

Timescape 501

Chapter 501: Half-Step into Smoldering God! (part 1)

Xu Qing didn't push them for an answer. He waited for a moment, then seeing that neither the heavenly spiritual soul nor the earthly spiritual soul was responding, he decided not to continue with any sort of sales pitch.

"August Spirits, please take time to think it over. This evening at sunset I'll be waiting outside the Eight Sect Coalition atop Mount Seagazing."

With that, he spoke to Qingqin via divine will. Qingqin burped, cawed, then stretched his wings and flew up into the sky. Clouds gathered, surrounding Qingqin. They rapidly turned pitch black and filled with countless lightning bolts. The rumbling of thunder echoed out. Then Qingqin burst into motion, exploding from the clouds and shooting in the direction of the Ghost Emperor mountain.

Two hours later, the giant mountain became visible ahead.

The Ghost Emperor had sat down cross-legged and become an incredibly formidable mountain. Although the surface of the mountain had degenerated and ultimately become a 'garment' of plants and vegetation, that couldn't completely cover the suit of armor or the two vicious blades that emanated strong, baleful auras. The Ghost Emperor sat there, facing the direction of the Forbidden Sea, head slightly bowed as if waiting for something....

Just looking at the spectacular mountain filled Xu Qing's heart with emotion. Back when he came here with Master Seventh to seek enlightenment, he didn't see the seven physical souls of the Ghost Emperor mountain. He had stayed in a little residence near the base of the mountain. [1]

Now that he was back and looking at the real Ghost Emperor mountain, he felt his Ghost Emperor palace stirring.

Eyes shining, he took a deep breath and threw out some demonization talismans. As Qingqin got closer to the mountain, a projection of the Ghost Emperor appeared behind Xu Qing. Wild colors flashed in heaven and earth. Winds screamed. From a distance, it was possible to see two Ghost Emperor mountains. One was large, the other small. One was real, the other was illusory. The two of them almost seemed to be looking at each other.

A roar echoed from the real Ghost Emperor mountain, something that sounded almost like a threat. At the same time, seven streams of black smoke shot out from the two major worlds resting on the Ghost Emperor mountain's shoulders. Each was roughly 300 meters thick, and was extremely ghastly. They all pulsed with terrifying fluctuations as they rose into the dome of heaven and transformed into seven enormous faces that looked down at Xu Qing.

They were bizarre in appearance. Some were human, some were beastly. There were men and women, old and young represented. And the middle face actually looked extremely similar to the actual Ghost Emperor.

Their arrival on the scene caused the air to ripple and distort. What was actually a bright day turned into something more like a gloomy evening as immense pressure pulsed down from the faces. A ferocious and brutal sensation erupted out as they glared down at Xu Qing with seeming displeasure.

At the same time, ghostly shadows emerged from the two major worlds, spreading out in all directions. Among those entities were evil ghosts and grues. They were unhealthy yin entities that had come to exist after those two major worlds were extinguished. They spread out to obfuscate the sky and enshroud the lands, making it seem almost like the gates of hell had been opened.

Of course, such things hardly registered with Qingqin. He even looked a bit excited, as though he were now wondering what these evil ghosts tasted like.

Xu Qing stood atop Qingqin's right head, looking at the seven faces of smoke. Expression calm, he said, "I already talked things over with the spirit automaton and the heavenly and earthly spiritual souls. I don't want to rehash the same information. Presumably, the seven of you already know what's going on. Tonight at sunset I'll be waiting on Mount Seagazing outside the Eight Sect Coalition."

He clasped hands, bowed, and turned to leave.

Truth be told, he didn't even need to come here. The three spiritual souls and seven physical souls were technically two distinct groups, but they had the same origin. Xu Qing refused to believe that these seven faces didn't already know what had played out at the Three-Spirits Dao-Suppressing Mountain.

That said, even people who knew all the information might come up with additional demands.

Therefore, it wasn't a huge surprise that, as Xu Qing turned, the face that resembled the Ghost Emperor, who ranked first among the physical souls, spoke in a voice that boomed like thunder.

"I want to see your heavenly dao!"

Xu Qing stopped in place.

Turning to face the first-ranked physical soul, he waved his hand toward the sky, and a rumbling howl filled the dark canopy of heaven. The clouds became like an ocean, and the bluegreen dragon leaped out of it. Its long whiskers rippled as it swirled through the air, pulsing with astonishing energy and the clear aura of a heavenly dao.

The seven physical souls looked on silently.

Xu Qing waited for a moment, called back the bluegreen dragon, then turned to Qingqin's middle head and clasped hands. Qingqin knew exactly what Xu Qing was getting at. Cawing, he flew a circle around the Ghost Emperor mountain, then flapped his wings and shot off into the distance.

The day passed, and eventually evening approached. It wasn't a red evening. Instead, the dome of heaven was a waxy yellow color, like an old person clinging to life who just couldn't bear to let go. As that fading light enveloped Mount Seagazing outside of the Eight Sect Coalition, the evening hour arrived.

Xu Qing stood at the summit of the mountain. To his right was the Eight Sect Coalition, which had long since activated its defensive shields. Martial law had been imposed there, just in case the seals on Forbidden by the Zombie failed. The sect wasn't completely locked down, but was close. All of the sects had activated their taboo treasures, which would occasionally send pulsing beams of radiant light into the depths of the sea.

In front of Xu Qing was the pitch-black Forbidden Sea.

Waves crashed there, smashing into the rocky shore and creating a brown froth that piled up on the shoreline. The froth would build up, dissipate, and then build up again. The mutagen in the Forbidden Sea's waters was also in that froth, and when the froth dissipated, the mutagen would spread out into the area.

Forbidden by the Zombie is in that direction. Xu Qing continued looking out at the sea.

He waited. Time passed. Eventually, evening deepened, and darkness started to gobble up the light. Just when it seemed like the sky was going to turn black, a huge figure appeared a great distance away in the canopy of heaven.

He was emaciated, with a vicious-looking head and a cancerous growth on his back that made him look like a hunchback. He was none other than August Spirit Sunslaughter!

He wasn't alone. Astonishingly, there was a dwarf standing on his head.

The dwarf wore a black robe and had tiny, beady eyes along with a bulging forehead. He had two very long eyebrows that drooped down to his cheeks, a recessed chin, and a mustache shaped roughly like the character 八, with the ends curled up so they resembled tusks. In short, the dwarf was very ugly. However, the fact that he was standing on August Spirit Sunslaughter's head made it clear how high of a position he commanded. He was surrounded by a black cloud that looked like it was formed from countless shrieking centipedes. The dwarf was looking at Xu Qing. He was, of course, August Spirit Sporelight.

"We'll help you this one time," August Spirit Sporelight said in a raspy voice. It was the voice of the heavenly spiritual soul that Xu Qing had heard earlier.

Next, rumbling sounds filled the dark sky as seven enormous faces appeared. They were also looking at Xu Qing.

"We'll help you this one time!" they said, all at the same time. Their voices echoed like thunder.

"Okay." Xu Qing nodded. Since the deal had already been struck, there was no need for formalities.

Every single one of the seven physical souls was in the first stage of Void Returning, with the exception of the first-ranking soul, which was in the second stage. August Spirit Sunslaughter, the earthly spiritual soul, was surrounded by second-stage projections, and August Spirit Sporelight, the heavenly spiritual soul, was so powerful Xu Qing had a hard time assessing him. However, given that he was the leader of all the three spiritual souls and seven physical souls, it went without saying that he was extraordinary. With battle prowess like that, all it would take was one instance of help at the right time.

That was even truer considering that they hadn't come alone. Xu Qing could sense the aura of countless evil cultivators from the Three-Spirits Dao-Suppressing Mountain, as well as a host of evil ghosts.

Both of these groups, which were two of the major powers of Emperor-Receiving Prefecture, had come in full force. Xu Qing also had Qingqin. With the full power of Emperor-Receiving Prefecture in play, Xu Qing was confident that Forbidden by the Zombie could be fully sealed.

With such thoughts on his mind, he took a step forward. Qingqin materialized in front of him and accepted him. Then the great bird looked around, let loose a deafening cry, and flew out over the Forbidden Sea.

Behind Qingqin, August Spirit Sunslaughter licked his lips and followed. August Spirit Sporelight clasped his hands behind his back and stood atop August Spirit Sunslaughter, his face completely expressionless. Above them, the clouds seethed as the seven massive faces also followed along. Within those clouds were innumerable evil ghosts, pulsing with a formidable aura that made them seem like a horde of devils that darkened the sky.

The sky was dark, and the Forbidden Sea was just as dark. Waves surged, and mutagen pulsed. Currents flowed under the surface, and it was just possible to see sea beasts swimming through them. They were a lot different than Xu Qing remembered. Most of them existed in various stages of rot. And by inhaling deeply, it was possible to detect the aroma of decay in the salty sea air.

Clearly, this incident with Forbidden by the Zombie had severely contaminated the Forbidden Sea. After all, the true heart of the sea was Forbidden by the Zombie, which made it easy for the containments to freely spread through most of the sea.

Up ahead, Xu Qing spotted a massive wave heading in a certain direction. Meanwhile, a stiff wind built up. The two forces slammed into each other with a deafening crash, sending more waves, some dozens of meters tall, others hundreds, sweeping out in all directions. The Forbidden Sea looked like an irascible giant, frantically trying to ease the pain that wracked its body.

The fluctuations of magical techniques merged with the sound of sutras being chanted, all coming from the direction of Forbidden by the Zombie.

As Xu Qing continued on his way, he noticed the color of the sea changing. He saw streaks of gold spreading out, as if the area around Forbidden by the Zombie were slowly becoming golden. The closer he got to Forbidden by the Zombie, the more gold he saw. It got denser and more numerous, and glittered dazzlingly.

The sound of sutras and the fluctuations of magical techniques became more boundless, until they were like the cry of countless people.

“A person can fail the dao; the dao cannot fail a person. A person can lose their life; a life cannot lose the dao.”

“Things touched by a god are given life by that spirit. Gains are not gifted by heaven, failures are not seized by a person.”

The sutra seemed capable of stirring one’s soul; as soon as Xu Qing heard it, his expression flickered, and his mind vibrated as though his soul might leave his body.

But then Qingqin’s head shifted slightly beneath his feet, and magenta light spread out. Daybreak light erupted from Xu Qing. Thus, his soul was kept under control, and ceased attempting to escape.

The physical and spiritual souls behind him looked out at the Forbidden Sea with gleaming eyes.

A shocking formation was active on the Forbidden Sea right now.

From his position in the sky, Xu Qing looked around and saw masses of cultivators from all over Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. And he also saw what Forbidden by the Zombie looked like now.

It resembled a massive golden face.

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The face covered as much of the sea as the entire dimension of Forbidden by the Zombie. It bulged slightly out of the water, massive and ghastly, struggling as if to emerge from the depths. Terrifying fluctuations rolled out as the closed eyes of the face constantly tried to open. This was the source of the corpse-like stench that spread out and tried to invade all living beings.

From what Xu Qing could sense, there were some huge differences between this face and the gods he had encountered. The golden face definitely wasn't a god, but it did seem like it had been formed by the aura of a god.

The reason it hadn't broken free was that there was a net restraining it formed from 999 blood threads. That meant there were very nearly 1,000 blood threads. Every single one was affixed to the surface of the sea, and was held in place by various cultivators from Emperor-Receiving Prefecture.

There were a total of 1,998 points of contact surrounding the face. Each was a spell formation heart, which meant that there were a total of 1,998 spell formations in play. These formations all worked together to create a heaven-shaking, earth-shattering grand formation. The formation completely surrounded Forbidden by the Zombie, restraining the huge face. From high in the sky, it was apparent that within each formation sat over a thousand cultivators.

Xu Qing saw many familiar faces among them. All-in-all, there were around 2,000,000 cultivators.

Represented among them were species from all over Emperor-Receiving Prefecture and the Forbidden Sea, and they formed a terrifying force. There were even some Qi Condensation cultivators in the group, which made it obvious that Emperor-Receiving Prefecture and the Forbidden Sea were going all out in this effort. All were chanting the same sutra.

“We embody the energy of heaven and earth; the dao shall curse the ghosts to be sealed.

“Curse gold to melt itself; curse wood to chop itself; curse water to drink itself; curse fire to extinguish itself; curse mountains to collapse themselves.

“Seal ghosts to kill themselves; seal prayers to end themselves; seal boils to excise themselves; seal gods to bind themselves.

“The paramount yin-yang dao sealing cannot be violated.”

The voices of over 2,000,000 people combined, creating a shocking sound that resonated high into the sky. It was like countless bolts of heavenly thunder crashing at the same time. It was an iron-clad command that instantly made the godly might dim.

The sight caused the spiritual and physical souls to react with visible surprise, and Xu Qing was also taken aback.

Meanwhile, there were two extremely powerful auras present, one in the sky, one beneath the surface of the water.

Reinforcing the formation from the sky were streams of power from twenty-six taboo treasures. Apparently, most of the taboo treasures in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture were focused there, creating a projected image.

It was readily apparent what levels of taboo treasures were at play.

At the very top was the strongest. It was an ancient bronze bell that emanated an aura so ancient it was impossible to tell how old it was. Every time the bell tolled, it would shake the souls of those who heard it, and would cause the gigantic face below to frown. It contained the power of emotions, and could influence the hearts and minds of all living things. That was the taboo treasure from the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society.

Beneath the bell were three slightly weaker taboo treasures. One of them was a statue with its arms wrapped around its chest, bent over and pierced with countless thorns. Its facial expression was a mixture of pain and piety. There was also a green spear that emanated piercing sensations and a strong baleful aura. The final treasure on that level was Seven Blood Eyes' giant mirror, which featured seven opened eyes that all glowed with gruish light.

Below those were slightly weaker taboo treasures, and there were a lot of them. They included the other treasures from the Eight Sect Coalition, as well as additional treasures from the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society and the Church of Departure.

However, they did not form the overall structure of the formation in the sky.

That formation was also made from taboo treasures, but they were from Emperor-Receiving Prefecture's Swordsage Court. They were secret reserve powers from the Swordsage Court, and they were actually two formations conforming to yin and yang. The yang formation was in the sky, and the yin formation was at the bottom of the sea.

The two formations bolstered each other and constantly emitted suppressing power.

Looking down through the water, it was possible to see that the yin formation suppressing the face contained over eighty Void Returning cultivators from across Emperor-Receiving Prefecture, seated cross-legged. They included members of the Eight Sect Coalition, the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society, the Church of Departure, as well as patriarchs from other species. All of them were following the lead of the Swordsage Court. They included the Void Returning swordsages that Xu Qing remembered from the Swordsage Court.

Especially noteworthy was the grand elder, whose terrifying might was enough to power about ten percent of the formation. August Spirit Nethersprite sat next to him. Though her expression was placid, she had no choice but to lend aid.

Sir Bloodsmelter, Master Seventh, and Arch-Immortal Plumdark were all there as well. Master Seventh had experienced a breakthrough recently. In fact, given his position in the formation, it seemed that he had already surpassed Sir Bloodsmelter in terms of importance.

All of that went to show that, thanks to the month of hard work to suppress Forbidden by the Zombie, they had managed to keep it in check. Although Forbidden by the Zombie was terrifyingly powerful, the combined power of the prefectural forces was enough to seal it, given enough time.

When Xu Qing arrived, he immediately attracted a lot of attention. Numerous streams of divine will swirled to lock onto him.

The spiritual and physical souls were clearly taking the situation very seriously, and even Qingqin had reigned in some of his ferocity. The sight of Emperor-Receiving Prefecture's formations was nothing less than astonishing.

The various patriarchs sitting in the yin formation opened their eyes and looked up. Master Seventh, Sir Bloodsmelter, and Plumdark all looked at Xu Qing. The latter two seemed surprised. Master Seventh looked thoughtful.

When the Swordsage Court's grand elder saw Xu Qing, Qingqin, the heavenly and earthly souls, and the seven physical souls, his eyes glittered. He wasn't surprised at all, as he had been expecting Xu Qing. After Xu Qing entered Emperor-Receiving Prefecture, while he was on the way to the Three-Spirits Dao-Suppressing Mountain, he had sent a message to the grand elder notifying him of the plan, and letting him know about the situation with his Ghost Emperor palace. The grand elder had approved of the plan.

After all, it was an inherently dangerous plan, and bringing the Ghost Emperor's spiritual and physical souls into the situation came with the risk of betrayal. Logically speaking, the chances of that seemed small, but they still had to be on guard in case it happened.

Xu Qing and the grand elder had talked it out. The grand elder agreed, and told Xu Qing to go through with the plan.

"Swordsage Xu Qing reporting for duty. Well met, Grand Elder!" From his spot atop Qingqin's right head, Xu Qing clasped hands and bowed. "Your humble servant has invited the two spiritual souls of heaven and earth, plus the seven physical souls here today. That's a total of nine members of the Senior generation here to help. I also have Senior Qingqin willing to lend a hand. Please, Grand Elder, let us know what to do."

Qingqin let loose a caw to emphasize his agreement.

Xu Qing then turned to Master Seventh and the patriarch and offered a respectful bow.

"Greetings, Master. Greetings, Patriarch."

Next he looked at Plumdark, who smiled at him with glittering eyes.

Master Seventh stroked his beard, and Sir Bloodsmelter's eyebrows danced up and down in pride. However, given the enormity of the work at hand, none of them could afford to be distracted.

As for the grand elder, he didn't waste any time. "Xu Qing, please reveal your Ghost Emperor mountain!"

Xu Qing nodded. Thankfully, his last trip to the Supreme Void World had left him with enough demonization talismans to summon the Ghost Emperor a few times.

He activated the talismans, and the Ghost Emperor mountain rumbled into being. The mountain was shocking in appearance as it hovered in the dome of heaven. It looked extremely lifelike, and sent

out maddening pressure. Even more noteworthy was the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar that rested on its knees, glittering brightly.

More shocking than all of that, though, was that the face resembled Xu Qing.

The moment the Ghost Emperor appeared, the more than 2,000,000 cultivators from Emperor-Receiving Prefecture and the Forbidden Sea reacted with visible astonishment. Obviously, most of them knew about the Ghost Emperor mountain in general, but to see it manifested by Xu Qing was a bit of a shock.

Among those who were shocked was Master Seventh. He almost couldn't believe what he was seeing. And then he thought back to what he had taught Xu Qing about materialization techniques before he left for the county capital. All of his advice had been merely theoretical, and he hadn't truly thought that Xu Qing might succeed. Yet now... he could see with his own eyes that the Ghost Emperor mountain really was right there. Clearly, it had been done via a different method than he suggested, but when all was said and done, there it was, right in front of him.

It really worked? he thought, feeling quite at a loss.

Around then, the Swordsage Court's grand elder said, "August Spirit Sporelight, August Spirit Sunslaughter, and you seven physical soul Fellow Daoists, I'm aware of the deal you struck with Xu Qing. I hereby solemnly swear that after this day, you can sit back and wait for the next step of the plan to unfold.

"Since you'll only be helping this one time, please fuse with this illusory ghost mountain. Then, after your three spiritual souls and seven physical souls have combined temporarily, please take action!

"All allied species from Emperor-Receiving Prefecture, in a moment, add your power to the Ghost Emperor projection to ensure it stays whole. Senior Qingqin, please release your life essence godlight to do the same thing. We need the Ghost Emperor projection to stay whole for only a short time.

"Xu Qing, stay alert. This instance of destined opportunity and good fortune for Emperor-Receiving Prefecture is all due to you!"

Xu Qing noticed Master Seventh nod in his direction, and thus, without hesitation, cast his senses out.

August Spirit Sunslaughter said nothing, while August Spirit Sporelight gave the grand elder a long, hard look. The request that had just been made surpassed what he had expected, yet was perfectly reasonable. There was no conspiracy at play. Sporelight and the other souls didn't want the Ghost Emperor to awaken. Nor did the various groups in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. There was a tense situation on the front lines of battle, and the sealing of Forbidden by the Zombie had reached a critical juncture. Besides, if this was some trick, he felt confident that he could deal with it. Therefore, he nodded, and then looked at Xu Qing.

"You're obviously very important to the Swordsage Palace. Well, that's fine. Since we don't have to do anything after this, I wish you success in your future endeavors!"

With that, he turned into a white beam of light that shot toward Xu Qing's Ghost Emperor. As he fused with it, the mountain trembled, and its aura erupted. It now pulsed with a third-stage Void-Returning energy, causing it to be surrounded by countless minor worlds.

August Spirit Sunslaughter's eyes glowed; he had never done anything like this before, but that didn't stop him from turning into a second beam of white light that shot toward the mountain. After he was fully fused, the Ghost Emperor mountain's aura erupted again. The minor worlds around it started shattering and reforming in an endless cycle.

Next, the seven physical souls also became beams of light that fused with the Ghost Emperor mountain. The Ghost Emperor projection was obviously unable to sustain such a fusion, and began teetering on the verge of collapse. However, Qingqin sent forth a beam of magenta light to bolster it. At the same time, the 2,000,000 cultivators below added in the blessing of the formation's power.

The image of the Ghost Emperor grew even clearer, and began to pulse with heaven-shaking, earth-shattering pressure. It was as if the Ghost Emperor had actually come!

The countless minor worlds started merging with each other amidst their cycles of destruction and creation. Eventually, they became part of the two major worlds on the Ghost Emperor's right and left shoulders. And those worlds, previously dark and dim, began to shine with godlight.

An aura very close to that of a Smoldering God spread out over the Forbidden Sea. The clouds in the sky trembled and collapsed in the face of an aura that commanded ultimate respect! Much of the Forbidden Sea sank down, as if the sea itself were bowing its head!

Whether it was cultivators of varying species from Emperor-Receiving Prefecture or the strange denizens of the Forbidden Sea, all were shaken to the core. It was an instinct built into their life force, a veneration that came from the depths of their soul. They trembled uncontrollably, and a profound feeling of terror filled them.

It was something they couldn't resist or avoid. They could only yield to that terror that weighed down on them from above. It was as if this being commanded the might of an emperor that all living beings would immediately kowtow to. It was as if this being commanded imperial majesty that all species would bow and pray to. It was immeasurably domineering!

The chanting of the sutra was stifled, and the formations in the area trembled. The golden face stopped struggling. Having sensed an immense threat, its eyes suddenly opened.

This was a being that was half a step into the Smoldering God level. If Nethersprite was added as the final spiritual soul, it would be a Smoldering God! However, the grand elder had not released that final soul.

What was more, if Qingqin's godlight vanished, then the Ghost Emperor would crumble. So there were great limitations at work. The help of the 2,000,000 cultivators served the same function. What was more, this projected emperor belonged to Xu Qing, and thus he had some measure of control over it.

"Ghost Emperor, please crush Forbidden by the Zombie with the might of a single attack!" the grand elder shouted.

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The Ghost Emperor, which was just about to collapse, extended his right hand toward Forbidden by the Zombie, then pushed it down. That motion released heaven-rending, earth-crushing power. Countless dao lineaments manifested, and innumerable magical laws appeared. There were even heavenly dao auras in the air, offering blessings of might! Countless supernatural phenomena filled heaven and earth. Humanoid images stood tall. Beastly images howled. Heavenly maids scattered blossoms. Ancient Emperors watched attentively.

As the hand descended, it seemed to replace the dome of heaven, crushing down. Intense, deafening rumbling sounds echoed out! The power of heavenly might soared to the limit.

In all directions, the water of the Forbidden Sea exploded. Water sprayed everywhere as an endless tempest built on the Forbidden Sea, sweeping across all of the islands there, causing the sea level to rise by hundreds of meters.

The golden face was instantly inundated, yet it fought back defiantly. Its eyes were open, as was its mouth, as it howled in frustration. However, the sealing net surged with force. After the brief pause in the chanting of the daoist sutra, it returned with a thunderous roar, clamping down with suppressive strength.

In the end, the face could do nothing but howl begrudgingly as it sank down.

Previously, the sealing would have worked, but required much more time. But that was only with the combined might of an entire prefecture, nearly a hundred species from the Forbidden Sea, a host of top experts and taboo treasures.

Adding in the palm strike of a half-step Smoldering God, it sped up the process dramatically. The reality was that not even the might of a half-step Smoldering God was enough to seal Forbidden by the Zombie with a single blow. It was only because of the combined strength put into play by Emperor-Receiving Prefecture that one single blow was enough to complete the sealing.

Neither side could have accomplished it so quickly on their own.

When the golden face sank into the sea, covered by the blood-colored net, the image of the Ghost Emperor couldn't remain whole. Just before it collapsed, the somewhat vacant eyes of the Ghost Emperor didn't look at anyone present. Instead, it looked at the sinking face. Then it opened its mouth as if to say something, except no words came out. A boom rang out, and the Ghost Emperor crumbled into dust.

