

## Timescape 491

Chapter 491: Someone in a Euphoria Iris

Xu Qing's voice contained not even a hint of emotion.

When his words echoed into the head's ears, the head shivered even more intensely than before. Never could it have ever imagined that its talk about a reunion would actually come true. This development left it completely flabbergasted.

Off to the side, Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior felt superlatively excited as he urged, "Go on! Get inside!"

The head looked like it was really about to start crying, and was about to say something when Xu Qing waved his hand. A scream echoed out as the head tumbled into D-132 and back into its same old cell. Once inside, the head sensed the presence of the finger, and it let loose an agonized shriek.

"Th-th-this..."

Before it could even react, light glittered as the stone lion also flew into its old cage in D-132, where it landed with a thump and turned into a cloud troll. After looking around blankly, it spun until its back was to the door, then started eating its own tentacles. Apparently that was the only way it could pacify itself. However, every time it plucked off a tentacle, that tentacle turned into a head. Clearly, it was not very happy about the head's so-called 'reunion.'

When the head saw that, it started crying.

Before many tears could fall, light glittered again in D-132, and Sir Inkwell appeared. In order to make sure the god's finger had familiar surroundings, Xu Qing didn't want to kill the old Paintedfolk. Instead, he would keep him in D-132. He had bite marks all over him as he stood looking around mutely at D-132. His cell felt very familiar. Then he heard the head weeping, and saw the god's finger sleeping. He looked dazed.

"And thus, the D-132 reunion begins," Xu Qing said, his voice echoing within the tenth heavenly palace.

The head wept. The stone lion chewed. Sir Inkwell trembled. And the god's finger had apparently found the familiarity it sought, for it slept very soundly.

Having accomplished these things, Xu Qing paid no further attention to his tenth heavenly palace. Instead, he looked in the direction of Mount Daybreak, and started moving. Previously, he hadn't been capable of long-term travel on the surface of the Abyssal Sea. But things were different with this new body.

In that matter, time slipped by slowly but surely.

A day later, when he was about two days away from Mount Daybreak, Xu Qing suddenly slowed down as he realized he had caught wind of someone crying for help. With his previous body, his senses were not so acute. It went to show how extraordinary he was now.

By paying attention closely, he could make out what this person was saying.

"Help... can someone help... help me..."

The voice sounded weak. At the same time, it caused Xu Qing's eyebrows to shoot up as he realized it was a familiar voice. After some thought, he realized who it was.

"Ning Yan?"

Surprised, Xu Qing looked around at the pitch-black waters of the Abyssal Sea and thought back to when they had all teleported away from the Ten Entrails Tree. He hadn't seen Ning Yan since that event. [1]

Could it be that the sun winds here interrupted his teleportation path and caused him to drop down in this area? Then he ran into some sort of trouble, and that's why he never made it back to the county capital?

Curious, Xu Qing started moving in the direction of the voice. About an hour later, he found its source. Deep beneath the surface of the Abyssal Sea, he saw an enormous, beautiful flower, right in the middle of blooming.

It was a euphoria iris.

The flower was some dozens of meters in size, and had a host of colorful petals that swayed rhythmically. What was more, there were hundreds of stamens swaying about, and at the end of each was a nonhuman woman. The stamens didn't extend above the surface. Instead, they clustered around the flower, their expressions joyful as they continuously absorbed something. Right in the middle of the flower and its countless swaying petals lay a figure.

It was Ning Yan. His clothing was tattered, and he was gasping for breath. He looked shriveled to the point of being skeletal. His listless eyes seemed dazed and lifeless as he looked at the surrounding nonhuman women absorbing him. He occasionally shivered, and as he seemed to grow weaker and weaker, he would occasionally cry out.

"Help... help..."

The euphoria iris was a unique type of flower native to Daybreak Prefecture, and Xu Qing had seen one on his travels. He had also been told by the head that even strong men would only last four or five breaths of time before being turned into a desiccated corpse. Not even Gold Core experts would last for very long. The flower's unique ability was to turn the ends of its stamens into beautiful members of the opposite sex, who would then attract victims.

An odd expression appeared on Xu Qing's face as he looked at the huge euphoria iris. This flower seemed smaller than the one he'd seen on his travels, although this one seemed much more attractive.

The women on the ends of the stamens had flushed faces and seemed extremely flirtatious. Clearly, Ning Yan was providing them with abundant nutrients.

*If Ning Yan was really teleported here... then he's been stuck for a long time! I can't believe he's still alive!* Xu Qing thought back to everything that happened at the Ten Entrails Tree, and had to admit that the Captain's intuition was really on point. *There's definitely something very unusual about this guy.*

After some thought, he decided that he should save the skeletal Ning Yan. After all, he was a good tool in his and the Captain's arsenal, and was relatively easy to make use of. Just leaving him to die here would be a big pity.

Face calm, he strode forward. As he neared, the euphoria iris could sense the impending danger. Shivering, it sent its stamens away from Ning Yan and toward Xu Qing, where they gnashed their teeth and made threatening noises.

Xu Qing just got closer.

Seeing that, the euphoria iris belched out a pink mist that roiled forth. At the same time, it uprooted itself to flee.

Meanwhile, the stamens swished to block Xu Qing's path. Before they could even get close to him, the ones in the lead screamed in agony as their skin melted, turning into black goo that dripped down.

Xu Qing noticed that with some intrigue. Only now was he realizing that, after his transformation, his taboo poison took effect even more quickly than before. Pondering that, he continued forward. As he proceeded, the stamens melted. The beautiful, nonhuman faces filled with terror as they backed up, trembling. From their expressions, they clearly didn't want him getting close to them.

It was a familiar sensation to Xu Qing. It made him think back to when he'd pushed the violet crystal close to his heavenly palaces, or when the god's finger had experienced something similar. Xu Qing frowned. He actually didn't like this scene. So he stamped his foot down, sending out a ripple that exploded the stamens.

The only thing left behind was the euphoria iris itself, which shivered in terror.

Pleased, Xu Qing walked onto the flower, past its many petals, and picked up the emaciated Ning Yan.

Ning Yan was virtually naked. Looking up at Xu Qing with pleading eyes, he said, "Elder Brother Xu Qing? What are you doing here...? Help... help me...."

When Xu Qing saw the extent to which Ning Yan had been tormented, he sighed inwardly. It was just further evidence of the horrors this world could inflict. Taking out some medicinal pills, he fed them to Ning Yan. He also took out a new set of clothing for him. Then he helped him out of the euphoria iris. Once they were some distance away, and the euphoria iris was melting in a cloud of poison, a scream echoed out. Behind them was nothing but a mass of black sludge.

The moment the euphoria iris died, Ning Yan shivered. Then he seemed to recover to a degree. He looked back in the direction of the euphoria iris, mixed emotions on his face.

Xu Qing was actually shocked by the look on his face after he regained his senses. "You miss it?"

"No..." Ning Yan said, shivering. He looked at Xu Qing with eyes full of gratitude.

"Elder Brother Xu Qing, you saved my life. I, Ning Yan, will never forget this! But what are you doing here...?"

"What are *you* doing here?" Xu Qing replied calmly. Most importantly, he wanted to know if Ning Yan had ever realized it was Xu Qing back at the Ten Entrails Tree. That

said, it didn't really matter either way. The four of them had all been involved in that incident, so if word got out, it would be bad for all of them.

"Huh?" Ning Yan said hesitantly. "Elder Brother Xu Qing, I came here to Daybreak Prefecture on a mission. But then I got snagged by that damned euphoria iris. I was trapped for so long...."

"So you don't know about what's happening in Sea-Sealing County?" Xu Qing asked.

Ning Yan looked surprised. He had no idea what was happening outside. Actually, Xu Qing's earlier guess was correct. Ning Yan had been teleported here, and had been unable to make his way out. Then he ran into the euphoria iris. At first, the euphoria iris had been just a tiny plant. Almost ordinary in nature. But as time passed, it grew larger and larger. Stronger and stronger. And... no matter how Ning Yan tried to free himself, he failed.

Xu Qing got the answer he needed just by looking at Ning Yan's facial expression.

*So, he never guessed that it was me....*

Without another word, he started moving again.

Ning Yan hesitated. He had always been afraid of Xu Qing, but for some reason, he now felt even more afraid; he could sense that Xu Qing was actually stronger than before. After a moment, he cautiously started following.

Finally, he asked, "Elder Brother Xu Qing... where are we going?"

"To Mount Daybreak."

Time passed, and Xu Qing and Ning Yan eventually got closer to Mount Daybreak.

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The critical situation at Mount Daybreak was reaching a head. Whistling sounds filled heaven and earth as numerous black spikes shot toward Mount Daybreak and slammed into the spell formation. The shockwaves from the attacks sent rumbling sounds everywhere.

From the look of it, there were now thousands of black spikes piercing into the spell formation. Because of them, Mount Daybreak's spell formation had deep cracks all over it.

It obviously wasn't going to last for much longer.

Chapter 492: Multicolored Light Shakes a Horde of Devils

Outside of Mount Daybreak, every spike that whistled through the air contained explosively destructive power. And they had an unusually restrictive effect on spell formations. When they stabbed into the defensive spell formation, they created black lightning bolts that slowly connected. Though Mount Daybreak's spell formation was very powerful, even it was being slowly weakened.

"It's gonna blow soon!"

"Hahaha! Keep it up, everyone!"

“After it blows, we’ll charge in, kill everyone, loot the place, then tear down the mountain!”

This attack on Mount Daybreak was obviously the result of careful planning. At the moment, there were over a thousand cultivators involved in the siege. Roughly eighty former prisoners from the Corrections Division formed the core of the operation. The others were rogue cultivators and random hoodlums that had been recruited to help. There were also clues indicating that some of the major nonhuman species in Daybreak Prefecture were secretly backing the effort. That was especially true of the spikes being used on the formation. They were not a weapon that ordinary cultivators would have access to; only a major species would be able to provide them.

In terms of the cultivation level of the besieging forces, most of them were in Foundation Establishment or Gold Core. There were only three Nascent Soul cultivators present.

Of those, two were male and one was female. All were nonhumans. One of the males had scales covering his face, while the other had four arms. The female was middle-aged, with a second face on her forehead. That second face was charming and pretty, making her overall appearance grotesque. In terms of cultivation base, the fluctuations they emitted made their level of strength obvious. The woman was in the mid Nascent Soul stage while the two men were in the early stage. All three were prisoners who had escaped from Unit C in the Corrections Division, and they were also the ones leading the siege. It was with very cold eyes that they looked down at Mount Daybreak from high in the air.

“The skeleton crew left behind by the Swordsage Court hasn’t called for backup. And they even sent orders to the other human sects nearby to not send aid! Things aren’t going exactly as predicted....”

“We didn’t make the predictions. The major species backing us did. I’d say this cooperation of ours is going quite well. Since there’s been a bit of a twist... let’s clean this place out and figure things out later!”

“Agreed. I’ve been wanting to taste swordsage flesh for a long time now.”

Chuckling viciously, the three Nascent Soul nonhumans sent out orders for more black spikes to be loaded into the magical devices, and for the assault on the formation to be intensified.

Shockwaves rippled out, shaking Mount Daybreak.

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The skeleton crew left behind was made up of only a few dozen swordsages. As they felt the mountain shaking beneath their feet, their faces flickered with fury. They all knew that there was no hope of defending Mount Daybreak successfully.

There was no backup on the way. There *couldn’t* be any backup on the way.

The majority of the forces from Mount Daybreak, and from humankind in general, had been sent to the front lines in the west and north. All taboo treasures were in the control of the county capital.

Everything was focused on defending against the Holytide invasion of Sea-Sealing County. Because of that, there was nothing left to provide aid to the interior.

The only backup available was in the various human sects in Daybreak Prefecture that were currently on lockdown.

It was a big shock to find that these despicable criminals had magical devices that could target spell formations. That said, they had obviously been using them sporadically, as if giving Mount Daybreak a chance to call for help.

Among the group of a few dozen swordsages was a Nascent Soul expert who was obviously their leader. It was possible to see the conviction of his swordsage oath in his eyes as he said, “This siege of Mount Daybreak is obviously about more than the Swordsage Court. They *want* us to call for backup. If we did that, then the major human organizations in Daybreak Prefecture would all have to open their defenses to come to our aid. These villains want to use Mount Daybreak as bait!

“That’s why I haven’t asked for any help from anyone. In fact, I’ve taken advantage of the lulls in their attacks to notify all human sects in Daybreak Prefecture that they absolutely, positively must not try to help us in any way! We’re going to fight this battle without any hope of backup.

“I don’t have the authority to call on the taboo treasure net in the sky. The main battle is too significant. Humankind as a whole is more important, and things look bad right now....

“However, I trust the palace lord! Humankind will definitely come out on top in this war for Sea-Sealing County. We here might fall in battle, but humans as a whole will rise victorious! And afterward, every nonhuman organization backing this despicable siege will suffer the fate of complete extermination!”

The Nascent Soul expert’s eyes were bloodshot as he made his speech, and the other swordsages surrounding him were clearly ready to fight to the death.

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A massive boom echoed out in all directions. The Abyssal Sea vibrated, and all the mountain ranges shook. Mount Daybreak’s grand spell formation had collapsed!

The demonic villains and devilish rogues that had been surrounding the mountain let loose greedy howls as they surged forth in attack.

The handful of swordsages there to defend Mount Daybreak also charged forward. Magical devices installed in the mountain were activated, sending out blinding beams of light.

The battle had begun.

The magical devices could unleash astonishing power, making it impossible for the first wave of attackers to advance very far. But the enemy had prepared well. A moment later, the three Nascent Soul nonhumans made their move, causing a huge screen of light to descend from above.

