

Timescape 511

Chapter 511: Classified Dossier 19

From his spot in the county memorial service, Xu Qing turned and looked toward the distant Yao Yunhui and Zhang Siyun.

He thought about how the Smokewights in Daybreak Prefecture had mentioned Marquis Yao. He also considered Marquis Yao's previous actions, and how he'd simply disappeared from the battlefield. On the surface, it really did make it seem like there was something suspicious going on with him. What was more, the palace lord had also suspected Marquis Yao.[1]

But there were some things that didn't make sense to Xu Qing. Why would Marquis Yao take his entire people, with the exception of the women and children, to the battlefield, where they were all wiped out? And why would all the women and children just sit around waiting to be arrested? What was more, Marquis Yao had been the one to rally the nonhumans into an alliance and then lead them to the northern front. And everything had gone smoothly in that regard. When you considered all the elements as a whole, they didn't add up.

Of course, Xu Qing was well aware that he couldn't possibly be the only person to have come to this conclusion. But right now... no one dared to speak up.

For one thing, Marquis Yao was generally disliked. What was more, there was no evidence to prove that he *wasn't* a traitor to humanity.

Xu Qing didn't say anything. By now, he had come to the conclusion that the war in Sea-Sealing County was a lot more complicated than just two enemies fighting each other. The fact that Seventh Prince showed up at almost exactly the same moment that Palace Lord Kong died gave Xu Qing the sense that there was much more to the situation than what appeared on the surface.

Off to the side, the Captain narrowed his eyes and spoke to Xu Qing in a voice as quiet as a mosquito's. "This Seventh Prince is quite impressive. He's tugging at everyone's heart strings with complete ease! He hits things from every angle, has his pulse on the community, and really knows how to work the crowd!

"As of now, Sea-Sealing County might as well be his personal fiefdom. He's got an incredibly high status, he can take credit for saving the entire county, and he's got the support of the masses. In reality, if he'd shown up just a moment earlier, Palace Lord Kong wouldn't have died in battle. And if the palace lord didn't die, then the imperial prince's arrival wouldn't have been as dazzling. He would have had to share the spotlight with the palace lord.

"In contrast, by arriving just a bit too late, he took all the glory. He completely saved the day and became famous far and wide. All because of one battle.

"I know you've already come to realize this on your own, little Junior Brother. I know you're close with Kong Xianglong, but you've got to remember not to be impulsive. This prince is not someone you can casually trifle with.

“Surely you can see how even the deputy palace lords and the lieutenant governor are biting their tongues. And Kong Xianglong is holding back too. A lot of people know what’s really going on here, not just us! We small fries should focus on keeping our friends and family safe. Trying to do more than that... isn’t going to do any good.”

The Captain patted Xu Qing’s shoulder.

Xu Qing looked up into the sky. Truth be told, he had come to a realization of what was going on a lot earlier, and had been keeping it inside for a long time.

“I know, Eldest Brother,” he replied quietly. “There’s no way he was going to show up before the taboo net fell and Palace Lord Kong died. That was why the palace lord issued all those orders to the army, and also the reason he chose to die as he did.”

Xu Qing closed his eyes and thought back to everything the palace lord had said before dying, and all the arrangements he’d made.

It rained all day. As for the memorial service, it didn’t last that long. It was over after about two hours. When Seventh Prince left, it marked the end of the service. The crowd dispersed in lonesome solitude.

The Captain seemed really worried about Xu Qing, and gave several more warnings in line with his previous exhortation. Then he said he was going to go buy Ancient Dao Righteous Bestowal Edict, then find a place to open another of his seals. Apparently, that was going to take some time.

“I’m going to be in seclusion for about half a month, little Junior Brother. Remember. Don’t do anything impulsive. After I’m out of seclusion, we can assess the situation. If things are really bad, then we can just resign as swordsages.”

Noting how sincere the Captain seemed, Xu Qing nodded.

The Captain, convinced of Xu Qing’s sincerity, hurried away.

Xu Qing really was being sincere. He knew that even if he said something to someone, his words wouldn’t carry any weight. Whether because of his general status or his cultivation base, he couldn’t do anything to affect the tangled web of intrigue that was this war.

And yet, he couldn’t stop thinking about Palace Lord Kong. Eventually, he sighed and went back to his sword pavilion beneath the glow of evening. Upon arriving, he looked around.

