the mighty power from this eye filled him with intense pain that made it seem like his soul was about to be shattered.

It's similar to a god, but also dissimilar....

As the godly might weighed down, countless screams rose up from the imperial palace beneath the mountain of flesh. It sounded like a host of howling demons and devils.

A host of deceased souls erupted from the palace, all of them pulsing with a terrifying aura. They were immeasurably vicious, with the smallest being dozens of meters tall and the largest hundreds. Some had the bodies of snakes, others had humanoid bodies. Each and every one emanated fluctuations that surpassed the phoenix Xu Qing had faced earlier. Obviously, the entities that qualified to come to this imperial palace and offer sacrifices to this god were people who, in life, had terrifying cultivation bases. Then the land churned as vicious zombies clawed their way into the open, pulsing with godliness. There were far too many to count!

This place was a major world belonging to Emperor Ancient Spirit. It was the burial place of his entire species. However, Xu Qing got the feeling that this wasn't the only imperial palace in this world. There were more.

As the countless evil ghosts and zombies started approaching, a crazy look appeared in Xu Qing's eyes.

His hand became semitransparent, and without the slightest hesitation he plunged it into his chest, to his fourth heavenly palace, where he grabbed the godsource of the violet moon. Then he yanked it out! Violet light erupted from his chest, just like it had in his fight with Chu Tianqun.

Xu Qing held the violet moon godsource aloft, then shouted, “Back down!!”

He wasn’t using the power of the violet moon to resist the godly might. Instead, he was holding the godsource high and unleashing it, thoroughly and completely. Deafening winds screamed, and blinding violet light erupted. The light shot up, creating a pillar of violet that connected to the dome of heaven, sending out ripples through the clouds.

As the ripples spread, a violet moon was revealed. Combining, they shone brilliantly! Boundless violet mist formed around Xu Qing, creating a tornado that linked heaven and earth.

Normally speaking, when Xu Qing used the power of the violet moon, he did so cautiously. Under those circumstances, you could say he released fluctuations at level 1. During his fight with Chu Tianqun, the fluctuations had reached level 10. Right now, they were at level 100! He was holding nothing back to release a signal! And it had one purpose: to attract the attention of the red moon!

In the blink of an eye, a boundless godly might erupted from the major world, sweeping through the void. Wherever it passed, the air shattered, and one minor world after another started to crumble.

The major world of Emperor Ancient Spirit also trembled, and a hair-raising red color filled the sky. A paramount will that was completely indifferent to life seemed to be on the way. It would arrive at any moment.

As a result of that, the evil ghosts and zombies that had been rushing toward Xu Qing stopped in place. Their expressions, instead of being malicious, were now that of terror. The imperial palace and the mountain of flesh both trembled. Up above, rifts opened up in the dome of heaven.

When Xu Qing saw all of that, the crazy look in his eyes intensified. Lifting up the godsource, he watched the dome of heaven crack, and then growled, “I don’t know if you’re really Emperor Ancient Spirit. But I’m going to assume you are. Given that you’re accepting sacrificial offerings, and that you gathered these mindless souls here to worship you, I refuse to believe that you have no will. Therefore, you must know what I’m holding right now!”

As the words left his mouth, a series of thunderclaps rang out, and lightning fell in droves, illuminating the surrounding lands. Godly might was about to descend.

“If I die, or if I exercise a thought, then my godmother will come to this place.” The godly might caused Xu Qing to tremble, but the crazy look in his eyes didn’t lessen. “Shē’ll be very happy to look upon something like you. When that time comes, you’ll be food!”

As Xu Qing’s voice echoed out loudly, the godly might grew more intense. Heaven and earth trembled, and the zombies and evil ghosts around Xu Qing howled piercingly.

“Begone! If you dare take even half a step forward, my godmother will come to this place!”

Xu Qing's eyes were completely bloodshot as he glared at the rift in the dome of heaven. He kept a tight grip on his godsource. Combined with the shining violet moon above, the signal it cast grew stronger.

This was Xu Qing's trump card! This was what he had determined to do in order to get the other half of Ling'er's soul. This was why he had sent the power of his violet moon into the sky. This was why he had constantly stimulated the violet moon along his journey, making sure it grew stronger and stronger. Everything had been done in preparation for this moment!

He was summoning the red moon to threaten Emperor Ancient Spirit!

Even from a distance, it was a terrifying scene. Xu Qing was surrounded by endless zombies and evil ghosts. Ahead of him, the black palace looked like the skull of some evil god. And up above was that rift in the dome of heaven, which was the source of the godly might!

As Xu Qing's words echoed out, and the violet moon sent out the signal, a bellow of rage erupted from the rift. It was different from the thunderous howl from before. It was the first true cry uttered by the eye since Xu Qing's arrival.

Because of that cry, the zombies and ghosts around Xu Qing parted to form a path that led toward the imperial palace and the mountain of flesh.

Face completely expressionless, Xu Qing held the violet moon godsource aloft as he strode down the path. On either side of him were hosts of vicious, snarling zombies and ghosts. He ignored them. Godly might retreated in front of him until he reached the dilapidated imperial palace. After a moment of consideration, he entered the palace and walked to the staircase that led up the mountain of flesh.

He didn't lower his hand at all the entire time. Nor did the crazy look ever leave his eyes. He climbed the steps until he was at the peak of the mountain of flesh. From there, he could see everything clearly.

The dome of heaven was split between two colors.

One was the original dark evening color that belonged to the major world. It filled about ninety percent of the sky. And within the churning clouds were numerous vicious ghost faces. Their continuous howls crackled like thunder. Occasionally, lightning bolts would fall, illuminating the mountain of flesh and the endless sea of zombies and souls. Rotting birds flew circles in the sky, glaring malevolently at Xu Qing. Their dark gray eyes were clearly full of death, and yet their decaying bodies emitted fluctuations of godliness. All of them had been holy beasts when alive.

There were dragons and snakes as well. The dragons soared in the clouds, and the snakes slithered on the ground. All were rotting. The distant Underworld River seethed as ancient entities within the water awoke and rose from the water. There were mist giants and zombie generals....

Further past all that, there were countless chariots and banners, pulsing with baleful auras that obfuscated the sky and enshrouded the land.

It was a shocking and ghastly sight.

All of this was just for one sacrifice in this major world. One could only imagine how intimidating and mighty the Ancient Spirits must have been in the past.

The other color in the sky was violet. It occupied only a small section of the sky, but it was very strong. It was like a nail stuck in the sky, and it continuously cast its brilliance out.

And that light was converging on the peak of the mountain of flesh, where Xu Qing stood with his right hand held high. At the moment, he was completely calm. Although he had that crazy look in his bloodshot eyes, he wasn't unfamiliar with insane situations like this. Having accomplished so many big things with the Captain, he was used to it.

And right now, he was looking at that closed eye in the dome of heaven. That huge eye was mostly hidden, and it emanated a most ancient aura.

In front of that eye, hovering above the mountain peak, were hundreds of souls, and one of them looked like a young woman. It was Ling'er!

Surrounded by black soul light, she had her hands on her knees, and her head was bowed as she trembled. She seemed terrified and unwilling to look around. And because of the soul light surrounding her, she was apparently unable to sense what was happening around her.

When Xu Qing spotted the trembling Ling'er, the hand that held the violet moon tensed.

Chapter 472: Don't Be Scared, Ling'er. I'm Taking You Home

Beneath that evening sky, atop the mountain of flesh, beneath the weight of godly might, Xu Qing stood looking into the sky. When he spotted Ling'er's soul body, the little white snake in his sea of consciousness sensed it and opened her eyes.

"Coo. Cooooo..."

Sensing the call from a soul fragment of the same source, the Ling'er in the sky shivered and looked up.

However, the eighteen dragons made of green mist that glided in the sky emitted powerful flows of destiny aura, creating a power of confinement that cut Ling'er off from the sensation.

When that destiny aura flowed out, the little white snake in Xu Qing's sea of consciousness suddenly pulsed with longing. Those dragons were formed from the destiny aura of the Ancient Spirits. They were very realistic, down to their lifelike scales. Though the Ancient Spirit species had been cursed by a heavenly dao, they were still the legendary species also known as the Heavenfates, who were a convergence of the destiny aura of all of Revered Ancient. Even to this day, that was still their heavenly fate.

Xu Qing's eyes glittered fiercely. Considering that it wasn't possible to summon Ling'er's soul to him, he leaped off the mountain of flesh to go get her. The dragons formed from green destiny aura howled threateningly. Apparently, all it would take was an order from the Ancient Emperor, and they would lunge forward and devour Xu Qing. Unmoved by the display, Xu Qing flew toward Ling'er's soul, radiating the power of the violet moon.

The destiny aura dragons stirred, yet had no choice but to back away from him. As they yielded, the force of confinement faded away. Ling'er's soul body shivered again, and as she again sensed that strong call, Xu Qing appeared in front of her. Without the slightest hesitation, he reached out with his left hand and took her soul.

The moment his hand made contact with her, the black light around her faded away. At the same time, the little white snake in his sea of consciousness flew out of him and shot into the soul body's forehead.

A tremor passed through Ling'er. Her eyelashes fluttered, and she looked up. The first thing she saw was Xu Qing.

"Big Bro Xu Qing... is this a dream...?" she murmured, looking confused. Her soul body seemed profoundly weak. Clearly, she had been away from her fleshly body for too long.

"Don't be scared, Ling'er," Xu Qing said softly. "I'm taking you home."

Taking her into his arms, he backed away at top speed. At the same time, he crushed the jade slip the old innkeeper had given him.

Outside Emperor Ancient Spirit's major world, in the Wood Spirit territory in Sea-Sealing County, the innkeeper had been anxiously waiting for days at the altar above the Spirit Abyss. When Xu Qing crushed that jade slip, the innkeeper shivered.

His haggard, wrinkled face trembled as the power of hope surged within him. His bloodshot eyes snapped open, and they shone with unprecedented brightness. Without any hesitation, he performed an incantation gesture. A tremor passed through him, and his heart rate increased. As his blood pumped through him, a bloodline sealing power erupted from within him.

The spirit energy of the Wood Spirits streamed out from the altar, and roots from the huge tree in the basin above extended down toward the innkeeper. The innkeeper shivered from head to toe as his blood vessels swelled. Then his forehead split open, and a mass of writhing tentacles snaked out! Blood sprayed off the tentacles, gathering in front of the innkeeper to create a writhing nine-meter-wide sphere of blood in front of him.

"Open!"

The blood sphere started rotating faster and faster, locking onto the location of the jade slip. Then a tiny crevice opened up! It was a link to the spot where the jade slip had been crushed!

As a boundless death energy erupted from the crevice, the innkeeper excitedly looked inside. The first thing he saw was Xu Qing carrying Ling'er in his arms!

The crevice was unstable, and would only stay open a short time before it closed.

On the other side of the crevice, where Xu Qing was, the dome of heaven trembled as Emperor Ancient Spirit prepared to open his eye.

Atop the mountain of flesh, Xu Qing's expression flickered. He could sense that a terrifying godly might was about to emerge, something that surpassed everything from before. Everything around him blurred and distorted as destructive power from Emperor Ancient Spirit built up. Fluctuations of awakening rolled out over everything. The evil souls and zombies all kowtowed. Xu Qing felt unimaginable pain, but still kept fighting back with the power of the violet moon.

All of that happened in the time it takes a spark to fly off of a piece of flint. As Xu Qing trembled, he backed up, getting closer to the crevice the innkeeper had opened. The crevice's instability seemed to be building, making it clear the entire thing could disappear at any moment.

"Ling'er!!" the innkeeper cried.

There was no time to ponder the situation. Xu Qing immediately put Ling'er's unconscious soul into the crevice. Then he turned and stood there protectively, making sure that the astonishing might from Emperor Ancient Spirit didn't affect her. Rumbling sounds echoed out as the ripping, tearing sensations within him grew more intense. Wounds opened up all over him, staining his uniform. Yet he just stood there.

Behind him, the innkeeper's hands latched onto Ling'er's soul. He also seemed to be trying to grab Xu Qing, but wasn't fast enough. He had no choice but to yank his hand back as the crevice snapped shut and collapsed.

Xu Qing smiled. It was the first smile to appear on his ashen face since coming into this major world of death. He had known from the beginning that the crevice was too small for him to fit through. He didn't care. He had succeeded. He had seen Ling'er's soul away, safe and sound.