That light came from a magical treasure given to them by the nonhuman species backing this event. It turned into a huge palm print that dropped onto Mount Daybreak and crushed all of the defensive magical devices. Popping sounds rang out left and right as the magical devices crumbled. Rumbling sounds filled heaven and earth as the second and third wave of rogue cultivators and random hoodlums raced forward. A major crisis was building.

Seeing what was happening caused a look of madness to fill the Nascent Soul swordsage's eyes. Shouting a battle cry, he fought back along with the dozens of swordsages at his side. However, their counterattack seemed like a little sailboat fighting back against a burst dam. It just wasn't enough. In the blink of an eye, they sustained heavy injuries, causing blood to spray from their mouths.

The Nascent Soul swordsage sustained a combined attack from the three Nascent Soul nonhumans, leaving him badly hurt.

However, there wasn't a scrap of regret or pain on his face. Eyes radiating madness, he backed up a bit, along with the other swordsages. When he looked around at the grief and indignation in the eyes of the other swordsages, his expression became even fiercer. He took out a transmission jade slip.

*"All human sects in Daybreak Prefecture, this is Sun Hai from the Swordsage Court on Mount Daybreak. This is my final message to all of you...."*

*"Do not send us any help! Your job is to stay safe in your spell formations, and wait... for humankind to rise to victory! When that happens, report what happened today to the Swordsage Palace!"*

*"Any species involved in this attack, whether rogue cultivators or not, and any species backing them, shall be sent to hell. And I, Sun Hai, will be waiting for them there, with all of my fellow swordsages at my side today!"*

*"Swordsages are pledged to defend humankind, even if we die in the process!" [1]*

Sun Hai laughed heartily. The surrounding swordsages, despite being in a situation of complete despair, also joined him in laughing. When their laughter reached the ears of the enemy rogue cultivators, their killing intent burned, and they charged forward with increased rage.

Just when things seemed completely hopeless for the swordsages....

A piercing cry that could shake heaven and earth erupted from the direction of the Abyssal Sea. The fog and water roiled as a huge golden crow with a wingspan of hundreds of meters rose up, surrounded by a sea of fire. Bursting with a spectacular aura, it shot toward Mount Daybreak. The golden crow glittered with black light, and from within the boundless sea of fire around it, more than a hundred tails swirled, releasing a terrifying aura.

Even more notable was a small figure seated cross-legged on its head, clad in an imperial robe, with an imperial crown on its head. That tiny figure's eyes were ice cold. It seemed threatening without being angry, and pulsed with a massive killing intent along with Nascent Soul fluctuations.

As the golden crow let loose its cry, the tiny figure got to its feet, and together, they erupted with a spirit that could conquer mountains and rivers.

In response to this unexpected event, the nonhuman cultivators assaulting Mount Daybreak looked over their shoulders with shocked looks. That was especially true of the three Nascent Soul criminals, whose pupils constricted.

The middle-aged woman with the mid Nascent Soul stage cultivation base looked over with narrowed eyes.

“Jiaolin,” she said coldly, “go slaughter that golden crow!” [2]

The moment the words left her mouth, the Nascent Soul nonhuman with the scaled face turned, his eyes flickering with killing intent. Calling to a handful of other cultivators to come with him, he flew to meet the golden crow.

Meanwhile, the swordsages on Mount Daybreak were visibly surprised. That was especially true of the Nascent Soul swordsage.

“Stay away!” he shouted anxiously. “I don’t care who you are, just get out of here! Run!”

However, even as he shouted those words, the group that had split off from the main attacking force to block the golden crow... suddenly found themselves in darkness. An evening glow of sunset had been covered over!

The entire sky had turned pitch black, as if it had turned into an ocean of darkness. And it was just barely possible to spot a bluegreen dragon swirling above, howling, its draconic whiskers floating around it. As it moved, it unleashed heaven-shaking, earth-shattering fluctuations. The mighty pressure it exuded weighed down on the rogue cultivators with such crushing force that all of them vomited.

Then Mount Daybreak trembled violently as all of the weaker cultivators in the criminal army suddenly shivered and exploded. Miserable shrieks rang out as they were destroyed in body and soul.

As the canopy of heaven turned dark, countless eyes appeared, extremely gruish in appearance. They blinked, and the nonhuman cultivators’ hearts shivered, leaving them stunned. A red bolt of lightning appeared, shooting back and forth among the stunned cultivators, piercing through each of them.

Then, to the astonishment of all of the enemy cultivators, a beam of light appeared from within the Abyssal Sea. As it shot toward them, it let loose a piercing sound. It was... daybreak light!

Within that seven-colored light was a person.

He was not dressed in ordinary clothing. Instead, he wore the white uniform of a swordsage. His eyes were ice-cold and contained killing intent that could reach the highest heights.

He was none other than Xu Qing.

He had been some distance away, but he had seen Mount Daybreak’s spell formation collapse. Whether it was because of his responsibility as a swordsage, or what Mount Daybreak meant to him personally, there was no way he would allow it to be desecrated.

Thus, he attacked.

Up above, the Nascent Soul nonhuman with the scales slammed into the golden crow. The sea of flames raged, intense rumbling sounds shook everything, and the sound of combat rang out.

Xu Qing glanced there, then looked away. Now that the golden crow had reached the third stage, it had Nascent Soul battle prowess. What was more, he didn't need to control it. Imperial-class techniques eventually gained their own independent thinking, which meant the golden crow could handle itself.

Xu Qing accelerated. With the blessing provided by the godly body, he became a blur that almost instantly reached Mount Daybreak. The first thing he did was slam into a Gold Core nonhuman. That cultivator was an extraordinary individual, but all he could do was scream for a moment before he exploded. As the mist of blood spread out, Xu Qing emerged from within. A moment later, he was in front of another Gold Core nonhuman. Before that cultivator could react, Xu Qing took out a dagger and slashed it through his throat. The force was such that the head flew off the shoulders, accompanied by an explosion of blood.

It was a somewhat familiar scene. Eyes cold, Xu Qing leapt forward, performing an incantation gesture and pointing out. Daybreak light shot out from him, heading toward the gaping swordsages.

As it neared, it created a defensive barrier around them. Xu Qing didn't have time at the moment for explanations. He simply unleashed the power of his third heavenly palace.

He was going all out! Given the circumstances, he wasn't thinking a lot about keeping secrets. A poison cloud spread, and when it touched the nonhuman cultivators, they screamed and melted into bloody sludges. It was a shocking and ghastly scene.

As Xu Qing's poison spread out, his shadow went crazy. In order to prove its worth and loyalty, it took advantage of the darkness to start parasitizing everything it could. It took control of one nonhuman cultivator after another. To their terror, they found they couldn't control their own bodies. They started self-detonating and killing each other.

Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior was on the killing path as well. In an attempt to elevate his own position and make himself seem stronger, he put everything on the line. As a red lightning bolt, he shot back and forth, causing endless booms and rumbling sounds.

And then there was the heavenly dao bluegreen dragon. As it exhaled left and right, the power of the magical treasures provided by the major nonhuman species began to ripple and distort. Meanwhile, the defensive magical devices on Mount Daybreak were bolstered by destiny aura. Activating, they started unleashing devastating attacks.

Deafening booms rang out everywhere. Xu Qing had arrived just in the nick of time!

Chapter 493: It Was You! It Was You!!

Xu Qing descended, wreathed in daybreak light. He attacked ferociously, without holding anything back. He even activated his Ghost Emperor heavenly palace, causing the extremely terrifying pressure of the Ghost Emperor mountain to appear above him. It didn't crush down in an attack, but rather, emanated shocking might from above. Its mere existence would strike fear and shock into the hearts of any enemies who remained hidden or in disguise, and would cause them to think twice before making an attack.

Though the Ghost Emperor mountain didn't 'join the fight,' its presence also caused many of the nonhuman cultivators below to start crumbling.

But everything so far wasn't gruish enough. What was truly gruish was when Xu Qing unleashed the aura of D-132, which caused all of the invading cultivators to be suddenly overwhelmed with an aura of misfortune.

That misfortune became immediately evident on the battlefield in terrifying fashion. Magical techniques suddenly flew in the wrong direction, and unexpected yet fatal accidents started occurring left and right. One cultivator slipped up in his attack, ripping the cultivator next to them to shreds. Another cultivator tripped and fell right into a puddle of deadly poison. Another person was in the middle of unleashing a technique when it backfired, killing him.

Astonishment rippled through the ranks of the invading rogue cultivators. Some of the prisoners among them recognized Xu Qing, and started crying out.

“He’s a jailer. He’s the Fiendish Xu from Unit D!”

There were two Nascent Soul cultivators still hovering overhead, and one was the nonhuman with four arms. Shivering, he stared at Xu Qing and then shrieked, “He’s Xu Qing! A Unit C jailer from the Corrections Division!”

This particular nonhuman was a prisoner from Unit C, and had actually been in East District 13, which Xu Qing had been in charge of.

The middle-aged woman examined Xu Qing briefly. “Who cares about some puny jailer? He might have some skill, but he can’t stand up to all of us. The western and northern fronts are all in big trouble, so there’s no way any top swordsmen experts could be here right now. Everyone join forces to kill this guy! He’s obviously got a lot of valuable stuff that’s going to be ours now!”

Eyes flashing with killing intent, she shot toward Xu Qing. The four-armed cultivator gritted his teeth, then followed, his eyes flashing viciously. Even as he flew through the air, a suit of armor spread out over him. It was a manifestation of his life essence, and was incredibly tough. From a distance, it resembled a turtle shell. Rumbling booms echoed out as the two Nascent Soul cultivators flew to block Xu Qing’s path.

Xu Qing’s eyes narrowed. Even before he arrived on the scene, he’d sensed the presence of these Nascent Soul cultivators. He knew that the strongest of them was in the mid Nascent Soul stage. However, the biggest threat to him wasn’t these three individuals.

The biggest threat came from the canopy of heaven.

There were energy fluctuations coming from above that covered the whole battlefield, and Xu Qing could sense the resulting pressure.

I can’t tell if that’s a cultivator or something else....

Xu Qing’s eyes glittered coldly. He lifted his right foot, then stomped it down. Beneath his feet, his shadow transformed into a coffin that surrounded him, then fused into him.

Instantly, his fleshly body power reached unprecedented heights. His fleshly body had already been remolded by the god’s finger, making it many times stronger than before. By combining that effect

with the Shadow Fusion Secret Magic, he could release terrifying power that far surpassed the Gold Core level.

As the four-armed nonhuman approached and unleashed a barrage of divine abilities and magical techniques, Xu Qing completely ignored all that. Moving far, far faster than his opponent, he closed in, clenched his right hand into a fist, and launched a punch.

The punch landed, and the four-armed nonhuman's life essence turtle shell cracked in numerous places. The nonhuman coughed up blood like mad as he tumbled backward, eyes shining with surprise.

Xu Qing was actually a bit taken aback. Based on his assessment, that punch should have been enough to kill this opponent.

Nonhumans do have a lot of life essence innate abilities... this villain's external shell is really tough.

The four-armed nonhuman backed away, his heart filled with waves of astonishment, and all of his organs trembling on the verge of collapse. He knew full well how tough his life essence shell was, so he would never have been able to guess that a single punch would be enough to nearly destroy it.

“You—”

Before he could say anything else, Xu Qing strode forward and launched a second punch. In response, the middle-aged woman with the charming face on her forehead lunged to intervene. Hands flashing in an incantation gesture, she summoned a huge black umbrella made of mist.

The umbrella had countless charming faces on it that moaned in an enticing way as the umbrella approached Xu Qing. Then the charming faces turned vicious as they opened their mouths to devour him.

Xu Qing's face remained expressionless. As daybreak light shone out from him, he shattered the woman's umbrella, causing all of the vicious faces to scream as they collapsed. The middle-aged woman was then forced into retreat. Daybreak light was like a precious treasure that could resist even the power of a god. To it, simple magical techniques were things that could easily be wiped out of existence. That was one of the terrifying things about that type of light.

Everything happened so quickly that, even as the middle-aged woman's face flickered with surprise, Xu Qing blurred into motion toward the fleeing four-armed nonhuman.

The four-armed cultivator resorted to a minor teleportation to gain some distance. However, the enemy's suppressive spell formation didn't just apply to Mount Daybreak. Everyone was affected. Teleportations couldn't go very far, and therefore, Xu Qing managed to close the distance and launch another fist strike.

It was a moment of deadly crisis, and the four-armed cultivator's expression was one of deep madness. Stopping in place, he turned and put his four hands together into one big fist attack. As for his species, they had innate abilities focused on fleshly body power. In other words, his biggest trump card wasn't a magical technique, but rather, his own fleshly body. Right now, he was putting everything on the line, tapping into all his strength to fight back. In fact, two nascent souls appeared behind him, further bolstering him.

That said, it wasn't even possible to compare his fleshly body to Xu Qing. That's how far apart they were. When they slammed into each other, the four-armed nonhuman's fists couldn't stand up to the

force. The flesh was shredded, the bones shattered, and the arms were broken. As the nonhuman tumbled backward, the effects spread to the rest of him, and his entire body exploded.

One of his nascent souls was caught up and shredded to pieces. The lone surviving nascent soul screamed in terror and fled in the opposite direction.

Xu Qing was about to give chase when the middle-aged woman gritted her teeth and performed a double-handed incantation gesture. Instantly, the charming face on her forehead blurred and switched places with her existing face. Afterwards, she was a charming woman who looked at Xu Qing, opened her mouth, and exhaled a red mist.

The mist contained a powerful emotional longing; anyone who the mist hit would be attacked by their own emotions, and would suddenly want to yield to the woman. This was the technique she had used to make a name for herself. Over the years, she had used it to enslave quite a few experts who were in the same level as herself.

But today, she was dealing with Xu Qing.

Xu Qing didn't even look at the red mist. He pointed his right finger, and a projection of a violet moon appeared above the mist.