Rain fell from the sky, like weeping. Heavenly daos dispersed, like sighing. The supernatural phenomena departed, like demolished daos.

However, nine beams of light remained, shooting out to form the heavenly and earthly spiritual souls, plus the seven physical souls. All looked dazed, but at the same time, thrummed with emotional fluctuations. This event had been momentous for them.

What was more, they knew it probably wouldn't happen a second time, unless Xu Qing was willing to make it happen. It required protection from Qingqin's godlight, and more importantly, the entire might of a prefecture joined with that of nearly a hundred nonhumans, all under the command of the Swordsage Court, backed by dozens of taboo treasures and nearly a hundred Void Returning experts. That wasn't likely to happen ever again.

The catastrophe in Forbidden by the Zombie had been temporarily ended!

No one could wipe forbidden grounds out of existence. From ancient times until now, whenever a forbidden ground went out of control, their method of resolution was sealing.

As for this particular catastrophe, it was the result of outside meddling. The Holytides wanted it to happen to give them an advantage in the war. They needed to limit the battle prowess Sea-Sealing County was capable of fielding, and had therefore dispatched agents into Forbidden by the Zombie to secretly open the ancient bronze door there. They only opened it a crack, but that was enough to cause Emperor Zombie to be devoured. Without that emperor, the various entities that resided in Forbidden by the Zombie had nothing to keep them in check, and they began proliferating.

But that was only one aspect of the catastrophe. The aura of a god seeped out of the opened door, which was the second aspect.

Therefore, the sealing which had been carried out didn't just prevent the various evil entities inside Forbidden by the Zombie from escaping to cause harm, it also ensured that the door was tightly shut again. That was the most challenging aspect of the sealing formation that had been powered by over 2,000,000 cultivators. When the door of a god was opened even by a crack, it wasn't easy to shut.

Emperor-Receiving Prefecture had gone through countless trials and tribulations since the fighting started. And they had pushed the door until it was on the very verge of being closed. Then a half-step Smoldering God arrived and sped things up, completing the sealing. The only thing left to do was a bit of cleanup work.

As for Xu Qing, he had benefited greatly. His expression was currently blank. Thanks to his connection to the Ghost Emperor projection, his mind had gone through a heaven-shaking, earth-shattering baptism.

That baptism had a profound effect on his senses. To any other observer, the arrival of a half-step Smoldering God would be an incomparably shocking assault on one's vision. It could even be likened to a painting. In the end, no matter how clearly those observers saw what was happening, they were only 'seeing.'

That wasn't the case with Xu Qing. He was the one who had created that 'scene' and that 'assault on vision.' He participated in it, and had been an integral part. He was not an outside observer. He was a participant. Therefore, what he had sensed surpassed what anyone else could possibly know.

The power of a half-step Smoldering God had in some ways led Xu Qing in a certain direction, and given him a window through which to observe what it meant to be a Smoldering God.

Most importantly, it affected his understanding and his soul. He had gone through an astonishing expansion of understanding; going forward, whenever he faced powerful experts, he would have a much stronger mental state! It was roughly the same when it came to his soul. A half-step Smoldering God had been created out of nothing, and that provided a deep tempering. It wasn't a tangible benefit, but it was something that would prove very useful later on.

Xu Qing took a deep breath and looked down toward the grand elders and the others, who were rising up from the yin formation now that the face was sealed.

Xu Qing knew that though the grand elder had been mostly concerned about the sealing, he had also provided an amazing destined opportunity. Xu Qing clasped hands and bowed solemnly to the grand elder.

The grand elder gave a faint nod in return, and a look of approval appeared on his exhausted face. Xu Qing had gotten his start in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture, and this grand elder had viewed him as important even back then.

Sir Bloodsmelter felt similarly, and it went without saying that Master Seventh was the same. Master Seventh stroked his beard looking very pleased with himself.

Arch-Immortal Plumdark's eyes overflowed with an unreadable expression, but her gaze was clearly focused on Xu Qing.

Then a loud caw rang out, causing all eyes to shift to Qingqin.

Qingqin hovered haughtily in the air, and his call was apparently a reminder to everyone that he had also played an important role.

"Many thanks, Senior Qingqin!" the grand elder said respectfully, clasping his hands and bowing.

The other Void Returning experts all bowed in thanks, as did the 2,000,000 cultivators.

Qingqin seemed very pleased with the prestige he had garnered. He instinctively looked in the direction of South Phoenix, and suddenly realized it was strange that his Eldest Brother hadn't come. But then again, his Eldest Brother had his own set of principles, and obviously didn't like brushing shoulders with all sorts of species. At least, that's what Qingqin believed was the case.

The heavenly and earthly spiritual souls and the seven physical souls had all recovered. August Spirit Sporelight, who was the leader, looked grimly at the grand elder, and then Xu Qing.

"We've done our part. Now it's your turn."

Xu Qing nodded gravely.

August Spirit Sporelight turned and vanished. August Spirit Sunslaughter did the same. The seven physical souls turned into smoke that flew up into the air and vanished. During the entire time, none of them had even looked at Nethersprite.

If the Swordsage Court wanted to return her, they would. If they didn't, then everyone seemed fine to leave her behind as a hostage. Nethersprite was obviously disappointed with that, but couldn't do anything about it. She knew full well that her compatriots cared more about their personal freedom than any bonds of companionship.

After the Ghost Emperors souls were gone, and the cleanup work began, the grand elder called for a meeting with Xu Qing and the Void Returning patriarchs. One of the people in that group was the president of the Eight Sect Coalition. He looked at Xu Qing differently than he had before. He showed more respect.

"Xu Qing, do you mind telling us what you plan to do next?" the grand elder asked, massaging the bridge of his nose.

The gazes of the dozens of Void Returning cultivators all shifted to Xu Qing. Any other cultivator who had so many gazes like that locked onto them would start trembling uncontrollably. But after everything Xu Qing had experienced, including the gazes of multiple gods, he had no trouble having some Void Returning cultivators looking at him.

“The situations on the northern and western fronts are critical. The power of the taboo treasures is weakening. The front lines are in danger. Palace Lord Kong issued a dharmic decree giving me the power to represent him in all matters. My main job is to gather resources and troops from throughout Sea-Sealing County. I’ve already handled the supplies, and in fact, they should already have reached the battlefield. In terms of troops, my thoughts immediately turned to Injustice Prefecture and Emperor-Receiving Prefecture.”

Xu Qing looked at the grand elder.

The grand elder nodded, looked around at the group, then calmly said, “What do all of you think?”

Sir Bloodsmelter was the first to respond. “We fight!”

Master Seventh’s facial expression remained the same as ever as he nodded.

Arch-Immortal Plumdark looked at Xu Qing. “The Dark Serenity Sect will fight.”

The other patriarchs of the Eight Sect Coalition thought the matter over briefly, then agreed. Finally, the president looked at Xu Qing and gave an encouraging smile.

“It’s only natural that our Eight Sect Coalition will support its dao child. And more than that, we support humankind!”

The grand elder turned to look at the other Void-Returning cultivators. “In that case, what about the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society and the Church of Departure? And what about all you other human sects from throughout Emperor-Receiving Prefecture?”

The Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society had about ten Void Returning cultivators. They exchanged glances. Obviously, they had no reason to refuse the call, so they nodded in agreement.

The group from the Church of Departure took a moment longer, but also agreed.

The grand elder gave one final look at the group then turned to Xu Qing with a somber expression. “In that case, Secretary-General Xu, please represent Palace Lord Kong and give us your orders!”

Xu Qing’s expression was grave as he took out the palace lord command medallion and raised it high. As the medallion glittered with bright light, Xu Qing spoke in an imposing voice.

“I hereby call for all organizations in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture to follow the command of the Swordsage Court and make haste to Injustice Prefecture. There, you will help resolve the catastrophe with Forbidden by the Garment. Afterwards, the combined forces of both prefectures will head to the western front!”

“The palace lord’s orders shall be followed!” the grand elder said, bowing solemnly.

The swordsages who flanked him all had very serious expressions on their faces. As they bowed their heads to acknowledge the orders, somber and desolate auras pulsed from them. The other Void Returning experts all inclined their heads to the command medallion.

Two hours later, the grand elder of the Swordsage Court stood at the head of a new army.

The nonhumans who had come from various parts of the Forbidden Sea to help with Forbidden by the Zombie weren't interested in participating in another war, so they took their leave. The Swordsage Court didn't cause any problems for them, and in fact, courteously saw them off.

Not everyone from Emperor-Receiving Prefecture joined the new army. People from various sects and species stayed behind to take care of matters with Forbidden by the Zombie.

Among those who the grand elder ordered to stay behind were Master Seventh and Arch-Immortal Plumdark. They were to be in charge of the final cleanup at Forbidden by the Zombie.

When Xu Qing heard that order, he glanced at the grand elder. In his heart, he suspected that the grand elder had done that because of him. After all, things on the battlefield could get very dangerous.

Xu Qing accepted the situation without comment.

Everyone else was to be part of the new army. The Seven Blood Eyes contingent would be led by Sir Bloodsmelter.

At the behest of the grand elder, all Emperor-Receiving Prefecture sects sent the power of their taboo treasures to the county capital. As a result, the golden net shimmered briefly above Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. With more taboo treasure power under the control of the county capital, the northern and western fronts both grew a bit stronger.

And with that, Emperor-Receiving Prefecture's army headed toward Injustice Prefecture.

From a distance, it was possible to see tens of thousands of massive flying ships moving through the air. They were followed by even larger numbers of smaller magical ships. The movement of Emperor-Receiving Prefecture's army was quite impressive. Wherever it went, immense pressure weighed down in all directions.

Chapter 502: I'm Right Here, Little Junior Brother!! (part 1)

The grand army passed through the lands, imbued with a spirit that could conquer mountains and rivers. Any evil elements in Sea-Sealing County scattered in front of it. Intense rumbling sounds filled heaven and earth, and a somber and desolate aura spread out in all directions. Tens of thousands of massive flying ships blasted through the clouds.

Xu Qing flew off of Qingqin's right head and landed on the largest flying ship of them all, the Swordsage Court's, which headed up the procession. Sir Bloodsmelter was there as well. Xu Qing had come to ask him about Forbidden by the Zombie. After all, the golden hand he'd seen stretching out of that bronze door had made a lasting impression on him. [1]

"Forbidden by the Zombie is like the other forbidden grounds," Sir Bloodsmelter explained. "All were created when the eyes of the broken face of the god opened a second time. According to the information we have in the ancient records, it was countless years ago that the god looked into the depths of the Forbidden Sea at an ancient bronze door, transforming everything around it. The second gaze was also cast upon that door.

“Truth be told, it’s not just forbidden grounds that are like this. It’s the same with forbidden regions. They all have an object as their foundation. That’s why people will usually try to figure out what the broken face of the god was looking at. And that’s also why people have come to the conclusion that the broken face of the god is carrying out some sort of selection process. As for any details beyond that, nobody knows.”

If any other person had asked for this information, Sir Bloodsmelter wouldn’t have gone into such detail. But things were different when it came to Xu Qing. He took his time to explain everything. That was simply how he treated his grand-apprentice.

Meanwhile, the explanation so far caused Xu Qing to think about the forbidden region he had visited during his early days in Seven Blood Eyes, which was next to the scavenger basecamp in South Phoenix. Upon peering into its depths, he’d seen a dilapidated zither. [2]

Sir Bloodsmelter looked at Xu Qing and continued, “The emperor of Forbidden by the Zombie was created by the energy sent out into the forbidden ground by that ancient bronze door, which became part of the surrounding mutagen over many years.

“That’s why, when that bronze door opened, even just a little bit, the emperor was incapable of resistance. He was devoured. In some ways, you could consider that forbidden ground to be like a giant pantry.

“The emperor acted like the pantry custodian, except the reality is that he was standing in for someone else, and was himself nothing but food for the taking. The real pantry custodians are asleep.

“And they’re waiting for the eyes of the broken god face to open a third time. When that third time happens, they’ll awaken, and that area will turn into a god domain.”

“What about Forbidden by the Phoenix?” Xu Qing asked.

“Forbidden by the Phoenix... is different.” Sir Bloodsmelter shook his head. “The foundation of that forbidden ground isn’t an object. It’s Flame Phoenix himself. And Flame Phoenix isn’t asleep. He’s always been awake. Flame Phoenix could wait for the god’s eyes to open a third time, or he could decline to wait and ascend to a higher level of his own volition. That’s why Flame Phoenix is different.”

“*CAW!*”

called out Qingqin proudly from outside the flying ship.

Surprised, Xu Qing looked out at the huge bird.

Qingqin was actually a bit lazy. He had grabbed onto the bottom of the ship with his claws and was hanging there upside down, his three heads swaying as he inhaled and exhaled the clouds. Noting Xu Qing’s gaze, he lifted his right head. He looked a bit frustrated. Xu Qing knew exactly what that expression meant. Qingqin wanted to exterminate a species....

“Just be a little patient, Senior,” Xu Qing said quickly. “You’ll get your chance!”

His right head dropped back down and continued inhaling and exhaling the clouds. He seemed quite bored.

Sir Bloodsmelter noted the exchange. Looking thoughtful, he sighed. “Your Master has some real skills. He’s really blessed to have taken in you and your Elder Sister as apprentices. It’s also a blessing for you two. You’ve got to stay alive and keep getting stronger. Don’t worry about anything else. As long as I’m alive and kicking, I’ll make sure to watch out for you!”

The praise in his words couldn’t have been more clear.

Xu Qing was very taken aback. “Wait.... Me and my Elder Sister? What about Eldest Brother and Third Elder Brother?”

Sir Bloodsmelter snorted coldly. “Them? Heh. Right. Forgot about those two. We cultivators can’t let carnal desires affect us. Your Third Elder Brother had things under control for a while. But he just had to go seduce that holy daughter from the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society. In the end, he tried to flee the marriage, but failed. The Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society gathered enough evidence to track him down and drag him back from where he was hiding overseas. [3]

“Now he’s stuck in the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society, forced to live like a normal person. How tragic! Well, that’s what you get when your cultivation base is too low.” Sir Bloodsmelter actually looked angry. “If his cultivation base was high enough, he would be more like your Master. One glare from your Master is enough to cow any daoist partner and even her family!”

An odd look appeared in Xu Qing’s eyes as he looked at the patriarch, and he started wondering if there was a hidden meaning to the patriarch’s words.

“Anyway, your Third Elder Brother is in a really tragic situation, but your Master doesn’t feel like wasting the time to go save him. Me either.

“As for your Eldest Brother... I have no idea when it happened exactly, but sometime recently he suddenly became obsessed with lust. In fact, roughly half a year ago, he sent a message to your Master asking him to propose a marriage with some woman named... Tao something. He ignores his responsibilities, refuses to be a good swordsage, refuses to focus on his cultivation, and cares only about lust!”

Xu Qing blinked a few times and refrained from saying anything.

“But you, Fourth Sib, are a perfect example. It’s not that we cultivators should completely sever sensual desires. Rather, they aren’t the focus. The cultivation base is the most important thing.

“Once you reach Void Returning, you won’t have to go looking for a daoist partner. The tall ones, short ones, fat ones, skinny ones, in fact, every type of female cultivator will line up hoping you pick them. Trust me, I know a thing or two. Just take my advice and work hard!”

Sir Bloodsmelter's words seemed very sincere and heartfelt.

However, Xu Qing, after hesitating a moment, cautiously asked, "But Second Elder Sister and Huang Yan... aren't they—"

"That's different!" Sir Bloodsmelter cleared his throat and looked out at Qingqin. Apparently, he was done with the conversation.

Xu Qing was a little surprised. But then he noticed what Sir Bloodsmelter was looking at, and it reminded him of the time he'd looked at Huang Yan using the Seven Blood Eyes taboo treasure, and how Huang Yan had seemingly noticed him. Even back then, he'd gotten the impression there was something unusual about Huang Yan. [4]

I remember Huang Yan saying something about having a friend in the county capital who was going to watch out for me.... Upon recalling that, an outrageous notion occurred to Xu Qing that got his heart pounding. He suddenly looked at Qingqin. Xu Qing had always been confused about why Qingqin so readily agreed to help him. After mulling the matter over a bit, he shoved it aside and decided to just ask Qingqin about it later when the time was right. [5]

In that manner, time passed.

As arranged by the Swordsage Court, the grand army of Emperor-Receiving Prefecture used a long-range teleportation to shorten the trip to Injustice Prefecture. Three days later, the army reached a point that was only about six hours from the other prefecture.

During the three days, Xu Qing spent most of his time with Sir Bloodsmelter, catching up on all the sect matters he had missed during his time away.

Other bits of time were spent with the grand elder from the Swordsage Palace, informing him of what he had learned in the Secretariat Division about the Forbidden by the Garment situation. Using that information, they formed a general strategy.

"Forbidden by the Garment in Injustice Prefecture is right next to the Garmentfolk territory," Xu Qing said. "It's not a jungle, but rather, an enormous pitch-black funerary garment. The funerary garment is extremely inauspicious, and is full of mutagen. Living beings who enter it find themselves in another world, a bizarre place of infinite dusk.

"On a fundamental level, this disaster comes down to that black funerary garment awakening. Those bearing the brunt of the disaster are not the human sects and the Swordsage Court of Injustice Prefecture, but rather, the Garmentfolk. The Garmentfolk aren't an original native species of Injustice Prefecture. They're a new species that came into existence in Forbidden by the Garment, after the broken face of the god arrived.

"They despise death and love beauty, so the environment of Forbidden by the Garment wasn't appropriate for them. They split ways and became a unique species, which is why they and Forbidden by the Garment are as intolerant of each other as

water and fire. It goes without saying that the Garmentfolk stand guard over Forbidden by the Garment.

“The major powers of Injustice Prefecture have teamed up, and thanks to their hard work, Forbidden by the Garment is almost completely sealed. Based on the estimates sent by the Swordsage Court, most of the work is done.”

That was the gist of the information Qing Qiu had compiled for Xu Qing back in the Secretariat Division. Though the grand elder knew some of the details, his information wasn't as comprehensive.

“In that case,” the grand elder said, “with our help, things should go as they did with Forbidden by the Zombie. We should be able to complete the sealing fairly quickly.”

Xu Qing nodded and glanced at August Spirit Nethersprite, who had shrunk down to the size of a normal person and stood behind the grand elder. As a prisoner, she had no personal freedom, and had been required to come with the army. Seeing Xu Qing looking at her, she hmped and looked away.

Xu Qing looked away and focused on the discussion with the grand elder. Eventually, when the army got even closer to Injustice Prefecture, he returned to Qingqin's right head.

Right when they were about to cross the border, Xu Qing remembered the question he'd been planning to ask. Lowering his voice, he said, “Senior Qingqin. Sir... do you know Huang Yan?”

“CAW?” Qingqin's three heads, which had all been preening each other, suddenly turned to look at Xu Qing. They all blinked a few times.

Seeing Qingqin's gaze upon him, Xu Qing said, “Senior Qingqin, maybe we should communicate via divine will...?”

“CAW!” Qingqin's eyes flashed with displeasure. Apparently, he was determined to speak only by means of his caws. All three heads shook back and forth, and he was about to let loose another caw when, all of a sudden, all three heads swiveled to look toward the horizon.

It wasn't just Qingqin. The entire army immediately pulsed with the fluctuations of magical techniques, all focused on the horizon.

They had arrived in Injustice Prefecture.

There was a reason why everyone in the army was so focused on what was ahead. There was an extremely strong aura of death coming from Injustice Prefecture, so strong that it changed the color of the sky. In fact, it changed the color of everything.

Xu Qing remembered what Injustice Prefecture looked like, especially the part controlled by the Garmentfolk. The Garmentfolk occupied at least twenty percent of Injustice Prefecture, and because of them, the lands were usually very colorful and beautiful. But right now... everything looked like it was covered with an ash-colored white. It was an enormous white shroud! [6]

Chapter 502: I'm Right Here, Little Junior Brother!! (part 2)

Looking closely, it looked like the huge shroud was made of countless individual Garmentfolk who had been fused together. There were shirts, pants, hats, gloves, and all sorts of other apparel. But none of them were colorful. They were all ashen white. The terrifying fluctuations rolling out from the shroud made it so that the sky seemed as dark as evening. It was the same color as the skin of a rotting corpse, and created a very oppressive atmosphere. The ashen white lands seemed withered, and they were rife with an aura of death. In fact, if you scanned the area with divine will, you would find that the Garmentfolk who made up the shroud were all dead. Their corpses had been formed together into this huge shroud. It looked extremely ghastly.¹¹

Xu Qing didn't say anything.⁰

As Emperor-Receiving Prefecture's army proceeded, they eventually caught sight of the army formed from the various sects and species of Injustice Prefecture.⁰

Combined, they numbered well over a million individuals, and they were all under the command of the Swordsage Court. They were scattered at the edges of the huge shroud, and had tapped into the full power of their cultivation bases to send the enormous shroud forward at a slow pace. There were all sorts of taboo treasures at play, their powers filling the dome of heaven and connecting to the shroud to power it. The shroud was being used to cover an enormous black funerary garment. Compared to that garment, the cultivators seemed like tiny bugs that counted for nothing.⁵

That said, what was most plainly visible was the shroud. It had been stretched up all the way to the funerary garment's chest. At the same time, dozens of Void Returning cultivators under the command of the Swordsage Court's grand elder were using various divine abilities and magical techniques to attack the funerary garment.⁰

Counterattacks came in the form of black streams of energy with vicious figures inside them. They represented all species imaginable, but they all wore the same attire: black funerary garments that pulsed with shocking mutagen.²

Down below, the huge black funerary garment was like a massive chasm, pulsing with a terrifying and evil aura. Shocking howls echoed out, filling heaven and earth. At the same time, there was breathing. Each breath caused an explosion of black mist that was so dangerous even the Void Returning cultivators had to avoid it. And it caused the encroaching shroud to wave and ripple.⁰

This was how the forces of Injustice Prefecture were sealing Forbidden by the Garment.⁰

The arrival of the forces from Emperor-Receiving Prefecture caused an immediate stir. Many cultivators looked excited.⁰

Along the way, Xu Qing had used his authority to notify Injustice Prefecture's Swordsage Court that they were on the way, so their arrival wasn't a surprise. Instead, the Injustice Prefecture forces had been looking forward to seeing them.⁰

The grand elder from Injustice Prefecture's Swordsage Court was a middle-aged cultivator. Upon seeing the incoming reinforcements, he excitedly said, "Many thanks for your assistance, Secretary-General Xu! And many thanks to the help from all you Fellow Daoists from Emperor-Receiving Prefecture! Please, help bolster our strength to complete the sealing!"⁰

Xu Qing nodded. Knowing that now wasn't the time for casual conversation, he gently patted Qingqin. The great bird let loose a cry, shot forward, then sent forth a beam of its godlight toward

the black funerary garment. The godlight smashed into the vicious streams of black energy, causing them to collapse. The funerary garment shivered and howled in rage.¹

At the same time, cultivators from Emperor-Receiving Prefecture flew out and, under the leadership of the various sects, settled into place into the Swordsage Court's two formations of yin and yang. Being used to the process from their previous experience, they immediately joined in the chanting of the sutra.¹

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Brightly colored light flashed in heaven and earth. Wild winds screamed everywhere. The power of Emperor-Receiving Prefecture caused the two formations of yin and yang to glitter brightly as the sound of the sutra echoed out.⁰

The ground quaked, and the black funerary garment vibrated visibly. Thanks to the reinforcements from Emperor-Receiving Prefecture, the exhausted cultivators from Injustice Prefecture felt enlivened. Now, the huge white shroud advanced a bit faster than before.⁰

Xu Qing stood atop Qingqin's right head, fighting the attacks being sent up by the funerary garment. As he did, his transmission jade slip suddenly vibrated, and a voice message came in.⁰

Xu Qing's eyes narrowed. After parting ways with the Captain back at the Ten Entrails Tree, he hadn't heard from him at all. If it wasn't for the fact that Xu Qing knew he could survive even after losing everything but his head, he would have thought the Captain was done for. Even still, he had always been a bit worried. And now, here by Forbidden by the Garment, he finally heard the Captain's voice again.⁰

Xu Qing looked down toward the ground. Down in the black funerary garment, which was more than half covered by the white shroud, there was a figure in the thick fog, waving at Xu Qing. He looked vaguely like the Captain.²