And now, the rift in the dome of heaven was fully open!

He saw an inimitably massive yellow eye with a vertical pupil, staring at him.

The endless hordes of zombies and deceased souls all madly howled the same thing.

"Emperor!"

Their voices were deafeningly loud.

They weren't the only ones. The dragons in the clouds, the snakes in the soil, the terrifying entities in the Underworld River, and the hosts of chariots and troops, were all screaming the same thing.

"Emperor!!"

The eye above seemed completely indifferent to everything. Surrounding the vertical pupil were black flames, and a godly might that filled the major world.

Xu Qing immediately lost control of his injuries, and they exploded with blood. The power of Emperor Ancient Spirit made all injuries vastly worse. It was one of the effects of facing hīm. In the blink of an eye, that strange power would make minor injuries into severe ones. And the ripping sensation compounded upon itself.

It was only possible to imagine how terrifying Emperor Ancient Spirit must have been in his prime. Any enemy who faced him would have had a very difficult time, because even the slightest injury would have quickly become extremely deadly.

As Xu Qing endured that ripping and destruction, chunks of flesh fell off him, yet he still kept the power of the violet moon held aloft. Waves of pain assailed him, and the sensation of his wounds worsening caused him to shiver. But he held firm. He looked up and met the gaze of Emperor Ancient Spirit!

For a moment, boundless information poured into Xu Qing's mind. A flood. An explosion. They were fragmented pieces of information. They contained cruelty and madness that made Xu Qing feel like his head might explode. And there was a terrifying will that swept through him, shaking his sea of consciousness, crushing down on his soul. The taboo poison power fought back.

His bluegreen dragon howled as it rose from his sixth heavenly palace to resist. When that happened, the incredibly powerful will trembled, as if it recognized the heavenly dao on the bluegreen dragon.

A thunderous divine will then spoke coldly into Xu Qing's mind.

"You hold the godsource of Crimson Mother. You must have stolen it."

Xu Qing's eyes were so bloodshot they started bleeding. As the blood dripped down his chin, he looked up at the massive eye and growled, "So what if I did?"

Violet light exploded from Xu Qing's hand, and his fourth heavenly palace vibrated violently. The violet moon in the dome of heaven glittered with moonlight, and along its edges... it was turning red.

That redness continued to expand. It seemed like there was something the color of blood behind the violet moon, outside of the world, but slowly enveloping it.

"Either you let me go, or we die together!" Xu Qing said, enunciating each word slowly and clearly.

Xu Qing had absorbed a lot of information by facing off with this huge eye. Though it almost made his head explode, he had learned some things. Gods could devour one another. If that red moon came, then given Emperor Ancient Spirit's current state, he would definitely be nothing but food. That made Xu Qing confident that his threat would be effective.

He had reached the point where he couldn't endure any longer. The splitting pain that filled him, and the countless bits of random information filling his mind, caused the world to spin. If it weren't for the tension created by the violet moon's summons, he would already have been destroyed in body and soul.

And yet, as the huge eye looked at him with full intensity, Xu Qing steeled himself. "Red moon, red moon...."

As his voice rang out, red spots filled the dome of heaven. They were starting to create a shape. More and more appeared, spreading out, connecting together.

Xu Qing was taking the initiative to summon the red moon! In the past, it happened passively. But this time it was completely different.

The sky was turning red.

The pupil of the huge eye constricted, and something like labored breathing could be heard. Even more terrifying, though, was the emotional shout that followed.

"Screw off!"

Chapter 473: The Wind Sweeping Through the Tower Heralds a Rising Storm in the Mountains

Emperor Ancient Spirit's voice shook heaven and earth. Yet the emperor seemed worried that the fluctuations might actually kill Xu Qing, and thus constrained the godly might and ripping power.

Xu Qing, who had been at his very limit, breathed a sigh of relief. After staggering backward a few paces, he turned to leave. Right before he did, he glanced at the green dragons made from destiny aura, and then thought about that sense of longing he'd detected from Ling'er when she saw them. Feeling a twinge of nervousness, he pointed at the nearest one.

"Oh illustrious Ancient Emperor, please lend me some destiny aura. Later on, I'll offer repayment with something of equal value."

The Ancient Spirit's godly might, which had just been retracting, suddenly shivered, and the huge eye stared down coldly at Xu Qing with increasing majesty.

"I'm asking for a loan, not a gift," Xu Qing noted.

The gigantic eye looked at the red spots in the sky, then back at Xu Qing, and finally at his heavenly dao bluegreen dragon. A moment passed, and then a green dragon of destiny shivered and shot toward Xu Qing. Xu Qing grabbed it, whereupon the dragon turned into a green crystal. It was delicate and beautiful, making it obvious it was a precious treasure.

Next, a low-pitched roar erupted from the gigantic eye.

"Screw off, NOW!"

With that, the eye closed and ceased looking at Xu Qing.

Without hesitation, Xu Qing sped off the mountain of flesh and out of the imperial palace. The wing on his back flapped, and he became a beam of light that shot off at incredible speed.

In order to prevent any unexpected situations, he did not return the violet moon to his fourth heavenly palace, but he did cover the signal with a poison mist. Occasionally, he checked the situation above. He was worried about the red moon coming, but also worried that Emperor Ancient Spirit's eye would open again.

With those two concerns constantly on his mind, he maintained top speed as he returned along the same path he had originally followed to the palace.

During the days that followed, he didn't run into any evil souls. Eventually, he found the spot where he had landed. Perhaps because he had covered up the signal, or perhaps because of efforts made by Emperor Ancient Spirit, the violet moon in the sky had faded significantly, and the red spots had blurred to the point where they were hardly visible.

Without a pause, Xu Qing started flying upward.

As the lands beneath him grew smaller and smaller, he felt an increasingly strong gravitational force pulling on him. But with a lot of effort, he broke free. At that point, he returned the violet moon to his heavenly palace, and retracted the taboo poison. After waiting for a long, nervous moment to see if anything would happen, he shot up into the Spirit Abyss and grabbed onto the cliff-like wall. It pulsed with a frigid cold as he started climbing up. Meanwhile, the violet crystal worked hard to heal his injuries.

The trip down had been easy. But going up, he had to deal with the constant downward tug. And not only was he injured, but also he didn't dare use the violet moon to resist that tug. Therefore, he had to just struggle up along the wall.

In that manner, time passed.

He would occasionally stop to rest. About six hours later, he saw the altar above him, as well as the innkeeper from Plankspring Way, sitting on the edge and constantly working through incantation gestures in an attempt to open a path to Xu Qing.

After only glancing for a moment at the innkeeper, Xu Qing's gaze shifted to the cave, where he saw Ling'er in her white garments, sitting there cross-legged. He breathed a sigh of relief.

She no longer looked as pale as death. She was breathing steadily, and her face was flush with life force. That said, her soul had been out of her body for a significant time, so at the moment, she was gathering her strength. It would take time before she would regain consciousness. Surrounding her were various magical defenses erected by the innkeeper to keep her safe.

Even as Xu Qing was studying Ling'er, the innkeeper failed at his attempt to open a path. Suddenly, his eyes widened and he looked over the edge of the altar into the spirit abyss. There he saw Xu Qing crawling slowly up the wall.

"Y-you... you came back on your own?" The innkeeper looked like he'd seen a ghost. Truth be told, he had repeatedly attempted to use his magic to get to Xu Qing, and had even asked for help from the Wood Spirits, only to fail over and over again. What was more, he knew deep in his heart that even if he succeeded, he probably wouldn't be able to save Xu Qing, not considering that Emperor Ancient Spirit's eye had opened.

Because of that, he had been fretting this entire time. For one thing, he was worried that he had sent Xu Qing to his death to save Ling'er, and that left him with deeply conflicted emotions. Beyond that, he was worried about what Ling'er would do after she woke up and found out that Xu Qing wasn't coming back. But even as he had stewed in deep anxiety, he suddenly saw Xu Qing crawling out of the Spirit Abyss.

"But that was Emperor Ancient Spirit...!" he murmured, looking visibly stunned.

Xu Qing hopped onto the altar. The innkeeper inhaled sharply, and was about to say something when Xu Qing waved his hand dismissively. Still gasping for breath, Xu Qing took out the green crystal of destiny aura and handed it to the innkeeper.

"That's for Ling'er."

The innkeeper instinctively caught it. When he looked down and saw what it was, his eyes went wide, and his head spun.

"Ancestral emperor destiny aura!!" he blurted. He gripped it tightly, his heart racing as he contemplated how valuable that crystal was. In fact, to descendants of the Ancient Spirits, it was priceless. If Ling'er absorbed that ancestral emperor destiny aura, not only would it make her bloodline stronger, but also, it would suppress the

curse within her to a much greater extent. Back in the era of the Ancient Spirits, only the imperial clan had access to personalized destiny auras like this. With it, Ling'er's cultivation would advance by leaps and bounds.

When Xu Qing saw the innkeeper's reaction he relaxed a bit. Looking over at Ling'er seated in meditation, he thought about everything that just happened beneath the Spirit Abyss.

"Ling'er's bloodline essence was damaged," the innkeeper explained. "It will take her at least a month before she can awaken. But with this ancestral emperor destiny aura, her bloodline won't just recover. It will reach a higher level."

Xu Qing nodded. As waves of exhaustion rose within him, he took out a talisman of black iron. "Do you recognize this?"

The talisman was round and covered with complex magical symbols. It radiated black light and frigid coldness, as well as teleportation fluctuations. Xu Qing had acquired it from one of the zombies he'd killed. Sensing that it was something amazing, he'd kept it.

"That's a spirit abyss talisman!" the innkeeper said. "I mentioned that kind of talisman before. They're very rare. When you activate it by infusing it with your dharma force, you'll be teleported back into the Spirit Abyss. Even more amazing is that, in the moment of teleportation, you can set your destination by merely visualizing it."

As far as the innkeeper was concerned, this Xu Qing was a completely different person than before. Even now, he had no idea how he'd managed to escape such a deadly situation.

Xu Qing nodded and put the spirit abyss talisman away. Looking one final time at Ling'er, he turned to leave.

"Y-you're... you're not going to wait for Ling'er?" the innkeeper asked hesitantly.

"I'm not in good shape," Xu Qing answered quietly. "I can't stay. We'll see each other again later on." With that, he started climbing the stairs up.

The innkeeper watched him go, all the while thinking back to what he'd seen after opening that crevice. Xu Qing had stood there, protecting Ling'er from godly might.

The bratty punk has a lot of faults and isn't exactly charming. But... he knows the difference between gratitude and grudges. Plus, he's obviously sentimental and has a sense of justice!

It was evening outside, and the red sky of evening looked like blood.

When Xu Qing flew up into the air, the wind caused his clothing to flap. With a bit of anxiety in his eyes, he looked in the direction of the county capital.

One reason he'd left the altar so quickly was that he had no idea if there would be further ramifications because of how he'd summoned the red moon. Another reason... was that the sense of unease and crisis had become incomparably intense after he left the Spirit Abyss.

Don't tell me it has something to do with the red moon.

With a thousand thoughts running through his head, he started on his way back. However, he had only traveled a short distance out of the basin when the ground suddenly heaved!

Countless trees swayed as something like an invisible shockwave swept through the area. Cracking sounds rang out from distant mountains and crevices opened up on them. Colors flashed in the sky, and a boom rang out that echoed through half of Sea-Sealing County. And it came from the direction of the county capital, as if... something there had exploded.

The residual echoes were like heavenly thunder that smashed through the red evening sky. Black clouds sprang into being in the sky, spreading out like ripples in a pond. In the shortest of moments, the evening vanished, to be replaced by the darkness of night!

Xu Qing felt immense shock as he sensed and saw all of those things. Being in midair, he was shoved backward by the shockwave. As that happened, he looked in the direction of the distant county capital, and saw a massive, glowing white figure.

It looked like an old man, so enormous he could prop up heaven and earth. He radiated terrifying power, and was surrounded by countless minor worlds that were constantly forming and collapsing. Although he couldn't compare to a god, based on what Xu Qing could sense, he obviously surpassed the palace lord.

The old man's eyes seemed filled with a reluctance to say farewell as he looked down at Sea-Sealing County. Black spots appeared on his body, more and more of them, growing and clumping together. Eventually, they spread out to cover him. The old man opened his mouth as if to speak...