The red mist seethed, and frantic fluctuations rolled out from it. A thump rang out as it exploded. The woman's face fell, and blood sprayed out of her mouth. Then her face turned a shade of violet, and her expression became vicious, as if she were dealing with an internal attack.

Not slowing down at all, Xu Qing chased after the four-armed cultivator's nascent soul.

"Why are you only attacking me??" the four-armed cultivator howled in despair.

Xu Qing didn't bother wasting time trying to determine if the cultivator's voice contained some sound-based magical technique. The daybreak light around him rippled, and then he waved his hand in a slapping attack. The eyes of the four-armed nonhuman's nascent soul went wide. There was no way he could evade an attack like this in his current form. A boom rang out as he was killed in body and soul.

Meanwhile, the golden crow let loose another cry before devouring the nonhuman with the scales. The horrifying chewing sounds that echoed out shook all the remaining cultivators to the core.

Two Nascent Soul experts were already dead. It was such a crushing blow to the invading force that the surrounding villains' hearts crumbled. They lost any desire to do battle, and madly scattered in all directions. These people had basically been a disorganized mob to begin with, so it was no surprise at all that they quickly lost the will to fight.

What was more, as Xu Qing's poison spread, more cultivators screamed in agony. That made the rest of them think of Xu Qing as being the most vicious and fiendish opponent imaginable.

As for the middle-aged woman who had tried unsuccessfully to do something about Xu Qing, she was also fleeing, her expression extremely somber, her heart aghast. She could tell that this person wasn't in the Nascent Soul level, but rather, was in pseudo-Nascent Soul. But his battle prowess was frightful and almost unbelievable. In fact, she had never encountered someone like this in her entire life.

Ning Yan was also present on the battlefield. Though he was fighting ferociously, when he saw everything Xu Qing was doing, he shivered.

That's not Gold Core... it's too powerful!

After slaughtering the four-armed cultivator, Xu Qing turned his full attention to the middle-aged woman. Eyes burning with killing intent, he was about to start chasing her when his expression flickered.

He suddenly shot backward toward Ning Yan. Before Ning Yan could react, Xu Qing reached out and slapped his belly.

Ning Yan's garment burst open, and the green vines he had been working so hard to conceal were revealed. Xu Qing grabbed them.

Ning Yan's jaw dropped.

Meanwhile, the area Xu Qing had just vacated collapsed, and a black hand appeared out of nowhere. It was a sneak attack that had failed. However, it sent a terrible shockwave rolling out as a figure with two black wings emerged. The fluctuations of the late Nascent Soul stage rolled out as the figure shot toward Xu Qing, leaving a string of afterimages behind it.

"Die!"

As the dark figure neared, Xu Qing's eyes glittered with cold light, and he tugged at the vines. Ning Yan was then thrown out in front of Xu Qing to block the enemy.

A boom echoed out as the shadowy figure slammed into Ning Yan. It was followed by a cold harrumph as the figure backed away and looked at Ning Yan in disbelief.

Ning Yan didn't have a scratch on him, and he was so shocked he didn't even think to let loose a howl of grief. He just stared at the vines coming out of his belly, and then followed them to Xu Qing. His eyes went wide. Then he let loose an extremely brutal scream that could shake heaven and earth.

"Y-y-you...? I can't believe it was YOU!!!"

Chapter 494: Xu Qing is Hereby Assigned to Represent the Palace Lord! (part 1)

Xu Qing ignored Ning Yan's scream of disbelief as he mentally issued a call, causing the golden crow to fly toward him. Half of it merged into Xu Qing, while the other half remained outside, causing 300-meter wings to spread out in a shocking display. Xu Qing's aura also skyrocketed, making him pulse with an energy that could devour mountains and seas. From a distance, the golden crow surrounding Xu Qing made him look like the reincarnation of an emperor, descended into the mortal world. He now pulsed with one-soul, nine-palace strength.

And then there were his fleshly body fluctuations, which also gave off a Nascent Soul sensation. With that, he had the equivalent of two-soul, nine-palace battle prowess. Battle prowess like that was completely unheard-of in the Gold Core level.

Rumbling sounds echoed out everywhere, and the fluctuations sent out by both sides of the conflict created ripple-like waves that only served to further spread Xu Qing's poison. The fleeing rogue cultivators didn't even make it past the bounds of Mount Daybreak before they succumbed. Their screams echoed out over the Abyssal Sea. The ground was soon covered with puddles of black

sludge. Previously, there had been over a thousand villainous cultivators. As of now, there were only about forty percent of the original number, and they were all visibly terrified.

The magical devices of Mount Daybreak were gradually repairing themselves, and unleashed more destruction. All of the prisoners in the invading force... knew that the battle was lost.

Xu Qing had come alone. But he had immediately killed two early Nascent Soul enemies, shocking everyone to the core. At the same time, the fearsome power of his taboo poison was probably the most terrifying thing on the battlefield. The term 'poison cultivator' was now the thing of nightmares to the rogue cultivators who still had their lives.

That said, Xu Qing didn't let his guard down. Eyes cold, he looked up at the shadowy figure with the wings. And he kept a firm grip on the vines growing out of Ning Yan's belly, ready to jerk him out at any moment. This shadowy figure was no ordinary Nascent Soul cultivator. He pulsed with the valiant fluctuations of the late Nascent Soul stage. And the sneak attack he had just launched gave Xu Qing a first-hand taste of how incisive he was. This enemy was very reminiscent of the Demi-Immortals' immortal puppets. However, close examination revealed some differences and deficiencies.

Xu Qing's eyes shone with cold light as he waved the palace lord's command medallion, which gave him control over all of Mount Daybreak's magical devices. The weapons all shifted to point at the shadowy, winged figure.

Xu Qing quickly tried to assess how he stacked up to this enemy. Just now, killing early Nascent Soul cultivators had been as simple as turning over his hand. Once a Gold Core cultivator surpassed ten-palace battle prowess, then they were essentially the same as a cultivator with a single nascent soul, as long as you excluded matters of divine abilities, divine sense, and minor teleportations.

But Xu Qing had godsource, which could be used to counter divine abilities. In terms of the threat of divine sense, he could resist it with his third-stage golden crow and godsource. When it came to minor teleportations, Xu Qing's fleshly body power combined with the hellspirit bloodwing gave him speed that was roughly equivalent.

It was for that reason that his first fist strike shattered the innate ability of the four-armed cultivator, that turtle-like shell. His second fist strike had then destroyed that cultivator's fleshly body and one of his nascent souls. And his final slap had wiped out the final nascent soul.

That said, not every Nascent Soul cultivator was the same. It was similar to how some Gold Core cultivators would reach the great circle when they had six palaces, while for others, it was eight palaces. And for cultivators with life lamps, the ultimate limit could be thirteen.

For an ordinary Nascent Soul cultivator, one-soul was the early stage, three-souls was the mid stage, five-souls was the late stage, and six-souls was the great circle.

That four-armed nonhuman's cultivation base had been suppressed in the Corrections Division. As a result, though he might have eventually been able to reach the six-soul level, that didn't matter, as he didn't have time to do that after the prison break. Therefore, though he seemingly had two-soul power, making it seem like Xu Qing was fighting someone from a higher cultivation realm, the reality was a bit different. The four-armed cultivator was so weak that Xu Qing was able to easily crush him.

If Xu Qing had to fight an ordinary mid-Nascent Soul enemy, killing them would be quite difficult. For instance, when fighting the injured three-soul Chu Tianqun, Xu Qing had been forced to put his life on the line, and also ended up injured more badly than he ever had been before. Without Ling'er and the violet crystal, he would have died.

Now, after having his body remolded by the god's finger, he had made up for that deficiency. Maybe he couldn't unleash the true abilities of a god body, but he was still about three times as strong as he had previously been in terms of fleshly body. And that gave him one-soul strength, in other words, the fleshly body of a Nascent Soul cultivator.

His greatest strength, though, were his defenses. Within his fleshly body were those countless golden threads that provided terrifying defensive capabilities to him.

With that combination, he didn't need to use any magical techniques to tangle with a three-soul mid-Nascent Soul opponent. And if he did use magical techniques, then he could kill a four-soul expert without risk of injury.

When it came to a five-soul enemy, if Xu Qing held nothing back in the fight, he wasn't sure what the result would be. In all likelihood, he wouldn't be able to harm his opponent, while his opponent wouldn't be able to touch him.

My fleshly body attacks are equivalent to the one-soul level. My golden crow adds a nascent soul, while my nine palaces are also equivalent to the one-soul level. That alone gives me three-soul strength. Add in my magical techniques, and I can definitely fight four-soul enemies! My biggest asset is my fleshly body defenses. With this body, I'm almost untouchable to most Nascent Soul opponents.

During the fighting just now, Xu Qing had been able to test out his limitations. Thus, his eyes glittered coldly as he realized that this shadowy, winged opponent was most likely capable of five-soul battle prowess.

The middle-aged woman had already flown up next to the winged nonhuman, her expression one of reverence.

"Boss, this jailer is trouble. When are the species financing this operation going to make a move? We—"

She suddenly coughed up a mouthful of black blood. Obviously, there were areas of rot spreading through her, and she was using all her strength to only partly suppress the effects. After seeing the fates of the other cultivators hit by that poison, her terror prompted her to back out of the fight.

"How amusing," said the black-winged nonhuman, staring down coldly at Xu Qing. Seeing that Mount Daybreak's magical devices were working again, and that the rogue cultivators were all scattering, he knew that the battle was lost. What was more, he got a very strange feeling from Xu Qing. He could sense that Xu Qing's fleshly body was out of the ordinary, and also could tell there was something very odd about the cultivator Xu Qing was wielding like a weapon. And then there was the humanoid mountain hovering above that emanated such an astonishing pressure. Finally, there was the bluegreen dragon in the clouds, eyeing him. All of these things

gave him a very bad feeling. And that wasn't even to mention the poison mist spreading out below.

So many gruish techniques.... Plus he has daybreak light, which makes him even harder to deal with. What's worse, those cowards financing this operation won't dare to make a move openly until the northern and western fronts collapse. Until then, they'll only hide like rats. Therefore....

All of these considerations caused the black-winged nonhuman's wariness to build. After glowering briefly at Xu Qing, he grabbed the middle-aged woman, who was teetering on the verge of collapse thanks to the poison, then turned and shot off into the sky. A moment later, he collapsed into a black dot as he used a minor teleportation to vanish.

His departure signaled the end of the assault on Mount Daybreak.

Xu Qing didn't give chase. Instead, he dropped down and took Ning Yan with him to find all of the scattered rogue cultivators. He attacked viciously and showed no mercy. Before long, blood flowed in rivers, accompanied by numerous agonized shrieks.

Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior and the shadow helped, as did the bluegreen dragon.

Only after all the enemies were dead did Xu Qing rein in all his assets, including the poison mist. Then he removed the daybreak light shell surrounding the swordsages.

The swordsages all had various injuries, but that did nothing to cover their expressions of excitement and disbelief. And their eyes were full of reverence as they clasped hands and bowed in greeting to Xu Qing.

“Greetings, Secretary-General!”

The old man Sun Hai quickly stepped forward and bowed deeply. “I am your humble servant Sun Hai. Greetings, Secretary-General!”

Thanks to the uproar amongst the prisoners, all the swordsages knew who Xu Qing was. What was more, Xu Qing had also passed along the palace lord's orders to all swordsages in Sea-Sealing County, ensuring that his name was already widespread among the various Swordsage Courts. His title of secretary-general obviously placed him in a higher position than most ordinary swordsages, which was why it was entirely proper for Sun Hai to address himself as ‘humble servant.’

Of course, Sun Hai was more than a little surprised. Having just recently reached Nascent Soul, he knew exactly how strong the enemy prisoners had been. Even just the three Nascent Soul nonhumans who had been part of the initial assault had been too difficult for him to defend against, and that wasn't to mention the final five-soul enemy who showed up at the last minute. To most ordinary Nascent Soul cultivators, a five-soul cultivation base was a peak level of power. A person like that would be the nucleus of most ordinary sects and organizations.

Generally speaking, chosen cultivators, as well as ordinary cultivators with three flames and six palaces, made up the majority of the cultivators in a sect. After such people reached Nascent Soul, their limit would be the six-soul level. Given that, it made sense that five-soul cultivators were nothing to look down on.

Yet Xu Qing had just killed two early-Nascent Soul enemies, and had even prompted a five-soul expert to simply flee rather than fight him. That level of battle prowess in a mere Gold Core cultivator was dazzlingly impressive.

Sun Hai's assessment of the situation was absolutely correct. Were it not for Xu Qing choosing to come check on Mount Daybreak, then the mountain would have been destroyed. Though it might seem coincidental, the reality was that similar things were happening across Sea-Sealing County right now.

"News doesn't reach us in a very timely manner," Sun Hai said. "All we know is that, after some defeats on the northern and western fronts, no less than three Swordsage Courts fell to treacherous species who got their hands on formation-breaking devices. Many rogue cultivators were involved in those events. Thankfully, none of the human sects taking part in the war effort were implicated.

"There are definitely even more nonhuman species that are part of the conspiracy, but they won't show their faces right now. As long as humankind holds strong on the northern and western fronts, they won't dare make an open move against any Swordsage Court. Their ultimate goal is obvious. They're hoping to have a blood tribute ready to pay to the Holytides if their invasion is successful.

"We can only hope that humankind ends up surviving this tribulation. Then we can put these traitorous, backstabbing nonhumans to death!"

Xu Qing stood there looking taciturn. Dawn was breaking, driving away the darkness of light. As the sun touched Mount Daybreak, it became incomparably dazzling. The aftermath of the battle didn't reduce the splendor of the mountain, and the seven-colored light was as beautiful as always.

"Everything will be fine," Xu Qing said softly as the seven-colored light illuminated him.