I miss Seven Blood Eyes.

Closing his eyes, he sat down and started meditating. Eventually, night fell and the moon rose. Around midnight... he heard a voice outside his sword pavilion, full of pain and bitterness.

“You there, Xu Qing?”

Xu Qing opened his eyes. It was Kong Xianglong. Xu Qing opened the door of his sword pavilion and saw Kong Xianglong standing there in the moonlight. He was obviously drunk. The smile he wore made him look more full of grief than if he’d been weeping.

“Duskspirit is dead. Wang Chen is dead. Sir Mountain-River is back in his sect recovering from his injuries. I... I don't have anyone else to drink with. Xu Qing, do you mind drinking with me again today?”

Xu Qing didn't say anything. He just took a few steps back.

Kong Xianglong grinned and walked inside, swaying back and forth a bit as he did. Sitting down, he tossed a jug of alcohol to Xu Qing, then pulled out one of his own and took a drink.

“Wanna guess who I saw this afternoon?” he said with another forced smile.

Xu Qing took a drink and shook his head.

“Seventh Prince, of course! The deputy palace lord took me to see him. Oh, that prince. As you might expect, he knew that the palace lord was my grandfather. So what do you think happened next? He commended me, and even gave me an assignment. I'm in charge of the Corrections Division now. I'm supposed to get the place back in order. I mentioned you, by the way. He agreed to let me handle things however I wanted.” He laughed. “I expressed my deep and heartfelt gratitude.”

Kong Xianglong laughed even more. However, his expression looked pained, and though his laughter was full of many emotions, joy was not one of them. In the end, he huffed and then spat off to the side.

“Screw that motherfucker! You know who the first batch of new inmates are? Everyone from the Yao Clan. What does he think I'm going to do, execute them all? I'm not an idiot. Don't tell me that the shadowy figure that appeared before the old man right before he died was Marquis Yao?” Kong Xianglong roared with laughter, but his eyes were cold. He took another drink. “I went over and took a look at the Yao Clan prisoners. They're all women and children. Zhang Siyun was nowhere to be seen. Apparently Honor Guard Sima vouched for him. [2]

“That said, maybe it would be good for me to be a bit of an idiot. If I execute them, I might be able to get closer to Seventh Prince. Then maybe I can figure out what's really going on with this war.” As he spoke, his voice got colder and colder. His eyes glittered. “What do you think, Xu Qing?”

Xu Qing looked at Kong Xianglong, who had lost most of his friends during the war, then had to deal with Palace Lord Kong's death. After all of that, Kong Xianglong's personality had changed.

Based on his tone of voice, Xu Qing could tell that Kong Xianglong's killing intent was truly growing strong. And it was very possible that Kong Xianglong would go so far as to violate his own sense of morality if it meant getting close to Seventh Prince and finding out the truth.

Xu Qing took a moment before answering. “If we get to make the decision, I suggest not executing them.”

Kong Xianglong looked up. “Why?”

Xu Qing didn't give an answer. He just looked Kong Xianglong in the eye.

As he did, the coldness in Kong Xianglong's gaze slowly disappeared. He seemed to shrink in on himself, and then he took another drink.

The two of them sat together drinking, just like they had the night before.

Eventually, Kong Xianglong put the jug down, lay back, and looked at the ceiling. "I miss the old days, Xu Qing. Remember last year when we all went on that mission...?"

Xu Qing nodded, and thought back to when the two of them had left on the mission with Duskspirit, Wang Chen, and Sir Mountain-River. Their task had been to extract an agent who was fleeing from Holytide territory. There was also an intelligence report in a wish box. Later, they slaughtered an entire group of Black Guard cultivators to get revenge for the young man they'd tortured to death. Then they fled like mad into the night. Eventually, they reached an open plain where they lay down in the grass to catch their breaths. After that event, all of them had grown closer to each other.

"What a pity..." Kong Xianglong said, shaking his head. He lifted the jug, only to find it was empty, just like the wish box they'd recovered on that mission. [3]

Xu Qing slid another jug over to him. Kong Xianglong sat up and took it. "Oh, by the way, Seventh Prince's people took away the wish box we got on that mission. They said it was evidence of Marquis Yao's secret plan."

Xu Qing thought back to the empty wish box. "There wasn't anything inside, was there? Or did the palace recover something later on?"