But he wasn't able to. The darkness of night consumed him, and he slowly vanished. Without a sound... he perished!

Thunder crashed deafeningly. Then rain started to fall, pelting the basin, the mountains, the soil, the plants, and all of the living beings in Sea-Sealing County. The rain also hit Xu Qing. As he hovered there in the wind and rain, his mind was in chaos.

He had seen that old man from a distance a few times in the county capital.

"The governor..." he murmured, his expression one of complete incredulity.

Chapter 474: A Once-in-Many-Millennia Spectacle

The canopy of heaven was pitch black. Thunder boomed and occasional bolts of lightning ripped through the darkness. Ice-cold rain fell, soaking Sea-Sealing County.

Xu Qing stared in the direction of the county capital, his heart pounding with astonishment.

"The governor perished...?"

Xu Qing had glimpsed the governor from afar on a few occasions in the Swordsage Palace, but had never interacted with him. That said, he had heard a lot about him. He knew that it was only because of the governor that Sea-Sealing County remained whole, and that the Holytides had never managed to devour it or rip it apart.

This governor had served in Sea-Sealing County for eight hundred years. Though he hadn't done anything to expand his territory, he did maintain a balance. He was cautious and conscientious, and had kept Sea-Sealing County in human control the entire time. It had always had thirteen

prefectures, which was a rare thing. Over the past thousand years, the other six counties controlled by humans had all lost prefectures.

Today, the governor perished.

Xu Qing didn't know the details of what happened, nor did he have any idea what was happening in the county capital. But as various emotions swept through him, he thought about Arch-Immortal Plumdark, Kong Xianglong, and the others he knew there.

He quickly took out his command sword and transmission jade slip. Before he could even send messages to inquire about what was happening, both devices started vibrating as messages poured in.

“Xu Qing, are you at the Corrections Division? Are you okay??”

“Xu Qing, the governor just died! There was no sign it was going to happen. He just died, out of nowhere!”

“Xu Qing, where are you? The Corrections Division collapsed!!”

“Countless prisoners have broken free! The county capital is in chaos!”

Messages were flooding in from Kong Xianglong, Sir Mountain-River, and many others Xu Qing considered to be friends, as well as from other swordsages he knew, and of course jailers from the Corrections Division.

A tremor passed through Xu Qing, starting in the depths of his heart, rapidly spreading to his extremities, and turning into a rumbling sound in his mind.

The Corrections Division collapsed? Xu Qing almost couldn't believe it. Hefting his command sword, he sent an inquiry to Kong Xianglong.

The response came almost immediately. Kong Xianglong's voice was tinged with grief and indignation as he said, “Xu Qing, the Corrections Division exploded! The prisoners are currently fleeing. They're everywhere. Tons of them. Unit D. Unit C. Unit B. The palace lord, the deputy palace lord, and the honor guards are currently using the county capital's taboo treasure to fight with the clone of a god that was imprisoned in the Corrections Division.”

Xu Qing was about to ask some follow-up questions when his transmission jade slip vibrated and a voice message came in from Arch-Immortal Plumdark.

“Xu Qing,” she asked, her voice quavering, “where... where are you? Are you well...? I'm at the Corrections Division and you're not here....”

Given how shaken she sounded, Xu Qing immediately responded and let her know he was fine. Hearing that, she breathed a sigh of relief and seemed about to ask him some more details.

However, he was so flustered he ended the conversation and then sent a voice message to Kong Xianglong. “Kong Xianglong, you need to know that—”

Before he could even finish the message, Kong Xianglong sent his own urgent message.

“Xu Qing, if you’re not here in the county capital, then find a hiding spot and stay away. Don’t come back, at least for a few days. Prisoners are fleeing from the Corrections Division, and you’re a jailer. There are going to be villains on the roads, so be careful. By the way... something even bigger has happened! I just got news that a huge Holytide army just showed up on the border of Sea-Sealing County. This entire thing was premeditated! Xu Qing, war’s about to start!”

Kong Xianglong sounded anxious, but by the end of his message, his voice was decisive.

Xu Qing was still reeling. This turn of events was completely unexpected. All he could do was try to calm down. He took a deep breath, dropped to the ground, and found an underground area to hide. There, he took steps to conceal his aura.

He wasn’t very far from the county capital. Given the level of his cultivation base, he could make the trip in about an hour. And that meant that it wouldn’t be long before prisoners from the Corrections Division could arrive. Although the prisoners were all in a very weak state, when those from Unit C were back in the open, without the heavenly daos of the minor world suppressing them, their battle prowess would quickly return. Kong Xianglong was right. He needed to stay hidden and wait for a few days before going back.

Sea-Sealing County is going to be thrown into chaos.

Next he took out his transmission jade slip and sent a voice message to the innkeeper to let him know what was happening, and also to have the Wood Spirits be on guard. Next he sent a message to the Captain.

The Captain didn’t respond. Xu Qing frowned. After some thought, he messaged Qing Qiu. She didn’t respond either. Sighing, he put away the jade slip and sat down cross-legged to try to settle his thoughts.

In that manner, a day passed.

At a certain point, his command sword vibrated, and the exhausted voice of the palace lord echoed out.

“All swordsages in the vicinity of the county capital are hereby given notice to return at once. Report by this evening! Furthermore, I have three important updates.

“One: the governor is dead.

“Two: the prisoners in the Corrections Division have all escaped. On your way back, take extra precautions to avoid any dangerous situations.

“Three: the Holytides have invaded Sea-Sealing County with a large army. According to our intelligence reports, the Holytides’ ancestral emperor has awakened and given orders to wage war.

“Swordsages... war is upon us.”

Xu Qing put away the command sword, organized his bag of holding, and did a quick check to make sure he was in condition to travel. Then, his eyes gleamed with cold light as he flew up into the air and started traveling.

It was currently noontime. The dome of heaven looked different than it had the previous day. Something like a net seemed to be spreading across the sky. It glittered like gold as it expanded to cover the canopy of heaven. It emanated pulsing pressure, and as soon as Xu Qing was out in the open, it flickered as if noting his presence and making a record of it.

Looking thoughtful, Xu Qing shot toward the county capital.

Along the way, he kept his guard up. Before long, he was near the capital, which was when he got another message from Kong Xianglong.

According to Kong Xianglong, the chaos in the county capital had been temporarily quelled by the lieutenant governor and palace lords of the three Greater Celestial Divisions. Because war was coming, and the Swordsage Palace held primary responsibilities for matters of war, the palace lord had been appointed as the acting governor.

Two dharmic decrees had been issued earlier in the day.

The first was the one summoning all swordsages back to the capital. The second was that the entire county was being locked down and the capital's taboo treasure activated. The huge net in the sky was the manifestation of that taboo treasure.

Xu Qing looked up at the golden net, put his command sword away, and then continued on his way. Shortly after... the county capital became visible up ahead.

It looked completely different than before.

The floating city was full of cracks and crevices. It looked heavily damaged. What was more, the three palaces of the Greater Celestial Divisions were also in extremely bad shape. Most shocking of all was the situation on the ground. The gaping pit where the Corrections Division existed had collapsed in on itself, and the opening was now plugged with rocks and debris. Numerous massive fissures snaked out from it in all directions. For all intents and purposes, the Corrections Division didn't exist anymore.

There were many more swordsages present on patrol duty, as well as guards from the county capital. They were keeping a close eye on everything, looking somber and desolate, but at the same time, full of grief and anger.

There was mutagen present, as well as the lingering fluctuations of magical techniques. Because such things had not yet been purged, the air rippled around them.

Xu Qing was in a grim mood as he entered the county capital. More than a few swordsages noticed him and put their guard up. Some even scanned him with divine will. When they realized who he was, they made way for him.

Xu Qing headed to the Corrections Division first.

Some of the jailers had already carved out a narrow pathway leading down inside. Upon noticing Xu Qing, they nodded in greeting. None spoke. They looked like wild beasts on the lookout to devour someone, who then spotted one of their own kind.

Xu Qing quietly walked past them and went through the narrow passage. Once inside, he saw that the cell blocks were all in ruins.

Eyes turning colder and colder, he eventually found his way to D-132. The door was busted open, and the inside was full of rubble. The cells were all destroyed, and the prisoners were gone. The boy was also missing. Xu Qing inspected the area and eventually found a spot in the back corner where there was a pile of broken bamboo slips. Every single bamboo slip contained the same basic information.... Xu Qing collected the fragments, then continued down to Level 89.

There, he looked at the mural. The minor world... had been destroyed.

“You’re here,” a hoarse voice said from some nearby rubble.

Xu Qing spotted Ghost Hand sitting there, his body riddled with wounds. He was surrounded by empty alcohol jugs. He had one remaining jug in his hand as he looked at Xu Qing. He chuckled bitterly.

“They escaped. Every single one of them. Well, I killed a few. But not enough....”

Xu Qing approached and studied Ghost Hand’s injuries. They were serious. His cultivation base was even fractured. Sensing the strong aura of death on him, Xu Qing took out some medicinal pills and put them off to the side.

“I’m not dead yet, Xu Qing. Say, have any alcohol?” Ghost Hand tossed the empty alcohol jug to the side, where it clattered off into the darkness.

Xu Qing nodded. Taking out a jug from his bag of holding, he handed it over.

Ghost Hand accepted it with a trembling hand. Opening it, he took a long drink. Afterwards, he coughed hard, and his face flushed in an unhealthy way. Taking a few gasping breaths, he looked at the shattered mural.

“Don’t worry, I’m not going to die this easily,” he said. “Remember, Xu Qing, I’ve been powering up my sword for hundreds of years now, and I still haven’t used it.... There were just too many of them escaping. My sword is meant take down a single enemy. So I wasn’t going to waste it on something like this.

“I’m saving it for the sake of Unit C. I’m going to use it on the cretin that destroyed the Corrections Division.... Until I do that, I’m not going to die.” His voice became increasingly filled with determination.

Xu Qing clasped hands and bowed. Then, feeling very conflicted, he left.

Far from Sea-Sealing County, in the depths of the Holytide Region, there was a very special plain that wasn’t part of any county. It was in the very middle of the Holytide Region, and was considered a holy land to the Holytide species.

It was pure white, not because there was snow there, but because there was sand. Each grain contained powerful spirit energy.

There were countless statues present, humanoid in shape, and pulsing with ancient auras. They were the personal guard of Grand Duke Holytide, who had betrayed humankind years in the past. In the years since that event, the cultivators of the guard legion had turned into statues that stood over that white plain. Ironically, the entire place seemed like sacred ground.

The source of that sacredness was a temple in the middle of the plain, which was also pure white. It was the Holytide's ancestral temple, which was where their ancestral emperor slept.

There were currently four hulking figures outside the temple, prostrated and unmoving.

All four of them wore imperial robes and had imperial crowns on their heads. They were the four emperors of the Holytides' four royal dynasties. Emperor Heavengale was one of them. [1]

"Your Ancestral Highness," he said respectfully, "we've done everything according to plan."

Next to Emperor Heavengale was Emperor Redspirit, who said, "Your Ancestral Highness, the Redspirit Army has entered Sea-Sealing County. Regarding the matter of the Nightshade godchild, we've uncovered as many clues as we can, and await your decision."

After a long moment of silence from the temple, an ancient voice echoed out from inside.

"Shelve the godchild matter for the time being. Focus on important things!"

"Your decree shall be obeyed, Ancestral Emperor!" The four emperors ducked their heads and kowtowed.

Chapter 475: Secretary-General

Xu Qing emerged from the collapsed Corrections Division looking very somber. Glancing up at the ruined city above, he took to flight and made his way toward the Eight Sect Coalition's subsidiary sect.

Along the way, he passed countless devastated buildings. The dramatic events of the previous day had clearly had a huge effect on the city. Previously, the streets had been crowded with pedestrians. Now, there were few people out and about. Those who were on the streets hurried about their business. On their faces, Xu Qing saw hesitancy, confusion, anxiety, and even terror. The unusual circumstances surrounding the governor's death would have been enough to cause panic. But then the Corrections Division collapsed, and that made things much worse. Finally, news of the Holytide invasion was spreading, and that pushed people into a state of shock. There were even cultivators who seemed overwhelmed with fear. After all, not everyone was a swordsage. Eventually, Xu Qing stopped looking around.