However, he was quite a distance away, and also in fog, so Xu Qing couldn't make out much of him other than a general outline. What was more, he was pulsing with a black energy that made him seem very much like the vicious beings produced by Forbidden by the Garment.¹

Eyebrows shooting up, Xu Qing quickly considered the situation from atop Qingqin's right head. Behind that figure in the fog and black energy, he saw a host of huge hands, pursuing the figure with madness and fury. Obviously, that figure had done something to arouse their rage.¹³

That was all Xu Qing needed to confirm this figure's identity.²⁷

“Senior Qingqin, that's my Elder Brother. If it's not too much trouble, sir...”⁰

Qingqin was in the middle of sending magenta light blasting forth in attack after attack. Every single burst would explode multiple enemies from Forbidden by the Garment. As they detonated, Qingqin would suck them in as if he were guzzling fine wine.⁰

Upon hearing Xu Qing's request, he turned his heads.⁰

“CAW!”³

Turning, he dropped into the fog of Forbidden by the Garment. Any enemies he passed shrieked as they were either destroyed by godlight, wiped out of existence by Qingqin's massive body, or devoured.⁰

When Qingqin dropped into Forbidden by the Garment with Xu Qing, it was immediately noticed by the forces from the two Swordsage Courts. Both of the grand elders seemed shocked, and charged in that direction at the same time. To them, Xu Qing was simply too important of a person to risk losing.⁰

Sir Bloodsmelter also took immediate action. In fact, though his cultivation base wasn't on the same level as the two grand elders, he was actually the first to rush to help. After all, Xu Qing was essentially a member of his family. This was a battlefield, and thus, though the sealing was important, and though the survival of allies was something he cared about, nothing was more important than the safety of his own family. That was also why he had made sure to stay relatively close to Xu Qing the whole time.⁸

Meanwhile, Qingqin had taken Xu Qing into the depths of Forbidden by the Garment. Everything around them was dark, and the mutagen levels were very high. Deafening roars buffeted them from all directions.¹

Xu Qing was able to see the Captain much more clearly now.⁰

The Captain was going all out to try to escape Forbidden by the Garment, except that the huge hands behind him were just about to catch up to him. It was a critical moment, and the Captain wasn't holding anything back. He had a crazy look in his eyes as he shot forward. Suddenly, a host of eyes opened all over him, then popped out of his skin and shot back toward the hands, where they started exploding one after another.²

Many of the hands detonated. Taking advantage of that moment, the Captain shot toward Xu Qing.⁰

“Little Junior Brother!” The Captain extended his right hand as if to grab Qingqin. However, there was still about 300 meters between them.⁰

To Qingqin, 300 meters was nothing. However, just as Qingqin's right hand was about to stretch forward to close that distance, all three heads' facial expressions flickered, and the feathers on them stood erect. An intense sensation of deadly crisis suddenly rose up in Qingqin.⁹

At the same time, a terrifying pressure swept forth from the depths of the forbidden land, causing everything to tremble violently. And it was heading right toward Xu Qing and Qingqin. There was also a thunderous roar that rippled out from behind the Captain.⁰

“Vile thief!”⁴¹

More massive hands appeared, covered with black veins, vicious in the extreme as they shot toward the Captain. Further back in the depths of the forbidden ground, a pair of bright-red eyes opened, full of madness and rage. And they were getting bigger. Clearly, the face those eyes were set into was getting closer rapidly.⁰

The Captain looked even more anxious, but the crazy look in his eyes was even stronger. He reached out with his right hand, and a long saber appeared, which he used to chop his own head off.⁷

His headless body then pulled back its right foot and kicked his head as hard as possible, sending it streaking toward Xu Qing. It spanned the 300-meter distance in an instant, allowing Xu Qing to grab it. The Captain sighed in relief while Qingqin backed up at top speed.³²

Meanwhile, 300 meters back, a face appeared behind the Captain’s headless body and gobbled it up.⁰

The face looked like it had been soaking in water for too long. It was swollen with rot and looked incredibly vicious. It also stank as it viciously chewed the Captain’s body. The red eyes glowed with madness as they locked onto the Captain’s head in Xu Qing’s hand. The face roared again, and masses of black mist shot toward Xu Qing.⁰

Qingqin unleashed a cry that could pierce metal or rock, then flapped his wings. His cultivation base flared, and he accelerated, shooting out of Forbidden by the Garment.⁰

The face raced in pursuit, but then Sir Bloodsmelter and the two grand elders launched simultaneous attacks, backed by the crushing power of Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. A rumbling boom rang out. The face howled again, but now it was even farther away from the Captain. It struggled wildly, and clearly wanted to keep giving chase.⁰

But then Injustice Prefecture’s shroud swept over it, ceasing any pursuit.⁰

A cry of intense humiliation and rage just barely made it through the shroud, and it was even possible to see the fabric bulging up.⁰

“You vile thief! I’m gonna kill you!”¹¹

The combined power of two entire prefectures was astonishing. With the sutra being chanted, and the cultivators of Injustice Prefecture working on their sealing magic, the shroud continued to extend, and the face had no way to break out into the open.⁰

“Vile thief! Shameless! I’m going to devour you! I’ll chew you to pieces! I’ll consume you!”¹

Xu Qing stood atop Qingqin's head watching everything happening, and of course, listening. The words caused a strange expression to appear on his face, and left him feeling lingering fear. He looked at the face struggling to break out of the shroud, then turned to the Captain's head.⁰

At the same time, Qingqin's middle and left head also looked at the Captain. It was the same with the grand elders from the Swordsage Court, and the other prefectural cultivators nearby.¹

Seeing that, the Captain inhaled sharply before shouting, "I did it! I did something amazing for the Swordsage Palace! I did something amazing for Injustice Prefecture! Do you people know why that moronic fellow in Forbidden by the Garment didn't fully awaken? It's because of me! It was for the sake of my fellow swordsages, and in order to save Injustice Prefecture, and also because of my love of humankind that I risked my life to personally go into the depths of Forbidden by the Garment!³¹

"And then, just when that moronic fellow was about to wake up, I successfully bit out his soul-heart! And thus, he's incomplete! That, in turn, threw a wrench into his plan to wake up. It was a completely unexpected turn of events!"¹⁸

The Captain was obviously worried that people were going to get the wrong idea about what he'd been up to, and the circumstances of his return, so he preemptively offered an explanation. If people thought he was the reason for the big disaster with Forbidden by the Garment, it would be a very tricky situation to deal with.⁴

How could he have guessed that going into that place with his friend, simply to have some fun, would turn into such a heaven-shaking, earth-shattering event? In fact, he barely ended up escaping with his life. And now that he was out, he could see the combined forces of two prefectures, numbering into the millions. Many people were glaring at him angrily. Though he wasn't exactly sure what was going on, he could tell the situation was urgent.⁴

In fact, it looked like some people were hefting their weapons with the intention of killing him.⁰

Having reached this point in his train of thought, the Captain shivered. He actually felt quite wronged. He definitely wasn't the one who started all of this!¹⁶

In any case, his words caused some very strange expressions to appear on the surrounding cultivators' faces. The forces of Injustice Prefecture clearly didn't believe him. After all, the huge face that was chasing him was obviously still furious.... Then the forces of Injustice Prefecture looked at Xu Qing and the grand elder from Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. The grand elder was frowning.⁰

Chen Erniu had made a deep impression on him. As he weighed whether or not the explanation seemed realistic, he looked at Sir Bloodsmelter. After all, Chen Erniu was a disciple from Seven Blood Eyes.¹

Sir Bloodsmelter's facial expression was solemn as he said, "Chen Erniu is one of the most gifted disciples in Seven Blood Eyes. He grew up in my sect, and has always been steadfast and loyal. He knows his place, is straightforward, never causes disasters, and never lies. I always completely trust everything he says."

Chapter 503: Worse than a Hell on Earth (part 1)

Upon hearing the patriarch's words, the Captain immediately felt a bit excited. He turned to look at Sir Bloodsmelter, his eyes brimming with glittering tears. To him, Sir Bloodsmelter was a towering and mighty figure who also overflowed with warmth and kindness. The truth was that he really was the subject of a lot of malevolent gazes from millions of cultivators from two prefectures. For the patriarch to forthrightly speak up for him went to show how much the patriarch approved of him. It instantly turned all of the Captain's feelings of humiliation into pride. All of a sudden, he realized that there really was such a thing as truth and warmth in the world. It was his Grand-Master that had always loved him the most. And he had always been the most beloved of the grand-apprentices. With that, he forced his eyelids up, causing his head to tilt slightly so he could give Xu Qing a look.

Xu Qing's face remained expressionless as he lifted the Captain's head up high so he could see what was going on. Then Xu Qing turned to the grand elders from Emperor-Receiving Prefecture and Injustice Prefecture and said, "Based on the Secretariat Division's Summary Intelligence Report #A-379, I found out that the chaos in the two prefectures was caused by the Holytides. Then, Classified Dossier 214 confirmed that they were trying to awaken Forbidden by the Garment.

"In addition to that, the sealing in Injustice Prefecture was clearly going more smoothly than in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. By combining information I received from both prefectures, I confirmed that backup wasn't immediately required in Injustice Prefecture. All Injustice Prefecture required was about a month to complete the work. Emperor-Receiving Prefecture needed more.

"I had my suspicions about what was really going on, even when I was back in the Secretariat Division. Originally, I thought that sealing the godly door in Forbidden by the Zombie was simply a more difficult task. But now, thanks to Chen Erniu's efforts in Forbidden by the Garment, I can see that the two events are actually connected."

The Captain was getting even more excited. He nodded vigorously. That, combined with his haggard complexion and scraggly beard, made him seem unusually tragic, and as a result, quite convincing. However, the most convincing voice came from some distance away.

"The chaos in Forbidden by the Garment has nothing to do with this human child. In fact, he's been of immense help to my people."

Everyone turned to see a host of garments flying out from atop the giant shroud. Once in the air, they transformed, becoming extremely colorful. They were, of course, Garmentfolk. However, there were clearly much fewer living Garmentfolk than there were dead ones. The person who had just spoken was a garment that resembled the robe of an empress. Behind her were a host of garments that looked like those of an imperial guard.

The local cultivators all clasped hands respectfully. The Garmentfolk had paid the steepest price to carry out this sealing of Forbidden by the Garment, and the words spoken by this empress' robe clearly carried a lot of weight.

When the Garmentfolk appeared, the Captain suddenly made something of a retching sound. Looking somewhat uncomfortable, he said, "Little Ah Qing, help me out."

Face completely expressionless, Xu Qing pulled open the Captain's mouth, fiddled around for a moment, then pulled a glove out.

It was hard to say how the Captain had managed to hide that glove in his mouth. It was all crumpled up into a ball, and was very wrinkled. But after it was out in the open, the Captain exhaled sharply into the glove, causing it to expand to its normal shape.

It was none other than Lady Fivefingers. Having just awoken, she looked around, seemingly confused. Then she flew a few unsteady circles around the Captain's head. After sending out some emotional fluctuations of joy, she waved to the Captain and flew back to her people.

Xu Qing noted the way the Captain looked at the glove, and something about it seemed suspicious. His gaze seemed too warm. It was a look Xu Qing had never seen in the Captain's eyes before. Knowing that now wasn't the time to pry, he said nothing.

The sealing of Forbidden by the Garment was essentially complete at this point. The black funerary garment was completely covered by the white shroud.

Things had gone according to plan. Two hours later, Injustice Prefecture's Swordsage Court had already organized the human cultivators to join the forces of Emperor-Receiving Prefecture to head to the front lines of the war.

In majestic fashion, the armies began the process of leaving Forbidden by the Garment via the teleportation portal.

As the armies started entering the teleportation portal, Qingqin looked at Xu Qing and gave a caw. From the look in his eyes, it was obvious he was getting ready to part ways. He had helped Xu Qing because his Eldest Brother had asked him to. But that didn't mean he would just blithely follow along and fight to the bitter end. He had his own ideals. Though he didn't feel any malice toward humans, he didn't love them either. What was more, he didn't want to directly participate in a war between two major species. That was the main reason he'd refused Palace Lord Kong's original request for help. He was more than willing to help Xu Qing as a personal favor. But he didn't want to do favors for the species as a whole.

For the entire time, Qingqin hadn't used any divine will, and had only used his physical voice. That said, Xu Qing could tell what he meant, and he understood the decision.

"Many thanks, Senior Qingqin!" Xu Qing said from aboard the huge flying ship. Clasp his hands, he bowed.

Qingqin soared through the sky, looked at Xu Qing with his three heads, then circled around.

"CAW! CAW! CAW!!!"

With a flap of his wings, he rocketed off into the dome of heaven and disappeared over the horizon.

Xu Qing watched him go. After he was gone, he looked down at the Captain, who stood next to him. The Captain was currently as tall as Xu Qing's knee.

"I never thought so much stuff would happen in such a short time," the Captain said. The Captain had already grown a tiny body, which was roughly the size of an infant. His plump little hands and feet were very cute. However, when they were combined with an adult-sized head, it made him look very strange.

Xu Qing glanced around to confirm that everyone else was focused on entering the teleportation portal. Lowering his voice, he said, “Eldest Brother, what actually happened back there?”

The Captain sighed. “I really got the short end of the stick. After I teleported away from Ten Entrails Tree, I ended up in Garmentfolk territory. I happened to run into my old friend Little Sis Fivefingers. I asked her if there was anywhere fun to hang out, and as we were going along, lo-and-behold the freaking Forbidden by the Garment started waking up!!

“The waking up part wasn’t so bad. But then Little Sis Fivefingers got devoured by the forbidden ground! It happened right in front of me! She just got devoured! So what could I do? I had to go after her. I went into the depths of Forbidden by the Garment, risked my life and nearly died, all to save her!

“Of course, you know me. Things always go bad for me, right? While I was there, I figured I might as well go in a little deeper. That was when I saw this heart flying along. Looked like it was in the process of waking up. Thinking solely of revenge, I took a bite out of that heart-soul. Well. A few bites.”

The Captain cleared his throat. Claspng his two tiny hands behind his back, he looked up at Xu Qing.

Xu Qing looked back, thinking about how that face had been angrily cursing him. For some reason, Xu Qing got the sense that what happened came down to a lot more than ‘a few bites.’ Xu Qing only believed about half of what the Captain said. However, the incomplete information just confirmed in his mind that the Captain wasn’t the reason behind the disaster.

Based on what he knew of the Captain, it seemed most likely that something heaven-shaking, earth-shattering had taken place in the depths of the forbidden ground. And some unpredictable thing had occurred that not even the Holytides could have guessed was coming. When all was said and done, things worked out, and the sealing was accomplished smoothly.

Nodding, Xu Qing looked down at the diminutive Captain. “In that case, Eldest Brother, when I get back, I’ll make sure to create an official record describing your amazing accomplishment.”

The Captain’s eyebrows shot up, and he laughed heartily. “That’s my little Junior Brother! Hahaha! Here, take this.”

After glancing around furtively, the Captain produced an egg-sized green crystal and shoved it into Xu Qing’s hand. There was clearly something sealed inside, although it wasn’t visible. But once it was in his hand, Xu Qing could sense shocking fluctuations inside. The moment he had it, he felt an instinctive sense of longing coming from his soul.

Even the god’s finger in his D-132 heavenly palace stirred because of it.

Xu Qing was visibly moved. “What is this?”

“Ahem. Want to know why I said that fellow in Forbidden by the Garment is a moron?” The Captain grinned enigmatically, then winked at Xu Qing. Raising his tiny little hand, he pointed at the crystal. “That’s why.”

Xu Qing inhaled sharply and looked at the Captain with disbelief in his eyes.

“What else did you eat, Eldest Brother?”

“Nothing! Really, nothing! That’s just a tiny fraction of the half-god body that fellow was trying to make. With a lot of difficulty, I should add.” The Captain burped haughtily, then looked at Xu Qing in the hopes of getting an envious reaction.

“Half-god?” Xu Qing asked.

“Of course. Ai. Better than nothing, I suppose. It’s not like it was that amazing. You know, little Ah Qing, you showed up just a tad too late. If you’d come earlier, I might not have ended up so stuffed, and you could have had some more for yourself.” The Captain cleared his throat. Though his tone of voice came across as sounding modest, his facial expression made it seem obvious that he was very pleased with himself. “Come on, show a bit of envy for your Elder Brother.”

Xu Qing nodded in agreement, then opened his eyes wide and let his jaw drop as if in astonishment. After, he put the green crystal away to absorb later.

The Captain didn’t look very pleased, though. “Ai, little Ah Qing. That expression wasn’t very good. Come, come. You need to click your tongue in admiration, and add in a gasp too.”

Xu Qing had to admit that it made sense, so he gave it a shot. In the end, it didn’t seem to add much to the effect, though.

The Captain was pleased to see Xu Qing cooperating in this way, but he still shook his head. “Oh, you! You need to practice more!”

With that, he and Xu Qing got off the ship and started walking toward the teleportation portal. As the Captain walked along, he stretched lazily.

“By the way, little Ah Qing, what sort of things have you acquired lately?” The Captain stepped onto the portal.

“Oh, not much,” Xu Qing said coolly, also stepping onto the portal. “I did get a god body, though.”

As the teleportation portal rumbled to life, the Captain spun and said something, except Xu Qing couldn’t hear him clearly. However, the Captain had clearly gasped, and his eyes were wide. What was more, after his gasp, he apparently bit his tongue.

Oh, is that what he means by clicking the tongue? Xu Qing thought about it for a moment.

The light of teleportation flared, covering them and the cultivators from two prefectures.

Chapter 503: Worse than a Hell on Earth (part 2)

Rainfield Prefecture was a long and thin prefecture. Its western border with Tidefall Prefecture formed the western front, and its northern border with Tranquility Prefecture formed its northern front. The climate was warm year-round. Because of that, the species in Rainfield Prefecture tended to be larger than those from other prefectures. For example, the Fullspirits that Qingqin had been such a fan of grew to an average height of about fifteen meters.

The prefecture was a very rainy place. There were mountains everywhere, with about one out of every ten being a volcano. That said, they didn't erupt very frequently. Because of the war, Rainfield Prefecture ended up becoming a staging zone. If supplies weren't delivered directly to the northern or western front, they would be stored in Rainfield Prefecture for a time.

To some extent, the prefecture was considered part of the war zone, and therefore, the Justice Palace was temporarily in control of it.

The vast majority of Holytides were in the armies being held off on the borders. But because the northern part of the county had lost three prefectures early on, not even the great net created by the combined forces of the county's taboo treasures could prevent small squads of Holytides from slipping into the interior.

Holytides were very skilled at disguising themselves, and were also equipped with magical treasures that could prevent the taboo treasure net from targeting them. Therefore, unless a lot of effort was put into tracking them down, it would be almost impossible to wipe them out completely. In addition to all that, they had received special training for this operation. The majority of them were from the Black Guard, and most of them had split up to avoid detection. Their main goal was to either divert or destroy the supplies being sent to the front lines.

After all, not all supplies could simply be stuffed into a holding device or dimensional space. And not everything could be sent through teleportation portals. Much of it was transported manually.

At the moment, a few thousand Black Guard cultivators had gathered outside of a large-scale teleportation portal in Rainfield Prefecture, and were launching an unexpected attack. Each one had an extraordinary cultivation base and shocking battle prowess. After all, members of the Black Guard were similar to swordsages; they were all outstanding figures among their people. Although not every single one could fight an enemy from a higher cultivation level, most were considered elites among elites.

Their mission was to destroy this specific teleportation portal. The complex had a total area of about fifty kilometers. From high above, it looked very impressive, and whenever it was activated, it could move tens of thousands of cultivators at a time.

The sounds of fighting already echoed along the edges of the portal.

There were a lot of cultivators stationed around the portal to defend it. However, most were disciples from the Justice Palace who couldn't even come close to being on the same level as the elite members of the Swordsage Palace. And compared to the Black Guard cultivators, they were just simply deficient.

The upside was that they had the advantage of numbers. Furthermore, there were also members of Rainfield Prefecture's native species present, plus some swordsages as well.

The portal had been activated, but there were a few hundred Black Guard cultivators in the air using magical devices to interfere with the portal's operation. As a result, the portal wasn't working.

Some of the Black Guard cultivators even managed to break through the defensive barriers, reach the portal itself, and self-detonate, causing shock waves to spread out and further disrupt the portal's operation.

That said, overall, the portal was still in good working order. Most of the assault was being held at bay by the borders.

Much of that was due to the person in charge of the overall defenses of the portal, Yao Yunhui. She was the director of the Justice Palace's Division 3, and was also a Spirit Trove cultivator. As such, she had personally repelled the Black Guard cultivators multiple times already. She did not seem alluring and seductive like she had back at the county capital. Instead, she wore a suit of armor, and though she was clearly exhausted, she exuded a somber and desolate aura. Thanks to her leadership, the forces under her command had held strong against the Black Guard assault.

After the protracted fight, the Black Guard cultivators seemed like they were on the verge of withdrawing. The commander in charge of the Black Guard contingent looked coldly at the distant Yao Yunhui and weighed the options. He knew that they couldn't stay in this location for too long, so finally, he decided to order the retreat.

However, even as the thousands of Black Guard cultivators prepared to leave, and as the human cultivators and their allies breathed sighs of relief... the ground started vibrating.

It happened so suddenly that both sides were shocked. Countless specks of dirt on the ground began to rise into the air, making it seem like some massive force was arriving from above.

Scattered buildings, rocks, corpses, and even blood on the ground started floating up. The sight of all that blood flowing up in rivulets was nothing short of appalling.

The Black Guard cultivators' magical devices were no longer capable of interfering with the teleportation portal. In fact, they suffered such a severe backlash that they exploded.

All of the local cultivators present were shaken to the core. Their hair began to drift up around them, and in some cases their skin sank down. There were even some with very low cultivation bases who found their blood oozing out of their pores and coating them in crimson. Thankfully, no one died.

Everyone was absolutely shocked, but what was more shocking was what was causing this event. The astonishing development wasn't coming from the sky, but the land. Specifically, it was the enormous, 50-kilometer-wide teleportation portal! The portal had been activated! The explosive power of the portal caused everyone to gasp for breath. A power of this shocking level hadn't been seen since the big movement of troops in the beginning of the war. The only thing that could provoke something like this was a teleportation that pushed the limits of what the portal was capable of! And that meant that the group teleporting in had to reach into the hundreds of thousands!

"That's not possible!"

"Our people and the humans are at a deadlock at the front lines. There's no way the humans could send in backup forces right now. Don't tell me we're dealing with nonhumans?"

"If it's a nonhuman force, it would be incredibly small. We've already sent notices to all nonhumans in Sea-Sealing County that we'll maintain the status quo after we take over!"

“Given the circumstances, what nonhuman species could fully mobilize like this?”

The Black Guard cultivators who had just been on the verge of retreating were visibly shocked. All of them could see the brilliant light building up on the massive teleportation portal. The light was so dazzling that it turned a dark night into what seemed like daytime. Along with that light came a deafening rumbling sound that pulsed to a special cadence.

“It doesn’t matter what’s going on. We can’t let this teleportation happen!”

“All Black Guard cultivators, attack at once! Stop this teleportation!”

When the commander gave the orders, the thousands of Black Guard cultivators all rushed toward the portal.

“Hold nothing back!” Yao Yunhui ordered. “Kill anyone that gets even close to the portal!” Then she personally shot forth to block the path of the Black Guard commander. When a large-scale teleportation portal like this was activated, it emitted its own type of pressure that mixed with the pressure of the incoming teleportation. That ensured that the teleportation process couldn’t be interfered with.

As the Black Guard cultivators advanced, and the Justice Palace cultivators fought back, intense rumbling sounds echoed from the portal. At the same time, a group of over a hundred individuals appeared.

The Black Guard commander had been both right and wrong. He was right in that there was a group of hundreds of thousands of cultivators teleporting in. But he was also wrong, because the first wave consisted of all Void Returning experts!

The arrival of over a hundred such cultivators caused brightly colored light to flash in heaven and earth, and screaming winds to whip about. The air trembled, and the ground shook so hard it seemed like it might crack.

The cultivators from both the Black Guard and the Justice Palace, plus the allied nonhumans, were all staring in absolute astonishment.

“Th-that... that....”

“That’s not possible!”

“Human relief troops!”

The Black Guard cultivators felt like their scalps were about to explode. All were visibly stunned and began to scramble backward. In contrast, the cultivators from the Justice Palace were all extremely excited.

“Relief troops!”

“The backup troops are here!”

“Reinforcements have finally arrived!”

Though these cultivators had not been stationed on the front lines, the past month had been very difficult for them. They had been forced to continuously suppress their feelings of despair and just endure. In fact, right now, some even wept or let loose piercing cries.