"They did. But it's top secret. I was in charge of the mission, so I qualified to know about it. But the intelligence report still hasn't been declassified.... Ah, whatever. There's no point in keeping you in the dark." Kong Xianglong took a drink. "Based on the aura that remained inside, it was determined that the box previously contained an ancient medicinal pill. Something called a fatehavoc pill."

Xu Qing's eyes narrowed, and he reached out to grab Kong Xianglong's arm.

Kong Xianglong's eyes went wide. "What's wrong?"

"A lightmost fatehavoc pill?"

"Yeah, exactly." Kong Xianglong's expression turned very serious. All of a sudden, he was much more sober than before. "What's going on, Xu Qing?"

Xu Qing didn't say anything. Thinking back to the jade slip the palace lord had given him, he thought for a moment then said, "Big Bro Kong, is there any chance the intelligence report you're talking about is Classified Dossier 19?" [4]

When Kong Xianglong heard Xu Qing mention that specific file, he became completely sober. Eyes shining, he looked at Xu Qing. "Okay, what's happening here?"

Xu Qing took out the jade slip from the palace lord and handed it to Kong Xianglong.

After returning to the county capital from Mount Daybreak, the urgency of the war, and his mission to deal with supplies and troops, made him too busy to check into Classified Dossier 19. Besides,

Palace Lord Kong was already familiar with the file's contents, and Xu Qing's mission had simply been to confirm some details regarding the daybreak light. When it came to the continuation of the investigation, he had been waiting for further instructions from the palace lord. But now, things had changed.

As Kong Xianglong studied the information on the jade slip, he started trembling. When he finished, he gripped the jade slip tight in his hand and looked at Xu Qing.

Xu Qing whispered, "I already investigated the daybreak light. And there was indeed some that didn't make it into the records."

Kong Xianglong's eyes were bloodshot as he said, "That shadowy figure that appeared to the old man before he died! Did he kill the governor with that pill? No wonder there wasn't a big fight on the day of the governor's assassination. His death came out of nowhere!"

Xu Qing nodded. "But it still doesn't make sense. If that pill is really so amazing, how did the killer manage to use it on the governor? I'm pretty good with poisons, so I know there are a lot of ways to poison someone. But given the high level of the governor's cultivation base, it seems almost impossible for someone to secretly poison him!

"That's even more true considering how many assassination attempts the governor experienced in his life. He was definitely a cautious person who wouldn't let his guard down even around people he trusted. For him to die so unexpectedly seems to indicate that the killer poisoned him in a very ingenious way! It was the perfect murder." [5]

After speaking, Xu Qing closed his mouth to think.

Kong Xianglong also sat there, thinking. After some time passed, Kong Xianglong stood, clasped hands, and bowed deeply to Xu Qing.

"Xu Qing, don't investigate this matter any further. It's too dangerous. I'll handle it!"

Xu Qing didn't respond.

Seeing Xu Qing's facial expression, Kong Xianglong seemed to want to say something further, but hesitated to do so. Finally, he sighed. Given how well he knew Xu Qing, he could tell that Xu Qing's silence was an indication that he was refusing Kong Xianglong's advice.

"Fine, we do it together!" Kong Xianglong said quietly.

Xu Qing nodded.

It was nearly dawn, and they were out of alcohol. Besides, after all of the recent revelations, Kong Xianglong wasn't interested in drinking. He made to leave. However, then he looked at the spot where he had spat off to the side. Shaking his head, he cleaned the spot with his sleeve. Then he walked to the door.

Meanwhile, Xu Qing took out a bag of holding and tossed it to Kong Xianglong. "Big Bro Kong, this is for you. Sir Mountain-River's portion is in there also. As for Duskspirit and Wang Chen... you decide what to do with their share."

"What's inside?" Kong Xianglong asked, looking surprised.

“Dao fruits,” Xu Qing replied softly.

Chapter 512: Crimson Mother of the Red Moon!

Kong Xianglong quietly left the sword pavilion with the bag of holding.

The first glimmer of dawn was visible outside as Xu Qing watched him leave. Then he stood there looking into the sky and thinking about the wish box from that mission.

“The smell of osmanthus flowers,” he murmured. He remembered checking the wish box, and he remembered the faint scent of osmanthus inside. [1]

Muffled thunder could be heard in the sky; it was the rainy season in the county capital. Before long, heavy rain blocked the rays of the sun, and everything turned gloomy. It gave early risers the strange sensation that evening had already fallen before noon had even come.