Three days later, the spell formation was back in working order. After it was activated, Xu Qing left Mount Daybreak. He had come alone, but on his return trip, he had Ning Yan with him. One reason for leaving so quickly was that he had already found all the clues he needed. The other reason... was that he had received a dharmic decree from the palace lord.

*"Xu Qing, regardless of the progress on your investigation, I want you to drop everything and return to the county capital to handle some matters related to the war.*

*"The situation on the western and northern fronts is extremely critical. We need troops, and we need supplies, right away. I'm not able to go back myself, so I want you to represent me. Work with the lieutenant governor to handle everything in the county capital!*

*"The command medallion I gave you will provide you with complete authorization to act with all my power!"*

The palace lord sounded completely exhausted. However, as his words echoed out, a beam of golden light fell from the net above. It landed on the command medallion, and cracking sounds rang out as it was fully activated.

“Yes, sir!” Xu Qing replied somberly. He didn’t ask any questions about the situation on the battlefield. He could tell from the dharmic decree that the situation was urgent. The fighting must have reached an extremely critical juncture. Had it not, the palace lord wouldn’t have made the arrangement he did. He would have simply issued orders for troops and supplies however he saw fit.

What was more, the fact that the palace lord told Xu Qing to abandon the investigation went to show how important the mission was.

The palace lord doesn’t fully trust anyone. Not Marquis Yao on the northern front or the two palace lords from the Administration Palace or the Justice Palace. Not even the lieutenant governor. He doesn’t trust any of them. That’s why he wants me to handle the matter of troops and supplies.

It seems like he’s sending me to ‘work with’ the lieutenant governor, but in reality, I’ll be keeping an eye on things. Most likely, the palace lord will have other contingencies in place. Other people helping him.

Feeling very anxious about what was going on, Xu Qing took Ning Yan and left Mount Daybreak.

Thankfully, this trip hadn’t been a waste. Shortly before the palace lord’s message arrived on the third day, Xu Qing and Sun Hai uncovered an important bit of information.

#### Chapter 495: An Irritable Bird!

In response to Ning Yan’s question, Xu Qing shook his head. Gripping the flustered Ning Yan by the neck, he stepped onto the teleportation portal. Glittering light surrounded them, and they vanished from the Swordsage Palace.

A moment later they materialized near the border of the county capital’s territory, very near the desert, at one of the Swordsage Palace’s teleportation portals. A shimmering defensive shield surrounded both them and the portal. The Swordsage Palace operated a lot of teleportation portals, and not all of them were in cities. There were some located out in the wilderness, and they had built-in defensive shields to make it safe to teleport in.

The moment they materialized, Xu Qing scanned the area vigilantly. Before leaving, he had been able to use a function of the portal on the county capital end to confirm that the destination portal was safe. But checking his surroundings was an instinct that he wouldn’t abandon. After confirming they were in no danger, he stepped off the portal onto the weed-covered paving stones beyond.

He looked up into the sky. It was still the dead of night, and clouds covered most of the sky. A steady rain fell, bringing with it a bone-chilling cold. Because there were no large buildings in the area, there was nothing to stop the wind from blowing steadily through the rain. It created a soft, whimpering sound.

Ning Yan looked around nervously at the surrounding wasteland. “Elder Brother Xu Qing, where... where are we going?”

“Ning Yan,” Xu Qing said calmly, “back when we first arrived at the county capital to report for duty, this is where the two of us initially met.”

“Huh?” Ning Yan was initially stunned, but then he nodded in agreement.

Xu Qing continued to scan the dark clouds above. “Back then, you’d been captured by Senior Qingqin. And that’s where we’re heading right now. To Senior Qingqin’s place.”

“Uh...” Ning Yan shivered. He feared Xu Qing, but he also feared that enormous bird. In fact, that event in which the big bird had seemed intent on eating him had left him with recurring nightmares.

He was already trying to think of a tactful way to get out of helping Xu Qing. But then, as the rain fell and the wind blew, Xu Qing turned and looked at him.

“Ning Yan, this matter relates to the safety of a hundred thousand swordsages on the front line, as well as the millions upon millions of human cultivators who’ve joined them. Their lives are on the line. If you can help me find Senior Qingqin, I’ll report the matter to the palace lord and make sure you get a big reward for your effort!”

“But...” said Ning Yan hesitantly.

“And if not,” Xu Qing said coolly, “I’ll send you back to Daybreak Prefecture for a little reunion with the euphoria irises.”

Ning Yan’s facial expression turned extremely grave. “Don’t underestimate me, Elder Brother Xu Qing. Since this matter relates to Sea-Sealing County as a whole, then I’ll do everything in my power to help. Back then, I was just flying along in an area not too far from here when I spotted Senior Qingqin. Allow me to lead the way, Elder Brother!”

Looking very serious, he shot up through the rain into the air.

Xu Qing followed, his face completely expressionless.

It didn’t take long for the two of them to reach the spot where Ning Yan claimed to have spotted Qingqin. It was a wide-open plain without any mountains or trees. It definitely didn’t look like a place where a huge bird would perch.

Xu Qing looked around doubtfully.

Ning Yan shivered inwardly at the thought of Xu Qing seeing through his ruse. “It really was here, Elder Brother Xu Qing. I was just flying along when I saw something like a tornado. Then, out of nowhere, I was captured.”

Xu Qing looked at him. Ning Yan instinctively averted his eyes.

Xu Qing had brought Ning Yan along for the sole purpose of getting his help in tracking down Qingqin. He didn’t have anything else in mind. But now he was getting the feeling he’d been a bit too merciful. Looking away from Ning Yan, he took a deep breath.

“Senior Qingqin!” he shouted at the top of his lungs. “Swordsage Xu Qing of the Junior generation is here to offer formal greetings! As a show of good faith, I’ve

brought the swordsage Ning Yan with me, who offended you in the past. I want him to offer you an apology face-to-face.”

Ning Yan’s face fell. He really had been trying to pull a fast one on Xu Qing by taking him to a different location than the one where he’d encountered Qingqin. For one thing, he feared Qingqin. But also, he had certain secrets he didn’t want to reveal.... Back when Qingqin captured him, Ning Yan had told everyone he had no idea why it happened. But the truth was a bit different.... Their current location was actually quite far away from Qingqin’s nest, and therefore, Ning Yan felt a bit safer. Now all he had to do was come up with a way to make his story seem even more convincing.

However, before he could say anything, an ear-piercing and very unpleasant ‘caw’ echoed through the dark night. It was impossible to say if it happened because of Ning Yan or Xu Qing, but either way, the explosive sound kicked up a rushing wind that scattered the clouds and caused a brief torrential downpour. Then a 3,000-meter bird head appeared within the break in the clouds.

Two bright red eyes locked onto Xu Qing and Ning Yan, the gaze so intense it seemed corporeal. Then a second head appeared, as well as a third, each of them 3,000 meters long.

This was the great bird Qingqin. His perch was actually located *inside* the dark clouds.

The dramatic entrance caused countless lightning bolts to crackle in the shattered clouds as the bird’s massive torso appeared. The bird really was gargantuan. From Xu Qing’s perspective, he took up the larger part of the sky.

Perhaps because he had been awoken from sleep, the bird seemed to be in a foul mood. After letting loose his deafening cry, he inhaled deeply, causing the clouds and rain to rush toward him, making three rivers in the sky that entered his three mouths.

The sight of him left Xu Qing feeling deeply shaken. Apparently, this was the bird’s true body, as he was vastly larger than what Xu Qing remembered seeing before.

Additionally, Xu Qing’s cultivation base was much higher than the day he arrived at the county capital, and he had experienced many things. As a result, he had a much deeper understanding of Void Returning experts. He could now see that the eyes of the great bird Qingqin’s three heads were filled with countless dao lineaments. What was more, there were projections of his body superimposed over each other. And within the lightning that surrounded him were countless minor worlds being created and destroyed in an endless cycle.

This wasn’t quite the level of 1,000,000,000 Magics Combined. But the massive pressure radiating off his gargantuan body was enough to shake heaven and earth.

As waves of shock rolled through Xu Qing, Ning Yan was off to the side feeling extremely jumpy and also incredulous. After all, this was not the location where he had encountered Qingqin before. Qingqin’s nest was very, very far away....

What’s he doing here? Something weird’s going on. Qingqin is inherently lazy and doesn’t go out much! Don’t tell me... don’t tell me he’s been following me around?

As Ning Yan reeled, Xu Qing took a deep breath and looked up at the massive three-headed bird. Stepping forward, he clasped hands and bowed deeply.

“Swordsage Xu Qing here to offer greetings, Senior Qingqin.”

In response, the three heads all let loose loud caws. The sound was like the crash of heavenly thunder, creating a violent tempest around the bird. Xu Qing had no choice but to back up a bit.

Off to the side, Ning Yan wailed, "We're finished! Qingqin hates nothing more than being woken from sleep. We're finished!"

"Shut up!" Xu Qing growled as he struggled to keep his footing despite the wind. Then he once again clasped hands and politely continued, "Senior Qingqin, the Holytides have invaded Sea-Sealing County, putting us all in great danger. Senior, I beg of you to come out of retirement to help. If you don't want to go to the battlefield, that's fine! If you don't want to do any fighting, that's also fine! I'm just hoping you can accompany me on some tasks, and lend your weight to my authority."

Xu Qing finished by clasping hands and bowing again.

Meanwhile, Ning Yan was about to start crying. Ignoring Xu Qing's directive from moments ago, he said, "It's not going to do any good, Elder Brother Xu Qing. I guessed earlier that you were planning to do this, but the reality is that even though people say that Qingqin's ancestor was a follower of Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity, and died in battle for him, that story has been embellished over the years.

"The truth is that Qingqin's ancestor was a vicious bird of prey who was actually a rival of the Ancient Emperor. It was only because of the circumstances at the time, and a promise made by the Ancient Emperor to safeguard that ancestor's descendants, that the story about dying in battle was concocted and spread. When the broken face of the god arrived, the Ancient Emperors left the Revered Ancient mainland, and thus didn't live up to the original agreement. After that, the continuity of friendship ended.

"It's true that Qingqin later became friends with the previous governor. But that's only because the governor provided crucial assistance in an important situation. After the governor left, the karma between them was resolved, and that's why Qingqin didn't go with him.

"If you read *Annals of Sea-Sealing County*, you'll find that though Qingqin hasn't been hostile toward humans for the last eight hundred years, neither has he been friendly. What's more, Qingqin has a very irritable personality. That's public knowledge. What's more, the progenitor of his ancient mutant beast bloodline was famous for being a ravenous bird of prey that devoured victims from all intelligent species!

"We disturbed his sleep, and as a result, Qingqin is obviously furious. By the way, the reason I wasn't killed when he grabbed me before isn't because my fleshly body is strong. It's because he was scared of my bloodline!"

Ning Yan was so desperate and flustered that he was blurting out everything he knew, including some things he shouldn't have stated out loud.

As for Xu Qing, he had a lot of questions about the things Ning Yan had just told him, but now wasn't the time to dig into the subject. And that was because massive pressure was weighing down on him from above.

Qingqin's three heads were all sticking out of the clouds and staring at the two of them with deep ferocity.

Xu Qing was close enough that he could see that the three vicious heads had no feathers on them. They were made entirely of wrinkled, magenta skin. They were really quite ugly. The eyes were all bright red and overflowed with irritation, and the sharp beaks all pulsed with terrifying pressure.

Compared to the 30,000-meter bird, Xu Qing and Ning Yan were like specks of dust.

Ning Yan desperately released the power of his bloodline, hoping that it would get him out of danger. Obviously, he couldn't afford to pay attention to what happened to Xu Qing.

Xu Qing struggled to control his breathing as he stood stock-still. However, inside of him, the violet moon had already risen out of its heavenly palace, and he was preparing to speak. But then, Qingqin's three heads sniffed him, and the irritation in his eyes disappeared.

The right-most head suddenly dropped down until it was right in front of Xu Qing. Then he pushed his head forward and gently nudged Xu Qing onto it.

Xu Qing was very taken aback.

Ning Yan's eyes went wide with astonishment. Looking completely incredulous, he blurted, "That... that..."

Ning Yan was so overcome with shock that all he could do was remain in place, staring. His mind was completely blown by what he was seeing. He couldn't even think. The scene that was playing out really was astonishing to the point of being frightening. The truth was that Ning Yan had a very mysterious background. That was why he immediately recognized all the things the Captain had produced back at the Ten Entrails Tree. Actually, he knew a lot of things that Xu Qing didn't know. For instance, he knew about Qingqin's ferocity, and the bird's complicated relationship with humans, which was why he had been able to explain all those things to Xu Qing.

Based on Ning Yan's understanding, Qingqin wouldn't care if Sea-Sealing County was controlled by humans or not. It wouldn't make any difference to him. Even if the Holytides did end up taking over, they wouldn't casually mess with Qingqin. The state of affairs would be the same as it was now. Therefore, Ning Yan was absolutely certain that Qingqin wouldn't agree to help Xu Qing.

But now....

The mighty and proud Qingqin had actually lowered his right head and allowed Xu Qing to stand on it!

Chapter 496: This Species... Shall Be Exterminated

Ning Yan's head felt like it was spinning as massive waves of shock swept through his entire body. He knew full well that all three of Qingqin's heads had deep significance to the proud and arrogant bird.

The middle head was the source of his life essence. As for the right and left heads, they each represented something different. In fact, based on what Ning Yan knew, it should have been outright impossible for him to let Xu Qing stand on his right head. It had nothing to do with cultivation base, but rather, on the approval of Qingqin. He would only allow his lord and master to stand on his middle head. And neither Qingqin nor his ancestor had ever been in the habit of accepting a lord and master.

As for his left head, it would only accept his personal descendants there. If a member of any other species tried to stand there, the bird would take it as a huge insult, and would fight to the death to kill that person. When it came to his right head, Qingqin would only allow someone to stand there who he considered to be a dear friend and an equal. Years ago, the previous governor had been allowed to stand there.