Yao Yunhui was so moved she seemed dazed. She'd long assumed there would be no relief troops, and that the war was a lost cause.

In fact, everyone had thought that. It was easy to imagine how the front line troops would react when seeing backup arrive. Given how long they had been risking their lives on the battlefield, they would probably be ten times as excited as the cultivators here. Maybe even a hundred times.

The patriarchs from Injustice Prefecture and Emperor-Receiving Prefecture emerged and spread out in all directions. Some waved their hands, causing heaven and earth to explode. The thousands of Black Guard cultivators were as weak as wet paper, and they exploded into flowering clouds of blood.

The Void Returning cultivators checked the teleportation portal and the surrounding area for safety, and as the excited local cultivators looked on, began another teleportation.

Before long, an army of hundreds of thousands of cultivators appeared. Their combined aura spread out like a tempest, causing rumbling like thunder to fill the sky, and cracking the ground as if from an earthquake.

However, things weren't over yet! After those hundreds of thousands of cultivators materialized, they made room for another teleportation, and another wave materialized. Heaven shook! The earth quaked! After the over 1,000,000-strong army from two prefectures arrived, including the Captain, the teleportation portal glittered again as one more person arrived.

As this person materialized, everyone was asked to leave the portal, including the Captain.

Chapter 503: Worse than a Hell on Earth (part 3)

The entire portal was empty. The over 1,000,000 cultivators hovered in the air looking down, and the two Swordsage Court grand elders stood by, looking somber. Everyone was looking at the person materializing in the middle of the portal. The cultivators from the Justice Palace seemed very serious. As for Yao Yunhui, who had been just about to hurry forward to clasp hands in greetings, she suddenly stopped in place and looked at the materializing figure. For some reason, this person seemed familiar to her. And then, as the light reached its most dazzling brightness, that person became clear.

It was Xu Qing!

The moment he materialized, the surrounding 1,000,000 cultivators and the two Swordsage Court grand elders clasped hands and bowed to him.

They didn't speak a word. They just bowed. And yet, that bow was such a powerful gesture it caused heaven and earth to tremble violently. There was even an invisible convergence of destiny aura at play.

Xu Qing looked around at everything. He knew that as secretary-general, he didn't deserve to be bowed to like that. But right now he represented Palace Lord Kong, and therefore, he had to accept it. Besides, the cultivators of Emperor-Receiving Prefecture and Injustice Prefecture were only here

because of his leadership. Thus, he could accept that bow. Looking very respectful, he clasped hands and returned the bow.

From high in the sky, the grand elder from Emperor-Receiving Prefecture said, “Secretary-General Xu Qing is here on behalf of Palace Lord Kong with new orders!”

Holding the palace lord’s command medallion aloft, Xu Qing said, “The relief troops from Emperor-Receiving Prefecture and Injustice Prefecture will make haste... to the western front!”

“Your orders shall be followed!” the million cultivators shouted.

Some distance away, Yao Yunhui stood in place, stunned, her mind spinning, her vision growing dim. The only thing she could see was that person standing straight and tall as a million people bowed to him. The image would be etched in her mind forever.

The relief troops from Emperor-Receiving Prefecture and Injustice Prefecture didn’t stay in Rainfield Prefecture. As soon as Xu Qing issued his orders, they started moving. They would fly the rest of the way to the western front.

Yao Yunhui and her contingent of Justice Palace cultivators had their own assignments to attend to, and didn’t go along. However, even after the army was gone, she couldn’t dispel her astonishment. And she couldn’t stop thinking about that final figure who had teleported in and received honor from a million cultivators.

“That was the secretary-general from the Swordsage Palace. He works directly for Palace Lord Kong....”

“His name is Xu Qing!”

“I heard Xu Qing and Chief Yao... don’t get along.”

Though the cultivators from the Justice Palace didn’t care as much about Xu Qing as those from the Swordsage Palace, they had still heard about him. That was especially true considering that, before the start of the war, Palace Lord Kong had been named as the temporary governor, and Xu Qing had always been at his side.

That said, none of them were as shocked by what had just happened as Yao Yunhui was. And as some people remembered that she and Xu Qing had had their differences, many of them secretly looked over at Yao Yunhui.

Yao Yunhui didn’t say anything. Waves of shock pulsed through her as she thought back to past events. Everything was still vivid in her mind, and it all led to very mixed emotions. After a long moment passed, she managed to regain her composure. Looking around at her Justice Palace subordinates, she said, “Back into position! Guard the portal!”

Because of her status, her cultivation base, and her recent experience, Yao Yunhui seemed a bit more dignified than before.

The surrounding cultivators immediately voiced affirmation of her orders and stopped focusing on thoughts about the amazing event which had just occurred. With fresh reinforcements heading to the front lines, they now had some hope.

The fire of hope set Rainfield Prefecture ablaze. And it soon spread to Tidefall Prefecture and the western front.

On the western front, the humans and the Holytides had just gone through thirteen straight days of combat, and had only just agreed to a temporary ceasefire to rest and recuperate.

From a distance, it was possible to see that some 5,000 kilometers away from the Heaventide Mountains was a massive ravine. That ravine formed a clear division between sets of territory.

On the other side of the ravine were the Heaventide Mountains, which had once formed the third line of defense holdout in Tidefall Prefecture. Beyond the mountains were the Heaven Eye Abyss and the Ninelands Plains. Previously, you had to pass those three areas to get to Holytide lands.

But things were different now. From high above, the Heaventide Mountains looked like a dragon that had surrendered and was gasping for breath. Many areas in the mountains were in complete ruins. Some peaks had crumbled, and black smoke drifted about everywhere. The wreckage of magical devices was visible everywhere. They were the vestiges of war.

Previously, those mountains had been one of the major lines of defense against the Holytide army. But as the Sea-Sealing County taboo treasures began to crumble... the Holytides broke through.

The human forces had been forced to fall back 5,000 kilometers to where the taboo treasure net was reestablished, and a fourth line of defense was maintained.

As of now, the Heaventide Mountains had no humans in them. Most of the individuals present were heavily armored Holytide cultivators. They were several million strong. What was more, beyond the mountain range it was possible to see a vast area filled with countless army tents. There weren't just Holytides present. There were also members of countless species that the Holytides had enslaved.

Over the course of the last half-month, the Holytides had begun a host of engineering projects in the mountains. As of now, there were over a million towers rising up from the mountains. Black lightning bolts danced between them, creating a huge net of electricity. Then the lightning rose up, but didn't go all the way up into the sky. As deafening thunderclaps rang out, it caused the black clouds to form a very clear barrier that made it seem like there were countless enormous objects taking shape within them.

Each of those huge objects was a full 3,000 meters, roughly diamond-shaped, and had a red eye in the middle of it. There were no less than a hundred thousand of them. They existed within the boundless clouds in the sky and were arrayed in the direction of the front lines of battle. They pulsed with terrifying auras, as well as the drone of howling animals. Wherever that sound passed, the air twisted and rippled, making it sound almost like the chanting of a god. They were magical devices of war that the Nightshades had given to the Holytides. The sounds they emitted could shatter the soul, and cause pressure to weigh down that could crush the flesh. In fact, the magical techniques they released could devastate just about anything.

But most dangerous were the grim reapers they scattered about. Those reapers were strange, invisible entities that the senses couldn't perceive. They came and went on the battlefield like ambassadors of death with huge sickles that they used to inflict grievous and deadly wounds on humans.

They didn't just attack individual enemies, though. They also perpetrated invasions by releasing mutagen, just like the kind in forbidden regions and grounds. It was a severe corruption method specifically targeting humans. Humans who got too close to the reapers would only be able to launch a few attacks before their bodies started withering rapidly. Then their mutation blotches would go out of control, causing them to mutate into mindless beasts. That was just one of the tactics employed by the Holytides.

Above the battlefield, the dome of heaven was dark and gloomy, and weighed down oppressively. There were also black snowflakes that fell.

The black snow was another Holytide tactic. Although it looked like snow, if you examined the snowflakes closely, you would see that each flake had very tiny hands and feet, as well as faces. They fell everywhere. Individually, they could form magical techniques, or they could clump together to become divine abilities. As they spread, the humans who breathed them would be corrupted with an extremely dangerous poison. The snowflakes could also be used by Holytide cultivators to make weapons. There was almost nothing that could defend against them.

Inside the clouds were the diamond-shaped magical devices. Beneath the clouds was the endless black snow. But that wasn't even close to everything at play.

The Holytides had caused the ground itself to come alive.

The endless mud and corpses turned into enormous severed arms that crawled forward. The deep furrows left by the arms would quickly fill with black snow. The severed arms dragged black chains behind them that stretched up into the sky and into the clouds.

There, in the clouds, they converged in a massive black vortex. That vortex resembled a sun. As it slowly rotated, the chains from the ground merged into its depths. And as the severed arms slowly pulled the clanking chains, it seemed like they were gradually dragging some terrifying entity out into the open. An extremely noxious smell drifted out from the vortex, which became even more black clouds that made the black snowfall thicker.

As the armies from Emperor-Receiving Prefecture and Injustice Prefecture neared the front lines, they received official permission to get close. What they saw of the Holytide front lines was as described above.

Xu Qing led the army, and what he saw caused his heart to pound. The other most noticeable part of the battlefield were the endless corpses.

Mountains of corpses. Seas of blood. Forests of bones.

Xu Qing had killed a lot of enemies in his life. But not even he had seen anything as shocking as this battlefield.

There were just too many corpses. Too many. Few were in one piece. And the seemingly endless flesh and blood created a most vile of stench. War was like a millstone of heaven and earth. When it began to roll, all living beings would be caught up by it and crushed.

Xu Qing had thought of the Three-Spirits Dao-Suppressing Mountain as being a hell on earth. But compared to this, that was nothing.

This was worse than a hell on earth.

Next to Xu Qing was the Captain and everyone else, and all of them could only look around wordlessly.

Chapter 504: This World Really Eats People Up (part 1)

After taking everything in, Xu Qing focused on the front lines of the human forces.

The enormous golden net that filled the sky and connected to the lands below were what cut off the field of battle like a screen. Whether it was above or below, the Holytides' tactics were all blocked by the humans' fourth line of defense. The majestic golden net didn't just connect heaven and earth, it spread to the left and right for a seemingly endless distance.

If someone possessed a pair of eyes that could see all of Sea-Sealing County at the same time, they would see that the net reached all the way to the northern front, creating a barrier at every spot where the Holytides were encroaching on the county.

The huge ravine that formed the fourth line of defense had been selected for its location within the golden net. Behind the ravine were hosts of tents as well as defensive war machines. Innumerable human cultivators, all of them visibly wracked with exhaustion, worked to build and maintain the various structures.

There were rows of military magical devices that resembled thorns, filling the ravine and pointing in the direction of the Holytides. There had to be hundreds of thousands of them, and they glittered brightly and caused the air in front of them to distort in waves. In fact, the distortions were so intense that small rifts were torn open, causing deafening sounds to echo out. They weren't explosive bangs, but rather, deep and sustained rumblings.

The magical devices weren't unleashing techniques that could be seen with the naked eye. Rather, they were deploying magical sound waves to deal with the black snow. When fully deployed, they mostly negated the effects of the black snow clumping together, and would cause it to melt earlier than normal. The intense rumbling sounds put out by the devices were constantly drifting out over the front lines.

Hundreds of Void Returning experts sat cross-legged in the golden net, guiding the power of the taboo treasures to defend against the diamond-shaped magical devices used by the Holytides.

They also collected data and coordinates that were used to dispatch cultivators to kill the enemy.

Scattered everywhere on the ground were enormous war puppets that were clearly the work of human hands. They towered over the surrounding area like mountains. Each puppet was stationed atop a spell formation, and was operated by an entire squad of cultivators. It went without saying that they were incredibly mighty.

Most hair-raising of all were the nine enormous Emperor's Swords! They were beyond massive, as they stretched from the ground high into the sky. They radiated immense majesty and disturbing power. Looking closely at them, it was clear that the nine Emperor's Swords were actually composed of countless smaller Emperor's Swords. By combining the power of all those swords, it was possible to create an incredibly powerful weapon unique to humankind.

High in the sky was the enormous Dao Bell. That bell had been gifted to Sea-Sealing County's Swordsage Palace on the day of its founding by the Swordsage Division headquarters in the imperial capital. It had originally been hung in the Swordsage Palace. But it had been moved to the

field of battle. After all, it was... a precious treasure of Sea-Sealing County's Swordsage Palace, and was considered one of the reserve powers of both the Corrections Division and the Swordsage Palace as a whole. It wasn't just something that could be used as a weapon against enemies. It also provided a rousing boost to the humans and their allies.

From a distance, it was possible to see that the huge bell was surrounded by hundreds of thousands of bronze coffins, each of which was covered with many layers of sealing marks. Those coffins didn't contain dead people; they contained living people! There were men and women, old and young. They were 'living swords' created by the Swordsage Palace over the years, and their sole purpose was to be used in a wartime situation like this.

The majority of them were people who had lived in times of relative peace. When they reached the end of their life without ever having unsheathed The Emperor's Sword, they had submitted special requests to use a secret magic to enter a state of suspended animation. At the same time, The Emperor's Sword was fused with their life force.

Once they woke up, they could unleash a single attack with that special sword that was now a permanent part of their own life. There were others who, knowing that they couldn't progress any further in their cultivation, made the same decision to become living swords. Every single one of them knew that, were they to be woken up, it would be at a moment when Sea-Sealing County faced grave danger.

At the moment, about thirty percent of the coffins were empty. The swordsages in those coffins had been awoken in the fighting. Every single one of them had, without the slightest hesitation, ended their own lives to unleash that final devastating sword attack.

As Xu Qing looked on, a group of several dozen figures flew out from the front lines and headed toward him and the army he led. As they neared, it became clear that they were being led by one of the deputy palace lords. The fact that he was coming personally made his attitude very clear. He looked exhausted but also excited. Considering the high level of his cultivation, it wasn't common to see such things on his face.

Kong Xianglong was in the group flanking the deputy palace lord. Kong Xianglong was injured, and looked a bit depressed, although when he saw Xu Qing he managed to force a smile onto his face.

Xu Qing's heart sank upon seeing Kong Xianglong in that state, and he suddenly got a very bad feeling. However, now wasn't the time to ask questions. As the deputy palace lord neared, he spoke in a loud voice.

"Brother Mingyi, Brother Gongze!"

The grand elders from the Swordsage Courts in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture and Injustice Prefecture flew forth and clasped hands respectfully to the deputy palace lord.

"You came just in time. Just in the nick of time!" The deputy palace lord took a deep breath and forced himself into a state of relative calm. "Palace Lord Kong has issued commands. The Void Returning experts and other sect leadership from Injustice Prefecture and Emperor-Receiving Prefecture are to immediately proceed to the forward command tent. The palace lord wants to see you! Everyone else will set up

camp and wait for orders. Please, follow me!" The deputy palace lord clasped hands to the forces from the two prefectures. Then he looked at Xu Qing, his eyes glittered with open admiration. "Secretary-General Xu, you come to the command tent also."

"Yes, sir," Xu Qing said somberly.

No one wasted any time. The deputy palace lord led them to the command tent.

Just before leaving, Xu Qing looked over at the Captain.

The Captain's body was now roughly equivalent to a seven- or eight-year-old. He was standing next to one of the Spirit Trove honor guards, and looked just like a kid. Noticing Xu Qing's gaze, he waved as if to say, "See you in a bit."

Xu Qing nodded and followed the others to the command tent.

Along the way, Xu Qing noted countless wounded human cultivators. Clearly the front-line cultivators had been aware reinforcements were coming from two prefectures; as the group made their way to the command tent, numerous cultivators walked out of their tents and looked at Xu Qing and the others, excitement visible on their faces. There were sect disciples, rogue cultivators, and swordsages as well. Some had very serious injuries, others had minor wounds. But all of them clasped hands and bowed deeply to Xu Qing. The situation had been dire, bitter, and exhausting. No one seemed to be in a state of despair, yet they were longing for hope. And that hope had just arrived!

Xu Qing could sense the emotion in the eyes of the cultivators as he made his way through the camp. He saw some who looked taciturn or cold. Others were bitter, or had eyes glowing with killing intent. But all of them changed when they saw Xu Qing. Clearly, their spirits were lifting.

Of course, there were many swordsages present. Xu Qing even spotted Chen Tinghao and Sun Liying. Both had serious injuries, and Sun Liying was supporting Chen Tinghao with her arm. When they spotted him, both smiled. Because of being so close to the battlefield, the noise of the magical devices was almost deafening, making it pointless to call out greetings.

Xu Qing gave them a nod. Seeing Chen Tinghao so badly hurt, yet in good spirits, caused him to sigh inwardly. Xu Qing had always liked those two. They had been the ones who introduced the county capital to them, and also stood up for him to the Justice Palace. [1]

Xu Qing soon passed them. Before long, the deputy palace lord had led them through the camp to the command tent that overlooked the ravine.

This place was the Command Department, which oversaw the front lines.

There were several hundred guards keeping an eye on the area. There were also swordsages with civil post assignments, standing by waiting for orders to come out of the tent. They were the ones responsible for making sure those orders got delivered and executed. Orders streamed out of the command tent, whereupon the civil swordsages outside raced to execute them.

"Have the Seventh Battalion advance to the front lines immediately. I want to be apprised of even the slightest Holytide movements!"

“Arrange for the Ninth Battalion to split up and try to infiltrate the battlefield. I want updated data on the black snow levels!”

“Have the Corrections Division form small squads to track down the Black Guard infiltrators. We cannot allow the fifth line of defense to be sabotaged before it’s even ready!”

Xu Qing’s eyes glittered as he took stock of the civil swordsages. When those swordsages noticed Xu Qing, they were initially surprised. Then their eyes shone with respect. Those who accepted new orders and raced off would take the time to bow briefly to him as they passed. Because of their status and rank, as well as their focus on time management, they would rarely take time to show respect to others in a wartime situation. But they absolutely had to do so for Xu Qing. After all, they were all attached to the Secretariat Division now, which meant that they were his subordinates.

Though Xu Qing hadn’t come to the battlefield, the Secretariat Division had traveled with the army to the front lines.

Xu Qing nodded to them, indicating that they should hurry about their business. Meanwhile, the deputy palace lord stopped out front of the command tent.

“Palace Lord, the Void Returning experts and sect leadership from Emperor-Receiving Prefecture and Injustice Prefecture are here.”

“Enter!” Palace Lord Kong said from within the tent.

The Void Returning experts all filed into the tent solemnly. Before long, the only people outside the tent were the guards, as well as Xu Qing and Kong Xianglong.

Xu Qing looked over at the haggard and dispirited Kong Xianglong.

“What’s wrong, Big Bro Kong?” he asked softly.

“Duskspirit... is dead.” Kong Xianglong’s voice thrummed with grief and bitterness, and his eyes no longer sparkled.

Xu Qing’s heart thumped when he thought about Duskspirit, who had clearly been in love with Kong Xianglong.

“Before she died, she told me she loved me...” Kong Xianglong shivered. Reaching out, he gripped Xu Qing’s shoulder. His eyes were bloodshot and his hand trembled. “I don’t know how to deal with this, Xu Qing!”

He closed his eyes.

Xu Qing didn’t say anything. He just let Kong Xianglong hold on to his shoulder. Xu Qing had been forced to part with loved ones in death. More than once. So he could imagine what Kong Xianglong was feeling. It was a sensation that defied reality, and was something you could never get used to.

The only thing Xu Qing could think to do was take out a flagon of alcohol and hand it to the trembling Kong Xianglong.

Kong Xianglong took it and drank deeply. Then he murmured, "I never imagined there would be a time when alcohol tastes like nothing."

Kong Xianglong released his grip, patted Xu Qing on the shoulder, and then walked away. Despite feeling so heavy at heart, he had come here just to see Xu Qing.

Xu Qing didn't say anything. He suddenly thought back to the first time he saw Duskspirit, back when he first arrived at the Swordsage Palace. She was a young woman who liked eating melon seeds of flesh and blood. She was the one who suggested he go to the Supreme Void Demonization Sect to learn the Demonization Art. Even back then, he'd known that she only cared about Kong Xianglong. [1]

A long moment passed, and Xu Qing sighed. *This world really eats people up.*

Eventually, the Void Returning experts started filtering out of the tent to handle their various assignments. That included Sir Bloodsmelter and the two Swordsage Court grand elders.

Finally, Palace Lord Kong called out, "Come in, Xu Qing."

Steeling himself, Xu Qing stepped into the tent. He immediately caught sight of the palace lord sitting there in front of a huge sandbox formed by means of a magical technique. The sandbox was a map depicting the entire western front, including the ravine and much of the Holytides' front line. It even stretched all the way to include the northern front. Obviously, the western front was only one part of a much larger war. Though the command tent had a direct view of only one small part of that conflict, the fact that Palace Lord Kong had set up the Command Department here went to show that he thought of this place as the most important part of the front lines.

Xu Qing took a deep breath as he looked at the sandbox and then Palace Lord Kong. The palace lord looked even more haggard than before. His eyes were bloodshot, and he was clearly injured. He still wore the very same suit of armor that Xu Qing had helped him don. The baleful aura that surrounded him was stronger than before. To Xu Qing, he seemed like a wild beast, as if all of the ferocity of the army was focused on him.

"Greetings, Palace Lord," Xu Qing said somberly, clasping hands and bowing.

"Xu Qing, I received the supplies you sent." As the palace lord looked up at Xu Qing, he seemed to reign in his baleful aura. However, the destiny aura of the army made it impossible for him to completely dispel the aura of blood on him. That said, he managed to force a gentle look onto his face, and his eyes glittered with praise. "I'm also aware of what went into gathering the armies of the two prefectures. You've performed an amazing service!"

Xu Qing bowed his head. "Your humble servant only did what was necessary. By the way, about Mount Daybreak, I—"

Before he could finish speaking, the sky outside changed colors dramatically, as if it were being dilated and stretched out at the same time. Killing intent surged from the earth, which quaked as though being attacked by subterranean dragons and snakes.

The howls of Holytide cultivators echoed in the air. The temporary lull in the fighting had ended! Killing intent swept forth like storm winds from the Heaventide Mountains, slamming into the

taboo treasure net protecting Sea-Sealing County. The huge net trembled and emitted dazzling flashes of light. The wild wind swept across the ravine, hitting countless tents among the forces of Sea-Sealing County, and causing many of them to ripple wildly.

When the wind hit Palace Lord Kong's command tent, the fabric whipped back and forth loudly. The tent flaps opened, revealing that the dark clouds outside were filled with countless lightning bolts.

RUMBLE!

Both land and sky filled with the loud sound.

Xu Qing's long hair stirred, and his heart started to pound.

A roar echoed out like that of countless wild beasts, quickly surpassing the heavenly thunder as it spread far and wide.

Face completely expressionless, the palace lord stood. His baleful aura flared, and he handed a jade slip to Xu Qing. Then he walked toward the tent flaps.

"That jade slip contains all the details about the Holytides and the battleground. I want you to take the time to study it thoroughly, Xu Qing. I'll give you a day. What's happening now is just combat as usual. Things haven't really reached the point of being a big war. How to make use of all the details in that information will be up to you. Starting tomorrow, I want you back at my side as my secretary-general!"

"Yes, sir!" Xu Qing said immediately.

Palace Lord Kong nodded and walked out of the tent. The swordsages from the Secretariat Division had already returned and were waiting for new orders.

Xu Qing stood behind the palace lord looking out at the battlefield. In addition to the dramatic things happening in the dome of heaven, he saw countless Holytide cultivators racing forward like a wave on the ocean. Some flew in the air, others raced on the ground. All wore suits of armor and radiated killing intent. Their troop formations resembled enormous severed hands that covered the sky and spread out over the earth.

The palace lord began issuing orders, and Sea-Sealing County's army stirred like a beast that had been napping and was now ready to fight back.

After taking it in for a moment, Xu Qing clasped hands and left. He knew that, having just arrived at the battlefield, he didn't have any idea of the wartime operations, much less the ups and downs of the situation. The post of secretary-general wasn't something to be viewed casually. It didn't just involve passing along orders, but rather, required keen observational and analytical skills. In the current situation, it would require a general understanding of all the details related to the battlefield.

In reality, a single day wouldn't be enough for Xu Qing to catch up properly.

Nor could one jade slip possibly contain all of the information necessary to understand the Holytides and the battlefield.

In order to more quickly familiarize himself with everything, he wanted to find a spot that overlooked the battlefield, and station himself there to observe the fighting. At the same time, it

would be easy for him to actually go onto the battlefield to personally experience the details of the fighting between humans and Holytides.