Xu Qing went back into his sword pavilion. Sitting down cross-legged, he settled his thoughts and started meditating.

His cultivation base was close to the very peak of Gold Core. All he needed was one additional heavenly palace to reach the great circle. After everything he had experienced on the battlefield, that heavenly palace was almost fully materialized. It wouldn't be long now.

As for what to put inside of it....

Xu Qing took a moment to sense The Emperor's Sword.

If I can't think of anything else, then I'll use The Emperor's Sword.

Taking a deep breath, he continued working on breathing exercises.

In that manner, half a month flew by.

During that time, Xu Qing almost felt like he had been forgotten.

He didn't leave his sword pavilion, and almost no one came to visit. With Seventh Prince in charge of the county capital, everything had changed. It was common to see warrior cultivators from the imperial capital on the streets. The city was under military control now, and species from all over Sea-Sealing County were coming to pay respects.

The three palaces had been reorganized. With the three commanders-in-chief Seventh Prince had assigned to take over for the palace lords, they were now essentially a wing of the army. Imperial swordsmen from the swordsmen headquarters in the capital were now in charge of most of the departments. It was the same with the other two palaces.

Military law was even more strictly enforced. There were quite a few people who were executed publicly for breaking such laws. And they weren't just people from Sea-Sealing County. There were even officers and soldiers from the imperial capital who were punished! Kong Xianglong discussed the matter with Xu Qing, and clearly he had mixed emotions.

Seventh Prince issued a directive to all sects and organizations in Sea-Sealing County. It was very strictly worded and clearly was not supposed to be questioned. It required all sects to perform military service, and also required the sects to permanently hand over control of their taboo treasures. The directive caused quite a stir. However, there wasn't anybody willing to defy the orders. The nonhumans reacted similarly. In the end, they had no choice but to comply; they sent

half of their supplies as tribute, and joined the allied army, which meant they had to go to war on behalf of humankind whenever requested.

Under the leadership of Kong Xianglong, the Corrections Division was being rebuilt. However, it wasn't located in the same place as before. It was now in the Swordsage Palace.

The first batch of prisoners really were the women and children from the Yao Clan. Although there were many public demands for their execution, Kong Xianglong didn't do anything to them. He chose to accept Xu Qing's advice in that regard.

Though Honor Guard Sima had vouched for Zhang Siyun, that didn't mean Zhang Siyun could avoid investigation. In the end, he chose to testify against his mother's clan. Most people thought of it as his expression of loyalty to humankind. As a result, he wasn't implicated in any of the Yao Clan's crimes. After all, his surname wasn't Yao. What was more, he was allowed to remain as a swordsage.

In the end, Seventh Prince had the final say on everything that happened in Sea-Sealing County. His subordinates weren't just stationed in the county capital. They spread out to all the Swordsage Courts in all the prefectures. Because of the fact that they were essentially the saviors of Sea-Sealing County, they were welcomed with open arms wherever they went.

Meanwhile, a rumor started spreading. It started in the county capital, but before long, it reached all of the prefectures.

Forbidden by the Immortal really was going to be opened soon.

Sea-Sealing County was the first place Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity had occupied after coming back from sea, and thus it was home to a very special area called Forbidden by the Immortal.

In the past, it didn't have that name, though. It was an Immortal Estate, one of Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity's thirty-six remote operations palaces.

The Immortal Estates were all unique worlds that contained not only amazing and unique treasures, but also, strong immortal energy. Immortal energy was essentially a higher level of energy than spirit energy. The thirty-six operations palaces, or Immortal Estates, were worlds belonging to the imperial clan back in the era of Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity. They often contained mutant beasts, which were kept there to hunt.

After the broken face of the god arrived, everything changed. When Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity and the other emperors and sovereigns left, the thirty-six operations palaces were abandoned. Most of them fell into ruin. There were others that, as humans slowly lost one region after another, became the property of nonhumans.

In some cases, gods entered them and turned them into personal lairs, filling them with intense mutagen. The Immortal Estate in Sea-Sealing County was one of those, as there was a god sleeping inside. Its aura filled the Immortal Estate, making it rife with death. It was a place where the living couldn't go, and thus it came to be called Forbidden by the Immortal.