Qingqin thinks of Xu Qing as a friend?

As Xu Qing stood on Qingqin's right head, Ning Yan looked at him as if he were a deity. It wasn't his first time looking at Xu Qing in that way. Back when he finally realized that the so-called Nightshade godchild was actually Xu Qing, he had felt similar levels of shock. It was the same right now. He was having a hard time even coming up with a theory. The best that he could imagine was that perhaps Qingqin worshiped the red moon, and thus viewed Xu Qing as a godchild.

But even if that's true, why let him stand on the right head?

Ning Yan was truly at a loss.

Xu Qing was also at a loss. He had been preparing to use the red moon as a threat, only to have things turn out far better than he had ever thought possible. He didn't even need to make the threat. The great bird Qingqin just immediately showed good will toward him. Although Xu Qing didn't know all the details about what the bird's three heads signified, it was obvious that the way he offered his head to him held deep meaning.

What's going on...?

Before he could dig through his memories in the hopes of coming up with an explanation, Qingqin let loose a caw that shook heaven and earth. Then he dropped down fully from the clouds.

As the black clouds crumbled around it, and lightning surrounded him like a sea, the great bird was fully revealed.

3,000-meter heads. A 30,000-meter body. Completely magenta, with tiny wings. His feathers were messy and disheveled, but he emanated shocking fluctuations of godliness. After emerging from the clouds, he glided through the air and let loose a deafening cry that echoed out in all directions.

Xu Qing stood atop his right head, looking down at the lands below, a sensation swelling within him unlike anything he had ever experienced. Clapping hands, he bowed deeply toward the other two heads.

"Many thanks, Senior!"

Qingqin's middle head looked at him and nodded. Then it released another deafening caw. This time, the caw didn't seem aggressive at all, but rather, full of joy.

When Ning Yan saw all of that, a wild and almost completely unbelievable notion sprang up within him.

Don't tell me that Qingqin showed up here, far away from his nest... because of Xu Qing? There's no way that it's been hiding in the clouds this entire time, and follows Xu Qing around whenever he's in the county capital territory.... Hahaha, there's absolutely no way. Is there?

Ning Yan's own speculation struck him with fear. And yet, that theory seemed like the perfect explanation. Otherwise, what explanation could there be for how Qingqin had suddenly appeared the moment Xu Qing called out?

They know each other? No. They can't know each other. But if they don't, then why is all of this happening?

As Ning Yan's thoughts went wild, Xu Qing suppressed his own suspicions about what was happening. Regardless of anything, now wasn't the time to contemplate the matter. Although he had the feeling the palace lord had multiple plans underway to resolve the situation on the front lines, he still felt that it was important to get his mission done as quickly as possible.

"Senior Qingqin, please return to the county capital with me," he said with clasped hands.

Qingqin nodded and turned to fly off. However, that was when Xu Qing remembered Ning Yan, and quickly mentioned him to Qingqin.

Qingqin looked down, his eyes glittering with revulsion. However, he still reached down and grabbed the shrieking Ning Yan with one of his claws. Then his wings flapped and he shot off like a lightning bolt.

The level of speed was so different from what Xu Qing was capable of that he felt he finally understood the idiom *so close yet so far*. They were very far away from the county capital, and yet Qingqin moved so quickly that everything blurred around them. After only enough time had passed for an incense stick to burn, the county capital was just up ahead.

It was speed that Xu Qing had never experienced before. Of course, the arrival of Qingqin caused a stir in the capital.

The spell formation flared to life, and the lieutenant governor flew up into the air. When he saw Qingqin, his expression flickered, and when he noticed Xu Qing on its right head, his jaw dropped. But only a moment later, he breathed a sigh of relief.

"Xu Qing, the city's defenses are...." He trailed off without finishing his sentence, but his meaning was clear.

He couldn't allow Qingqin to actually enter the city. That would be a breach of responsibility. He also didn't ask Xu Qing about his relationship with Qingqin. Everyone had their secrets, and prying wouldn't be helpful.

Xu Qing knew where the lieutenant governor was coming from, so he offered a very respectful explanation to Qingqin. The bird let loose a cry, then flew up into the clouds, where he would remain. Xu Qing dropped to the ground, clasped hands to the lieutenant governor, and entered the Swordsage Palace.

When he arrived at the Secretariat Division, his eyes glittered. Having secured the help of Qingqin, he didn't need to worry about obstacles posed by battle prowess. The first thing he focused on was to ask for a report about how the various nonhumans in Sea-Sealing County were responding to the call for supplies.

Details began flowing in, and Qing Qiu, who had been assigned to stay in the Swordsage Palace instead of going to the front lines, compiled them into a report for Xu Qing.

“There are a total of 57,841 different nonhuman species in Sea-Sealing County. Of those, seventy percent have responded to the call, thirty have not. Of those who responded, about half expressed willingness to provide supplies. The other half demanded compensation, generally between three to ten times the normal market price. The most egregious of them....”

Qing Qiu trailed off and looked hesitantly at Xu Qing.

Face completely expressionless, Xu Qing calmly said, “Continue.”

“The most egregious of them are species allied with the Demi-Immortals. Such species have demanded outrageous prices. Taking medicinal pills as an example, they're asking a thousand spirit stones for medicinal pills that would normally only cost twenty spirit stones! For a magical device that normally costs a few tens of thousands of spirit stones, they're demanding ten million. And when it comes to magical devices with battlefield applications, they're being even stingier.

“The swordsages sent to confer with the Demi-Immortals were refused entry. The Demi-Immortals stated that in compliance with the palace lord's request, they've sequestered themselves and don't want to be disturbed.”

After finishing with the report, Qing Qiu stepped back. She had never felt more disgusted with nonhumans than she did right now.

In response to Qing Qiu's report, Xu Qing's eyes glittered coldly. As of now, he felt the same way as the palace lord, that the nonhumans in Sea-Sealing County were getting a lot more respect than they deserved. On the other hand, he could understand their stance. Humans were in decline as a species, and they couldn't throw their weight around like they had in the past. Furthermore, for many years, the Holytides had been opposed to a fully united Sea-Sealing County. As a result, maintaining a delicate balance was the only way to avoid war. Unfortunately, there were obviously some things that couldn't be avoided.

After thinking about the matter in silence for a moment, Xu Qing said, “Determine which species is demanding the most outrageous prices. I want all files relating to that species delivered to me. Also, find out how many times they've violated the law without repercussion, including all relevant details.”

With that, Xu Qing closed his eyes. It was still dark outside, and dawn had not yet come. It was also dark inside the Secretariat Division, making it seem like Xu Qing himself was part of the gloom.

When Qing Qiu looked at him, she could sense killing intent building within him. Nodding in affirmation, she hurried away to start compiling the information he wanted.

Half an incense stick of time later, as the light of dawn appeared on the horizon, she returned to the Secretariat Division with a jade slip that she handed to him.

With that, she provided a summary of the information. “The Fullspirit species is located to the northwest of the county capital in Enlightenment Prefecture, in the mountain highlands which bear the same name. They’re not a very large species, and they don’t organize into sects. Instead, they group themselves based on the ethnic composition of their species. Because they have four main ethnicities, they organize themselves into what they call the Four Branches.

“As a species, they’re very skilled in alchemy and equipment forging. They’re closely allied to the Tianyin Clan, which is one of the three great clans of the Demi-Immortals. The Tianyin Clan has eight subsidiary species that form the bulk of their subordinates, and the Fullspirits are one of them. Thanks to the treaty between humans and Demi-Immortals, the Fullspirits aren’t required to pay an annual tribute. They have complete autonomy in the 50,000-kilometer Enlightenment Highlands.

“During the past 800 years, the Four Branches have violated human laws 18,931 times. Of those, 1,300 were violations of Title 1 law, and as such, the law was enforced. But in all other instances, no action was taken.

“Furthermore, because of being so closely allied with the Demi-Immortals, this species refused to comply with the palace lord’s directive to send all Spirit Trove and Void Returning cultivators to war.”

Xu Qing’s face remained expressionless as he stood to leave.

Thinking back to everything that happened at the Ten Entrails Tree, she suddenly said, “Xu Qing, should we report this to the lieutenant governor and request forces from the county yamen to help?”

Xu Qing shook his head. As he stepped out of the Secretariat Division, the sun in the sky cast its brilliant light out, driving away all darkness.

“I’ll handle it myself,” he said coldly, then flew up into the air.

Rumbling sounds echoed out, and massive pressure weighed down onto the county capital as the great bird Qingqin appeared. The bird was so massive he blotted out the sun. As his shadow was cast over the city, Xu Qing stood on his right head. Squatting down, he gently rubbed the bird’s magenta skin.

“Senior,” he said quietly, “if you have some free time, I’d like to go to the Enlightenment Highlands and exterminate a species there. What do you say?”

“CAW!” replied Qingqin excitedly.

The sound was so intense it could pierce through metal and rock, and caused everything to tremble!

The scattered feathers on his small wings rippled as they flapped, causing a tempest to spring up around it. Pulsing with savagery, he flew off toward the northwest, moving with such incredible speed that he disappeared only a moment later.

Chapter 497: Dark Clouds Suppress Immortals; the Immortals are Furious (part 1)

The northwest of Sea-Sealing County had four prefectures.

To the far west was Tranquility Prefecture, which was also the location of the western front. To the north was the icy Tidefall Prefecture, which was the other main front line of the war.

Squeezed between those two prefectures was Rainfield Prefecture.

Water that drained into Rainfield Prefecture from the melting tundra to the north ensured that the place had a lot of water. However, it also had subterranean volcanic flows that caused mist to rise up from the ground year-round. That mist would then turn into rain, which was why the prefecture was named the way it was.

In the spot where Rainfield Prefecture neared the county capital was the fourth of the northwestern prefectures, which was Enlightenment Prefecture. The name of the prefecture came from the very famous mountainous region called the Enlightenment Highlands.

Mountainous regions and mountain ranges are different. The latter generally stretch out in a specific direction. They're composed of easily distinguished mountain peaks and valleys. Their clear geography and vast range distinguish them from mountainous regions. A mountainous region doesn't have such obvious terrain features, and might even contain volcanic belts. There might be countless mountain peaks interspersed with vast stretches of flat land. All of those unique features merge together to create something like a 'family' of mountains.

The 50,000-kilometer Enlightenment Highlands were just such a mountainous region, and they were the home to the Fullspirits.

The Fullspirits were a tall people. Normally speaking, they stood at a height of about fifteen meters, and specialized in body cultivation. In line with the common traditions in Revered Ancient, because they were so closely allied with the Demi-Immortals, they had been gifted with some of the blood of that species. That had provoked some changes in their own bloodline, and caused them to grow wings. However, due to the size of the Fullspirits, those wings didn't make them capable of true flight. They were more for show.

The reason the Demi-Immortals were so fond of the Fullspirits was that they were exceptionally skilled in alchemy and equipment forging.

The Enlightenment Highlands were filled with many equipment and alchemy workshops. Some were independently operated by individual Fullspirits, while others were much larger operations. All in all, there were hundreds of thousands of such workshops there. The clanking of tools and the fragrance of medicinal pills filled the highlands year-round. What was more, the volcanic flows under the ground ensured that the place was always warm. It could well be said that the Fullspirits were constantly producing medicinal pills and magical devices to be put onto the market. There were some off-limits areas set aside for the maturation of medicinal pills. The number of such locations was staggering. The presence of so much 'earthflame,' plus the species' innate abilities, allowed them to produce the highest-quality pills and equipment imaginable. And they were usually very expensive.

That said, even if they charged more than they usually did, it didn't make sense for a medicinal pill that normally cost twenty spirit stones to suddenly cost a thousand.

They had never charged such outrageous prices before the war, as no one would have paid them. And normally speaking, a dharmic decree from the Swordsage Palace was enough to get shipments of supplies flowing from them.

Although they were close with the Demi-Immortals, the Fullspirits were generally reasonable, and wouldn't risk offending humans over something as trivial as supplies. Therefore, they knew exactly what they were doing when they responded to the Swordsage Palace's most recent request.

At the moment, the branch chiefs of their Four Branches were meeting secretly in the Fullspirit ancestral mountain temple. They were all dressed in luxurious outfits, and were festooned with all types of jewelry and fancy magical devices.

"We have to charge these prices to make our stance clear to the Demi-Immortals!"

"War is here, and it seems highly unlikely the humans are going to maintain control of this particular administrative district."

Two statues were enshrined in the temple, one in the front and one in the back. The statue in the front resembled a Fullspirit, while the one in the back was much more amazing. It resembled an immortal flying into the sky. It was, of course, the original ancestor of the Demi-Immortals.

Each statue had a collection of thousands of items in front of it, including precious spirit fruits and high-quality medicinal pills. The strong spirit energy from those items filled the temple. That showed how important this temple was to them.

Any one of the spirit fruits and medicinal pills was something that could be urgently used on the battlefield. After all, casualties had been severe so far in the war to defend Sea-Sealing County. It might be an exaggeration to say that each item could save a life, but to say that ten could save a life would be completely reasonable. That said, the four branch chiefs couldn't care less about the humans dying on the battlefield. All they cared about was how their own species would fare going forward.

"For the sake of Marquis Yao, we should at least send some supplies. Over the past few hundred years, Marquis Yao has helped us out a lot. We should make sure all the other species know that we Fullspirits know how to properly repay favors."

"That's fine. So we ask for extremely high prices for most of the products, to make our stance clear to the Demi-Immortals. At the same time, we send a small amount to boost our reputation as a species. And finally, we'll offer a tiny bit for sale at a discount to prove we're not being hostile."

"Truth be told, this is what our species in general wants. Before coming here today, I did a little survey, and everyone I talked to agreed that we should charge high prices. After all... humans have plenty of money."