He was soon at the Eight Sect Coalition's subsidiary sect.

With Arch-Immortal Plumdark in charge, the subsidiary sect was in fairly good condition. However, the coalition forces inside were all packing for travel.

Xu Qing took in the scene and, without pausing for a moment, went to Arch-Immortal Plumdark's residence. Arch-Immortal Plumdark was there with her friend Li Shitao. The two of them looked like they were having a very serious discussion. When Arch-Immortal Plumdark saw Xu Qing, she smiled warmly.

“Xu Qing, I was just going to go looking for you. We received an urgent summons from the sect. Our contingent can’t stay here any longer. We’re teleporting back. Forbidden by the Zombie went completely out of control. The Swordsage Palace has already issued orders to Emperor-Receiving Prefecture; all human sects are required to mobilize and deal with the situation.”

Xu Qing’s heart sank. He had been present to witness the first inklings of unrest in Forbidden by the Zombie, and he had a good idea what was probably happening there.

“The truth is that the Eight Sect Coalition and the Swordsage Court knew all along that the Holytides were behind that initial incident in Forbidden by the Zombie. They instigated the current flare-up as well. Given the circumstances, it seems they want to bog down the major sects in the other prefectures in Sea-Sealing County. We’re entering troubling times, Xu Qing. Given how close you are to the palace lord of the Swordsage Palace, you should be safe. That’s why I’m not asking you to come back with us. You’ll stay here. But... you still need to keep your guard up.”

Looking concerned, she gave three jade slips to him. “The first contains a concealment magic similar to the symbols I painted on you. The second is a long-range teleportation talisman. You can use it in the heat of the moment to escape a dangerous situation. The last one contains a slip of my divine will. It will help you absorb one deadly attack.”

Xu Qing’s heart was anything but calm as he accepted the jade slips. Then he took out some of the dao fruits he’d acquired from the Ten Entrails Tree, which were miraculous ingredients when used in equipment forging and pill concocting. Considering the plentiful resources at the disposal of the Swordsage Palace, it made more sense to give them to the Eight Sect Coalition. They would surely find a good use for them. When Arch-Immortal Plumdark saw them, her expression flickered. Instead of politely refusing them, she simply took them.

About two hours later, things were in order in the subsidiary sect. As Xu Qing watched, the Eight Sect Coalition forces left. At the last possible moment, Arch-Immortal Plumdark turned and looked at him. Their gazes met, and then the light of teleportation flared, and she disappeared along with the rest of the coalition disciples.

Li Shitao clearly had a lot on her mind. After Arch-Immortal Plumdark was gone, she nodded to Xu Qing and hurried away.

Looking at the empty teleportation portal, Xu Qing felt numb. It was actually a familiar feeling. It brought him back to the years he had spent in the slums.

I should report for duty at the Swordsage Palace. Turning, he walked in that direction. In the evening sun, his swordsage uniform shone like blood, and his shadow stretched out long behind him.

It was dark by the time he got to the Swordsage Palace. Upon arriving, he sent a message to Kong Xianglong.

Kong Xianglong flew out to meet him. When he caught sight of Xu Qing, he looked visibly surprised. He could tell that Xu Qing’s cultivation base had advanced significantly. Kong Xianglong

actually felt like he was standing in the presence of a Nascent Soul cultivator. Under normal circumstances, he would have curiously inquired about the details. But considering what was happening, he wasn't in the mood for that.

"Xu Qing," he said, keeping his voice low, "I just got news from the outside. The taboo treasure isn't strong enough to keep out the Holytide army. It's only slowing them down a bit.

"Let's go. All the other swordsages are coming back, and we're supposed to have an assembly with the palace lord tonight to talk about our battle strategy. As of now, Xu Qing... you really are going to start working as a secretary-general."

Xu Qing nodded calmly. He'd known all along that even though he'd been appointed as a jailer, his true post was as the palace lord's secretary-general.

Just as Kong Xianglong had suggested, it was shortly after Xu Qing arrived at the Swordsage Palace that he received a summons from the palace lord. He made his way without delay to the Grand Hall of Swordsages deep in the Swordsage Palace. When he arrived, he saw the palace lord standing in front of a huge projected map, his expression somber and his eyes bloodshot.

The palace lord smelled of blood and looked completely exhausted. Clearly, he hadn't had any rest since the dramatic events began.

There were seven or eight other swordsages with him, plus the four honor guards and the deputy palace lords. All of them had injuries of some sort, with the most seriously injured being the two deputy palace lords. They'd been hurt the previous day when they joined the palace lord in dealing with the god from the Corrections Division. There was no time now to focus on recovery. Now, they were getting new orders from the palace lord.

"Yes, sir!" said the four honor guards and two deputy palace lords. Looking somber, they left, passing Xu Qing along the way and giving him a nod.

After that, the hall was empty, and the palace lord looked away from the map and looked at Xu Qing, his expression stern.

Xu Qing clasped hands and bowed gravely. "Swordsage Xu Qing, reporting for duty."

"Xu Qing, I want you to audit the swordsage personnel list. Determine who hasn't come back and why. I also want you to handle the preparations for the assembly tonight. Can you do that?"

"Your orders shall be followed," Xu Qing said.

The palace lord nodded, then turned away and paid no further heed to Xu Qing. He had many things to handle. Sea-Sealing County was dealing with *internal trouble and outside aggression*, and now that the governor was gone, the palace lord was responsible for everything.

Xu Qing knew his place, and quickly left the hall. Taking out his command sword, he got busy following orders. He was now the palace lord's secretary-general, not in name only, but in reality. He had the authority to check all the swordsage records, and all swordsages would have to

cooperate with his arrangements. That said, there was too much work for him to handle alone, so after mulling the matter over, he sent a message to Kong Xianglong.

Shortly thereafter, Kong Xianglong arrived along with Sir Mountain-River, Wang Chen, and Duskspirit. With their help, he began the audit of the swordsage personnel list, including details about those who had not returned.

Before long, it was only about two hours until the assembly was to start. The time and place had been set, so Xu Qing prepared the notification to be sent out.

“As per the orders of the palace lord, all swordsages will assemble an hour before midnight in Square #1 of the East Wing.”

Xu Qing’s voice echoed out from command swords far and wide. It was his first time speaking publicly with his authority as a secretary-general.

Before long, it was time for the meeting.

Square #1 in the East Wing soon filled with swordsages. There was no need to issue orders explaining how to assemble. Swordsages were a disciplined lot, and before long, all 100,000 swordsages were standing in ranks according to their cultivation base.

No one spoke. The atmosphere was somber, and it was clear that everyone had a lot on their mind. Their eyes flickered with a mix of fury and determination.

The governor was dead. The Corrections Division had collapsed. War was on the horizon. Those things didn’t make the swordsages afraid. Instead, it stoked their killing intent. Their auras combined, spreading out and causing a vortex to spin in the dome of heaven above. The four honor guards were present, as well as the deputy palace lords. And then, the palace lord appeared in front of everyone, his expression grave. He seemed threatening without being angry. Right behind him was Xu Qing.

All gazes were fixed on the stage, so of course everyone saw Xu Qing. His face remained expressionless as he came to a stop nine meters behind the palace lord.

The palace lord looked out at the crowd for a moment. Then he spoke in a grim voice that echoed out in all directions.

“Swordsages, war is here.

“The Holytides have long coveted Sea-Sealing County. But this county belongs to us humans. This isn’t the first time war has broken out. And every time it did in the past, they suffered defeat! There have been no exceptions! For nearly a thousand years, the late governor and I, as well as the other leaders in the county capital, have prepared for this moment.

“The Holytides have sent in the Redspirit Dynasty and the Moonmist Dynasty as their vanguard. They’ve already entered Sea-Sealing County. Yet I feel very confident.

“As long as everyone remains loyal and responsible, nothing unexpected will go wrong. Everything has been planned out in detail. Just like all the great martyrs of the

past here in Sea-Sealing County, we'll prove that we can defend our lands. When the winds of war blow, we will come out victorious. We will stand strong against this Holytide threat.

"We have the assistance of the Administration Palace, as well as 379 allied species including the Saintfiends. They, too, will join the fighting. As of this morning, I personally conferred with the Demi-Immortals. They have chosen to retreat into their ancestral land and seal themselves therein. They will not come out under any circumstances. Therefore, we are not in a weak position in this war."

As the palace lord spoke, he did not get impassioned or worked up. He spoke slowly and analytically.

"However, there's one thing all of you need to know. Today, two things happened in the distant imperial capital.

"First. Our emperor dispatched a new governor along with an army in our direction via cross-region teleportation. They should have arrived tomorrow. However, earlier this afternoon, they were ambushed by Nightshades. We have no idea if they're alive or dead.

"Second. A Nightshade army is advancing on the imperial capital.

"Hard times are coming. For the time being, we here in Sea-Sealing County are solely responsible for defending against the enemy invasion. In all likelihood, this is going to be a prolonged war. In all likelihood, this will be a bitter fight without any backup on the horizon. Regardless, we have to deal with the situation at hand. Do not let this influence your determination to follow through with your pledge. The fact remains: there is nowhere for us to retreat to.

"Of the thirteen prefectures in our county, three have already been occupied by the Holytides. Thankfully, our taboo treasures have been fully activated, slowing their advance. That has bought us a bit of time.

"During that time, we have a few issues we need to resolve.

"Great chaos has broken out in two forbidden grounds. Forbidden by the Zombie and Forbidden by the Garment. It's a Holytide strategy to distract and weaken our prefectural forces.

"The Corrections Division collapsed, and the prisoners escaped. That is going to cause a lot of chaos in Sea-Sealing County. As a result, we are facing *internal trouble and outside aggression*. That is yet another Holytide strategy."

The 100,000 swordsages were clearly getting a bit worked up, including Xu Qing. The palace lord's words were hammering home how much danger Sea-Sealing County was in. However, the palace

lord's voice remained calm, and was a stabilizing force. As a result, the somber and desolate resolve in the hearts of the swordsages didn't lessen.

The palace lord stopped speaking for a moment as he looked at the crowd. Then he said, "Fear not. If heaven collapses, I will hold it up!"

Chapter 476: Matters of War in Sea-Sealing

The *iron-willed and unyielding* palace lord didn't need to say a lot. His short speech was more than enough. The swordsages looked up at him, their eyes shining with determination, respect, and faith.

"All of you remember the oath you took when you became swordsages. *Defend humanity. Sever the doom of dawn. Cause the light of heaven and earth to blossom.*

"It's not just a slogan or a catchphrase. You spoke those words. I spoke them. And now... we will live them. Going forward, we must love each other like family, have each other's backs, never waver, and never give in to defeat!

"We will either live or die with Sea-Sealing County. We will fight to the end! Regardless of what chaos comes to grip our county... we will lead the armies of humankind into battle for the sake of our emperor. And when the time comes, we will take the flame of the Holytide's legacy... and extinguish it!"

The palace lord looked out at the 100,000 swordsages and continued, "And now, prepare to receive your orders! Xu Qing, keep a record of this."

Xu Qing took three steps forward, produced a jade slip, and somberly prepared to record information.

"Notify all human sects from outside Emperor-Receiving Prefecture and Injustice Prefecture that they are hereby conscripted to quell the unrest in Forbidden by the Zombie and Forbidden by the Garment!

"Notify all sects that we require complete loyalty. The Holytides have invaded us with the goal of exterminating the human species. Any sect who does not follow orders, or refuses to die fighting the Holytides, will be considered traitors against humanity.

"Notify the Swordsage Courts in all prefectures to rally all other human cultivators. Form new armies, head to the west, and meet the invading foes on the field of battle.

"Notify the Administration Palace that they shall lead a new army of allied nonhuman species. The Yao Clan is hereby ordered to participate in this effort. They will be stationed on the northern front.

"Notify the Justice Palace that they shall lead the three great sects from the county capital to be the link between the northern and western armies. They will be responsible for logistics and transportation!

“Notify the lieutenant governor that he shall be responsible for defending the county capital, and maintaining law and order throughout the Sea-Sealing County.

“Furthermore... notify all remaining nonhumans and other organizations in the Sea-Sealing County who have not been assigned to the war effort, even if they are evil cultivators or grues, that in order to prevent unrest during this period of war, they're to send all of their Spirit Trove and Void Returning cultivators to war. Any who refuse to cooperate will be exterminated!