He could do the former by staying with Palace Lord Kong, but not the latter. Being near the palace lord, who was the core of the entire army, would make it difficult to actually go onto the battlefield.

As rumbling sounds filled heaven and earth, and everything shook, Xu Qing looked around for a suitable spot. Eventually, he noticed an area where a host of scrap puppets had been piled up on a mountain. The war puppets of Sea-Sealing County were usually operated by large numbers of cultivators, and would be stationed on a spell formation to be kept in a peak state of readiness. But already, many of them had been rendered nonoperational due to damage taken. They were being temporarily stored on that mountain, where they could be scavenged for spare parts. Or, they could be tossed out at key moments in the battle and detonated.

After spotting the pile of scrap puppets, Xu Qing flew over.

Given the state of the fighting, there was only one person on guard. It was an old cripple who sat there looking out woodenly at the battlefield. He noticed Xu Qing's approach, and he looked over with a blank expression.

Xu Qing didn't speak to him. He leaped up onto the scrap puppets and climbed to the top of the pile. Standing there, he took out the jade slip and reviewed the contents while simultaneously looking out at the battlefield.

The high vantage point offered a good view. Just beyond the golden net, the battle raged.

High in the sky, the Holytides had their diamond-shaped magical devices. Occasionally, they would release ear-piercing sounds that rippled through the air, along with lightning bolts that would smash into the ground. The blood-colored eyes in the middle of the diamond-shaped devices would emit crushing pressure that hindered the human forces but bolstered the Holytides.

The jade slip had some basic information about the diamond-shaped magical devices, such as the fact that the gruish things were a gift from the Nightshades.

That said, the humans had their own advantages. For instance, Xu Qing could see the Void Returning experts seated in the golden net sending out cultivation base power into the net. As a result, numerous golden mouths appeared, which emitted noiseless howls as they launched attacks at the diamond-shaped magical devices.

Though the mouths interfered with the diamond-shaped devices, and even drew their attention, the black snow was pervasive and difficult to contain.

Sometimes the snowflakes transformed into magical attacks that hit the human cultivators, or converged to form both humanoid and beastly shapes. Some landed near Holytide cultivators, where they formed into dangerous weapons. Sometimes the black snow would land on the humans, no matter how they tried to avoid it. There was simply too much of it. When that happened, the cultivator would shiver as the snow turned into a dangerous poison. If the mutagen within those cultivators reached a certain point, they would scream as they experienced mutation and started blindly attacking anyone around them. It was a brutal scene.

But there was still more the humans could do.

Even as Xu Qing felt shaken, he saw the shocking magical thorns emit deafening sound wave attacks. Wherever the sound passed, the snow would melt, turning into black water that splashed onto the ground and eventually turned into a black mist.

When that happened, some humans on the battlefield would just take the time to catch their breath, maybe even by falling back from the fighting. Then, after recovering, they would charge back into the battle.

Chapter 505: The Emperor of Redspirit (part 1)

Xu Qing was shocked by what he was seeing. Even in the short time he had been observing, he had seen many people die. Human cultivators lost their lives in a very gruesome fashion. Despite being far from any enemies, they would suddenly be slashed to pieces by unseen blades. Then, after dying, they mutated into mindless mutant beasts. Hoarse shouts and bloodcurdling screams mixed with the sounds of self-detonations and the thrum of magical devices. Taking in the scene as a whole, it didn't seem like the forces of Sea-Sealing County could possibly launch a counteroffensive. They could only mount a defense.

Sea-Sealing County originally had thirteen prefectures, but lost three at the very beginning. Injustice and Emperor-Receiving weren't participating from the beginning. That means we had the power of eight prefectures. And I remember that, at the beginning of the conflict, we had eight battalions!

Suppressing his shock at what he was seeing, he quickly analyzed the situation.

There's no specific strategy being forced on everyone. The forces from the different prefectures all have their own unique qualities, so it doesn't make sense to shoehorn everything into one plan.

Therefore... the eight battalions are essentially autonomous, with their own supplies, magical devices, battle plans, and the like.

For example, those magical thorns are overseen by the Third Battalion. And the hundreds of Void Returning cultivators managing the taboo treasures from the various prefectures are actually selected from all of the different battalions. And they only represent a portion of the Void Returning forces. The Swordsage Palace is responsible for the war puppets, the Dao Bell, and The Emperor's Swords!

Taking a deep breath, Xu Qing looked left and right and didn't see anyone from Injustice Prefecture and Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. And the army forces here seemed lacking.

It made Xu Qing think back to the sandbox he'd seen in the command tent.

The front lines stretch for a long way, and are divided into multiple battle zones. Injustice Prefecture and Emperor-Receiving Prefecture, as well as the forces from two other prefectures, are being assigned to one of the more westerly areas. The part I'm in right now is the battle zone overseen by the Command Department!

Don't tell me Palace Lord Kong has set himself up here to make himself bait? Is he trying to attract the attention of the Holytides...? Or maybe he has some other plan.

Without more detailed information, Xu Qing couldn't be sure of the nuances of what he was seeing. That said, he was still getting much more familiar with the war situation. After wrapping his mind around the various battle zones, he decided to number the zones to make it easier to analyze them.

Sea-Sealing County is the West Zone, while the Holytides occupy the East Zone.

Zones West 1, West 3, West 4, and West 8 are closest to the golden net. The forces there are on standby as they wait to engage with the enemy forces from Zones East 5, East 7, and East 11. West 2, West 5 are using war puppets, while the other three zones are providing support. On the Holytide side, dozens of zones including Zones East 3, East 6, East 14, and East 17 have shifted to make Zone East 2 the most prominent.... No, hold on. The Holytide formation is changing into an arrow, with East 2 being the arrowhead!

After having made that determination, he looked over to where the golden net hovered above East 2.

With the Holytide's formation shift complete, over ten thousand living severed hands suddenly appeared. Every single one of them held a huge chain as they surged forward. Simultaneously, intense rumbling sounds rang out as the vortex behind them opened up further. More black snow emerged, pouring like an avalanche onto the field of battle.

Xu Qing's expression flickered as he noticed one of The Emperor's Swords suddenly glitter with light, as if it had been waiting for this moment. Massive amounts of sword light erupted from it, turning into a sword sea that shot toward the vortex. It closed in and detonated, causing howls of anguish to emerge from the spinning vortex. The sword sea sent the avalanche of black snow spraying off in different directions.

Meanwhile, high above the Sea-Sealing County, the huge Dao Bell surrounded by the bronze coffins suddenly tolled. The sound was profoundly ancient, and seemed capable of shattering anything and everything. The bell tolled seven times, and each time, it sent ripples out over the battlefield. Countless Holytide cultivators simply exploded, while at the same time revealing figures that had previously been invisible.

The illusory figures were not Holytides. Instead, they looked like mantises, each of them dozens of meters tall and pulsing with a very unique mutagen that invaded everything around them. Xu Qing knew that these were the grim reapers created by the Nightshades' diamond-shaped magical devices. Their unusual state of existence made them impossible to detect, and thus extremely difficult to deal with. Normally speaking, the golden net was needed to mark them. But right now, the Dao Bell was exerting crushing power that instantly revealed them.

That was the moment when the war puppets sprang into action. Over ten thousand gigantic puppets rushed onto the battlefield toward the grim reapers.

War was like a complicated game. Sometimes, a defensive maneuver could actually turn into a counteroffensive. And sometimes complicated situations were actually simple.

That said, war was always like a millstone that required great effort to be expended as it rotated. Whether one side was in the right or wrong didn't matter. Blood had to be spilled. When the millstone rotated, lives were taken. Matters of victory and defeat were secondary.

Xu Qing stood by, silently studying the battlefield.

The sky above seemed to be that of perpetual dusk. It didn't matter if it was day or night. The sky always looked like that.

Intense sounds. The reek of blood. Mutagen. Those were the main themes of the war. As for how long the brutal symphony would continue to play, no one knew. The slaughter went on and on, an endless cycle that brought untold pressure onto the combatants. Along with that pressure came a mounting despair.

Eventually, Xu Qing looked away. He had seen enough of the battlefield. The fighting continued, with both sides employing various tactics to keep the bloody millstone turning.

Death was commonplace. Survival was a miracle.

Yet, during the entire time he watched, Xu Qing didn't see retreating troops.

Where would they retreat to?

From his position atop the pile of scrap puppets, he looked back at Sea-Sealing County. Even though he had experienced countless sufferings from his youth until now, there were still many things he worried about. It made sense for a well-rounded person to have worries.

Eventually, he looked away from Sea-Sealing County and up at the diamond-shaped magical device in the sky, and the rippling distortions that surrounded them.

I can sense a bit of the power of the red moon on those magical devices....

He had only picked up on that after observing them from a distance for a while. He got the same sense from the black snow. That said, he was so far away from both that the sensation wasn't very strong.

After considering the matter, he left the scrap puppet pile and headed toward the battlefield.

As he was leaving, the old cripple called out in a voice hoarse from age, "Come back alive!"

Xu Qing stopped and turned in place to look at the old man. Xu Qing didn't know him, and the two of them hadn't exchanged any words up to this point. The old man didn't say anything further. He just looked out at the battlefield, his expression one of sorrow. Xu Qing nodded to him, then became a streak of light that shot toward the golden net.

He wanted to get onto the actual battlefield to get a better sense of the power of the black snow and the diamond-shaped magical devices. If both of them were really backed by the power of the red moon, then maybe he could provide some help.

Given the speed he was capable of, he quickly passed through the golden net and onto the battlefield. The smell of blood and gore hit him like a wave. The air was humid and smelled disgusting. Even a hardened killer would feel nauseous upon smelling such an odor. It was because of how many had died, and how many had been filled with feelings of despair when they did.

Emotions were like contaminants. The eyes of humans would turn red, whether from fear or excitement. And when those two emotions mixed together, the results were even more dramatic.

Being on the battlefield was very different from observing it from afar. The sights, sounds, and smells were now much more intense.

He saw bitter faces, enraged expressions, and back-and-forth fighting. There was madness and confusion. It almost looked like a great hand had dropped from the sky to create a painting in front of Xu Qing. And then the painter had unwittingly added Xu Qing into the picture as well, like a tiny dot that could hardly measure up to the larger image.

Next to that tiny dot was a Holytide cultivator, his expression one of ferocity as he shot forth to take Xu Qing's head. Black snow became a magical device shaped like a ghost claw. It burst with extraordinary might, yet the moment the vicious Holytide arrived, Xu Qing vanished.

A black dagger slashed through the Holytide's neck. Blood sprayed and the head flew, allowing the Holytide cultivator to briefly see his own headless body.

Xu Qing licked the acerbic blood from his lips, all while the baleful aura seeped out of his bloodshot eyes. He didn't waste any time. He burst into motion, sending taboo poison power all around him. Any Holytides who dare get close to him would shudder, then scream as their bodies melted within their armor.

As he proceeded along, he got closer to an area with black snow. When he arrived, he let the snow fall and looked closely for traces of the red moon. However, as he studied them, the snowflakes released faint fluctuations that caused them to collapse.

It does and doesn't... he thought, looking around vigilantly. The black snowflakes did have the power of the red moon in them, but it was so weak as to be insignificant.

What was more noteworthy was that it had some type of chaotic power element. As a result, though Xu Qing could exert some tiny fraction of control, the slightest misstep would result in total failure. If he wanted to gain true control, he would need to do further observation and testing.

As for the poison in the snow, it didn't count for much when compared to Xu Qing's poisons. However, when the black snow turned into various magical techniques, they were very strong. And when they clumped together, they became incredibly astounding.

There's more to them than meets the eye. There's something vicious inside, plus there's that unstable chaos power that guides the melting of the snowflakes....

After some thought, he tried to collect some of the snow, then turned to leave for another area.

Chapter 505: The Emperor of Redspirit (part 2)

He wanted to see if the diamond-shaped magical devices were similar to the black snow. Unfortunately, the devices were high in the sky, which made them much more dangerous to approach. Therefore, he settled on the grim reapers as his next goal.

Blurring into motion, he headed to a spot in the distance where he saw some war puppets fighting with some grim reapers. Along the way, he took time to study the mutagen on the battlefield.

This is a living mutagen, not the kind that comes from forbidden grounds, or the kind made by cultivators!

Narrowing his eyes, he sent his shadow out to devour the surrounding mutagen. Such living mutagen was very suitable for the shadow. Meanwhile, Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior flew out and circled protectively around Xu Qing like a dharma protector.

Xu Qing continued on his way, and the slaughter proceeded around him. There were too many Holytides on the battlefield. As Xu Qing sped along, blood splattered onto his uniform, and dripped from his face and hands down to the ground. As time passed, he left behind a wake of corpses. He was cautious by nature, so despite the bloodshot nature of his eyes, his expression was still calm

and collected. He didn't stay in one place for very long, and whenever he sensed Spirit Trove fluctuations, he would flee.

Thus, time passed, and eventually he reached the spot where the war puppets and grim reapers were fighting. Being on the battlefield, he now had a good sense of how difficult things were for the human cultivators. The deafening noise here was much more intense than on the other side of the golden net.

It was easy to imagine how cultivators from either side would eventually go deaf from it. They wouldn't hear the screams of others, nor their own howls of grief. People who lost their hearing would experience two contradictory sensations. On the one hand, the battlefield would seem vastly bigger because of the lack of sound. On the other hand, that person would feel immeasurably small because of being isolated and alone. That state could help a cultivator to focus more on fighting, but could also drive them to the limits of sanity.

Xu Qing saw people like that as he moved along. He saw some corpses with hands clamped over their ears as if they only hoped to stop hearing the rumbling and booms around them. It was the same with both humans and Holytides.

At the moment, Xu Qing was stepping over a mangled corpse. He looked at it, then looked up at the spot ahead where the grim reapers and the war puppets fought back and forth. The puppets seemed to have the upper hand.

Both parties were dozens of meters high. The Sea-Sealing County war puppets were humanoid, while the grim reapers looked like mantises. They fought back and forth ferociously, causing blood to spray with each blow. Either that, or shattered puppet parts would fly out.

The shockwaves spread far and wide. After all, the battle prowess on display was not just Nascent Soul; it was actually more in the Spirit Trove level. More than ten thousand war puppets had engaged the grim reapers, and there were already high casualties on both sides. Before long, though, the war puppets blasted through the grim reapers, then surged onward.

When Xu Qing arrived, he gathered some of the flesh and blood of the grim reapers. He could sense their brutal aura, and was able to detect the power of the red moon in it. It was stronger than in the black snow.

Xu Qing's eyes narrowed as he once again sensed that, all of a sudden, things were changing on the battlefield!

Then Palace Lord Kong's voice echoed out, filled with unprecedented solemnity.

"All Sea-Sealing County battalions: fall back immediately!"

Even as the words rang out, the sky flashed as an intense sound that surpassed all the magical devices erupted from the huge vortex. The sound crushed down on everything, and seemed to restore hearing to all cultivators on both sides of the conflict.

Thump-thump!

Thump-thump!

Thump-thump!

It sounded like a heartbeat, pulsing down from the vortex in the sky, filling all the lands. And then, an eye peered out from within that vortex. It was ashen gray, lifeless, and in fact, pulsing with a boundless aura of death. Then the eye lunged forward, and the vortex was pulled open as a crimson head emerged!

It was not the head of a human. Rather, it was the bright red head of a bird! It was only a head, not a body. The bird's neck ended in a gaping hole, as if its neck had been cut through with a sharp blade. This bird's head was so huge that it was larger than Qingqin's entire body, as if Qingqin were just a child, and this was an adult. As it appeared, filling the sky, a huge emperor's throne could be seen in its eye!

Sitting on that throne was a person. He wore an emperor's robe, as well as a crown, the beads of which obscured his face. He emanated a majestic mightiness that created a tempest all around him. The terrifying bird's head was apparently serving as his imperial carriage.

All of the Holytide cultivators on the field of battle dropped to their knees to kowtow, their eyes gleaming with fanaticism.

“Emperor!”

“Emperor!!”

Next, a projected image of Palace Lord Kong appeared above the fourth line of defense, tens of thousands of meters in size. His feet were planted on the ground while his head was high in the sky, and he radiated a terrifying, baleful aura. To his left was the Dao Bell, emanating an ancient thrumming, and to his right was a 30,000-meter Emperor's Sword, pulsing with killing intent. Behind him, the air undulated into the shape of a huge eye that stared at the newly-arrived emperor.

“Redspirit, you old bastard.”

The newcomer was the emperor of the Holytides' fourth royal dynasty, the Redspirit Dynasty!

The battle lines were clearly drawn, with Emperor Redspirit on one side and Palace Lord Kong on the other.

The delineation created by the golden net was very clear. Outside of the net, imperial might surged. Inside the net, a baleful will enveloped all. The pressure from the two mighty figures swept across the battlefield, filling the prefecture. As a result, countless living beings in Tidefall Prefecture shivered from the depths of their souls.

Emperor Redspirit and the Palace Lord Kong were simply too powerful. As they locked eyes and their energies squared off, heaven shook and the earth quaked. Close examination would reveal that the air between them was filled with the projections of countless minor worlds.

It looked like a sort of supernatural phenomena. As their minor worlds collided, countless figures flew out from them and started fighting. It was a hair-raising sight as innumerable minor worlds crumbled. Yet more minor worlds popped into being to replace them. It was obvious that the minor worlds on both sides were reaching the point of being able to combine into one. Both of their auras rose higher and higher, until that unification happened, and illusory major worlds appeared. That signified the true extent of their cultivation bases.

By reaching this point and forming illusory major worlds, they were in the fourth stage of Void Returning. After creating that major world, they would lift it high, turning it from illusory to corporeal. And by hoisting it onto their shoulders, then fusing it with their soul, they would turn it into a full world.

They would be one-world Smoldering Gods!

That said, neither Emperor Redspirit nor Palace Lord Kong were at that point yet. After all, the difference between fourth-stage Void Returning and one-world Smoldering God was a gap that was rarely crossed!

As a result, fourth-stage Void Returning was considered extremely domineering in most situations. As their minor worlds collided endlessly, black clouds collapsed and lightning transformed into starlight. Down below, only those cultivators who were in Spirit Trove dared to look up at what was happening. All others could only avert their eyes.

However, there were a few who had outrageous gall, or perhaps who didn't look away in time, who saw what was happening. When they did, their eyes bulged, their flesh exploded, and they were destroyed in body and soul.

Xu Qing only saw for a brief moment, and it caused his mind to reel and his soul to feel like it was about to be ripped to shreds. Thankfully, his fleshly eyes were able to endure the pain. He took a deep breath as he realized that meant his fleshly body was a lot tougher than his soul. Taking out the green crystal the Captain had given him, he began to absorb it while backing up with the rest of the army toward the golden net.

Intense rumbling sounds echoed out that surpassed the magical devices of war.

The Holytide army was clearly in high spirits. In fact, as soon as they received the orders from their commanders, they started rushing toward the retreating Sea-Sealing County forces.

Meanwhile, Emperor Redspirit's cold voice echoed out high above.

"Kong Liangxiu, if it weren't for the destiny aura of Sea-Sealing County converging on you and forming your major world, you wouldn't be a match for me."

"You," Palace Lord Kong said coolly, "one of the four mighty emperors of the Holytides, don't have the blessing of the Holytide Region's destiny? Why might that be? Don't you know?"

Chapter 506: Grievous News (part 1)

The slaughter intensified. Though the Holytides advanced with deadly momentum, the golden net of Sea-Sealing County bolstered the troops, and the countless magical devices thrummed, providing cover for the orderly retreat of the battalions.

Large numbers of cultivators gathered in the war puppets and then rushed out to provide further support. There were both large puppets and small ones. The smaller varieties were sometimes only a few dozen meters tall, while the larger ones could reach a height of 3,000 meters. All contained a variety of spell formations, and were crewed by cultivators of all types and kinds. In some cases, the crew had less than a hundred people, but in most cases, thousands. The latter were the variety that had been fighting the grim reapers. The cultivators in them linked their cultivation base with the

puppet itself, allowing them to unleash battle prowess similar to the Spirit Trove level. Looking around the battlefield as a whole, there were tens of thousands of puppets both large and small.

Because of that, the human battalions maintained order as they fell back and went through the golden net into safety.

Meanwhile, Emperor Redspirit faced off with Palace Lord Kong.

“Kong Liangxiu,” the emperor said in a voice that thrummed with heavenly might, “the scope of the conflict surpasses your little county here. The Nightshades are already at war with you humans, and that’s why your Imperial Region is powerless to help you. You can’t afford to delay things any longer, and you have no backup on the way.

“All the major species in Revered Ancient are waiting to see how this war will fare. The slightest decline in human strength will result in them uniting to wipe you out of existence. You must realize all of that, don’t you?”

“The imperial dynasty of one of the most paramount species in Revered Ancient, the Firemoon Darkheaven people, will soon carry out the grand tradition they’ve maintained for the past 400,000 years. The Great Hunt of Species. The ancient treaty will expire soon, and there isn’t a single species that wants to be the prey in the Great Hunt. Since humans have no *domain treasure* it’s obvious you’ll be the sacrificial gift. That way, the other species can rest at ease for the next 100,000 years. [1]

“Therefore... the outcome here is inevitable. You’re out of time. I’ll give you one single chance to surrender to my Holytide army. That’s the only chance you have to save Sea-Sealing County.”

The words spoken by Emperor Redspirit weren’t just for Palace Lord Kong to hear. They echoed across the entire battlefield and through the golden net. All the humans heard them. Just as the emperor intended. Everyone who heard the words were shaken. The speech had some mysterious power within it that caused feelings of despair to rise unbidden in the hearts of the listeners.

When Palace Lord Kong spoke, his voice was as cool and collected as always. It didn’t tremble in the least bit, making him seem like a boulder that stood in place no matter how the sea smashed it with waves. “It’s interesting you would resort to such ridiculous words in an attempt to erode the fighting spirit of Sea-Sealing County. I guess you must be getting really nervous, Emperor Redspirit.”

As his voice echoed out, the effects of Emperor Redspirit’s words faded from the hearts of the human cultivators.

Then Palace Lord Kong strode forward, reached out, and grabbed the scintillating Emperor’s Sword. As he did, it changed shape, becoming a long spear that he hefted. He charged toward Emperor Redspirit. They clashed, sending wild colors pulsing out left and right. As they fought, they rose higher and higher into the air until it wasn’t possible to see them. That said, the rumbling booms of their fight shook everything below.

The battle continued.

After the human battalions had all fallen back behind the golden net, the county capital's taboo treasures were unleashed. They manifested as spirit automatons on the golden net, which began to advance in resistance of the Holytide assault. Unfortunately, Sea-Sealing County was only one county, and it couldn't possibly measure up to the entire Holytide Region. That was why the conflict had been fairly one-sided so far. Though they were only facing the lone Redspirit Dynasty, they still weren't a match. They could only hold the line as best they could, and hope that reinforcements would eventually come from the imperial capital.

Time passed, slowly but surely. Soon, seven days had passed. The battle continued as it had up to this point. Whether it was night or day, rumbling booms echoed out, and deadly fighting went on.

Palace Lord Kong had not returned. However, thanks to the deputy palace lords and the swordsmen grand elders from the various prefectures, things remained orderly. On numerous occasions, it seemed like the lines would collapse, but in the end, they held.

The construction work on the fifth line of defense, which was 5,000 kilometers back, was halfway complete.

Xu Qing joined the fighting on multiple occasions. As he got familiar with the situation on the battlefield, and the tactics of the various battalions, he slaughtered many enemies. That said, he suffered his fair share of injuries. The violet crystal was always there to heal him, but he couldn't shake the feeling of mental exhaustion that continued to build up in him. It seemed to almost close up his throat, making him even more silent than ever.

On a few occasions, he ran into Holytide Spirit Trove cultivators. Thankfully, he never strayed too far into the fighting, and was always able to escape them. On one occasion, he received a very serious injury.

Eventually, he joined up with Kong Xianglong's squad of several hundred cultivators. Sir Mountain-River was there. Using one of the war puppets, they were able to wade deep into the fighting.

Because of the relentless assault of the Holytide forces, the troops of Sea-Sealing County as a whole got no opportunities for rest. Nerves grew taut. Only by rotating forces within the battalions were any of the cultivators able to get any rest. It was currently just such a moment.

Kong Xianglong lay on the ground staring blankly up into the sky. It was the same with Sir Mountain-River. Normally speaking, Sir Mountain-River wasn't a big drinker. But now he leaned back against the battered war puppet, gulping alcohol and rubbing his slowly growing beard stubble. He was young, yet right now he looked incomparably old.