“My branch feels the same. In fact, some people I talked to even suggested that we use this as an opportunity to get rid of all our defective products that we would normally destroy. Although, that might be pushing things a bit too far.”

“Since we’re all in agreement, then we’ll follow through with this plan. One branch will support the humans, one branch will cooperate to repay previous favors, one branch will do nothing in public but will secretly contact the Holytides to curry favor, and the last branch will be responsible for maintaining the status quo with the Demi-Immortals!”

“If we want this act to seem realistic, we should pretend to be debating the matter for a few more days....”

Chuckling, the four branch chiefs rose to their feet to end the secret meeting. However, it was at that exact moment that a terrifying pressure suddenly weighed down on all of them from above, causing their hearts to lurch.

To the shock of the branch chiefs, the ground quaked, and a deep rumbling sound erupted within the Enlightenment Highlands. From a distance, it was possible to see that the sky above the Fullspirit’s ancestral mountain temple was glittering with red light.

A massive, 30,000-meter three-headed bird emerged from the clouds, with both of his massive claws pointed directly toward the temple. The bird ignored the mountain’s defenses. He ignored the temple’s defenses. He ignored everything. Massive rumbling sounds echoed out as the temple and the two statues inside of it exploded.

The huge bird’s claws then latched onto the mountain, and as he flapped his wings, he wrenched the entire ancestral mountain out of the ground and into the air! Boulders fell like rain, trees and plants showered down, and massive clouds of dust billowed everywhere.

All Fullspirits present to witness what was happening were dumbstruck. That was especially true when they noticed that someone was standing atop one of the bird’s heads.

That person wore a white swordmage uniform, and had long hair that seemed both black and violet at the same time. He was consummately good-looking, but his expression was ice cold. For a good ten breaths of time, all people could do was look on in shock.

As Qingqin lifted the Fullspirits’ ancestral mountain into the air, his claws tightened, and cracks started spreading out across the mountain. Then it exploded!

Blood sprayed out of the mouths of the four branch chiefs, and they backed away looking both shocked and furious. When they saw their ancestral mountain destroyed, they looked at the terrifying, strange bird, and Xu Qing perched atop it, their hearts seething with rage.

“Qingqin!?”

“A swordmage??”

“Senior Qingqin, what’s the meaning of this? Why did you destroy our ancestral mountain temple??”

The four branch chiefs were all in the Spirit Trove level, but none of them had completely formed their first secret trove.

In the Spirit Trove level, powering up the secret troves was usually a slow and difficult process. Because of that, the majority of Spirit Trove cultivators were actually at this same point. It was only after the first secret trove took the shape of a world, and also had a heavenly dao, that it could truly be considered a secret trove. That said, even when still in the process of powering up the first secret trove, such cultivators would still be able to crush any Nascent Soul enemy.

As the four branch chiefs howled in rage, several dozen nearby mountain peaks trembled, and the lake they bordered was suddenly filled with massive waves.

The water all flowed in the same direction as a pair of eyes as big as the lake itself suddenly opened inside of it. They were looking at Qingqin.

“Fellow Daoist Qingqin, why have you done this?”

As the eyes opened and the voice rang out, a 24,000-meter-tall giant slowly stood up. The dozens of mountain peaks came with it, as they were actually spikes sticking out of its body. It even had spikes growing out of its head.

This figure was the Fullspirits’ only Void Returning patriarch.

He had dao lineaments in his eyes, and had numerous projections of himself superimposed upon each other. He also had a number of minor worlds that were on the verge of being complete. He was in the great circle of the second stage of Void Returning, and was half a step into the third stage. Though he seemed calm, the truth was that inwardly he was feeling very flustered.

“CAW!” said Qingqin disdainfully.

Meanwhile, Xu Qing, who stood atop the right head, looked down coldly. “Over the past 800 years, the Four Branches of the Fullspirits have violated human law a total of 18,931 times. The most recent was the refusal to comply with the palace lord’s demand that Spirit Trove and Void Returning cultivators join the war effort. I’m here today to punish all of the criminals who perpetrated those crimes over the past 800 years!”

His voice echoed through the Enlightenment Highlands, and the hundreds of thousands of Fullspirits there looked up angrily at the huge bird in the sky.

Meanwhile, the massive giant standing there with energy and blood seething seemed incredibly intimidating.

“Our species is allied with the Demi-Immortals. And we haven’t violated any part of our agreement with you humans. For a swordmage to come here and wreck our ancestral mountain is a clear breach of our alliance!” For the first time, that giant’s gaze came to rest on Xu Qing. “Are you really trying to cause chaos in Sea-Sealing County right now, in this moment of crisis on the front lines of the war?”

Face expressionless, Xu Qing turned to Qingqin, clasped hands, and bowed. “Senior Qingqin, please take action and exterminate this species!”

Qingqin's eyes glittered with excitement. It had been a long time since he wiped out a species, a point which had caused him to sigh many times in the past. He was supposed to be a fierce beast, so the fact that he hadn't wiped out many species seemed like a betrayal of his own bloodline. Beyond that, it had been a long time since he had eaten any meat. He spent all his time absorbing water and mist, making him feel like he was starting to fade from existence.

That said, he had always restrained himself. After all, the humans had long since kept things peaceful in Sea-Sealing County, and he didn't feel inclined to cause trouble and disturb the status quo. Besides, his most revered Eldest Brother from the continent of South Phoenix had told him to be a little less fierce, and not follow the path of his ancestor. He wasn't supposed to go around slaughtering people, especially humans. He was supposed to make more friends. That was the way to stick around for a long time.

However, the little bro his Eldest Brother had entrusted to his care had just made a very reasonable request. Considering that he was also a swordsage, there didn't seem to be any reason to refuse.

As for why his Eldest Brother had become bros with a human didn't really matter. He just knew that his Eldest Brother had always treated him so well that it didn't seem like it would be possible to repay the favor in this life. Therefore, he didn't want to do anything to lose face for his Eldest Brother.

And thus, it was with an excited caw that Qingqin bristled with rage and prepared to shoot toward the Fullspirits.

"Hold on!!" the Fullspirit patriarch blurted.

#### Chapter 498: Xu Qing's Friendly Negotiation

Xu Qing's voice echoed out in all directions. He sounded very calm, and only the tiniest scrap of craziness was visible in his eyes. After all that he had experienced through the years, including more than one instance of engaging in a friendly negotiation, he was now very familiar with how to manifest the spirit of friendship when doing business. For example, by remaining kind and professional when dealing with Emperor Ancient Spirit and the god's finger, he had successfully reached acceptable deals. Given those examples of success, he didn't feel the least amount of stress at having to deal with these Demi-Immortals.

Xu Qing knew well that, when involved in a business discussion, sincerity had to be used like a weapon to get the best results. Only by being truly genuine could one touch the heart of the party on the other side of the negotiation table. The more simple and direct you were, the better. That was why he had stuck to concrete facts.

If Sea-Sealing County fell into enemy hands, why would the Swordsage Palace go to the trouble of keeping that god sealed up? The most logical thing to do would be to release the god, regardless of who lived or died afterward.

The best way to get a good outcome in this friendly negotiation was to stick to logic and focus on pros and cons.

When Xu Qing finished speaking, the three Demi-Immortal cultivators in the sky all had scowls on their faces. They all had high positions in Demi-Immortal society, being in the patriarch level. Yet all of them had to admit that if Xu Qing really freed that sealed god, then... given how close the Demi-Immortals were to the county capital, they would be the first ones in line to be devoured.

It was true that the county capital was mostly full of mortals. What was more, they were under the protection of the net created by all the taboo treasures. There would be two options presented to that freed god: a little appetizer that would require great care to eat, and a huge feast that could be gobbled down with ease. It was self-evident which of those two options would be selected.

If it happened, Sea-Sealing County would be done for. But it was also true that unless the humans got the resources they needed, the front lines would collapse, and the end result would be the same.

As a result, Xu Qing's final question 'do you dare?' echoed out into heaven and earth, and especially within the hearts of the three Demi-Immortal patriarchs.

A long moment passed. Finally, the female Demi-Immortal said, "You're the first human we've ever encountered who would dare to threaten people like us with a cultivation base that low. The reality is that though you came here and caused trouble for the Fullspirits, your actual goal was to draw us out into the open. Well-played. Very clever. Maintaining the status quo in Sea-Sealing County is actually the best outcome for us. So, tell us your demands."

"I'm not demanding anything, as this is a negotiation," Xu Qing corrected, his facial expression one of full sincerity. It was no surprise to him that the Demi-Immortals were willing to compromise. Any logical person would do that. However, he was also aware that the situation wasn't over yet. Everything would come down to whether it was worth it or not for the various parties involved. Xu Qing had come to realize how that worked back in Seven Blood Eyes. If he made demands that weren't worth it, then everything would devolve into chaos. Looking up at the three of them, he continued, "All resources required for the battlefield will be made available at a fair price. Purchasing on credit will be allowed!"

The female Demi-Immortal looked down at him expressionlessly. "So, this is a negotiation, huh? Fine. Your requests... are acceptable."

"The oath of alliance between our two species will remain in place," Xu Qing continued. "Furthermore, you will continue to abide by Palace Lord Kong's suggestion to remain sequestered."

The demands weren't unreasonable at all, which was evidenced by how the three Demi-Immortals considered the proposal and then nodded.

"However," the leader said, "you will cease your slaughter of the Fullspirits!"

The truth was that it was a good deal for them. They didn't want to participate in the war, which was why they had agreed to Palace Lord Kong's original suggestion. The only difference now was that they were leery of Xu Qing's threat of releasing the god. That said, all they needed was enough time to prepare, and then even that threat could be dealt with.

And with that, the deal was struck. Because of it being wartime, things were relatively simple, and Xu Qing didn't feel the need to talk about any further details. Nor was he worried about the Demi-Immortals going back on their word.

Going forward, it wouldn't take long for the other nonhumans in the county to find out about how the Demi-Immortals had agreed to a compromise. And everyone would know that the Fullspirit species was nearly wiped off the face of the map. No one would want to risk the same thing happening to them.

With the negotiation over, the three Demi-Immortals opened the rift again. Before entering, the female asked, "What's your name?"

Xu Qing thought for a moment. There wasn't really a need to hide the truth; if the Demi-Immortals wanted that information, it wouldn't be hard for them to find out.

"Zhang Siyun!" he said. Despite the reality of the situation, Xu Qing was just too cautious of a person. It didn't matter if the Demi-Immortals could easily find out his true identity. He didn't want to be the one to tell them the truth. That was especially true considering that although the negotiation had gone smoothly, it would be a big pity to slip up at the very end. He had no idea what magical techniques a Void Returning expert might be able to unleash. For instance, what if they had some special way of striking a fatal blow if they knew his real name?

At almost the exact same moment that Xu Qing spoke, a whistling sound echoed out from the direction of the county capital as a figure blurred toward them at top speed.

It was none other than the lieutenant governor. He was scowling anxiously as he rushed over to them. Upon arriving, he saw the three Demi-Immortals, and then he saw Xu Qing. Noticing Xu Qing's calm demeanor, he relaxed inwardly.

"Zhang Siyun!" he barked. "You've got a lot of guts to do something like this. I'm definitely going to report you to the palace lord!" Turning to the three Demi-Immortals, he clasped hands and plastered an apologetic look onto his face. "This was a big misunderstanding. The situation on the battlefield is critical, and Zhang Siyun got a bit too anxious. That's what led to this disaster. After the war is over, I'll make this up to you!"

The three Demi-Immortals all gave cold harrumphs. "Lieutenant Governor, this human of yours has some potential. He actually dared to threaten us!"

Looking very stern, the lieutenant governor glared at Xu Qing and snapped, "Zhang Siyun, hurry up and apologize to the Demi-Immortal patriarchs!"

Xu Qing blinked a few times, then bowed his head and clasped hands to the Demi-Immortals.

"Seniors," he said, sounding very sincere, "I was really anxious about the battlefield situation, and thus inadvertently offended you. Please, I hope the three of you patriarchs can forgive me."

The three Demi-Immortals didn't respond. Filled with a variety of thoughts and emotions, they turned back to the rift.

Except, just then, the female Demi-Immortal's expression flickered, and she suddenly coughed up a mouthful of violet blood. Turning, she looked at the lieutenant governor, then Xu Qing, her expression grim, and her eyes flickering with a profound look.

Xu Qing's expression didn't change. However, it was obvious that she had used some sort of magical technique, and... it had failed.

The lieutenant governor's eyes went wide and he looked confused. "What just happened?"

The female Demi-Immortal gritted her teeth but didn't say anything. There wasn't going to be an easy way to offer an explanation. As a matriarch of the Demi-Immortals, she had ways to plot against people if she knew their name. If the technique had worked, no one would have been the wiser. Except it didn't work....

It was a passive technique that, once employed, required no action on her part. Normally speaking, it wouldn't matter if it worked or not. But contrary to all expectations, when the technique failed, she instantly suffered a serious backlash. What was more noteworthy was that moments ago, she got the distinct feeling that some unknown entity was watching her.

Scowling, she hurried into the rift and disappeared.

After they were gone, the Fullspirit patriarch backed up a few steps. He took in the devastation around, then looked at Xu Qing and the lieutenant governor. He sighed.

The lieutenant governor, meanwhile, looked at Xu Qing. "You took a really big risk today."

"CAW!" Qingqin's three heads all glared at the lieutenant governor, as if Qingqin wasn't very pleased at hearing his Eldest Brother's bro being criticized. That was especially true considering that the little bro provided a very filling meal, and also the fact that, just like Qingqin and his Eldest Brother, could harness light. [1]

Seeing that response, the lieutenant governor smiled wryly and clasped hands to Qingqin. Qingqin then looked away from him.

"Many thanks for coming, Lieutenant Governor," said Xu Qing. "Sorry for the trouble, sir."