“Notify all human organizations to hand over control of their taboo treasures to the county capital. The only exceptions are the sects in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture and Injustice Prefecture.

“Honor guards!”

Daoist Sima, the highest ranking of the four honor guards in the Swordsage Palace, stepped forward and saluted.

“The four of you are responsible for seeing these orders carried out. Any who refuse to cooperate should be executed on the spot!”

“Yes, sir!” the four honor guards said, their expression grave.

Xu Qing kept a careful record of each order. His responsibility would be to process and send out the orders after they were uttered, and also keep track of their progress.

“Brother Yunshan, Brother Shentu!” the palace lord said, turning to look at the two deputy palace lords of the Swordsage Palace. They stepped forward with respectful looks on their faces.

“The situation with the prisoners who escaped from the Corrections Division needs to be resolved as soon as possible. One third of all swordsages will remain in the county capital to take care of things here. The remaining seventy percent will be divided into 700 companies. Each company will have 100 swordsages in it. Split them up into squads as necessary. We want at least 7,000 squads. Each squad will be assigned to a different area, and will cooperate with the jailers to track down the escaped prisoners! If you can arrest them, arrest them. If it's not convenient to arrest them, kill them. Don't let any escape. You two deputy palace lords will take the lead in this matter. I want the entire thing handled in ten days or less. Ten days from now, regroup here to advance to the battlefield!”

The two deputy palace lords nodded, and the 100,000 swordsages all bristled with killing intent. The jailers among them all had cold expressions, and unusually strong killing intent. After all, they were the ones responsible for the prisoners, and knew them well. With other swordsages helping them, they would be able to work very efficiently. The truth was that even if the palace lord hadn't

issued orders like this, the jailers would have decided on their own... to track down the prisoners that they were responsible for.

With the orders given, the swordsages spread out into the night to start working. Most of them followed the leadership of the two deputy palace lords and headed out of the county capital.

Xu Qing did not leave the capital. But that didn't mean he had nothing to do. Quite the opposite. He had no time for rest as he helped the palace lord handle all sorts of random tasks. He was also responsible for filtering all the reports coming in.

After the assembly was over, the palace lord convened a smaller counsel with the Administration Palace and the Justice Palace. Xu Qing stood by his side, keeping the minutes of the meeting, and also forwarding any new information from the palace lord to those on the outside.

Before long, Xu Qing's voice could be heard throughout the various prefectures as he transmitted the palace lord's orders. Virtually overnight, people from all groups became familiar with the palace lord's secretary-general.

Given how closely Xu Qing was working with the palace lord, as the days passed, he personally witnessed how exhausted the palace lord was, thanks to working nonstop. Every few days, the palace lord would exchange communications with the lieutenant governor and the other two palace lords.

More and more dharmic decrees were issued. All of Sea-Sealing County was astir.

As Xu Qing became responsible for dealing with more and more reports, it reached the point where he needed help. Therefore, he summoned some swordsages and formed a new division.

It was called the Secretariat Division.

Qing Qiu was among those he recruited. She had returned two days prior. The moment she'd received Xu Qing's notification, and came to understand the situation, she'd hurried back. When she came into his presence, she had a very strange expression on her face. However, Xu Qing didn't have time for a discussion. He just assigned her a number of important tasks.

I really wish the Captain was here.... Despite how busy he was, Xu Qing kept thinking about the Captain. Unfortunately, the Captain wasn't responding to any messages.

Occasionally, nonhumans would send representatives for audiences. More often than not, Xu Qing was there to receive them.

At the moment, Xu Qing was in one of the Swordsage Palace's reception halls, rubbing the bridge of his nose. In front of him was a very angry nonhuman cultivator.

He was an emissary from the Spirit Ear species. They looked very similar to humans, except they had a second set of ears and twin pupils. They also had gray skin, and no hair whatsoever.

"Exalted Xu, our species really cannot join the war effort. Our patriarch and the other high-level cultivators are unable to leave our homeland. If they do, our enemies, the Persewater species, will definitely cause big problems."

Xu Qing looked at the jade slip he held in his hand. Virtually all the nonhumans who had come for audiences had some sort of problem with the palace lord's demand that the Spirit Trove and Void

Returning cultivators fight in the war. Many groups didn't want to comply, but also knew that they were being forced to comply. Therefore, their only option was to complain and protest.

"Your species has nine late Nascent Soul stage cultivators," Xu Qing said. "Thirty-seven in the mid stage. And forty-five in the early stage. You have over three hundred Gold Core cultivators. The Persewater species has similar numbers.... So how exactly are they going to cause 'big problems' for you?"

Xu Qing looked coldly at the nonhuman.

The Spirit Ear emissary was clearly taken aback. The exact numbers of cultivators in their species wasn't public knowledge. Normally speaking, they kept thirty percent of their forces top secret. Yet Xu Qing obviously had very accurate numbers.

The nonhuman was just preparing a response when Xu Qing received a summons from the palace lord. He stood.

"Look," he said coolly, "either you comply, or your species gets wiped out. Qing Qiu, you handle the final details. If they refuse to cooperate, notify Honor Guard Sima."

"Yes, sir," Qing Qiu said, approaching the Spirit Ear cultivator. Xu Qing didn't pay any further attention as he headed toward the Grand Hall of Swordsages.

He'd already dealt with too many situations like the one with the Spirit Ears. In reality, the stance of people like this wasn't very complicated. In short, they didn't want to send their high-level experts fighting in the war.

But there were likely other, less obvious reasons. For instance, if Sea-Sealing County lost the war, then any top experts left behind in the surviving species and organizations would have a much easier time profiting from the fallout. And as long as they were careful, they wouldn't need to worry about any repercussions. In reality, that was exactly what the palace lord was worried about, and the reason why he had issued such a harsh dharmic decree. The four honor guards had already exterminated a handful of defiant species.

"Internal trouble and outside aggression,"

Xu Qing murmured.

In all of Sea-Sealing County, there was no government agency more in tune with the general state of affairs than the Secretariat Division. All war reports came through the Secretariat Division, and after they were filtered and sorted, they were delivered to the palace lord. That was how the palace lord wanted things handled. And though it made the war effort more streamlined, it put a lot of weight on Xu Qing's shoulders. Not only did he need to organize all the reports, but he also needed to verify their accuracy.

As he was thinking about those things, he arrived at the Grand Hall of Swordsages.

As the palace lord's only secretary-general, he was able to enter the palace lord's presence without being announced. The swordsages outside nodded deferentially to him when he arrived, and he entered.

The palace lord wasn't the only person inside. The lieutenant governor was there, as were the palace lords from the other two palaces. Also present was a middle-aged cultivator dressed like a scholar. Xu Qing had encountered him multiple times in the past few days. He was Marquis Yao. These five individuals were clearly having some sort of disagreement.

"Brother Liangxiu," said Marquis Yao, "how can you be treating the nonhumans in the prefecture so harshly at a time like this? If we don't get things under control quickly, open rebellion could break out. And if that happens, then all other military affairs will have to be delayed until the taboo treasure fallout passes!"

"Tianyan is right," the lieutenant governor said. He sighed. "Liangxiu, don't you think you're being a bit extreme? I'm sure we can think of other ways to make use of the top experts from the nonhuman species."

The palace lords from the Administration Palace and the Justice Palace, a man and a woman, were just sitting looking on with cold expressions.

Xu Qing kept his head bowed as he approached his spot behind the palace lord. The palace lord's expression was cold and grim. Not responding to Marquis Yao or the lieutenant governor, he just stood there looking completely unruffled.

A long moment passed, and then the palace lord said, "Xu Qing, read today's report."

Xu Qing nodded, took a step forward, and then began.

"Between the two forbidden grounds, the most catastrophic situation is in Forbidden by the Zombie. The circumstances in Forbidden by the Garment are less severe. Thanks to the hard work of the forces in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture and Injustice Prefecture, both forbidden grounds have been brought under a certain level of control. According to the reports from the respective Swordsage Courts, the stalemate will continue for about a month.

"In Emperor-Receiving Prefecture, the Seven Blood Eyes sect from the Eight Sect Coalition requested help from 93 nonhuman sects from the Forbidden Sea, as well as forces from the continent of South Phoenix.

"The Swordsage Courts from the other eight prefectures have finished their conscription campaigns. They've gathered 37 large sects, 975 mid-sized sects, and 7,831 small sects that are currently marshaling on the western front.

"A total of 39 human sects of varying sizes refused to follow orders, and in line with the orders from the Swordsage Palace, were exterminated by various Swordsage Courts as a warning to the others.

"Thirty percent of the nonhumans overseen by the Administration Palace and the Yao Clan have gathered on the northern front. The remaining seventy percent have

demanded compensation to participate, and are refusing to do anything until they get it.

“The three great sects overseen by the Justice Palace are all fully equipped. With their combined strength, they have successfully transported the first six batches of war supplies to the battlefield.

“In addition, of the various species and organizations that were not required to join the war effort, a total of 421 have refused to send their top experts as required by your command. Only 215 have honored the dharmic decree. The four honor guards have already exterminated 13 species, and are reporting that the resulting intimidation factor is effective. They have submitted an official request to continue with that work.

“As of one hour ago, all human taboo treasures have been successfully commandeered.

“Today, the swordsages sent out into Sea-Sealing County have killed 9,513 escaped prisoners, which is a ten percent increase over yesterday. Unfortunately, 971 swordsages lost their lives in the process.

“The situation is dire on the western front. The Holytides have fielded three Void Returning experts. What’s more, the Earthsoil Dynasty has joined the fighting. The county capital’s taboo treasure net has been forced to fall back by 35,000 kilometers.

“The Heavengale Dynasty arrived on the northern front today, and their emperor is personally taking command of the troops there.”

Having finished with the report, Xu Qing took a step back.

Chapter 477: The Desolate Wind Blows, the Waters of Yi are Cold

Silence reigned in the hall. Everyone present, including the lieutenant governor, Marquis Yao, and the palace lords from the Administration Palace and Justice Palace, were all privy to various war reports. But none of them had a comprehensive understanding of the situation like the Swordsage Palace did. After all, the palace lord from the Swordsage Palace was temporarily serving as the governor. Therefore, it was only natural that the Swordsage Palace would have the most complete information during this period of conflict.

“Did you all hear that?” the palace lord said, his face expressionless. “Lieutenant Governor, it’s not that I don’t want to use less severe methods to get cooperation from the nonhuman experts. It’s just that we don’t have time.”

The lieutenant governor didn’t say anything in response.

“Marquis Yao, why has a full seventy percent of the allied army not even budged? They’re demanding compensation? What outrageous gall!” The palace lord’s voice was as cold as a winter wind. “Over four hundred groups have refused to dispatch their experts. If a rebellion breaks out in Sea-Sealing County right now, what do you think will happen as a result? Have you put *any* thought into that, Marquis Yao?”

“Both fronts are facing impending crises. Given the current state of Sea-Sealing County, I’m shocked the lot of you are sitting around moaning and whining about things. If I don’t kill a few nonhumans to stabilize things, then my surname isn’t Kong!”

The palace lord’s voice was so icy the entire hall seemed to get colder.

“And what happens if the nonhumans join forces to resist?” Marquis Yao said, his expression steely as he looked at the palace lord.

“Then,” the palace lord replied, enunciating each word one at a time, “we kill them.”

“What if they betray us on the battlefield? You’re just going to kill them all?”

Ignoring Marquis Yao, the palace lord said, “Xu Qing, notify the four honor guards to continue slaughtering any species that defies us. I’m curious to see who refuses to comply when they see that.”

Xu Qing nodded and made a notation.

“You’re as obstinate and self-opinionated as ever, Kong Liangxiu,” Marquis Yao said. “If you do things like this, but don’t keep absolute control over Sea-Sealing County, then when the time comes, those nonhumans....” He trailed off. [1]

The palace lord looked at him coldly. “If Sea-Sealing County ends up being destroyed, then why would I possibly care about what the nonhumans get up to?”

Marquis Yao gave the palace lord a hard look, then flicked his sleeve and stalked off.

“When will the allied nonhumans mobilize, Yao Tianyan?” the palace lord called after him.

“In a day,” came the reply from outside the hall. It was followed by a cold harrumph.