Xu Qing had heard that three days after Duskspirit died, about half a month ago... Wang Chen was killed in combat. He had been providing backup for Sir Mountain-River. In one of the lulls in the fighting, Kong Xianglong and Sir Mountain-River went out to look for his corpse on the bloody sludge of the battlefield. They never found it. [2]

Xu Qing looked off into the distance. It was evening. Red light occasionally flared, and deafening booms rang out constantly. Specifically, he was looking toward another part of the western front, where the battalion from Emperor-Receiving Prefecture was garrisoned.

The Captain was there, as was Sir Bloodsmelter.

I hope they're safe.

It wasn't possible to send a message via transmission jade slip, as communications were locked down on the battlefield. Only messages relating to the war itself were allowed.

Stifling pressure. Taciturn silence. That was the general state of affairs in war. Any periods of rest were very short.

When orders came down to start fighting again, Kong Xianglong wordlessly got back up and returned to his spot on the war puppet. The puppet itself was splattered with blood and had taken a lot of damage already. This was the seventh puppet their squad had gone through in the past seven days. Sir Mountain-River carefully put away his flagon of alcohol and also returned to the puppet. Xu Qing did the same, along with all the other cultivators in the squad. Back at his spot, he sat down cross-legged and sent his cultivation base out. A tremor passed through the puppet, and then it pulsed with mighty pressure as it lumbered toward the field of battle. As it moved, chunks of bloody flesh slipped out of its joints and fell to the ground. Some came from the crew, but most was the flesh of Holytide cultivators. The flesh that fell to the ground was left behind, to be trampled by other puppets that followed behind them.

Xu Qing was responsible for the war puppet's left hand, which gave him command of incredibly destructive force.

From his spot, Xu Qing was able to see the outside through a screen. As they neared the battlefield, he unconsciously maintained the same expression as everyone else; wooden and numb.

Upon passing the pile of scrap puppets, Xu Qing looked over and didn't see any living person there. He thought back to the crippled old man who had told him to 'come back alive.' The old man's corpse was leaned up against one of the scrap puppets, greenish-black from advanced spread of mutagen.

Xu Qing had seen many corpses like that back in South Phoenix. On a battlefield full of millions upon millions of people, a single death wouldn't be noted by anyone other than the squad they had been a member of, or perhaps by the records division. Such deaths were inconsequential.

The puppet eventually charged through the golden net, joining tens of thousands of other puppets to race toward the enemy.

Time passed.

On the evening of the tenth day, Palace Lord Kong returned. His presence boosted morale; it was possible to see a gleam in the eyes of the Sea-Sealing County cultivators. After the palace lord returned, the Holytide forces chose to fall back for a short time. Another rest period began. Squads from both sides did their best to recover the corpses of their comrades. Although that resulted in occasional friction and even fighting, for the most part, both sides would look for the quickest opportunity to back down.

Xu Qing received a summons from Palace Lord Kong and left Kong Xianglong's squad.

Back in the command tent, Xu Qing noted that the palace lord didn't have any visible injuries. In fact, the flame of his life force seemed to burn with more intensity, and he had an even stronger baleful aura than before. It didn't make sense. How could the palace lord have possibly fought such an extended battle with Emperor Redspirit without ending up hurt?

After a moment of hesitation, Xu Qing finally related the results of his investigation in Daybreak Prefecture. Taking Palace Lord Kong's command medallion, he offered it forward with both hands.

Palace Lord Kong took it, looked at it, and then tossed it back to Xu Qing. "There are two of these command medallions. You can keep that one. It might keep you safe later on. Even after the new governor arrives, and the authority of that medallion is taken away... it will still allow you to activate the capital's taboo treasure one time."

Xu Qing looked at the old palace lord and felt deeply moved. "Palace Lord—"

"Xu Qing," Palace Lord Kong interrupted, "do you have a handle on the battlefield now?"

Inside, Palace Lord Kong was sighing. He really liked Xu Qing, and had originally planned to mentor him as a successor. But then war came along and changed everything. There wasn't enough time.

Xu Qing bowed his head and quietly answered, "I think I have a rough handle on it."

Palace Lord Kong looked out of the tent and calmly said, "In that case, going forward, I want you to continue serving as my secretary-general. Record the following information."

"Yes, sir," Xu Qing said, taking out a jade slip.

"Notify the Sixth Battalion as well as the Seventh Battalion that they're to fall back 5,000 kilometers to the garrisons on the fifth line of defense.

"Notify the battalions from Emperor-Receiving Prefecture and Injustice Prefecture to fall back 19,000 kilometers to the garrison in the Rainvast Mountains.

"Notify the Fourth and Fifth Battalions to retreat 35,000 kilometers to the garrison on the border of Rainfield Prefecture.

"Notify the Corrections Division to scatter into Tidefall Prefecture and hunt down every last Black Guard cultivator that's there. I want all roads in Rainfield Prefecture purged.

"Notify Rainfield Prefecture that they're to immediately activate their large-scale teleportation portal!

"Secretly notify the First Battalion to make haste to Rainfield and Enlightenment Prefectures to inspect the current state of the earthflame there, and to accelerate the evacuation of the mortals in those prefectures."

Upon hearing the last order, Xu Qing looked up at the palace lord. "Palace Lord, this will leave the fourth line of defense manned solely by the Swordsage Palace and the Second and Third Battalions."

Palace Lord Kong closed his eyes. "Send out the orders!"

Xu Qing bowed his head and backed away. At the mouth of the tent, he hesitated, then quietly said, "Palace Lord, in case you're not aware... Big Bro Kong is in very low spirits...."

Palace Lord Kong didn't say anything.

Xu Qing waited for a moment, then quietly left.

After he was gone, Palace Lord Kong opened his eyes. When he did, the flame of his life force that gleamed in his eyes went dim. A moment later, it flared back to life, though it came with a price: blood leaked out of the corners of his mouth.

Outside the command tent, Xu Qing encountered Kong Xianglong.

Kong Xianglong caught his eye and nodded. Palace Lord Kong called to Kong Xianglong, and he hurried into the tent.

Seeing Kong Xianglong look so desolate caused Xu Qing to sigh in his heart. Taking a moment to settle his thoughts, he started organizing the various commands to send out.

Chapter 506: Grievous News (part 2)

Days passed. The fighting got more intense, and the casualties mounted. As the battalions got new orders and left, the camp remained busy. Corpses continued to pile up.

Xu Qing walked silently through the camp. Twenty-three days had passed since he arrived at the front lines. He had seen a lot of death during those twenty-three days. He had witnessed unspeakable misery. He had observed a true hell on earth. At this point, he hardly noticed the constant rumbling boom of combat.

There was another lull in combat right now, and Xu Qing was planning on taking advantage of the moment to recruit a few more people into his Secretariat Division. The Secretariat Division played an integral role in the fighting, and as a result, over a hundred members had already lost their lives. There weren't enough left behind.

When he thought about how many people he saw die on a daily basis, Xu Qing's feet felt heavy as he walked. At the same time, he thought about Palace Lord Kong. There was definitely something wrong with the palace lord. It wasn't possible for the flame of his life force to burn so brightly. In fact, that fire seemed to overshadow the baleful aura on him.

Grief flickered in Xu Qing's eyes. As a cultivator, he knew what it indicated. Though he hadn't realized it at first, after enough time passed, it became obvious. Palace Lord Kong was burning his life force. And he was burning it with abandon. Doing so gave a terrifying boost to strength, which the palace lord was pooling into a powerful reserve he could unleash later.

Are the relief troops from the imperial capital really not going to show up?

All of the Sea-Sealing County cultivators were wondering the same thing.

As the secretary-general, Xu Qing knew more about the war situation than just about anyone, but... he didn't know the answer to that question. As he sighed, he walked past piles of corpses. Suddenly he stopped walking and turned his head.

Off in the distance were two corpses embraced in death. They were covered with wounds and full of mutagen. But despite having sacrificed their lives, they wouldn't let go of each other. That was the case even though the lower halves of their bodies were missing.

Xu Qing walked over and stood by the two corpses. A very long time passed.

“Elder Brother Chen...”

The two embracing corpses were Chen Tinghao and Sun Liying. Xu Qing had seen them when he first arrived. Back then, Chen Tinghao had been injured, and Sun Liying had been tending his wounds. He remembered how they smiled at him when they spotted him. Now they were gone forever. [1]

Xu Qing took the cape off of his swordmage uniform and put it over the two corpses. After ten breaths of time passed, he softly said, “Rest in peace.”

He closed his eyes briefly, then opened them and left. Around then, horns blared on the battlefield as fighting began again. Things were intensifying.

Palace Lord Kong stood outside of his command tent in his suit of armor. He didn't need the Secretariat Division, as he was projecting these orders directly to the army using divine will.

“Activate all taboo treasures, and unleash them at seventy percent capacity!”

“Notify all war puppets to use discarded weapons as projectiles on the battlefield!”

“Notify all swordmages to use their Emperor's Swords!”

“Have the dharma thorns utilize stage three power. Unleash five barrages onto the battlefield.”

“Tell all battalions to prepare to retreat to the fifth line of defense!”

Though the palace lord had an overall view of the situation, there was no way he could be aware of all the minute details. Therefore, he needed Xu Qing's Secretariat Division swordmages to go to the battlefield to collect detailed reports for him, which he could use to make judgment calls. Before long, the fighting was back at full intensity. This time, thanks to the fact that Xu Qing was personally filtering all of the reports, he got the sense that the entire western front was about to collapse.

“Palace Lord,” he said, “there's something wrong with the exhaustion levels of the Holytide cultivators! Something's also wrong with the black lightning! It's only about fifty percent as strong as before! Based on casualty statistics, and also based on the differences between the magical device and spell formation operation numbers... the Secretariat Division has come to the conclusion that the Holytide's have secret reinforcements on the way!”

At almost the exact same moment that Xu Qing said that, a wild tempest sprang into being in the north. It was like a tornado that connected heaven and earth. The rain within the wind spread out over the battlefield. It was a rain, not of water but of blood. And it was coming from the north.

Meanwhile, Xu Qing's command sword started vibrating as reports started pouring in from the north.

As Xu Qing scanned the reports, his mind started spinning. It took all the willpower he was capable of to maintain calm. The hand that gripped his command sword tightened.

Also outside the command tent was one of the deputy palace lords, two honor guards, and the Swordsage Court grand elders associated with the Second and Third Battalions. All of them could sense something strange going on, and they looked at Xu Qing and the palace lord.

Palace Lord Kong shivered slightly. Given his authority over the magical treasures from the capital city, he was already aware of the information contained in Xu Qing's reports. For the first time, Palace Lord Kong, who had always been like an unmovable bastion, boulder-like stabilizing force for Sea-Sealing County, betrayed a look of sadness. With that look in his eyes, he gazed northward. The trembling and the grief only lasted for a short moment, though. Then he purged the weakness. He stood tall and straight, his expression grim, his eyes as determined as ever.

"Palace Lord...?"

The grand elders from the Second and Third Battalions stood there hesitantly.

"Read the report, Xu Qing!" Palace Lord Kong said. He was back to being that unmovable bastion.

Xu Qing ducked his head in acknowledgement, then took a deep breath.

"The northern front reports that the taboo treasure net collapsed and can't be restored. The army of allied species was defeated. Casualties are impossible to track. The Holytide's Heavengale Dynasty and Earthsoil Dynasty have surged into Tranquility Prefecture! The palace lord of the Justice Palace died in battle! The palace lord of the Administration Palace died in battle! The Yao Clan forces on the northern front... were wiped out. Marquis Yao went missing on the battlefield. It's not yet known if he's alive or dead."

Xu Qing's words hit the deputy palace lord like a bolt of lightning. Everyone gasped and looked at Palace Lord Kong. He smiled.

"It's only now that I understand everything..." he said. "Fear not. There's no need for any of you to be afraid." He looked out at the battlefield. "The final battle is coming."

The moment the words left his mouth, something dramatic happened on the battlefield. All of the Holytide forces simultaneously started cheering, and at the same time, falling back. They retreated to the Heaventide Mountains. So did the diamond-shaped magical devices.

The retreat of the devices cleared the sky of much of the cloud cover and revealed that there was a huge vortex spinning there. Black snow poured down from it. At the same time, the countless severed arms pulled the chains violently, whereupon a powerful aura of death emerged from the

vortex. Even just the small bit of that aura that came out was enough to turn everything as dark as a winter night. Green mist gathered on the ground. The chains stretching out of the vortex frosted over, as if they were being frozen.

Two huge figures rose up from behind the Holytide army, standing tall on the mountains.

On the left was Emperor Redspirit. On the right was another figure in an imperial robe and crown. It was the emperor from the fourth of the Holytide's royal dynasties. As they towered up into the sky, they looked down at the palace lord by his command tent.

“Kong Liangxiu, the northern front has collapsed. Our army is inside Sea-Sealing County. The Nightshades' domain treasure is coming. Things will end soon. You know what a domain treasure is. If you want to try to stop it, go ahead. We won't interfere. But as you know... you can't stop it.”

The swordsages around the command tent stood there with decisive looks on their faces. Palace Lord Kong looked up at the two emperors standing atop the Heaventide Mountains.

“You're right, things will end soon.” The palace lord looked back at Sea-Sealing County, then continued, “Notify the Second and Third Battalions to retreat 5,000 kilometers. They're not to continue fighting.

“Notify all Sea-Sealing County cultivators present to cease fighting.

“Notify all other battalions to hold their ground. They will cease fighting.

“Notify all swordsages... to retreat 2,500 kilometers. They will cease fighting!”

Everyone present looked at the palace lord with surprise. Xu Qing also turned to face him.

The deputy palace lord took a step forward, his face somewhat ashen. “All of our forces are to cease fighting. That just leaves you.... Palace Lord, given your age, let me stand with you.”

Honor Guard Sima's eyes revealed that he was ready to die, yet he still smiled as he took a step forward. “Palace lord, I, Sima Nan, might not have an amazing cultivation base. But my blood runs hot in my veins, and I don't want to waste that. That domain treasure is emanating a frigid coldness. I'd love nothing more than to go use it to cool down.” [2]

The other honor guard present was Honor Guard Sun, the very one who had played a lead role the day Xu Qing and the other new swordsages swore their oaths. Smiling, he stepped forward. “Of the four honor guards, Ol' Zhou and Ol' Song are no longer with us. Only myself and Ol' Sima are left behind. Palace lord, you can't show favoritism to Ol' Sima. I'll be coming along too.”

As the honor guards stepped forward, the frigid power coming from the vortex grew stronger. The sky looked even darker than before. The vortex rotated, and shocking coldness emerged, spreading out to cover everything. Where it passed, it froze the clouds. It also turned the green mist into a forest of irregularly shaped columns. It was horrendous in appearance.

Looking at the honor guards, Palace Lord Kong said, “Am I still the palace lord, or not?”

Everyone stood there silently.

“Are you tired of the Swordsage Palace?” the palace lord continued. “When humans go to war, do we fear death? All of you. *Follow orders!*”

Looking in the direction of the battlefield, he waved his hand. Instantly, a majestic tempest sprang up that took all of the countless cultivators on the front lines and physically moved them back 30,000 meters.

Now there was a lone figure standing on the fourth line of defense. It was a man who, up to now, had not removed his armor.

Sand flew in the wind. Frost lifted from the ground. Everything became hazy.

He strode forward, growing more distant, but at the same time, stronger. He waved his hand, and the Dao Bell tolled. Flying out from amidst the coffins, it shot toward the vortex, exuding crushing pressure.

Then, Palace Lord Kong’s hoarse voice echoed out.

“Redspirit. Moonmist. Do the two of you dare to fight me?”

Chapter 507: The Lone General, A Hero Through the Ages (part 1)

The spinning vortex in the dome of heaven emitted rumbling sounds along with a frigid coldness so intense it turned the chains into ice. The coldness spat out by the vortex turned the sky into something like a black mirror.

The terrifying entity inside was slowly emerging.

In front of it hung the huge Dao Bell, which was covered in countless ancient magical symbols, all flickering as the bell emitted an invisible pressure. However, the aura coming from the vortex was so astonishing that not even the bell could suppress it. The bell held nothing back, yet eventually it reached its limit. Cracks started to spread out across its surface; clearly it couldn’t prevent the domain treasure from emerging.

A wind of extermination blew out from the vortex. It looked like a windmill, slowly spinning to send the icy cold out in all directions. More frost built up on the ground below, turning countless corpses and stretches of gore into ice that eventually shattered and became dust. Meanwhile, the black snow continued to fall, turning everything blurry.

A lone figure strode through it all, his cultivation base burning, causing everything around him to twist and contort.

All Sea-Sealing County cultivators saw him.

Xu Qing saw him, and only him.

He wore the pitch black armor of a soldier, and had long hair that was white because of how he was burning his own life force. The cold wind blew Palace Lord Kong’s cape to the side, making it look almost like a flag. Sand and frost swirled through the dark of evening, making the scene seem ancient.

“Palace Lord...” Waves of grief and indignation swept through Xu Qing.

As Palace Lord Kong walked away, his energy built. He wasn't just the focus of the watching cultivators, but also seemed to attract the attention of heaven, earth, and the universe. In front of him was the massive Holytide army, and the two shocking emperors standing in front of the Heaventide Mountains. Those emperors seemed to block out the sun, sending out brutal and fiendish auras to cover everything. 30,000 meters behind Palace Lord Kong were the Second and Third Battalions, as well as tens of thousands of surviving swordsages.

He was making his stand alone! The sight caused all human cultivators to feel sorrow deep in their hearts. Their eyes were already bloodshot from all the fighting, but now they'd become more deeply bloodshot.

Kong Xianglong looked at that lone figure, and his somewhat glazed eyes suddenly lit up. He began trembling.

As waves of emotion swept through everyone, the deputy palace lord suddenly cried out, "Everyone. The time has come... to fall back!" The pain in his hoarse voice was there for everyone to hear, yet his words echoed like thunder. "That is what Palace Lord Kong commanded. Follow your orders!"

As the wind blew, the honor guards and grand elders shouted further instructions to get the army moving. Everyone kept looking over their shoulders. Unfortunately, there was nothing for them to see. That figure had melted into the darkness.

But then, a dazzling stream of light ripped through the gloom, rising high into the sky above the battlefield. The sky trembled and the lands shook. A boundless sword will drove away the darkness, turning the sky light again. It was a beam of sword light.

It was The Emperor's Sword!

The Swordsage Palace of Sea-Sealing County had a total of nine composite Emperor's Swords. They had previously used four in the fighting, and this was the fifth. The moment the sword appeared, it cast out blinding light that sliced apart the haziness. Everything rippled as it shot into the sky and headed toward the two Holytide emperors atop the Heaventide Mountains. Wherever the sword passed, it left a huge furrow in the ground, almost like a dragon. Deafening rumbling sounds echoed out. The light of the sword illuminated the faces of the countless Holytide cultivators, shocking them to the core.

"You've already lost this war, Kong Liangxiu," Emperor Redspirit said. "What's the point of burning away your own life force?"

He strode forward, and when his foot landed on the ground, everything shook. He lifted his right hand, and the tens of millions of minor worlds around him converged on his palm. Shrinking down, they turned into an illusory major world. That was a sign of the fourth stage of Void Returning. He gently pushed his hand down. Heaven and earth shook wildly, and everything blurred again. A violent storm sprang up, causing the frozen ground to shatter and turn into what looked like meteors. The Heaventide Mountains trembled, and rocks tumbled down.

When things became clear again, Xu Qing and all the other Sea-Sealing County cultivators could see a 30,000-meter gap in the Heaventide Mountains! A shocking crevice had been hewn from the battlefield and through the Heaventide Mountains. It was hundreds of kilometers long and completely shocking in appearance.

Emperor Redspirit was staggering backward toward the mountains.

All Holytide cultivators looked on with shock and fear.

In front of them, the air rippled as Palace Lord Kong walked out of the haze. His entire body burned with the power of his life force and cultivation base. As he walked, his hoarse voice echoed out along with the sound of his footsteps.

“As long as Sea-Sealing County lives, I won’t hesitate to sacrifice myself for it.”

As his words rang into the hearts of the cultivators from Sea-Sealing County, a second radiant beam of sword light appeared.

It was the sixth Emperor’s Sword. The moment it appeared, the battlefield shattered. Blinding light spread out into what seemed like the Nine Serenities itself, and it shot right toward Emperor Redspirit.

Things weren’t over yet. As Palace Lord Kong continued to move forward, burning his own life force, he unleashed the seventh and eighth swords.

This time, Emperor Moonmist gravely stepped to Emperor Redspirit’s side and thrust out his hand. The dome of heaven seemed to tilt, and the ground collapsed outward. Everything blurred again.

This time, the cause of the blur wasn’t the rippling air, or the collapse of the frost, or any other such thing. It was that the cultivation bases of the cultivators in the area were too low, and that made it impossible for them to see clearly.

Even Xu Qing saw nothing but a blur, within which three figures fought a battle to the death. Every time they clashed, booms rang out that surpassed the intensity of heavenly thunder. The deafening shockwaves slammed into the hearts and minds of the observers, forcing them to back away. It was the same among the Holytides.

Sword energy swept back and forth, wreaking havoc on the lands. This lasted until there was one more boom, accompanied by shattering sounds as the countless bits of floating earth in the air collapsed.

The three battling figures parted.

Once again, everything became clear to the observers. Palace Lord Kong’s advance had finally been halted. He looked up into the sky.

Behind Emperor Redspirit and Emperor Moonmist, the Heaventide Mountains were half collapsed. Massive gullies had been slashed through them. The two emperors were also looking up into the sky.

All cultivators, including Holytides and those from Sea-Sealing County, likewise inclined their heads and looked into the dome of heaven, their hearts pounding.

“The portal to the Nightshades’ Nine Serenities is about to open,” said Emperor Redspirit in a hoarse voice. His face was now ashen after his fight with Palace Lord Kong.

Intense rumbling sounds echoed out from the dome of heaven, specifically, from the massive vortex. The frigid power emanating from it was like an icy seal on life force. Even the vortex itself

seemed frozen. And then, the razor-sharp tip of a weapon emerged from within! It was pitch black and full of a consummate killing intent, as well as an intense aura of death.

Even Void Returning experts would tremble because of the terrifying cold.

The Dao Bell trembled as cracks spread further across its surface. Despite being a gift from the imperial capital, it was crumbling. And that was because it was now facing a precious treasure designed for warfare. The mysterious materials used in its construction had been a gift given by the red moon. According to the stories, it was made from the weapon of a god that the red moon had exterminated. The cold that it emanated could turn the world into a wasteland.

It was a domain treasure. Domain treasures were the ultimate reserve powers of entire major species, and were so powerful they defied imagination. They could even cause gods to tremble. They existed on a higher level than the taboo treasures of the sects in Revered Ancient. Domain treasures were the foundation of why a species could become strong.

The Holytide species did not have a domain treasure. Most species did not have domain treasures. Humans had one in the past, but not anymore. Any species who had a domain treasure could ensure that their position in the Revered Ancient mainland was secure; they wouldn't have to worry about invasion, and could even wage war on other major species.

What was emerging, however, wasn't the actual domain treasure of the Nightshades. It was a projection of the domain treasure. That said, the power within it was such that Void Returning cultivators couldn't resist it. It could wipe out heaven and earth. Its unparalleled coldness could eradicate anything and everything, reducing it to pure dust.

The countless spirit automatons in the distant golden net howled in anguish. They wanted to fight back, but simply couldn't, and were being wiped out one by one.

When the cultivators of Sea-Sealing County saw what was happening, they were despondent. Xu Qing's mind was a complete blank. Their entire world was being replaced with cold.

Meanwhile, Emperor Redspirit and Emperor Moonmist looked at Palace Lord Kong as the frost built up.

"Soldiers and officers, heed my command," Emperor Redspirit said. "Our target is the county capital. We'll rendezvous with Heavengale and Earthsoil there!"

In response, millions upon millions of voices joined together to shout, "Yes, sir!"

The massive army of Holytides and other species began to flow like the tide. Then Emperor Redspirit and Emperor Moonmist headed in the direction of Palace Lord Kong.

They closed in.

Palace Lord Kong stood in front of the massive army. Looking up at the vortex, he threw his right hand over his shoulder. A dazzling Emperor's Sword appeared, which was the ninth. It was also Palace Lord Kong's personal sword.

"I have a sword!" he said. As the words left his mouth, the countless bronze coffins that were still floating in the air... opened!

Voices echoed out.

“I have a sword!”

“I have a sword!!”

“I have a sword!!!”