Xu Qing really did feel sorry for doing something so crazy. Clasping hands, he bowed to the lieutenant governor. Besides, the lieutenant governor had played along with his act, which brought a warm feeling to Xu Qing's heart.

"It was no trouble at all," the lieutenant governor said. "It was all for Sea-Sealing County. However, next time... maybe you could let me know ahead of time when you do something like this." From the haggard look on the lieutenant governor's face, it was obvious he had been working very hard over the past few days. "Palace Lord Kong asked me to work with you to handle this situation. That just goes to show that he trusts both of us. Now, let's get back to the capital."

Xu Qing nodded. Qingqin flapped his wings and flew up into the air, casting one longing glance back at the dilapidated Fullspirits. They had lost about forty percent of their population, which was a grievous blow. Worse, two of their branch chiefs had been eaten by Qingqin. Xu Qing also looked

down at the Fullspirits, but didn't say anything. All the Fullspirits could do was watch bitterly as they left.

On the way back to the capital, Xu Qing sent some voice messages to his subordinates in the Secretariat Division and had them once again get in contact with the various nonhumans in the county to start collecting resources. That included the Fullspirits.

By the time he got back to the Swordsage Palace, three days had gone by.

During that time, all nonhumans in the county, be they big species or small species, were in a state of frenzied activity. Everyone knew about what happened to the Fullspirits, and how the Demi-Immortals had been forced into a compromise. It was a big shock to everyone. What was more, it wasn't long before people found out the name of the person who was central to it all: Xu Qing. Because of that, Xu Qing's name became known to leadership figures of species all over.

"We don't know exactly where he started out, but we do know he was very young when he joined Seven Blood Eyes in the continent of South Phoenix. He served in their Violent Crimes Division, where he slaughtered countless criminals. He's cruel and ruthless, and is very skilled in the use of poison!"

"Back when Seven Blood Eyes was at war with the Seazombies, he and his Elder Brother, who were both in Foundation Establishment at the time, carried out a daring plot to steal the nose of one of the Seazombies' divine likenesses. And then, when he was only known as a random disciple from that backwater sect, he actually slaughtered the Eight Sect Coalition's dao child Master Shengyun, and absolutely crushed all the other chosen disciples. Eventually, he became the Eight Sect Coalition's newest dao child!"

"He participated in the swordsage recruiting event in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture, where he dominated the dao child from the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society, as well as all the other elite chosen from that prefecture. He took first place in that event, hands down. The Grand Emperor of humankind blessed him with a 30,000-meter pillar of light, making him the number one figure in all of Sea-Sealing County!"

"After he got to the county capital, Palace Lord Kong made him his first and only secretary-general. And then, when he was only in Gold Core, he became a Unit C jailer in the Corrections Division!"

"Before the war, he worked with the palace lord of the Swordsage Palace to handle a lot of official business. He founded the Secretariat Division and became well-known far and wide. A lot of people are saying he's the most likely candidate to succeed Palace Lord Kong!"

"At Mount Daybreak, he came out of nowhere to save the Swordsage Court from imminent peril. He slaughtered two early Nascent Soul enemies, and forced mid- and late-stage cultivators into retreat. During that battle, he killed hundreds of rogue

cultivators with his poison. It was brutal! Anyone who got infected by his poison ended up melting into a black sludge! They were destroyed in body and soul!”

“He can actually devour the heavenly palaces of others! It’s hard to imagine what he’s going to be like when he rises to the Nascent Soul level. He’s going to be a complete monster!”

“And now he actually worked with Qingqin to devour the Fullspirit species. He threatened three Demi-Immortal patriarchs. Considering that and everything else he’s done, this guy comes across as being totally crazy!”

All sorts of stories were spreading through Sea-Sealing County, and Xu Qing’s name was causing a big stir.

When Ning Yan heard the news, he just sighed.

They don’t know the half of it. Among the other crazy things he’s done are: impersonating a Nightshade godchild; destroying the Ten Entrails Tree; becoming the father of a heaven-god; and... coming very close to becoming a high-ranking figure among the Holytides.

When Qing Qiu heard the news, she was a bit stunned. What was the most troubling to her, however, was the revelation that Xu Qing came from the continent of South Phoenix. Thinking back to the way he’d looked at her at the Ten Entrails Tree, a theory began to form in her heart that she didn’t dare to believe was true. In fact, the moment it rose up in her, she quashed it.

There’s no way. This guy is horrible. It’s absolutely not possible!

As she realized what it would mean if her speculation was actually true, she inhaled sharply.

Xu Qing looked over at her. “What’s wrong? Keep reading the report. I want to know all the details about which species are delivering supplies.”

“Oh, right,” she said, sounding very much like she had when she was a handmaiden back at the Ten Entrails Tree. She immediately began to continue with the report. Only then did her reaction kick in. She snorted coldly, and her facial expression beneath her mask once again became one of icy arrogance.

Chapter 499: Honest and Truthful

As stories spread about Xu Qing crushing the Fullspirits, it didn’t just result in him becoming famous. It had a marked effect on the nonhumans’ provision of supplies. Everything went much more smoothly in that regard, and not one single species dared to demand exorbitant prices.

When all was said and done, humankind had not fallen. When all was said and done, Xu Qing did command the power to exterminate entire species. Given that, it made perfect sense that things went smoothly.

“The Watermings delivered 180,000 seaspirt healing pills and three battlefield magical devices.

“The Listeners sold us 130,000 drops of their blood. Such blood has powerful medicinal properties that can be used to quickly treat serious injuries. They also gave us one battlefield magical device.

“The local ghost ward provided medicinal pills free of charge, and also agreed to send us evil ghost warriors to bolster our forces, as long as we’re willing to let them absorb Holytide souls on the battlefield.

“The Fullspirits... took the initiative to send 1,000,000 high-quality medicinal pills, free of charge.”

Still feeling shocked, Qing Qiu continued to read the report to Xu Qing. It was obvious to her that the species of Sea-Sealing County had been stricken with fear thanks to Xu Qing’s actions. As a swordmage, Qing Qiu was familiar with the philosophies that governed the Swordsage Palace. And ever since Xu Qing arranged for her to work in the Secretariat Division, she had learned a lot and received some very valuable experience.

As a result, she knew that Xu Qing’s actions fell perfectly in line with what Palace Lord Kong expected.

Because of the timing, it wasn’t as difficult to pull off as before the war. If he had done this before, it would have provoked a strong negative reaction. And considering that the Holytides were off to the side, eyeing the humans *like tigers eying prey*, it would never have worked. It was the same when they were mobilizing for war. Things had been complicated back then, and considering all the factors, the situation with the nonhumans had been a quagmire that, if not handled with finesse, would have led to disaster.

But things were different now. The situation on the front lines was urgent. What was more, the top experts from virtually all the species were on the battlefield. Because of that, there was no reason to hold back, and there was every reason to *strike like lightning and move like the wind*.

Of course, it was all built on the premise that there was force to back up the threats, and a corresponding cultivation base.

The strategy of standing on the shoulders of a giant might seem simple, but not anyone could do it. It requires tenacity and determination. Ruthlessness and audacity. And craziness. But at the same time, you can’t lose your cool. Even more important, the other party must be given a way out. It involves ‘attacking to defend’ while simultaneously ‘retreating to advance.’

Qing Qiu glanced at Xu Qing. Although she still didn’t like him, she couldn’t stop herself from admiring him as well.

Pulling this off successfully requires qualities that most people don’t have. If it was me... I think I’m ruthless enough. But I don’t have the finesse, the cool-headedness, or the negotiation instinct. I just don’t measure up to him in those ways.

Xu Qing had no way of knowing what Qing Qiu was thinking. After she finished with the report, he thought about the situation for a short time.

Finally, he said, “The Fullspirits still haven’t given us enough medicinal pills. When I was there, I personally saw their stockpiles, and I know they have a lot more in reserve. Tell them to give more.

However, don't try to squeeze them dry. Now's not the time for that. Furthermore, make sure to offer payment for whatever we take.

"As for the ghost ward... we can agree to that in principle. But tell them that they have to confirm the details with Palace Lord Kong. Have the evil ghost warriors go to the battlefield and make the final deal with him there.

"As for all the other goods from the other species, make sure they're delivered to the county capital within three days. Then we'll send them all to the front lines. In terms of the money we need to pay for the purchased items, we'll request it from the lieutenant governor after all of the goods have been shipped out."

"Yes, sir," Qing Qiu said with a nod.

As she left, Ning Yan hurried into the Secretariat Division.

"Urgent message, Secretary-General!"

Xu Qing looked up.

When that gaze landed on Ning Yan, he shivered and stood up a bit straighter. "An ambassador from the Wood Spirits has come seeking an audience with you, Secretary-General."

At almost the same moment, Xu Qing's transmission jade slip vibrated. He took it out and scanned it with divine will, whereupon the voice of the innkeeper from Plankspring Way echoed into his mind.

*"Xu Qing, I've brought a second group of Wood Spirits to join the war effort!"*

Moved, Xu Qing rose and went out to personally meet them.

The Wood Spirits were allies, and back when the palace lord was levying troops, they had sent a contingent of their people to join Marquis Yao's forces on the northern front. They weren't a very large species to begin with, and the fact that they were sending a second group was unusual. In fact, it was something that no other species in Sea-Sealing County had done up to this point.

Before long, Xu Qing caught sight of the innkeeper flying through the air, followed by a group of several thousand Wood Spirits. When they were in their tree form, they were very impressive, and they pulsed with extraordinary auras.

Next to the innkeeper was an old man. He was also a treant, but was in human form. His face was worn with age and wisdom. He had amazing fluctuations as well, with a thousand dao lineaments in his eyes, indicating he was in the first stage of Void Returning.

"Xu Qing, this is the grand elder of the Wood Spirits," the innkeeper said.

Xu Qing quickly clasped hands and bowed. "Well met, Grand Elder. Many thanks for your support!"

"There's no need for such formalities, Secretary-General. You yourself are like an *august spirit* of our species, and your status is the same as one of our clan chiefs.

Besides, humans have kept our species safe for many years. It's only natural that we would repay that kindness.

"I was previously in seclusion working toward a breakthrough, and received special permission from Palace Lord Kong for my arrival on the battlefield. Now that I've broken through, I wouldn't dare to stay behind."

Xu Qing wasn't sure what an 'august spirit' was to the Wood Spirits, but he assumed it had something to do with Ling'er. Yet again, he bowed, then called for a subordinate to make all the necessary arrangements. In three days, the Wood Spirits would join the procession going to the western front to deliver all the newly gathered supplies to the palace lord.

The Wood Spirits were kind by nature, and the grand elder didn't use his cultivation base as an excuse to look down on Xu Qing. Some of that was because of the situation with Ling'er, and part of it was because of Xu Qing's status in the Swordsage Palace. Most importantly, the grand elder knew that this young human was someone that had to be treated as a friend, and never as an enemy. Along the way, he'd heard the story of the Fullspirits, as well as how Xu Qing had negotiated with the Demi-Immortals. Because of all that, he knew that Xu Qing was the one responsible for resolving the supply crisis for the front lines.

It was going to be a big help to the war effort. If Xu Qing also resolved the troop crisis, then those two things combined would ensure that he rose to incredible heights in the Sea-Sealing County Swordsage Palace.

Of course, the prerequisite was that humankind came out victorious in the war.

Two groups of Wood Spirit troops were all the species could offer. And it was a gamble. They were betting that humans would win, and were gambling on a future Sea-Sealing County controlled by humans. If that gamble paid off, it would result in a thousand years of security for the Wood Spirits. And having a good relationship with Xu Qing would only give the potential to reach even higher heights.

Therefore, the Wood Spirit grand elder didn't object at all to Xu Qing's arrangements. Knowing that the holy dharma protector and the august spirit had some things to discuss, he bid farewell.

After he was gone, the innkeeper looked Xu Qing up and down and seemed pleased. But then he realized he didn't want to reveal what he really thought, so he smoothed out his face and cleared his throat.

"The Wood Spirits are doing this partly because they're gambling on humans coming out victorious. But some of it has to do with what Ling'er has accomplished."

"Is she still in seclusion?" Xu Qing asked.

"Yes. She still needs more time. This good fortune for Ling'er will take a while to take full advantage of." After that, the innkeeper wasn't sure what to say next.

Xu Qing, not being adept at small talk, took out a jade slip and sent some orders regarding the Wood Spirits and the big supply shipment.

A long moment passed.

The innkeeper cleared his throat. "Ahem. Isn't there something you wanted to ask me?"

Surprised, Xu Qing looked up.

"For example, don't you want to know about Ling'er's past? Or how this good fortune can transform her? Or if she happened to regain consciousness at all recently? Aren't you curious about any of that?" The innkeeper was actually feeling a little irritated.

Xu Qing frowned. "Why would I ask *you* about that? Wouldn't it be better to hear those things from her?"

"Uhh...." The innkeeper actually couldn't think of a way to rebut that. It made sense. That said, he still felt a bit irritated.

Xu Qing, meanwhile, could sense the innkeeper's irritation. It was actually a familiar sensation, as it reminded him of dealing with the Captain.

"I can't afford to fully trust the Wood Spirits," he said. "The supply shipment is too important. Therefore, Senior, I would like for you to go with them to keep an eye on things. The reality is there's only one person in the capital city that I can truly trust, and that's you, Senior."

The innkeeper suddenly felt very pleased. Laughing heartily, he said, "Don't worry at all. Once the shipment is ready, I'll use my life essence magic to seal it tight. And I'll keep a very close eye on it during the trip. That way, nothing wrong could possibly happen!"

Xu Qing clasped hands and bowed deeply.

The innkeeper now felt wonderful. *This Xu brat really does know how to show respect. As it turns out, he's actually not that bad.*

Three days passed.