The lieutenant governor sighed. Standing, he clasped hands to the palace lord of the Swordsage Palace, then left. The other two palace lords did the same, showing no facial expression the entire time.

After that, the hall was quiet. Only Xu Qing and the palace lord were there.

Seeing that no more orders were forthcoming, Xu Qing clasped hands and said, “I’ll take my leave now, Palace Lord.”

Once the palace lord was alone, he took out a jade slip and slowly rubbed its surface. Looking in the direction of Yao Mansion, he frowned.

Was it him?

Marquis Yao looked increasingly furious as he returned to his mansion. Once inside, he made his way to a secret chamber. At that point, the fury evaporated, and was replaced by a deeply somber expression.

It probably wasn't Kong Liangxiu. But then... who assassinated the governor...?

Ten days passed.

During that time, Xu Qing essentially had no opportunities to rest. His days were spent dealing with more and more reports. That was especially true after the main armies reached the western and northern fronts, and actually began fighting the Holytide forces.

Reports came in nonstop.

Marquis Yao followed through on his words. It was impossible to say how he did it, but in only a single day, he mobilized the allied nonhumans. Then he left for the northern front, taking virtually all the Yao Clan cultivators with him. The marquis never made a public appearance before leaving.

However, Xu Qing noticed the palace lord staring off in the direction of Yao Mansion on more than one occasion.

The forceful actions of the four honor guards, joined by the two deputy palace lords, intimidated the majority of the nonhumans. Their top experts basically had no choice but to comply with the Swordsage Palace's dharmic decree, and were assigned to armies in the various prefectures. Because of that, there were no Spirit Trove or Void Returning experts in Sea-Sealing County, save for in the armies.

The escaped prisoners were also handled.

The Swordsage Palace employed a dragnet that initially focused on the prisoners with the highest cultivation base. Although some of the weaker prisoners managed to escape, the majority were captured or killed.

Soon enough, the swordsages that had been dispatched started returning. On the tenth day, they were all back.

Around that time, the situation on the two main fronts grew critical. The reports coming through Xu Qing became increasingly desperate. Casualties were shocking, and they only mounted as the days went by. By the evening of the tenth day, both the western front and the northern front sent messages saying they needed emergency assistance.

Sea-Sealing County's taboo treasure was fully activated. It was already on the verge of collapse, and couldn't be used for very much longer. Once it fell, the Holytides would sweep through Sea-Sealing County like a flash flood.

Sadly, no backup army from the imperial capital ever showed up. What was more, Xu Qing knew through the war reports that the distant imperial capital, as well as other counties, were in similar circumstances. The Nightshades... were on the warpath. All of their subordinate species were also on the attack. Every single territory controlled by humankind was being threatened.

When Xu Qing delivered those reports to the palace lord, it was obvious that he was already aware of the situation. When Xu Qing found him, he was putting on a suit of armor. It was pitch black and contained over a hundred sections, each of which emanated terrifying might. When the palace lord spotted Xu Qing, his face remained as somber as ever as he waved him over.

“Come, help me with my armor.”

Xu Qing approached and started helping the palace lord strap the armor on. The palace lord looked off at the sunset, and he suddenly smiled.

“The last time I put on my armor, it was my oldest son who helped me. That was many years ago.”

Xu Qing looked at the palace lord, who suddenly seemed a lot older than he had before, and thought back to what Ghost Hand had mentioned about him having two sons that died in service. [2]

“My oldest son killed himself,” the palace lord said quietly. “I sent him on an infiltration mission into Holytide territory. He accomplished the mission, but was discovered in the process. Rather than putting me in the position of deciding his fate, he took his own life.”

Xu Qing strapped another section of armor onto the palace lord.

“My second son was very outgoing. Perhaps too outgoing. He was sentimental and honorable, but at the same time, was a bit of a ladies’ man. Those two sides to his personality made it easy for people to plot against him. Eventually, he fell victim to such plots, and died. There’s something that no one knows, though. I actually have a grandson. And my grandson... is amazing.”

The palace lord smiled again. Today was the first day Xu Qing ever saw him smile.

It was only a few days before that Xu Qing came to realize that the palace lord’s surname was Kong. After learning that, he’d started to speculate about the grandson that had just been mentioned. [3]

After Xu Qing put the last piece of armor onto the palace lord, the smile disappeared from his face. His expression was somber once again, making him seem like his usual rigid and inflexible self. Taking his helmet, he said, “Xu Qing, send orders to the Administration Palace and the Justice Palace. Tell the two palace lords to go to the northern front. They absolutely *must* hold the line! As for me, I’m going to take all 100,000 swordsmen to the western front. I want to see how strong those Holytide codgers have gotten.”

“Yes, sir,” Xu Qing said somberly. “When do we leave, Palace Lord? I need to prepare a few things.”

“You’re not going to battle. I’ve already arranged for a body double to replace you.”
Palace Lord Kong turned around and looked at Xu Qing.

Xu Qing was stunned as he looked back. The palace lord’s black armor emitted a strong baleful aura, as well as the faint sound of countless wild beasts howling. What was more, countless vicious souls were visible on the armor.

“I have a different assignment for you,” Palace Lord Kong continued. “I’m sending you on a top secret mission. You’ll leave immediately for Daybreak Prefecture. There’s something I need you to investigate. You’ll start in the local Swordsage Court, and then follow any leads as necessary!”

He handed a jade slip to Xu Qing. It was the very same jade slip he had been fiddling with a few days before in the grand hall.

Xu Qing took it, his expression grave.

Palace Lord Kong turned to look once again at the sunset. A long moment passed.

“Only half a month ago, it was underneath this very same sky... that the governor perished. Xu Qing, if I die, I want you to give that jade slip to the new governor, whoever it is. It contains all the clues I’ve gathered so far regarding the governor’s death. In the meantime, feel free to study it yourself...”

Xu Qing hid his surprise as he looked at Palace Lord Kong.

The palace lord’s eyes were still focused on the sunset. “There are too many things about the governor’s death that don’t add up. It’s not as simple as a mere Holytide assassination. The governor was half a step into the Smoldering God level. How could he perish, just like that? He didn’t even fight back! If I didn’t know the governor so well, I would think he died that way on purpose!

“But in the end, the governor is indeed dead. And the circumstances around his death... are very suspicious. Unfortunately, *time and tide wait for no man*, and I have no time to continue the investigation.

“I don’t know who the emperor dispatched to Sea-Sealing County to replace the old governor, but whoever it is, deliver the jade slip to them. The reason I’m entrusting you with this is that I don’t trust anyone else. My grandson is too impulsive, so this kind of responsibility doesn’t suit him.

“Yao Tianyan, the lieutenant governor, and palace lords of the Justice Palace and Administration Palace... are all potential suspects. The death of the governor and the collapse of the Corrections Division were definitely the work of an insider. In fact, I’m sure some people consider me to be the biggest suspect!

“Whoever the traitor is, their cover is perfect. If we can’t uncover their true identity, Sea-Sealing County is going to be completely destabilized.... Xu Qing, the reason I’m confident you’re not a traitor is that 30,000-meter pillar of light.”

Xu Qing struggled to breathe steadily as the ramifications of the palace lord’s words hit him.

“I’m also giving you a command medallion that will give you access to any Swordsage Palace facility in Sea-Sealing County, even restricted facilities. Normally you’d need to spend battle credits to get something like that, but not now. The medallion will ensure that the spell formations don’t react to you. That will let you conduct your investigation secretly.

“What’s more, the command medallion contains the authority to call on the full killing power of the county’s taboo treasure. That should keep you safe while you carry out the investigation.”

Palace Lord Kong handed a blue command medallion to Xu Qing. Then he turned to leave. Stopping at the door with his back to Xu Qing, he said, “Xu Qing, do you remember what I said to you when we met for the first time in the Corrections Division, a year ago?”

“I remember!”

“Repeat it for me.”

Raising his voice, Xu Qing said, “Every swordsage is a sharp sword wielded for humankind as a whole. They should be ready to sacrifice their lives at any moment, all for humanity’s sake.”

Hearing that, Palace Lord Kong laughed heartily and put on his helmet. As he walked away, he said, “I am a swordsage too!”

Chapter 478: Clues Left by the Palace Lord

That night, the palace lords from the Administration and Justice Palaces left for the northern front.

After that, Palace Lord Kong led 100,000 swordsages off to the west with great fanfare. That group of 100,000 included the best of the best from the Sea-Sealing County for the past centuries. The elite cultivators in that group represented all the prefectures in the county. Each one had passed the most difficult of assessments to become a swordsage. All had been on countless missions, and had gone through grueling training to hone their killing ability and toughness. In fact, you could say that they represented the heart of Sea-Sealing County.

And on this day, they took to the field. 100,000 swordsages. Just like the oath they had sworn, they headed to the western front with decisiveness and tenacity.

Xu Qing stood on a mountain outside the county capital, watching them go. He had already concealed his aura. The cold wind caused his garment to flap, and sent his long hair swaying behind him. After watching the swordsage army leave, his expression turned fierce. Turning, he shot in the direction of Daybreak Prefecture. He was like a lone wolf stalking through the night.

“Daybreak Prefecture....” he murmured. As he sped along with his guard up, his heart pounded.

After all, Mount Daybreak was in Daybreak Prefecture. His most deep-seated desire upon reaching the county capital was to eventually travel to Mount Daybreak. Never could he have imagined that he would end up going there like this.

As he flew, he took out the jade slip from Palace Lord Kong and studied the contents. The palace lord had explained a lot before they parted, and had made his way of thinking very clear. The governor's sudden death was extremely strange, and there was no telling who the secret traitor was.

As he studied the information in the jade slip, Xu Qing suddenly stopped in place and struggled to control his breathing.

The lightmost fatehavoc pill?

Despite everything Xu Qing knew about the dao of medicine, he had never heard of such a pill.

Palace Lord Kong's jade slip gave a detailed description of it. It was a taboo pill that had been outlawed during the time of Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity. The reason for the ban on the pill was that top experts from countless species had absolutely detested it. A lightmost fatehavoc pill wouldn't do anything to an ordinary cultivator. However, it was a pill that was extremely dangerous to government leaders, as it had the potential to kill them almost instantly.

The reason for that was related to destiny aura: the pill could cause a deadly eruption in destiny aura power. And the more destiny aura was gathered in someone, the more powerful the effect would be.

The pill was originally created to resist the rule of the Ancient Spirits, and was created using the light of a perished sun. It resurfaced in the days of Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity, and was used to assassinate many humans who had destiny aura, as well as many nonhuman political leaders. There were even three nonhuman emperors who were killed with it.

It didn't matter if someone was human or nonhuman, as long as they were an important leader, they would naturally gather the destiny aura of their species. Destiny aura would give a person something like the mandate of heaven. But at the same time, it could be turned into something that would wreak havoc on someone's fate, and ultimately destroy them with terrifying power. During the half-month that Palace Lord Kong had been investigating the governor's death, the clues he had uncovered pointed to the possibility of a lightmost fatehavoc pill being involved.

Xu Qing's pupils constricted as the information from the jade slip entered his mind.

“Based on my investigation, there are many possibilities as to why the governor died. However, among those many possibilities... only a few of them can account for what happened in the Corrections Division.

“Imprisoned in the Corrections Division was the clone of the god sleeping in Forbidden by the Immortal. The method of imprisonment involved converting destiny aura into a power of forced amnesia. In other words, the clone believed itself to be the spirit automaton of the Corrections Division.

“Whoever continues my investigation should study the files of D-132. For all intents and purposes, D-132 was the epitome of the Corrections Division, and a miniature representation of the entire prison. Feel free to consult my secretary-general, Xu Qing, who

was the most recent guard in D-132, and who I've been grooming as my successor. He's trustworthy.

"The D-132 cellblock was formed by an external manifestation of the prison's suppressing power. Inside of it was the finger of that god's clone, as well as a spirit manifestation of the destiny aura of Sea-Sealing County.

"This god clone from Forbidden by the Immortal had a formidable power: anyone who remembered him would be sucked into endless misfortune. Based on our records, whoever became wrapped up in that misfortune would experience increasingly terrifying situations that would ultimately lead to their death.

"The purpose of the destiny aura spirit in D-132 was to wipe out the memories of that god from anyone who served as a guard there, thus severing the karma.