One voice after another emerged from the coffins as numerous figures appeared out in the open.

They were people from ancient times until modern whose cultivation bases had reached the limit. They had lived in times of peace, and had ultimately chosen to enter a state of suspended animation in which their lives were fused with The Emperor’s Sword. They chose to be sealed until great need arose in Sea-Sealing County, whereupon they could unleash their deadly sword. They were... swordsages!

Light erupted from the awoken swordsages! Hundreds of thousands of beams of sword light converged in the dome of heaven, becoming a river of swords that rushed to Palace Lord Kong. The swordsages’ bodies withered rapidly, until they simply vanished from existence.

In their last moments, all of them looked in the direction of their home, Sea-Sealing County. They were reluctant to part ways with it. They wished it well. They felt relief, but at the same time reminiscence. And there was something that none of them had: regrets.

“I have a sword.” Palace Lord Kong looked up as hundreds of thousands of streams of sword light swept around his hand, fusing with his Emperor’s Sword. The light became blinding, to the point where even the coldness in the air had to shy away from it. The sword shook heaven, and its sound crushed the ages.

“I will defend my home!” Palace Lord Kong said, and he swept the sword out from behind him toward Emperors Redspirit and Moonmist.

It was an earth-quaking, sky-felling sword that could wipe out entire armies. It was a sword that could cause the weapons of gods to turn dark, whose intense cold could repudiate all transformations.

The two emperors were visibly taken aback. The convergence of hundreds of thousands of swordsage swords was something that could crush anything in its path. It could supersede heavenly daos, transform magical laws, slaughter villainous wills, and punish all invaders.

Emperor Redspirit fell back, summoned his red bird imperial carriage, and shoved it out in front of himself as a defense.

The sword energy screamed as it pierced right into the forehead of the red bird. It sliced it in half!

Looking shocked, Emperor Redspirit summoned his major world. When The Emperor’s Sword hit it, a deafening noise rang out as the major world once again turned illusory, then collapsed. Blood sprayed out of Redspirit’s mouth. His cultivation base was teetering, and as fury filled his eyes, the sword slashed through his forehead!

Moonmist was next to him to provide support, yet couldn’t even protect his own fleshly body. He was able to defend his soul, except he ended up being cut in half at the waist. Flustered, he could only watch as his imperial robe was shredded into nothing, and his imperial crown was destroyed. Looking completely bedraggled, he fell back.

The might of the sword dissipated. Heaven became peaceful, and the earth went silent.

Palace Lord Kong stood in place, his hand empty of any sword. Blood oozed out of his mouth, becoming like a rain of blood that fell toward the ground. However, that blood rain wasn't destined to reach the earth. As the might of the sword faded, the coldness from the vortex erupted again, sweeping across everything. Wherever it reached, heaven and earth iced over and turned into nothing.

The Dao Bell that had been gifted to Sea-Sealing County when it was founded... tolled for the last time.

The bell collapsed.

Chapter 507: The Lone General, A Hero Through the Ages (part 2)

The Nightshades' domain treasure continued to emerge. It was the darkest black imaginable, and emanated boundless evil that could ravish heaven. It was a long, sharp weapon that was infinitely vicious.

Sea-Sealing County's taboo treasure net pulsated. The spirit automatons of the various taboo treasures howled as they were wiped out. The net was about to collapse.

Emperor Moonmist only had half his body left. Threads of flesh and blood were already wriggling out to form a new lower body for him. He looked up at Palace Lord Kong, fear in his eyes.

"Do you have another sword, Kong Liangxiu?" Emperor Redspirit had lost his entire fleshly body and couldn't build another. He floated there in soul form. However, his soul wasn't like other ordinary soul shadows. It was covered with countless red threads that filled the soul, protecting it but also merging with it. It was a lifesaving aid to Holytides provided by the Nightshades. However, it would only sustain the soul for a limited time. Emperor Redspirit looked at Palace Lord Kong. "Your sword's power devastated my physical form. It shattered my major world. It severed my dao foundation. It wiped out half of Moonmist's body. It shook my soul. You're an amazing person, Kong Liangxiu!"

Palace Lord Kong looked up, his eyes filled with regret as he smiled. Cracks spread across his face, extending to his armor, like a spider web. He ignored that. Nor did he respond to Emperor Moonmist's words. He turned to the crumbling net protecting Sea-Sealing County. As he walked toward it, he got bigger and bigger, his armor eventually ceasing to function. The armor started collapsing, falling to the ground, piece by piece. He left the battlefield and walked to the crumbling net. By that point, he was several tens of thousands of meters tall. He looked through the net at the retreating human army.

"Palace Lord...."

Many such cries rang out from within the army.

Kong Xianglong nearly fell to the ground, but Xu Qing was there to help him stand. Kong Xianglong's eyes were red. Though he couldn't see everything clearly, he could see enough to know what was going on. It was the same with everyone else.

Outside the net, Palace Lord Kong looked at these scions of humanity and said, “Everyone dies, so why cry? Stand tall and straight!”

In their grief, everyone in the army stood a bit taller and straighter!

Palace Lord Kong nodded. He scanned the crowd, stopping to look at Xu Qing for a moment, anticipation in his eyes. His gaze came to rest on Kong Xianglong for two moments. He looked regretful but also gratified. He looked at the deputy palace lord for three moments. Though no one else knew what he meant by that, the deputy palace lord knew exactly what he was indicating. The deputy palace lord nodded, his heart filled with brief loneliness.

As Kong Xianglong trembled even harder, Palace Lord Kong looked in the direction of the county capital. As he did... the final piece of his armor fell off.

Terrifying and destructive fluctuations from the domain treasure pulsed out of the vortex, and the army of Holytides advanced....

Palace Lord Kong turned so his back was to Sea-Sealing County. Stretching out his arms, he leaned back into the great net and fused into it.

As he did, countless minor worlds appeared on the net. Endless amounts of them flowed into a burning major world that belonged to Palace Lord Kong. The coldness in all the taboo treasures in the net flowed to Palace Lord Kong’s major world, converging there. He was fusing with the taboo net! He had sacrificed his longevity and sacrificed his cultivation base. He had unleashed his final sword strike. Then, just as he was about to die, he sacrificed his own life. He had made himself a part of the taboo net, and had used his warmth to delay its crumbling.

“Notify all human forces in Tidefall Prefecture... to retreat to the county capital.”

As the intense coldness converged on him from all directions, he howled, until finally he turned into a statue of ice. Yet he still stood there propping up heaven and earth. He was still protecting Sea-Sealing County from that intense coldness. Down to the last, his tone of voice and his facial expression had not betrayed the slightest weakness.

The taboo net was once again the color of gold. After fusing with the net, he ensured that the net would last for longer, and would continue to protect all of the county. The northern front, the western front, and all of the scattered armies everywhere else were once again protected by the golden net. The advance of the Holytide army was halted. All of the occupied territories were once again covered, temporarily ending the deadly scenarios that had been playing out.

The source of all that, Palace Lord Kong, was starting to fade from existence. The frigid cold from the domain treasure was a destructive force that caused indescribable pain. To Palace Lord Kong, that didn’t matter. His limbs crumbled into dust, as did his torso. His head slowly lowered, and his eyes seemed about to close.

On the battlefield, Emperor Redspirit and Emperor Moonmist both raised their hands to stop the army from moving. They stood in place in front of the golden net, as did all the forces behind them. Then the expressions of the two emperors flickered as they looked into the air just in front of Palace Lord Kong. A raspy voice spoke out of nothing.

“Kong Liangxiu. There was no need for me to appear here, but to see you die in this way has earned you my respect. Thus, I’ve come here to ask you something. Are you holding on to your last breath of life in the hopes that I would show up?”

A shadowy figure appeared in the air in front of Palace Lord Kong’s face. The dark form caused all onlookers to be shocked to the core, whether they were Holytides or humans. Only the two emperors didn’t seem to be very surprised.

As for Xu Qing, his eyes went wide as he stared at that shadowy figure. It made him think about the mission Palace Lord Kong had assigned him. Using every ounce of ability he possessed, he tried to commit that figure’s image to memory.

Unfortunately, that shadowy figure was nothing but a blur.

Palace Lord Kong’s closed eyes suddenly opened, and he looked at the shadowy figure. Voice hoarse, he asked, “You’re the one who killed the governor?”

The shadowy figure nodded. “Yes. It was me. You assigned someone to investigate, didn’t you? What a pity you were looking in the wrong direction.”

Palace Lord Kong didn’t say anything in response.

“Aren’t you going to ask who I am?” the figure continued.

“Would you answer?”

The shadow figure shook its head and sighed. “In that case, goodbye, Kong Liangxiu.”

The shadowy figure stepped back a few paces, clasped hands, and bowed. Then it began to fade from existence.

However, just before it disappeared, a dazzling light suddenly erupted from Palace Lord Kong’s eyes. It was an astonishing Emperor’s Sword that had been converging there, and it slashed right toward the shadowy figure. It moved with such astonishing speed that it seemed impossible for anyone to dodge it. In the blink of an eye, that sword reached the shadowy figure’s forehead. It could track the essence, and could pierce through the endless void. It could find the shadowy figure’s true form, and slash it down regardless if it was in the past, present, or future. All those things were in the range of this sword.

The shadowy figure shivered, then vanished, leaving behind only a whisper.

“So, you did have another sword left. However, I have no past. I have no future. Nor do I have a present. There are not many people I admire, Kong Liangxiu. But you’re one of them. This sword of yours ensures that you’ll remain in my heart. I won’t forget you.”

Palace Lord Kong’s gaze froze for all eternity. Frost covered his face. He collapsed into dust. He had been annihilated.

“Palace Lord!!”

The human army wept blood in their hearts. Tears flowed from the eyes of all the cultivators. Each and every one felt overwhelmed with infinite grief. Palace Lord Kong of the Swordsage Palace had

perished. The leadership of Sea-Sealing County had once again fallen. The sky also seemed to grieve, and rained blood onto the ground.

Within that icy blood, Xu Qing shivered. His eyes were full of sorrow, and his heart felt like it was being squeezed by a giant hand. It hurt. Badly. He couldn't stop thinking back to all his interactions with Palace Lord Kong.

The sound of weeping echoed out. Kong Xianglong slipped out of Xu Qing's arms and dropped to his knees, tears streaming down his face. Helplessness and sorrow were the only things in his heart. He eventually fell prone on the ground, sobbing.

Right then, intense rumbling sounds filled heaven and earth as the taboo treasure net collapsed. It started in the northern front, then continued to the western front. It was an official indication that Sea-Sealing County had been defeated. Intensely cold storm winds blew in, sweeping in all directions. The ground quaked.

At the same time, the Holytide army advanced again. Frigid energy filled the air, making it hard to tell if it was night or day.

The reality was... it was dawn. Even if frost fills the sky, a rainbow can still appear. However, it only happens after the storm ends and the sun rises.

Palace Lord Kong's blood was the rain. The despair and grief of Sea-Sealing County kicked up the wind.

The Holytide army crossed the fourth line of defense exactly as the sun rose into the sky.

Golden light converged into a sea that spread through the dome of heaven. However, it wasn't just sunlight. Within that sea of light were countless flags streaming in the breeze. There were innumerable figures clad in golden armor. There were black dragons, howling, and countless spell formations sending out powerful fluctuations.

Wild colors flashed in heaven and earth. Winds screamed.

At the summit of heaven was a 300,000-meter four-clawed golden dragon, ripping through the air, its voice capable of shaking suns and moons. The lands shook, and the Holytide army stopped in place. Emperors Redspirit and Moonmist looked up.

On the back of that golden dragon, sitting in a golden throne, was a figure who seemed threatening without being angry. He wore a yellow robe, but was not an emperor. The four claws of the golden dragon indicated his identity. [1]

"It's the seventh son of the emperor. Seventh Prince!" [2]

Chapter 508: An Elegy to Sea-Sealing

In the fourth month of the year 2,932 of the Dark War calendar, the governor of Sea-Sealing County perished. In addition to that, Holytide forces invaded three prefectures, while the Nightshades mounted a large-scale offensive on the imperial capital. [1]

Sea-Sealing County was thrown into profound chaos, and hovered on the brink of utter disaster.

In the sixth month of the same year, Sea-Sealing County, after marshaling all the county forces and mounting a two-month-long defense, failed to hold its northern front. Li Rongyu, the palace lord of

the Administration Palace, died in battle. Zhang Hengxin, the palace lord of the Justice Palace, also died in battle. Yao Tianyan went missing. The allied army suffered untold casualties, and was forced to retreat 100,000 kilometers.

The day after the defeat on the northern front, the western front also collapsed. Kong Liangxiu, the palace lord of the Swordsage Palace, died valiantly in battle.

In that most critical of situations for the humans of Sea-Sealing County, the seventh imperial prince, who was deeply worried about the situation, fought against all odds to break through the Nightshade blockade and arrive with relief troops.

Seventh Prince hacked through brambles and thorns and struck like a thunderbolt backed by hundreds of thousands of pounds of force. Under his command was an imperial army 60,000,000 strong, including forces from five Celestial Divisions as well as 49 commanders-in-chief from Eastglory. With those forces, he swept through the northern front. [2]

He slaughtered 7,000,000 enemy cultivators from the two Holytide kingdoms of Heavengale and Earthsoil. Using the blood of those enemies, he established an impenetrable defensive perimeter on the northern front.

After that, he sallied forth into the night with 27 commanders-in-chief, 113 generals, and a host of seasoned warrior cultivators from the imperial capital. Mounted on a golden dragon imperial carriage, he made his debut on the western front. [3]

At that moment in which the western front collapsed, and all humans in Sea-Sealing County faced the peril of imminent extinction, Seventh Prince stopped the advance of the two royal Holytide dynasties of Redspirit and Moonmist. Personally taking to the field of battle, he inflicted grievous wounds on the emperors of both dynasties.

Seventh Prince didn't just seriously injure two emperors. Under his leadership, the forces of humankind slaughtered more than 6,000,000 enemies on the western front. Imperial blood stained the dome of heaven as Seventh Prince, with the cooperation of the commanders-in-chief, disregarded his own safety to unleash a taboo magic to seal half of the entire county and halt the effects of the Nightshade domain treasure. In that manner, he came to the rescue of the defeated forces on the western front.

He then marshaled the surviving forces to create a unified line of defense. He assigned 10,000,000 of his own troops, along with the surviving Sea-Sealing County cultivators, to guard the border. Then he assigned three commanders-in-chief and ten generals to lead warrior cultivators from the imperial capital into the heart of Sea-Sealing County to track down the Black Guard infiltrators.

The spirits of everyone in Sea-Sealing County were lifted, and during that time, fiends and devils trembled in fear, while evil spirits cowered in terror! All the villains in Sea-Sealing County were rooted out, and humankind entered into a period of peace and tranquility. The numerous allied species cried out in joy, and countless other species bowed in respect.

In the seventh month of that same year, after the Holytides were thoroughly defeated, the humans launched a major counteroffensive, sending a terrifying armed force out to reclaim their lost prefectural land.

Seventh Prince was a skilled strategist, and had the reputation of having an outstanding military mind. He turned retreat into assault and set devious traps for the enemy. By detonating the

earthflame in Rainfield and Enlightenment Prefectures, he used countless volcanoes as weapons. Lands shook and mountains rocked. The effects stretched all the way into Tidefall and Tranquility Prefectures. Four prefectures were set ablaze.

The sky there turned dark, with the only light coming from the ever burning earthflame.

The Holytides in those lands screamed in anguish as they were exterminated in large numbers. In that manner, the Holytide invasion was ended. When news of the victory spread through Sea-Sealing County, cries of rejoicing echoed out everywhere.

The lieutenant governor made several formal visits to the imperial prince, to formally beg for him to come to the county capital and take control. All such requests were denied. However, after the great victory was achieved, Seventh Prince, out of consideration of all the officers and soldiers in the human forces, announced his plans to travel to the county capital. That was in the seventh month of the year.

It was three days before the imperial prince planned to depart for the county capital.

On the border of Enlightenment Prefecture, where the mountains formed a natural barrier millions of kilometers in length, Xu Qing sat atop a mountain boulder looking out into heaven and earth.

He looked very different compared to the past.

Instead of his swordsmen uniform, he wore a battered suit of armor. He no longer had long, flowing hair. It was cut short. He was dirty and smelled of blood and gore. His lips were dry and cracked. Deep exhaustion filled his eyes. As he looked out into the evening he saw smoke everywhere. What had once been lush and verdant mountains were now scorched and bare. He saw either darkness or flames everywhere. And within all of that smoke and fire were countless blackened corpses....

Xu Qing took it all in silently.

At some point he heard footsteps behind him. It was Kong Xianglong.

Kong Xianglong was dressed in the same attire as Xu Qing, and looked just as exhausted and lonely. He approached and sat next to Xu Qing.

“Go back and rest, Xu Qing,” he said, sounding numb and emotionless as he looked out at heaven and earth. “I’ll take over for now. By the way, I saw your Eldest Brother on the way here. He wants you to hurry over and meet him. Earlier this morning the deputy palace lord said that our main force will be returning to the county capital in three days. He mentioned wanting you to come along. The Secretariat Division is no more, so there’s little point in you sticking around. I agreed on your behalf to go back.”

Xu Qing stood and looked at what was now the front line of defense. The forces here were made of Sea-Sealing County cultivators and imperial troops. Off in the distance was the main camp overseeing the second line of defense.

A long moment passed, and then Xu Qing clasped Kong Xianglong's shoulder. Taking out a jug of alcohol, he placed it off to the side. It was the only jug he had left after standing watch at this spot all day and all night.

Kong Xianglong took the jug and drank deeply. As Xu Qing turned to leave, he spoke again.

“Xu Qing, did you see that shadowy figure...?”

Xu Qing closed his eyes and nodded.

Kong Xianglong was silent for a moment. “What do you think of the imperial prince?”

“He’s ruthless,” Xu Qing replied in a hoarse voice.

He thought back to the moment when the grand net of taboo treasures collapsed, and the four-clawed gold dragon appeared in the sky. And he thought about the figure who had been riding that dragon.

“He detonated the earthflame in two provinces,” Kong Xianglong said. “The old man —er, I mean, the palace lord was also planning to do that, which is why he was trying to evacuate those provinces. But this imperial prince is so ruthless he didn’t bother. All he cares about is victory and reputation. He doesn’t care about life!”

Xu Qing didn’t say anything.

“Have you read the war reports, Xu Qing? All they talk about are the prince’s glorious achievements. He injured two emperors! Oh, how amazing! But why didn’t he come earlier? Even an incense stick’s worth of time would have made a big difference....”

Kong Xianglong chuckled bitterly and said nothing further. After taking another long drink from the jug, he waved his hand dismissively.

Xu Qing stood there for another long moment, then walked away.

A month had passed since the death of Palace Lord Kong.

Now that Seventh Prince had arrived, there was no point in having a Secretariat Division. In fact, most people had forgotten about it. The swordsages Xu Qing had recruited into his old division had been assigned to other posts.

Life went on. As the war dragged on, Xu Qing had personally come to know more about Seventh Prince’s personality and way of doing things. The prince seemed to care only about victory, regardless of the price to be paid. It was just as Kong Xianglong had said. To him, life didn’t count for much. Most of the humans, nonhumans, and mortals in Rainfield and Enlightenment Prefectures never had a chance to evacuate.

When the right strategic moment came, Seventh Prince detonated the earthflame. A lot of Holytides had died during the last month. But a lot of humans had also died.

It was the same with the forces who had originally been stationed on the western front. They usually served as the vanguard in battle. Not many survived, and those who did were sent out into the larger imperial army. Through the course of the war, each of them had been tempered into elite warriors, veterans of many battles.

Xu Qing and Kong Xianglong were no exception. Eventually, the deputy palace lord and other county leaders managed to get the two of them exempted from the most deadly missions. As of now, they were members of the grand imperial army, serving in the forces of the Seventeenth Commander-in-Chief. Specifically, they were in Fourth Legion led by Third General. That legion was in charge of this stretch of the defensive perimeter.

It was currently evening. The dark clouds and the smoke made everything look brown as Xu Qing walked silently along the mountain path.

He went straight to the garrison, which had been set up in a nearby valley. There were hundreds of cultivators there. Some were from the old western front. There weren't a lot of people, but neither was the group small. Yet things were very quiet. Everyone had injuries of some sort. Some people sat tending their wounds. Others were meditating. Yet others sat there with blank looks on their faces. A short distance away was a pile of corpses that had not yet been buried.

Xu Qing's arrival caught the attention of a few people who looked at him. Some were swordsages, some were sect disciples. He even saw some cultivators from the old Secretariat Division.

Off to the side, in front of one particular tent, was the Captain. He was bedraggled, and his armor was heavily damaged. But he seemed to be in good spirits. His body had long since grown back to normal. He squatted in front of the tent, gnawing on a black horn as if to test its toughness. In front of him was an army wok heated by a flame stone. There was some meat stewing inside, bubbling and popping. It smelled wonderful.

"Eldest Brother. I'm back." Xu Qing walked past him into the tent.

That tent was their joint residence. Although Seventh Prince was a strict commander on the field of battle, he had eventually succumbed to the repeated requests by the deputy palace lord and Swordsage Court grand elder to allow swordsages to return to their various sects, all of which were dangerously low on cultivators.

That said, he didn't allow all of them to return. Only some.

Sir Bloodsmelter, who had been seriously hurt, as well as some of the other Seven Blood Eyes disciples, had been able to return. They were in the fourth wave of county locals to be able to return.

As a swordsage, the Captain hadn't been able to join them. He had previously been assigned to a different location, but had somehow manipulated matters to eventually be transferred to the same legion as Xu Qing.

The Captain turned to look at Xu Qing and grinned. "You came back just when I calculated you would, little Junior Brother. Come on, let's eat!" Laughing, he beckoned for Xu Qing to join him at the wok. "Earlier this morning I went over to the imperial garrison and found that they have some delicious food there. I just so happened to get some for me and you. Did you know they have Holytide battle beasts over there?" He pointed at the wok. "Want to have a try?"

Xu Qing glanced at the Captain, inwardly marveling at how skilled he was at making friends. Ever since the imperial army arrived, the Captain had been visiting the imperial garrisons on a daily basis. He had made a lot of friends, and had also acquired a lot of information. And occasionally, he brought back some very nutritious supplies.

Xu Qing took a piece of meat and put it into his mouth. It tasted good. What was more, after swallowing, it sent warmth throughout his body, along with bits of spirit energy that benefited his cultivation base.

“Not bad, huh?” the Captain said, grinning again. Leaning back, he started eating his own piece of meat. “I heard Ol’ Kong say that we’re going back to the capital in three days. Feels like we haven’t been there in forever. Once we’re back, you and I need to start trading off some of those dao fruits we got.

“I asked around and found out that those things are even prized in the imperial capital.” The Captain glanced around, then lowered his voice and continued, “According to the rumors I’ve heard, the war in the Imperial Region is still ongoing. The Nightshades are attacking full force. And other species are getting antsy. Sea-Sealing County is the only place where humans have come out victorious.

“I heard that the big victory here has caused some of the major species near the Imperial Region to quell their thoughts of making a move. Instead, they’re waiting to see what happens.... Everybody in the world is talking about Seventh Prince and his big win.

“I also learned that the emperor has twelve sons and three daughters, yet there’s not even a hint of any succession struggle. The emperor is in the prime of his life, and he acts with strength and decisiveness. What’s more, he’s a grim and callous person. He doesn’t care much about family, and is only interested in what benefits humankind as a whole.

“You can tell Seventh Prince is cut from the same stock. Apparently, the prince doesn’t even plan to go back to the imperial capital. Think about everything he’s done since he got here; it all seems to be in preparation for making Sea-Sealing County his personal territory.”

The Captain looked very thoughtful.

“It’s all a huge game of Go. Who knows what move he’ll play next? One thing’s for certain: Sea-Sealing County has a new leader.... And thus, little Junior Brother, don’t be too attached to how things were in the past. There’s only one certainty in this world, and that’s death. Therefore, staying alive is the most important thing.

“It’s like the meat in this wok. Although it takes a while for it to stew, if you give it enough time, it’ll be very tender. There are no negative emotions that won’t abate with time. If you have them, it just means that not enough time has passed.

“Back before the patriarch left, he told me to work hard on my cultivation, and not worry about girls. He said that there will still be plenty of girls around after I get my

cultivation base to a very high level. I put a lot of thought into that, and I realized it makes sense.

“The same principle applies to Sea-Sealing County. If they don’t want us, we’ll leave. Later, when we get stronger, we can come back and throw our weight around. Other species will line up to work for us.”