The nonhuman supplies all came in, and as Xu Qing looked on, the Wood Spirits and the innkeeper left with the shipment to the western front. Although most of the trip would be made via teleportation portal, there was still a lot of ground to cover. And there were some parts of the trip that couldn't be made via teleportation. Therefore, the trip was scheduled to take five or six days.

After the convoy left, Xu Qing stood on the limestone tiles of the Swordsage Palace, looking out at heaven and earth.

Flanking him were Ning Yan and Qing Qiu, as well as a contingent of other swordsages who worked in the Secretariat Division. All of them were looking at Xu Qing with veneration in their eyes.

As for Qing Qiu, she was trying very hard not to feel respect for Xu Qing. Meanwhile, her evil ghost scythe sighed into her mind.

*"Oh, Ah Qiu, don't fight back.... I can sense the conflict in your heart. Why are you still fighting it? Just bow your head to the amazing and incredibly good-looking Secretary-General Xu. Isn't that just the normal thing to do?"*

*“Shut. Up. Ever since you got captured at the Ten Entrails Tree and found out that Xu Qing’s spirit automaton can hear you talking, all you’ve done is blabber like this. Aren’t you disgusted with yourself? You’re the one always yammering about ending things in mutual destruction! So... what, are you already dead?”* She snorted coldly in her heart. *“A disgusting individual such as yourself should know exactly what I’m thinking. I, Qing Qiu, am nothing like you. I would never bow my head so casually! And Xu Qing is the same!”*

Xu Qing, of course, had no way of knowing what Qing Qiu was thinking. It was currently dawn, and a brisk breeze lifted his hair as he stood at the edge of the Swordsage Palace and gazed out at all creation.

Over the past few days, he had been contemplating an important question. And that was how to provide fresh troops to the front lines. A few thousand Wood Spirits simply wasn’t enough.

This was a protracted war in which the enemy was a Holytide army that vastly outnumbered the humans. Even with the county’s taboo treasures helping in the defense, there were still people dying constantly. The supply shipment was going to make things a bit easier on the front lines, but the real key to making progress was going to be more troops.

A long moment passed.

“Qing Qiu.”

“Huh? Oh. Here!” Qing Qiu had been so focused on arguing with the evil ghost scythe, and had been so wrapped up in feeling superior, that Xu Qing caught her off guard. She took a step forward and stood there ramrod straight.

Looking off in the direction of Emperor-Receiving Prefecture, he said, “I want all the details about what’s happening in Forbidden by the Garment in Injustice Prefecture and Forbidden by the Zombie in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. You have one incense stick’s worth of time to put the report together.”

Puffing up her chest, she loudly said, “Your orders shall be followed! I guarantee the report will be done in one incense stick’s worth of time!!”

Her voice thrummed with passion, in just the way it did when she’d spoken with Palace Lord Kong in the past.

*“Didn’t someone just mention refusing to back down?”* the scythe said.

*“Shut up! I’m putting on a show, that’s all. This is for the sake of the front lines!”*

“Why are you standing around?” Xu Qing asked, looking over his shoulder at her.

“Yes, sir!” she said loudly, then turned and raced off.

Chapter 500: I’m... Back! (part 1)

For the time it takes an incense stick to burn, Qing Qiu scrambled to compile all the information from Injustice Prefecture and Emperor-Receiving Prefecture, then carefully put it all into two jade

slips. Racing back to the Secretariat Division, she found Xu Qing waiting for her, his eyes closed in rest. She hadn't done all the work herself. She'd enlisted the help of some of the other swordsages, who double checked everything and added their personal sealing marks to their work. This was all to ensure there were no slip-ups, since any mistakes could be easily traced back to their source.

Opening his eyes, Xu Qing took the jade slips and examined them.

Sea-Sealing County needed more troops, and they couldn't be levied from the nonhumans. Therefore, the only thing Xu Qing could think to do was look toward Injustice Prefecture and Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. Because of the incidents in Forbidden by the Garment and Forbidden by the Zombie, the palace lord had exempted the sects there from sending forces to the front lines. After all, they needed to focus all of their attention on keeping those two forbidden grounds under control.

Sea-Sealing County had a total of thirteen prefectures. If he could divert the forces of two entire prefectures to the forces on the front lines, it would be nearly a twenty percent boost. That would be a huge help to the troops on the front lines.

However, that wasn't going to be easy, even if he asked Qingqin to help. And that was why he wanted to look into the details of what was going on in those two prefectures.

The situation was summarized in the opening remarks on the first jade slip.

*"The situation in Forbidden by the Garment is under control. However, it required the combined power of the entire prefecture, led by the local Swordsage Court. They managed to place an initial seal on the forbidden ground, but are still dealing with counterattacks. They can't afford any reduction in battle prowess, and still need an entire month before the situation is fully contained."*

Xu Qing sighed. A month was too much. The troops on the front lines simply couldn't wait that long. However, if the forbidden ground wasn't contained, then the sects in the prefecture would be destroyed, and countless humans would end up being devoured or mutated. Eventually, it would lead to all of Sea-Sealing County being dragged into chaos.

The nonhumans in those two prefectures were also participating in the effort to keep the forbidden grounds under control. The situation there was different from the other prefectures. After all, when a crisis was at your front door, it didn't matter what species you were, you sent people to deal with it. There was no way Xu Qing could order the forces in those two prefectures to simply ignore the forbidden grounds and send their forces to the front lines.

Besides, Emperor-Receiving Prefecture was where Xu Qing's home sect was. It had taken over ninety nonhuman species from the Forbidden Sea plus the majority of the forces in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture to get Forbidden by the Zombie under control.

Things were currently in a deadlock.

Xu Qing silently perused the jade slips. At a certain point in going through the information from Emperor-Receiving Prefecture, he came across a bit of information that caused his eyes to narrow slightly. It was in one of the routine reports sent in by the Swordsage Court there.

*“The majority of the nonhuman species and organizations in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture participated in the war with Forbidden by the Zombie. But some did not participate. That contingent was led by the Three-Spirits Dao-Suppressing Mountain and the Ghost Emperor mountain.*

*“That said, both of those parties agreed that, during the duration of the conflict, neither of them would deploy any of their forces outside their own territory.*

*“The Dao-Suppressing Mountain’s three spirits, and the Ghost Emperor mountain’s seven fiends are manifestations of the spiritual and physical souls of the Ghost Emperor. The seal which remains on the Ghost Emperor mountain is something that can only be broken by a Smoldering God. As a result, they’re all undying. Forcing them to join the conflict would create friction, and unless they were willing participants, it wouldn’t help the situation with Forbidden by the Zombie, and would cause unnecessary distraction.*

*“In order to prevent side issues from cropping up, and in order to not waste time, the local Swordsage Court made the decision to exempt them from the war effort.”*

Xu Qing read the message and then mulled it over for a while. Finally, he stood and started pacing back and forth. His eyes sometimes flickered with determination, then with hesitation. He was clearly pondering some course of action.

Neither Qing Qiu nor Ning Yan had seen Xu Qing act like this before, not even back during the Nightshade godchild situation. The two of them exchanged a glance, and both were clearly hesitant to even breathe too loudly.

Frowning, he walked a few dozen more paces, then stopped in place. Sensing the Ghost Emperor palace within him, he looked out at the dome of heaven, and his eyes glittered with determination.

“Qing Qiu, Ning Yan, I’m leaving you in charge of the Secretariat Division. Keep on top of the reports from the front lines. Keep an eye on the progress of the supply shipment. Qing Qiu, you’re in charge. If there’s anything important, use the Swordsage Palace to send a message to my command sword.”

Qing Qiu stood up a bit straighter and was about to say something loudly, but then thought about her pride, and instead just nodded coolly.

Ning Yan didn’t have such reservations. “Yes, sir!” he said loudly. Then he curiously asked, “Elder Brother Xu, where are you going?”

Xu Qing looked at Ning Yan. He didn’t want to reveal the truth about his plan to anyone, so he said, “I’m taking a trip to Forbidden by the Garment.”

With that, he left the Secretariat Division and, without any hesitation, flew up into the sky.

A loud caw echoed out as Qingqin poked his three heads down out of the clouds and looked excitedly at Xu Qing. He seemed to be salivating at the prospect of wiping out another species. He extended his right head down, and Xu Qing stood atop it.

Then Xu Qing reached out with divine will. A moment later, Qingqin's eyes glittered with brilliant light. He flapped his wings, and intense rumbling sounds filled the sky above the county capital. In the blink of an eye, Qingqin disappeared with Xu Qing.

As long as Qingqin was traveling short distances, he could move so quickly that taking a teleportation portal wouldn't have been much faster. When greater distances were involved, though, he couldn't match up to a portal. However, Xu Qing didn't want to risk revealing where he was actually going. Though the likelihood of that information reaching the wrong ears wasn't high, he still preferred to be careful.

When he was some distance away from the capital, he found a teleportation portal belonging to the Swordsage Palace. After having Qingqin shrink down a great deal, they went through the portal. After a number of such teleportations, the two of them reached the northern tundra of the Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. The trip took about three days.

It was currently noon, yet the sun didn't seem very bright, and it didn't provide much warmth. The wind brought with it a frigid coldness that pierced into the bones, and it stirred the flakes of snow into motion, so that the landscape looked almost like a white sea.

Off in the distance, the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar rose to shocking heights, imparting a sense of wonder to those who looked at it. Xu Qing remembered the time when so many tents surrounded the massive pillar that they formed an entire city.

Now, though, there were few tents. And those tents that did exist were battered by the endless wind. A few people could be seen here and there, and they were all bundled up heavily against the cold. Those people weren't swordsages. They were locals, people that the Swordsage Court had left behind, primarily older ones who didn't need to participate in the war effort.

Xu Qing hovered in the air taking in the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar and the black palace at its top. He could sense that there weren't very many swordsages inside.

"The Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar..." he murmured, and then he had Qingqin glide in a few circles around the area.

As clouds gathered because of Qingqin's presence, Xu Qing looked at the shocking pillar. Before going through with this plan of his, he needed to confirm something using the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar.

Extending his hand, he made a grasping gesture. The Ghost Emperor palace within him activated, and the cross-legged Ghost Emperor opened his eyes.

Instantly, the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar trembled, which caught the attention of the rogue cultivators gathered at the base, as well as the Swordsage Court on the top. Many people looked up and saw the vague shape of a huge bird in the clouds.

"Who goes there?" rang out a voice from the Swordsage Court.

Now that he was in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture, there was no need to stay in hiding. Therefore, Xu Qing drew his command sword and calmly said, "Xu Qing."

As his words rang out, Qingqin flapped his wings, parting all of the clouds and revealing himself to the swordsages.

In the other prefectures of the county, the swordsages might have first recognized him by name. Then, the combination of his physical appearance and his command sword would confirm his identity. But here in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture, the swordsages already knew what he looked like. After all, back when he was given the 30,000-meter pillar of light, all swordsages from the prefecture were there to witness it. Therefore, after the Swordsage Court's spell formation authenticated Xu Qing's command sword, the swordsages rushed out to meet him.

"Xu Qing!"

"It's Secretary-General Xu!"

Most of these swordsages looked familiar to Xu Qing. They came out with friendly expressions on their faces and offered formal greetings. The swordsage in charge took a step forward and clasped hands.

"Secretary-General Xu, do you need to activate the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar? Can we help you in any way?"

Xu Qing shook his head. He knew that the pillar was being used to suppress the ghastr hollow, and because of that, it couldn't be activated. He had just come to do a test. He clenched his hand into a fist, whereupon the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar started vibrating with even more intensity. Of course, he knew that there was a limit to what he could do in this regard. His cultivation base was too low to extract the pillar.

That said, he wasn't here to take the pillar. Rather....

"Spirit Automaton!" he said, his voice booming like heavenly thunder. He was calling out to the spirit automaton of the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar. That was why he was here.

A short time passed, and the pillar continued to vibrate. And then a very distant moaning sound echoed out from within the pillar. As the sound rose high into the sky, an enormous pair of eyes opened up on the pillar. They seemed to radiate something profoundly ancient as they looked at Xu Qing with suspicion.

This scene shook the swordsages to the core. They all knew that the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar had a spirit automaton, but normally speaking, it stayed in a state of slumber. And in all the Swordsage Court, only the grand elder could communicate with it.

Yet right now, Xu Qing said one thing, and it unexpectedly regained consciousness.

As Xu Qing looked at the eyes which represented the pillar's spirit automaton, he activated his Ghost Emperor palace. The eyes of the Ghost Emperor seated within it started glowing brightly. But that wasn't enough for Xu Qing. Waving his hand, he tossed out some demonization talismans, whereupon the vague image of a Ghost Emperor mountain appeared.

"Ghost Emperor mountain!"

"Th-that... that...."

People in other prefectures wouldn't necessarily be familiar with the Ghost Emperor mountain, and thus wouldn't understand the significance of what they were seeing. But cultivators in Emperor-

Receiving Prefecture knew exactly what the Ghost Emperor mountain signified. And people there could recognize it on sight.

Meanwhile, the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar vibrated dramatically as those eyes looked out with confusion and a bit of excitement.

When Xu Qing saw that, he breathed a sigh of relief. His return to Emperor-Receiving Prefecture was all going to revolve around his Ghost Emperor palace, and he had needed to do this test to make sure he was on the right track with his plan.

“Spirit Automaton, do you recognize me?” Xu Qing suddenly said.

The spirit automaton was silent for a few breaths of time. Then it sent out divine will, not to answer Xu Qing’s question, but to say four words that carried deep meaning.

*“The emperor has awakened!”*

That wasn’t exactly what Xu Qing had been expecting. Based on his theory, the spirit automaton should have said something about accepting a legacy. That said, it didn’t matter too much. The spirit automaton’s actions fit in line with his plan.

“Do you mind sending a message to the three spiritual souls and seven physical souls? Tell them... I’m back.”