"Normally speaking, whatever the circumstances surrounding the governor's death, they shouldn't have any connection to the Corrections Division. After all, the Corrections Division has been around for an extremely long time, and has seen many governors come and go.

"After carefully considering the various possibilities, and weighing them against each other, I've come to focus on the lightmost fatehavoc pill. As for why I think that pill is involved, whoever continues the investigation can check Classified Dossier 19.

"I've had limited time to run this investigation, and time is now running out. What's more, the enemy is still in hiding, while I myself am exposed. I don't want to tip my hand, and also, the war situation is approaching a critical point. Sea-Sealing County is in great danger, making it impossible for me to secretly carry out this investigation.

"Thus, I'm sending my secretary-general, Xu Qing, to look for a very specific clue.

"And that is: daybreak light.

"Activating a lightmost fatehavoc pill requires one special element: the light of a perished sun. Such light can only exist for a very short moment. And that kind of light occasionally appears in the vicinity of Mount Daybreak.

"Whoever is behind this plot is obviously clever and skilled. In all likelihood, investigating Mount Daybreak won't lead to anything. But we can't ignore it. As for what it reveals in the end... if I die in battle, then whoever continues the investigation can ask Xu Qing." [1]

Xu Qing currently stood on a wide plane under the dark of night, a thoughtful look on his face as he put away the jade slip. He turned to look toward the western front, then started moving again toward Daybreak Prefecture.

A few days passed.

The public believed Xu Qing to be with Palace Lord Kong on the way to the battlefield, but in reality, he had already used the concealment magic given to him by Arch-Immortal Plumdark to 'disappear.' He was already in the prefecture that lay between the county capital and Daybreak Prefecture.

It was a very large area that was known for the very unique type of wind that blew through it. Wherever that wind blew, it would open up countless strange rifts in the air. That made it impossible to fly, and thus made ground travel a necessity. After all, the wind only touched the air, not the ground. According to local legend, when the sun perished in Daybreak Prefecture, it created an unusual climate that gave birth to this unique wind. As a result, it came to be called the 'sun wind'.

When the sun wind blew, only people with extremely high cultivation bases could fly. Everyone else had to drop to the ground. There was no way to reach Daybreak Prefecture without going through this area.

Xu Qing would drop to the ground when the wind blew. When it stopped, he would fly back up into the sky again. As he traveled, he saw how the war was already affecting Sea-Sealing County. The citizens of the small human nations that existed everywhere were visibly alarmed. The countless villages that dotted the wilderness were terrified. Everyone that Xu Qing saw was fearful because of the war, and also uncertain about the future.

And then there were the nonhumans. Now that Xu Qing wasn't wearing his swordmage uniform, and was instead clad in an ordinary robe, he could see the wild ambition and greed in their eyes. It was easy to imagine what would happen if the war spread to these areas, and the Holytide army took over. These nonhumans would immediately turn on the humans, and take advantage of the situation to plunder whatever was available.

Palace Lord Kong was right. If he hadn't forced the nonhuman experts into service, things would have been a lot worse.

Xu Qing's eyes glittered with cold light as he continued on his journey. Occasionally, he would spot human sects off in the distance. All of them had activated spell formations to seal off their headquarters. Most of the cultivators were off at war, leaving those headquarters with only a few people behind to take care of things.

All major sects had activated their taboo treasures and handed control over to the county capital.

Over the course of a few days of travel, Xu Qing saw brightly colored light flashing in heaven and earth, which were of course caused by the use of those various taboo treasures being activated. One afternoon, the canopy of heaven trembled, and Xu Qing looked up to see scintillating light flowing across the net in the sky. Terrifying pressure weighed down as one stream of light headed to the west, the other to the north. Clearly, power was being taken from the taboo treasures and used with killing force on the battlefield.

The rumbling sounds that filled the sky were a constant reminder to Xu Qing that a bitter war was being fought.

Looking down from the sky, he continued on his way.

Two more days passed.

If he traveled through the night, he would reach the border of Daybreak Prefecture. As the sun set, and the sun wind blew, Xu Qing landed near a village.

Something seemed off about the place. It looked different from other villages that Xu Qing had seen. For example, the trees weren't growing out of the ground. Instead, they floated in the air. There was a flock of birds overhead, and though the feathers of their wings rippled, they weren't actually moving. They seemed stuck in place. And they were being hurt by the sun wind.

The situation on the ground was even more freakish. The buildings were all upside down. Some parts of the village would disappear, then appear again a moment later. At the entrance of the village was a hairless dog with a human face, looking at Xu Qing with bared teeth, growling.

Xu Qing took in the scene as the sun set and darkness spread.

Once it was dark, everything changed again. It went back to normal, and resembled any old village. The dog at the entrance was now a muscular oaf. He grinned at Xu Qing with blackish-yellow teeth and beckoned at him to enter the village.

Xu Qing's face remained expressionless. He had no time to waste, and thus, he just circled around the village and continued on his way.

But then, the village behind him trembled, and then the buildings grew legs, stood up, and rushed toward him.

Xu Qing stopped in place and turned around. All the buildings dropped in place. The village oaf was still there, grinning and waving at him. As he grinned gruishly, the entire village emanated pure malice.

Xu Qing walked back toward the village.

His shadow stretched behind him, emitting fluctuations of excitement. It sounded like it was salivating.

“Hungry... so hungry...”

That made Xu Qing think back to when he was in Emperor Ancient Spirit's major world, when the shadow had tried to eat some of the evil souls, only to end up vomiting.

Xu Qing decided he ought to reward the shadow for its loyalty, and therefore walked a bit more quickly toward the village. It only took a few moments for him to reach the grinning oaf.

Seeing Xu Qing approaching, the oaf was about to open his mouth when the shadow suddenly lunged toward him. The shadow enveloped him, and the oaf disappeared.

As crunching sounds rang out, the entire village trembled. Numerous eyes popped up on the buildings and trees. They looked at Xu Qing, then closed.

“Eat,” Xu Qing said coolly, standing there with arms crossed.

Chapter 479: Patriarch Muddlesky and Stonefiend Seacrusher

After devouring the oaf, the shadow excitedly acknowledged Xu Qing's subsequent orders. It was like an extremely obedient but vicious dog who, in its extreme longing, suddenly received its master's approval to go wild.

The buildings in the village now realized that Xu Qing was someone not to be trifled with. Their legs immediately appeared, and they turned to flee. It was too late.

Xu Qing's shadow spread out rapidly, whereupon agonized shrieks rang out from the buildings. The shrieks didn't last for long, though. After the shadow covered the buildings, the shrieks were replaced by chewing sounds.

"Yum... yummm... yummmm....."

The shadow was clearly very excited. It even sent out black tendrils, like tentacles, to capture all the fleeing buildings.

It was a very grisly scene. Anyone who happened upon it would be astonished. After all, Xu Qing's method of giving orders to a grue made him more grisly than the grues themselves. The trees vanished. The buildings collapsed. The shadow was essentially devouring everything including the flesh and bones.

Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior suddenly appeared. He blinked a few times, and his eyes shone with excitement. Apparently, he was trying to remind Xu Qing of the things he had done in the past.

Xu Qing ignored him.

Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior suddenly felt the need to be more vigilant than ever, as he realized that his own sense of existence was fading. He had read a lot of books in which the main character had a pet who, because of matters relating to their sense of existence, gradually faded away, never to be seen again. In the past, the patriarch had always assumed it was because the author just forgot about the pet. But based on his current experiences, he realized that wasn't the case. It was instead a situation in which the pet didn't work hard enough. It didn't have anything to do with the author.

I have to break through soon! Very soon! I have to get Nascent Soul power before the Fiendish Xu! That way my sense of existence will be much stronger!

As the patriarch stewed in such thoughts, the shadow gorged itself. Apparently, the flavor really was delicious, as the shadow even materialized a tongue that it used to lick every last bit of flavor out. But then, an angry shout rang out.

"You're going too far!"

Some tentacles appeared that resembled the shadow's tendrils, except they were made of flesh and blood. As they burrowed out of the ground and whipped around wildly, the shadow stretched toward them excitedly. However, the tentacles then used some unknown method to spit out some black mist which blocked the shadow.

But the shadow wasn't picky with food: it just started devouring the mist, which got it even more excited. Then, it got closer to the tentacles, looking like it was very pleased to have found something so interesting.

When they clashed, chewing sounds mixed with cries of agony. The tentacles were quickly being ripped to shreds. Only a moment later, the surviving tentacles self-detonated, and the resulting explosion shoved the shadow backward and caused it to shatter. Then the countless chunks of bloody flesh converged in the distance, forming a strange beast that looked like a qilin, except that it was covered with tentacles.

The beast looked grimly at the shadow, which was already back in one piece and clearly unharmed. *What kind of grue is this?*

“Hurry up and eat it,” Xu Qing said coolly.

The shadow glared malevolently at the beast, then blurred toward it. Halfway there, it turned into a huge coffin with countless eyes covering its surface.

“You command grues? Very interesting. It seems that during my two hundred years of confinement in the Corrections Division, some very unusual magical techniques have been developed. In that case... allow me to devour you first, fool!”

With a roar, the beast exploded again, causing a host of bloody flesh chunks to rush forward. In the blink of an eye, they were right in front of Xu Qing, and were clearly about to surround him.

“Corrections Division?” Xu Qing murmured, his eyes turning cold. He shoved his hand out into the middle of all the chunks of flesh and grabbed a small, slippery object from within. He yanked it out.

A bloodcurdling scream shook the area. The chunks of flesh dissolved into ashes, and Xu Qing was left holding a trembling, pitch-black imp. It was dripping wet and had only one eye. What was more, the back half of its head was missing, and the interior of its skull was empty. Someone had apparently dug out most of its brain. The wound had not yet healed over.

It all seemed very strange. Xu Qing knew that not all jailers in the Corrections Division liked to just kill prisoners. Many of them were fond of experimentation and research. Many had grand aspirations that would lead them to perform vivisections on nonhumans. This imp most likely had been an experiment subject at the moment of the prison break.

Xu Qing’s shadow approached and swirled around him, looking curiously at the little imp that was the same color as itself.

“You wouldn’t dare kill me!” the imp shrieked. “My bosses are Patriarch Muddlesky and Stonefiend Seacrusher! They’re from D-132! You’ve probably heard of D-132, haven’t you? That’s the most brutal and mysterious location in the Corrections Division. If you dare do anything to me, they’ll definitely put you to death!”

Clearly, this little imp didn’t know who Xu Qing was....

It made sense considering how many prisoners had been kept in the Corrections Division. It wasn’t as if Xu Qing had visited all the cell blocks. What was more, the majority of prisoners who laid eyes on him ended up dead.

Xu Qing had been planning to just crush the imp out of existence. But then he started talking about D-132, and it caused Xu Qing’s eyes to glitter. Next, he threw him down in front of Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior.

“Get a location,” Xu Qing said quietly.

“Yes, sir!” the patriarch said. He flashed a vicious smile as he stalked toward the little imp.

Before long, screams rang out in all directions. They didn't last for very long. After enough time passed for half an incense stick to burn, the extremely pleased-looking patriarch got the information out of the imp.

Once they knew the direction to go in, Xu Qing blurred into motion.

About an hour later, they caught sight of an illusory mountain made of black mist. A pitch-black aura pulsed out from it in all directions, making it seem extremely malevolent. Anyone who looked at it would feel instantly uneasy, and wouldn't dare to approach it.

"Milord, based on the information from Little Imp, this mountain has a lot of grues on it. All of them were recruited by the two bosses he mentioned. They began recruiting after the swordsages left for war." Keeping a firm grip on the gasping imp, the patriarch respectfully continued, "What if I go with Little... Shadow to scout ahead? Once these two bosses appear, we can—"

"There's no need for that." Xu Qing didn't want to waste any more time, so he flew toward the misty mountain.

The concealment magic he was using didn't just hide his aura, it also concealed his cultivation base. As he entered the mountain, he waved his hand to part the mist.

A moment later, howls erupted from within the mountain as ghostly shadows surged out. But before they could even get a sense of where Xu Qing was, they screamed and exploded.

Seeing that, the little imp in the patriarch's hand grew increasingly terrified.

Xu Qing didn't slow down at all. He strode through the mist, causing any gruish entities to vanish before they could even get within thirty meters of him. Thus he climbed closer and closer to the summit of the mountain.