Looking very proud of himself, the Captain took another piece of meat out of the wok and handed it to Xu Qing.

Xu Qing slowly chewed the meat, one mouthful at a time.

Around the time that the Holytide invasion of Sea-Sealing County was ended by the earthflame conflagration in four prefectures, the four Holytide emperors gathered in the holy land of white sand. There in the temple of the ancestral emperor, they kowtowed in front of a special throne made from blood crystals.

Seated upon the throne was a figure cloaked in blurred darkness, making it impossible to see him clearly. The only things visible were the streams of black energy that seeped off of the figure and merged into the blood crystals. It seemed as if the figure’s blood vessels were being purified in that way.

Emperor Redspirit had regrown his fleshly body. However, he looked pale, as though his energy and blood were unstable. “Your Ancestral Highness,” he said, “everything is going according to plan. However, the Nightshades seem to be getting suspicious.”

Next to Emperor Redspirit were the other three emperors, Heavengale, Moonmist, and Earthsoil. All had their heads bowed.

When they got no response to Redspirit’s explanation, Emperor Heavengale said, “Your Ancestral Highness, we lost 30,000,000 troops in this conflict. Seventh Prince is both ruthless and decisive. He’s no ordinary individual. If the person we’re cooperating with... is deceiving us, or if Seventh Prince breaks his promise—”

“Heavengale,” interrupted Emperor Moonmist, “this has all been arranged by the ancestral emperor. All we have to do is get things done. Stop worrying so much.”

The other two emperors didn’t reveal what they were thinking, and just remained in place silently.

A short time later, an ancient voice echoed out from the figure on the throne.

“There’s no need for the four of you to probe for information. I know you’re curious about what’s going on. Some of you want independence. Some of you still think of yourselves as human. Some of you are concerned about my position. And some of you want a stronger leader. In the past I might have ignored all of that, but this time, I can tell you that whoever causes problems for our species will be killed immediately. I’ll replace them with a new emperor.”

The four emperors bowed their heads low.

“Redspirit.”

Emperor Redspirit’s expression turned even more serious.

“You made a big sacrifice, and you’ll be compensated. Though your dao was severed, I can replenish your loss!”

Trembling, Emperor Redspirit knocked his forehead onto the ground as he kowtowed.

“Regarding the suspicions of the Nightshades that you mentioned, it’s because of something I told them. After all, the truth can only be kept hidden if another truth is revealed.” When the four emperors heard that, various unusual expressions appeared on their faces.

“Heavengale.”

Emperor Heavengale took a deep breath.

“I’m aware of your misgivings. That said, the human Seventh Prince clearly wants to be some sort of hero. After all, it’s plain for everyone to see that, though he did kill 30,000,000 of our Holytide soldiers, it came at the price of countless humans dying. Yet who cares? Nobody. The humans want a hero, so they pay attention to the glorious accomplishments. As for what is wrong or right, other than the family members of the dead, who will pay attention? Few people know how many bones are buried in the shadows.

“He’ll still go through with his plans to expand his territory and establish a millennium of glory. If he succeeds, who will take note of how many people died along the way? Who will dare to defy him?”

“As the saying goes, *a general’s reputation is made out of ten thousand corpses*. Considering he wants to be the hero of humanity, he definitely won’t go back on his word before he reaches his goal. And he will send us that which we have requested.

“As for you four, you need to have the same attitude when it comes to the future of our species. It will be impossible to avoid making sacrifices. Now that the first step of the plan is complete, let’s wait to see what move will be made by the mediator linking us to the Seventh Prince. Most importantly, we need to see if the method they suggested is effective.”

“Your orders shall be followed!” the four emperors said, sounding both excited and respectful.

Chapter 509: Troops Return to the Capital

Time passed. Three days went by in a flash. At dawn on the fourth day, Seventh Prince’s grand army broke camp and prepared to travel.

Xu Qing, the Captain, and Kong Xianglong were all in the crowd.

As the army left the defensive perimeter, Xu Qing looked over his shoulder in the direction of the distant western front. He had experienced many things in the past two months, and had seen far too much death. There were many other cultivators who were similarly looking to the west. Most were swordsages from Sea-Sealing County.

Eventually, Xu Qing turned back around. High in the air, he could see several hundred black dragons gliding around a... four-clawed golden dragon.

Only bits and pieces of the dragon's massive frame were visible as it swirled through the clouds, but it gave off a sensation of holiness. Of course, there was little need to mention who sat on the imperial carriage atop the dragon. The people down below, including Xu Qing, were all familiar with that individual who was as respectable as the highest heavens, and was as far above them as the clouds were from the mud.

It made Xu Qing think back to something one of the scholar teachers back in the slums had once said.

“What are important people like...? It's simple. They're people who, if you're in a crowd and you look up at them, you remember them, whether you want to or not. Because they're the only person you see. But when that person looks into the crowd, they don't see you, and could never remember you. That's the difference between ordinary people and important people. So, ya little punk, if you ever reach the point that the city magistrate himself notices you, then you'll know you're an important person.”

Xu Qing remembered that after the broken face of the god's eyes opened, he had snuck into the city magistrate's manor to look for cultivation techniques. At that time, he found the city magistrate himself, who was nothing more than a corpse. Xu Qing had looked down at his blank eyes and seen his own reflection in those dead pupils. [1]

He glanced briefly at Seventh Prince high in the clouds, then looked away, his face completely expressionless as the army moved onward.

Several hours later, the army reached a large-scale teleportation portal. They marched into the portal, and then Xu Qing and his fellow war veterans disappeared in a flash of dazzling light. They materialized near the county capital.

The locals had been away for two months. It wasn't possible for the army as a whole to enter the capital. Xu Qing and most of the other rank-and-file soldiers waited on standby outside of the city. Only a handful of people who qualified to personally attend Seventh Prince teleported into the city itself.

Now that he was back in familiar territory, Xu Qing looked in the direction of the capital and listened to the familiar buzz of the city that drifted through the air. A seven-colored glow rose high above the city, and the three palaces emitted dazzling light.

Xu Qing couldn't see into the city, so he didn't notice the colorful banners that festooned all of the buildings. The main road which led from the teleportation portal into the Governor's Mansion had been renamed Boulevard of the Imperial Prince. Lanterns and colored banners decorated the streets, which were lined with cheering crowds.

“We won!”

“We won!”

“We won!”

Drums thumped and gongs clashed as the lieutenant governor waited outside the teleportation portal, flanked by a contingent of Demi-Immortals, Saintfiends, and other nonhuman patriarchs. When the teleportation light flared, and Seventh Prince stepped out, the entire group clasped hands and bowed respectfully.

“Greetings, Seventh Prince!”

High above, the four-clawed golden dragon exhaled a red mist that glowed with bright light. Down below, Seventh Prince stepped out and smiled.

The crowd roared.

Of course, none of that had anything to do with Xu Qing. He currently stood outside the city in the army, where they could hear the commotion but couldn't see anything. Eventually, orders came down telling the imperial army to pitch camp. Meanwhile, the swordsages from the western front were finally given freedom to return to their homes. They were being dismissed from service. Going forward, they wouldn't need to go to the front lines except under special circumstances.

The order came from the lieutenant governor and the deputy palace lord of the Swordsage Palace. Thanks to their pleadings, the imperial prince had shown favor to the swordsages to thank them for their service.

When Xu Qing left the army, he had nowhere else to go but his sword pavilion. Upon entering, he didn't even bother to take off his armor. Instead of meditating, he lay down and slept. He didn't wake up until the evening of the following day.

When he opened his eyes, he found that his transmission jade slip and command sword were both full of messages.

Message transmissions weren't allowed on the battlefield, and all such devices had been locked down. Now that he was back in the county capital, all of those messages came through.

“Xu Qing, I haven't been able to get in touch with you, but I saw your Eldest Brother today. I was very relieved to hear that you're fine. I'm going back with the Wood Spirits. Things are different nowadays in the county capital, and the war took a heavy toll on the Wood Spirits. I nearly died myself... If you have time, come visit the Wood Spirits. Ling'er will be awake soon.” That message was, of course, from the innkeeper of Plankspring Way.

“Xu Qing, when you wake up, come drink with me.” That was Kong Xianglong.

“Little Junior Brother, after you wake up, let me know. I need to come get your dao fruits.” That was the Captain.

“Secretary-General Xu, be careful. After I got back to the county capital I got news that some of the nonhumans you threatened joined forces to submit a formal petition claiming

you harmed the unity of Sea-Sealing County. The lieutenant governor has kept a lid on it, but you still need to watch out." That was Qing Qiu.

Xu Qing responded to each message with a few words, then put the jade slip down. After stretching a bit, he finally took off his armor, then waved his hand to summon plenty of rainwater and mist to bathe himself. He hadn't bothered with such things during the war. There hadn't been any point. The battlefield was filled with so much smoke and death that even if you cleaned yourself, you would almost immediately become dirty again. Only the most fastidious person would bother with such an endless, pointless cycle.

After bathing, Xu Qing put on a new swordmage uniform. Around that time, the Captain, who had similarly bathed and changed clothes, arrived with a look of anticipation on his face. Back on the battlefield, Xu Qing had explained to the Captain that he only brought a small portion of dao fruits with him, and had left most of his cache back in the county capital. Now that they were back, Xu Qing didn't even wait for the Captain to say a word. He took out a bag of holding and tossed it over.

"50/50," Xu Qing said calmly.

The Captain's eyebrows danced up and down. "Perfect! I'm finally going to have enough to buy that Ancient Dao Righteous Bestowal Edict. Let me tell you, little Ah Qing, all of my hard work here in the county capital to earn military credits has been for this!"

Looking very pleased with himself, the Captain tucked the bag of holding into the fold of his garment and then looked at Xu Qing with a broad smile on his face.

"Any chance you're thinking of buying a life lamp, little Ah Qing? The military credits from these dao fruits will be more than enough to get one. Pretty soon, they'll be giving out battle credits as well. Have you checked to see what battle credits you'll be getting? I got four grade-five battle credits and two grade-three!"

Xu Qing took out his command sword to check his battle credits.

"Swordmage Xu Qing, as approved by the Swordmage Palace and audited by the Military Affairs Department, you have earned the following battle credits during the war of Sea-Sealing County: one grade-two battle credit; four grade-three battle credits; seven grade-four battle credits; eleven grade-five battle credits."

Xu Qing was more than a little surprised that he had earned so much.

The Captain laughed heartily. "Looks like you got a lot. I heard that the deputy palace lord himself approved all of the rewards, and that he doled them out handsomely to everyone." Grinning, the Captain looked around and then lowered his voice. "Did you really sleep the entire time since you got back, little Ah Qing? Let me tell you, a lot of stuff happened since yesterday. The entire county capital has changed thanks to the arrival of Seventh Prince.

"He appointed three of his own subordinates as the palace lords of the Swordmage Palace, Administration Palace, and Justice Palace.

"The grand elders of four prefectural Swordmage Courts were accused of being negligent in their duties. The one from Emperor-Receiving Prefecture was among

them. One of the listed reasons was a prisoner escape. That shrew Nethersprite went so far as to suffer a serious injury and even a drop in her cultivation base to slip out of her bonds and escape during the chaos.

“There was a big change to the treaty with the Demi-Immortals and Saintfiends. Nobody knows how Seventh Prince did it, but all it took was a single day for both of those species to officially ally themselves with the humans of Sea-Sealing County. In addition to that, over 400 nonhumans agreed to increase their yearly tribute and also cede full military authority.

“Anyway, enough of that boring stuff. I’m going shopping! By the way, little Ah Qing, the lieutenant governor announced that tomorrow we’ll have a county-wide memorial service for the governor, the three palace lords who died, and all the other warriors who sacrificed their lives in the line of duty.”

Xu Qing watched the Captain leave. As he stood outside his sword pavilion, he realized that the familiar county capital already looked different. Things were changing.

He suddenly missed Seven Blood Eyes, and he missed his Master.

After some thought, he went into the city to buy some alcohol, then went to Kong Xianglong’s sword pavilion.

Kong Xianglong was there alone, drinking. Upon seeing Xu Qing, his lips twitched as if he might smile. However, he didn’t smile. He just took another drink. Xu Qing sat down next to him and took out a jug. Together, they drank without speaking for a while.

The night passed, and then light filled the sky outside. At that point, Xu Qing said, “Big Bro Kong, the memorial service is about to begin.”

Kong Xianglong looked up at him. A moment passed. “Xu Qing, go outside and wait for me for a moment.”

Xu Qing nodded and walked out of the sword pavilion.

Before long, the door opened and Kong Xianglong emerged. He had just shaved, and he didn’t smell of alcohol. With his fresh, white swordmage uniform on, he looked just like he had in the past, before the war.

“The old man never let me call him ‘grandfather,’” he said softly, “so I didn’t bother trying. Even when I was young, I always lived alone. Except... he was always so strict. If I showed up to the memorial drunk, I can only imagine how pissed he would be. Maybe he’s not here to curse me, but I think I should do what would please him. Am I right, Xu Qing?”

Xu Qing nodded.

Kong Xianglong took a deep breath and started walking. Xu Qing went with him. As they left the sword pavilions and went up into the city, bells tolled somberly. Eventually they found themselves... in front of the huge statue of Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity.

There were already hundreds of thousands of people gathered there. There were cultivators from the Swordsage Palace, Administration Palace, Justice Palace, as well as the county yamens.

More people were arriving, flying in from all directions. Some people were missing limbs or were otherwise recovering from serious injuries. Some people had bloodshot eyes, while others suppressed their grief. These were the veterans from the western front.

Down in the imperial military camp, the soldiers stepped out of their tents and bowed their heads.

All families in the county emerged. Men. Women. Young ones. The elderly. They all looked at Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity.

On the western front, the prefectural cultivators and swordsages who were still part of the war effort all stopped what they were doing and looked in the direction of the county capital, their expressions full of sorrow.

And the humans who had returned from the front lines to their sects in various prefectures did the same. Bells tolled in all of those sects, spreading through the prefectures and filling all heaven and earth.

As one, the county mourned.

Chapter 510: Guyue Zhang'an

The capital city was held in Dark Serenity's hands, roughly at his chest level. At the spot closest to the statue itself was a huge public square paved with limestone slabs, which could accommodate a million people. Ninety-nine stairs led from the square to an altar that had a total of nine hundred and ninety-nine enormous columns carved to resemble dragons.

Only a few hundred thousand people had been permitted to gather below the altar. Among them were swordsages, cultivators from the Administration and Justice Palaces, and county officials. Their robes and uniforms were all in perfect order, but their expressions were those of grief. All of them held black flowers.

The arrival of Xu Qing and Kong Xianglong attracted some attention. People looked over at them with sorrow, conflict, and reminiscence....

They went to the assembled swordsages, who parted to make a path leading to the front of the formation. Xu Qing stopped walking, but Kong Xianglong, his face expressionless, went to the very front, where he bowed his head and stood there unmoving. Xu Qing stayed behind with the Captain. The Captain clasped Xu Qing's shoulder, and the two of them stood there solemnly.

Everything was quiet. Grief built up in the hundreds of thousands of cultivators, spreading to fill the city, the three palaces, and eventually, all of Sea-Sealing County.

The clouds in the dome of heaven seemed to reflect the grief from below, and rain began to fall. The pitter-patter echoed out across the limestone slabs. No one used their cultivation base to avoid the rainfall. They let it fall on them.

After enough time had passed for an incense stick to burn, a rumbling sound reached their ears. High in the clouds, lightning snaked back and forth. A group of people appeared. Approaching, they entered the square and walked up the stairs.

All of the hundreds of thousands of cultivators bowed their heads.

The group included the highest ranking deputy palace lords of the Swordsage Palace, Administration Palace, and Justice Palace. There were also three middle-aged men who, despite having changed outfits recently, pulsed with baleful auras. They were the commanders-in-chief that the imperial prince had appointed to head the three palaces. Also present was the lieutenant governor, who had a very grim look on his face.

Leading the group was a young man in a yellow robe. He had long black hair that flowed down his back, extremely fair skin, angular features, sword-like eyebrows, and eyes that sparkled as if with starlight. Not only was he unusually good-looking, he also exuded an indescribable sense of nobility. It seemed as if, with him present, heaven and earth would dim. There seemed nothing more natural than for him to walk in front, while others followed behind.

This, of course, was the person who had saved Sea-Sealing County in its moment of crisis. He had suppressed all the evil devils in the county, had brought light to overcast skies, and earned the admiration of countless species. He was the seventh imperial prince!

On this day of memorial in Sea-Sealing County, only he qualified to preside.

As people left and right bowed low, Seventh Prince climbed the stairs to the highest spot on the altar. There he stood, alone. Only he had the right to stand in that spot. From that position, he looked up at the enormous statue of Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity, and his eyes glittered with reverence. After a moment, he got to his knees and kowtowed.

“Oh imperial ancestor, I am Guyue Zhang’an, your 3,915th descendent. I wish you peace and purity!” [1]

When he kowtowed, the lieutenant governor, the commanders-in-chief, the deputy palace lords, and everyone else bowed from the waist. Further down, the hundreds of thousands of cultivators also bowed respectfully. There was no need for them to kowtow. After Seventh Prince got to his knees, it indicated that no one else qualified to do the same. After kowtowing nine times, Seventh Prince stood back up and looked at the crowd.

Because of the rain, it was difficult to see him clearly. But the statue of Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity behind him was clear for everyone to see, and it created a very somber atmosphere.

A moment passed, and then he spoke with grief in his voice.

“Great winds blow, great tides flow; the flood dragon, totem of torrents; the phoenix reborn in the fire’s glow.”

“Today, I hereby submit a memorial to Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity, and a testimonial to Emperor Dark War. We humans, guardians of Sea-Sealing, bringers of peace and serendipity, have safeguarded the County for eight hundred twelve-months, and do yearn for more than ten continued sixty-year cycles of peace and security.

“Countless among our heroes have met their end, but three stand foremost among them.

“The palace lord of the Administration Palace was the epitome of scholarly wisdom and magnanimity. The palace lord of the Justice Palace was the personification of humility and courage. The palace lord of the Swordsage Palace was the paragon of loyalty and responsibility.

“The souls of the Sea-Sealing heroes provoke awe, thereby dimming the light of stars and moon. As the millennia pass in our lands, ancestors come and go. There are times of honor and times of disgrace. There are ups and there are downs.

“We grieve at the decline of heaven and earth. We mourn when stars fall in the blue sky. The fallen have gone, but the physical relics linger; when recalling their visages, tears of sorrow pour out. The anguish born therein pushes us beyond the point of self-control.”

Seventh Prince’s words up to this point were rife with sorrow, and his expression was downcast. He stopped speaking for a moment. Everyone in the crowd felt deeply sorrowful, and it was even possible to hear the sounds of weeping.

“However, the flame of humanity will never be extinguished! Not even gods can suppress the human heart! I hereby solemnly swear to petition our emperor to enshrine the souls of the fallen heroes, and erect a monument to them, before which incense will burn from generation to generation!

“We are a species whose ancient ancestors shone like the stars. And among our descendants will be generations of heroes. The universe is in constant motion, which embodies the spirit of eternal self-improvement. The cosmos is forgiving, which reinforces the virtue of magnanimity.

“Our respected ancestors, venerated by the masses, shall have temples erected in their names, as we join forces to establish lofty splendor. Let it be made clear to future generations that none of this will be forgotten. Not ever!”

As Seventh Prince’s mournful speech echoed out, the bells in all the numerous sects through the various prefectures of Sea-Sealing County tolled loudly.

The county grieved as one.

Down beneath the capital city, the tallest sword pavilion of all, which had belonged to Palace Lord Kong, crumbled into ashes which drifted out across the county.

Uncontrolled weeping could be heard within the crowd of hundreds of thousands of cultivators, and their tears mixed with the rain to fall to the ground.

Xu Qing was having trouble seeing clearly. It was hard to say whether it was because of the anguish in his heart or the blur caused by the rain. Either way, he felt like he could almost see Palace Lord Kong standing in front of him, tall and mighty. Majestic. After the death of the governor, he had become the leader of Sea-Sealing County.

As emotions swept through Xu Qing, he suddenly recalled something Arch-Immortal Plumdark had said.

“Xu Qing, maybe when you develop a bit of admiration for the organization and the people in it, you’ll eventually turn that admiration into respect. And when that happens, you’ll have figured things out.” [2]

Back then, Xu Qing had been a bit confused by that advice. After all, he hadn’t really thought of himself as truly being a swordsage. But now, as he stood there in the rain, his heart hurting, he suddenly felt deep respect.

Sadly, Palace Lord Kong wasn’t standing there in the rain. He existed only in Xu Qing’s memories. And now they were as far apart from each other as heaven was from earth. The only thing left behind was that command medallion. After Palace Lord Kong died and Seventh Prince took command of the Swordsage Palace, all of the authority in that medallion had been taken away. However, it still contained the right to use the county capital’s taboo treasure a single time.

After a long, mournful silence, Seventh Prince spoke again. This time, there was no grief in his voice. Instead, he spoke with unwavering determination, laced with killing intent, that caused thunder to rumble in the sky, and provoked a vicious growl from the four-clawed golden dragon.

“Let all of Sea-Sealing County be made aware that we have determined the identity of the culprit responsible for the death of the governor, the disastrous war, the fall of the three palace lords, and the blood of all our heroes!”

Xu Qing looked up.

“Yao Tianyan, a descendant of Heavenly Marquis Yao, has broken our hearts! Throughout the history of Sea-Sealing County, he has always shielded the nonhumans. And now, he has colluded with the Holytides to assassinate the governor, drag our county into the flames of war, betray humanity, and bring death to countless Sea-Sealing humans!

“Our investigation further confirmed that he was largely responsible for the collapse of the northern front. Due to the horrendous nature of his crimes, I hereby issue a county-wide arrest warrant for this traitorous Yao Tianyan. I will also submit a petition to the emperor to extend that warrant to all human territories!”

An immense swell of rage erupted from the hundreds of thousands of cultivators. And fury rose from the countless commoners in the county capital who heard the words. There had been plenty of people over the years who didn’t approve of Marquis Yao. People cursed him on just about a constant basis. Not only had he shielded nonhumans over and over again, he had even allowed members of his clan to marry nonhumans. It seemed like little more than working hand-in-glove with the enemy, which was why many people cursed the Yao Clan as being *worse than dogs or pigs*. They were traitors against humanity, devoid of conscience, people who bent the knee to outsiders. Such cursing had been common in the past eight hundred years.

The common view was that Marquis Yao thought that nonhumans were worth more, and that his reputation among nonhumans was more important. In other words, humans weren't very important. Such thoughts had weighed on the minds of cultivators for eight hundred years.

When Xu Qing arrived at the county capital, he had heard countless instances in which people cursed Marquis Yao in private.

As far as Xu Qing could tell, it made perfect sense that Marquis Yao was the traitor! In fact, back when the governor died, there was a lot of talk about Marquis Yao being the biggest suspect.

Right now, the eyes of the cultivators from the three palaces were incomparably bloodshot. In the blink of an eye, their killing intent reached unheard-of levels. For the swordsages, the death of their palace lord was the source of unending pain in their hearts, and all of them now felt it was their most important mission to avenge his death.

“Kill Marquis Yao!”

“Get revenge for the palace lords!”

“Avenge the governor!”

“Get revenge for the countless sons of Sea-Sealing County who sacrificed their lives in the war!”

“The Yao Clan should be exterminated!”

Down below, the imperial garrison surged with killing intent. The fury of the officers and the soldiers was so intense it shoved aside the rain!

Yao Yunhui was in the crowd, trembling, her eyes full of grief. People all around her glared at her, and backed away from her as if she were dirty. She opened her mouth to speak, but no words came out.

Zhang Siyun was in a similar situation. Moments later, both of them were escorted away by imperial troops.

Atop the altar, Seventh Prince noticed the movement below. He clearly saw what was happening, and when he looked at Zhang Siyun, his eyes glittered briefly.

Meanwhile, in Yao Mansion, Marquis Yao's younger sister Yao Feihe wept openly, her tears falling onto her garment, soaking it and turning it dark. [3]

“Brother... was it worth it?”

She closed her eyes as a crashing sound reached her ears. The forces sent by Seventh Prince had arrived to arrest everyone, including the elderly and the children. Yao Feihe didn't fight back as she was taken captive. As the prisoners were led out of Yao Mansion, many of the commoners looked on with disdain, calling out curses and demanding blood be spilled.

Li Shitao was off in the distance. She had arrived too late to help, and could only stand there helplessly, her expression one of fury. [4]

The anger burning in the county capital at the moment was more than enough to drown out all other sounds.