It was only at this point that whatever entities controlled the mountain started to realize that something was going on. A piercing cry erupted, full of wild arrogance.

"What blind dog dares to cause a scene in my presence?"

It was a familiar voice. As it echoed out, a head appeared, rising up from the summit of the mountain. And beneath it was the extremely impressive body of a stone guardian lion. The head and the stone lion didn't really match, but they emanated an impressive aura that weighed down viciously on everything.

Xu Qing looked up without a scrap of expression on his face.

Meanwhile, the imp being held by Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior suddenly got extremely excited.

"Bosses!" he screamed. "Bosses, help!"

A vicious gleam appeared in the eyes of the head, and its expression was equally ferocious. Looking down through the mists, it bellowed, "Whoever dares cause problems for one of my subordinates is courting... huh?" Before the head could finish speaking, its eyes came to rest on Xu Qing. "What? What?"

The head's eyes went wide and its pupils constricted. It started trembling. It seemed it couldn't believe what it was seeing, and it even blinked seven or eight times.

All the while, the imp was yelling more and more loudly. "Bosses, it was this bastard! You have to kill him!"

The head unleashed a piercing scream of terror that caused everything to tremble violently.

"Holy crap!!" Massive tidal waves of shock pounding the head's mind as it turned to flee.

However, the stone lion reacted even more quickly. All four of its legs pumped wildly, and its tail swished back and forth as it threw the head off it and started running away at top speed.

After being thrown off the lion, the head flipped end over end a few times before righting itself and fleeing after the lion.

"Y-y-you? What are you doing here? Aren't you supposed to be at war? Aren't all the swordsages off at war? Goddammit! What are you doing here??"

Remaining completely calm, Xu Qing strode after them in pursuit.

Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior hurried after Xu Qing, keeping his grip on the imp, who was completely stunned. Its two bosses were supposed to be illustrious and terrifying figures from D-132, but now they were fleeing like mad.

"Bosses... the two of you—"

"Shut up!" wailed the head. "He's the boss! He's the freaking guard in charge of D-132!" The head really wished it could just devour that imp. "I just got free! You little bastard! I can't believe you brought this heaven-damned killer here! Do you know how many times he's stomped me to death?"

Chapter 480: Not One Less!

Upon realizing that its short moment of freedom was coming to an end now that it had run into a jailer... the head was profoundly furious.

If it had been an ordinary jailer, it might not have been a big deal. The head could have made a big scene and probably pulled the wool over the eyes of someone unfamiliar with it. But when facing Xu Qing, it didn't dare to bare even a hint of its teeth. All it dared to do was flee. Not even it was sure how many times Xu Qing had killed it. Xu Qing's methods were profoundly brutal, and what was more, the fluctuations of godly authority he emanated were terrifying. And then there was that shadow of his....

The head could remember not too long ago how Xu Qing would awaken in D-132, and the first thing he would do was stomp the head out of existence. No matter how many times the head experienced that, it never got used to it. All it did was instill a deep terror of Xu Qing into it. It trembled in fear as it fled, and the stone lion ahead of it was in the same position.

Xu Qing wasn't in a rush. He watched coldly as the head and the stone lion ran from him. Now that he wasn't under the influence of D-132, some of the memories of that time were returning to him.

One thing he now recalled... was why he had always snapped those bamboo slips. They had gathered godly power from D-132, and were also full of the amnesiac destiny aura. What was more, being all piled together caused the bamboo slips to change on a substructural level.

Every time I woke up and realized that, I wanted to use the power of D-132 to create a special treasure.

With such thoughts on his mind, he summoned the hellspirit bloodwing and then shot forward with such astonishing speed that he instantly caught up with the head.

All the head saw was a blur, and then Xu Qing was in front of it. It shrieked in absolute terror as Xu Qing lifted his foot.

“AIIIIIIIIIIII! Not this again!” It instinctively closed its eyes, and then a loud thump rang out.

Xu Qing stomped his foot onto the head, causing it to burst. Then he looked placidly at the stone lion.

“Get the hell back here!”

The stone lion stopped in place and shivered. It didn't dare to continue fleeing. Thinking back to how many times Xu Qing had burned it to death, it obediently turned back around, then skipped back to Xu Qing, wagging its tail like a puppy. When it reached him, it dropped to the ground in front of him in obeisance.

Xu Qing coldly examined the lion. Whether it was because of his memories or the information carved onto the broken bamboo slips, he knew that this stone lion was the cloud troll from D-132. More precisely, under the effects of the destiny aura, it looked like a cloud troll. But this headless stone lion was its true form. That was why the head had made such a big deal about Xu Qing putting him in that specific cell. It was because it wanted to become the stone lion's head.

As Xu Qing considered those things, the chunks of flesh that had been the head flew back together. A moment later, the head was whole again, and it immediately started shrieking.

“Exalted Jailer, I—”

Xu Qing stomped on it. Another thump rang out as it exploded yet again.

The stone lion shivered and wagged its tail even harder.

The head recovered fairly quickly, and immediately began moaning. “I'm done for. Done for! Without the amnesic effects of D-132, I simply—”

Thump.

It exploded again.

In that manner, an hour passed. After stomping on the head seventeen or eighteen times, Xu Qing left.

But this time, he wasn't moving on foot. He was sitting on the back of the stone lion. As for the head... it was tied onto the stone lion's tail. As the stone lion bounded along, its two rear paws

would continuously smack the head, causing it to moan in grief and indignation. However, it didn't dare lose its temper with Xu Qing. Instead, it would curse the lion.

Upon hearing those curses, the stone lion would make sure to swish its tail vigorously, and kick out its hind legs with increasing force.

Xu Qing had originally intended to put these two prisoners to death. But apparently, they had been locked up in D-132 with that god for so long that they had been slowly transformed in miraculous ways. Or perhaps it was some curse. Either way, whenever they died, they were always resurrected almost immediately.

Now that Xu Qing thought about it, that was how they were back in D-132.

That said, though he couldn't kill them, he also couldn't just let them go free. So he decided to bring them with him.

The headless stone lion bounded along at incredible speed, using a lot of force with its rear legs. The head tied to its tail screamed and cursed constantly. And Xu Qing sat expressionlessly on the lion's back, occasionally pointing out to indicate which direction to travel in.

Around the time the sky was turning bright, Xu Qing could see Daybreak Prefecture in the distance. "Daybreak Prefecture?" the bruised head blurted. Spitting out some chunks of rock it had bitten off the stone lion's legs, it looked in the direction of Daybreak Prefecture and blinked a few times.

"Exalted one! Sir! I have information to report! Do you remember that Paintedfolk bastard Sir Inkwell? He's in Daybreak Prefecture! And not just him. That god's finger from D-132 is also there!"

Xu Qing's eyebrows shot up and he turned to look at the head.

Putting on a very fawning expression, the head said, "Those damn prisoners have no sense of gratitude. The Corrections Division treated us so well! We got food and drink, and they didn't execute us. We had a nice place to sleep. In a chaotic world such as ours, a place like that is hard to find. But them? They actually broke out!"

"Exalted one, the truth is that this entire time, I've been really missing life back in the Corrections Division. Every single memory is something I cherish! I miss it so much! So, being the upright and righteous head that I am, I absolutely had to give you this information! Exalted one, you should also know that the old fart Sir Inkwell was the one that instigated the whole prison break!"

Hearing all of that, Xu Qing looked thoughtfully in the direction of Daybreak Prefecture.

As the palace lord's secretary-general, he'd been given access to more than just the war reports from all of Sea-Sealing County. He'd also been privy to the details surrounding the collapse of the Corrections Division.

At the moment of the event, the suppressing power of the Corrections Division had vanished. The god's clone, which had been fooled into thinking it was a spirit automaton, instantly woke up. Then

it erupted with power as it tried to revert itself from a state of dismemberment into a state of being whole again.

Thankfully, Palace Lord Kong himself was stationed in the Corrections Division. Thanks to his quick action, along with the help of the honor guards and the deputy palace lords, bolstered by the power of the county capital's taboo treasure, they quickly re-sealed the clone's head and torso. However, as they did that, the governor died and the Corrections Division exploded. The county capital had descended into chaos, and large numbers of prisoners took advantage of the moment to escape. And among those who escaped were some of the other parts of the god's clone.

The final tally concluded that two fingers and an eye had vanished without a trace. The only upside was that they sustained severe injuries in the process.

During the swordmage's attempt to round up all the prisoners, they found one of the fingers, and the two deputy palace lords managed to capture it.

As for the other missing parts, one finger and one eye, there were no clues regarding their whereabouts. They had gone into hiding somewhere, and the presumption was that if further intense searching was carried out, they would be found. But because of the war, the swordmages didn't have that spare time to work with.

If what the head just said was true, then the finger from D-132 was hiding somewhere in Daybreak Prefecture.

As Xu Qing considered matters, the head blinked rapidly a few times. It was very pleased, as it was thinking that if Xu Qing went looking for Sir Inkwel, then either Xu Qing would end up dead and the head would have his freedom back, or the old Paintfolk bastard would also end up captured, and there would be a big D-132 reunion party.

As far as the head was concerned, it was too unfair that all the other D-132 cellmates were free, while it wasn't. It would be much better for them all to be suffering. Having reached the conclusion that this was definitely the best way to think about it, the head continued speaking.

"Exalted one, back when the Corrections Division exploded, that old fart Sir Inkwel ran off with the god's finger and—"

"I'm not a fan of lies," Xu Qing said coldly.

The head shivered and quickly spoke in a different tone of voice. "It was the god's finger! Hē clearly has thoughts of being independent. Instead of responding to the call of the other body parts, hē fled with Sir Inkwel. Me and the lion here had no choice but to follow along.

"Ehhh... while we were traveling, I heard that old fart Sir Inkwel talking to the finger. From what I could hear, I think hē wanted Sir Inkwel to paint something.

"Of course, hē's a god. Very different from us. So Sir Inkwel said that a painting like that would need special paint. And that's why they went to Daybreak Prefecture, to look for the legendary remains of the fallen sun, and use them as the main ingredient in the paint."

The head didn't dare to hide any elements of the story, and in fact took great efforts to include every detail. After all, if Xu Qing got the sense he was lying, he knew he would pay the price.

After some more thought, Xu Qing patted the stone lion's neck, and the lion bounded forward toward Daybreak Prefecture.

As the prefecture got closer, Xu Qing mentally reviewed everything he knew about it. Daybreak Prefecture was unlike Sea-Sealing County, or any of the other prefectures, for that matter. It contained virtually no dry land. Instead, it was a massive, incomparably deep pit covering ninety percent of the prefecture.

Legend had it the huge pit was really a crater that resulted when the broken face of the god arrived, and one of the suns perished. When it fell, it created that massive pit.

Thus, Daybreak Prefecture was like a bottomless abyss, a lake so big it was like a sea. In fact, it was called the Abyssal Sea. The surface of the pitch-black sea was dotted with occasional mountain peaks that stuck up out of the water. Over time, the tips of those huge mountains came to be occupied by humans and nonhumans alike. The mountains were very unique in that they were made of a black, crystalline substance that came to exist when the sun fell and released incomparable heat. That was one of the reasons why this prefecture was known for producing cloudmother stones.

In the middle of the Abyssal Sea and all the mountains, there was an extremely large mountain called Mount Daybreak, which was where Daybreak Prefecture's Swordsage Court was located.

What was more, the sun wind in Daybreak Prefecture was stronger than in surrounding areas. It blew constantly, year-round, and never abated. As a result, Daybreak Prefecture was a place where teleportations weren't possible, and flight was extremely limited. Instead, over the years that had passed, cultivators of the various species took to traveling on huge ships.

To accommodate those huge ships, the borders of Daybreak Prefecture featured numerous harbors. Right now, Xu Qing was looking at a mid-sized harbor. He was in disguise, and he had masked his aura. He had also disguised the stone lion and the head.

The huge harbor reminded him very much of Seven Blood Eyes. After all, the Abyssal Sea was reminiscent of the Forbidden Sea. It was even the same color.

A wharf stretched out into the water, but there were no ships docked. That said, a lot of cultivators were waiting on the wharf. There were a handful of humans present, but the majority were nonhumans of every shape and size.

The buzz of conversation reached Xu Qing's ears as he approached.