Throughout all the years that had passed, humans had only opened Forbidden by the Immortal one time. Powerful experts from the Imperial Region had attempted to extract the godsource from inside, only to fail. Although they didn't wake the god that slept inside, even in sleep that god was powerful enough to create a clone of itself. That clone caused a massive disaster in Sea-Sealing

County. In the end, the humans suppressed the clone. However, they couldn't completely destroy it. Therefore, the imperial preceptor of humankind dismembered it.

For certain reasons, it wasn't possible to take the parts of the clone away from the forbidden region, so they had been sealed at its entrance. And that entrance was none other than the famous Corrections Division in the county capital. By using a destiny sealing technique, the clone was fooled into thinking it was a spirit automaton. As a result, it was essentially tasked with keeping itself sealed.

Now, years after that incident, everyone was shocked to hear rumors about Forbidden by the Immortal being opened.

In reality, there had been talk of this happening in the past. But the governor and lieutenant governor hadn't approved of the idea. Even Palace Lord Kong had been hesitant. It was simply too dangerous. The slightest misstep could result in complete catastrophe for Sea-Sealing County. Living beings everywhere would be in horrific danger, and would end up as food for a god. But imperial orders couldn't be defied. And thus, all Sea-Sealing County could do was try to delay the opening. [2]

Now, the person with the final say in everything was Seventh Prince. It was shortly after the rumors started spreading like mad that Seventh Prince actually issued the formal dharmic decree.

In half a month, Forbidden by the Immortal was to be opened. First to enter would be the swordsmen, and they would be on a special mission. They would be laying the foundation for the second group to enter. The dharmic decree shook the entire county, and especially the county capital. Everyone was deeply alarmed.

However, due to public trust in Seventh Prince, and the mightiness of his army, people calmed down quickly enough. And then the preparations began.

Hordes of imperial troops started clearing the rubble out of the old Corrections Division. They placed sealing marks and also used the county capital's taboo treasure to hew out a path leading to Forbidden by the Immortal.

Xu Qing didn't know much about Forbidden by the Immortal. But being a former Corrections Division jailer, he knew a bit more than the average person. Furthermore, after making D-132 one of his heavenly palaces, he knew... that the finger therein was part of the clone of the god imprisoned in the forbidden ground. Just the finger of that clone had stupefying power. After all, the clone itself had been so mighty that the imperial preceptor had only been able to dismember and seal it. Destroying it hadn't been an option. It was easy to imagine how astonishingly powerful the actual god was.

Although there was a lot Xu Qing didn't know, one thing he did know thanks to his experience of sealing that finger, was that the clone definitely feared the red moon. That much was obvious from how it had reacted to the essence of his violet moon.

Obviously there were different levels of gods, and the red moon was stronger than the god in Forbidden by the Immortal! That said, just the term 'god' was enough to shake any cultivator to the core.

Xu Qing was on the list of people to enter Forbidden by the Immortal first. Kong Xianglong, the Captain, and most of the other Sea-Sealing swordsmen were also included.

At the moment, Xu Qing was walking down the street in the county capital on the way to purchase some medicinal pills. He was also trying to establish communication with the finger in D-132. He was hoping to get some more information about Forbidden by the Immortal. After all, considering there was still a war going on, it seemed like a strange time to open the place.

Unfortunately, the god's finger hadn't really woken at all since it went to sleep, and calling out to it didn't usually provoke any response. After buying the medicinal pills he wanted, Xu Qing thought about using the violet moon to stimulate the finger. However, before he could do anything, the finger shivered and started to wake up voluntarily.

The reason was because Xu Qing had just spotted a certain person.

Zhang Siyun.

Although his white swordsage uniform was inherently impressive, he himself was sallow, with bloodshot eyes. Overall, he looked bedraggled.

As Zhang Siyun walked down the street, he spotted Xu Qing. In the past, his heart would have filled with hatred as a result, but this time he just averted his gaze and walked off quickly in a different direction. He was being followed by a few people Xu Qing didn't recognize. Apparently, they were keeping an eye on him.

Xu Qing didn't react visibly to what he saw. However, inside, his heart surged with waves of astonishment, the reason being that the finger was shouting into his mind.

"The Crimson Mother parasitized him! That's a doppelg?nger of the red moon! Crimson Mother isn't awake now, but that won't last long. Why aren't you running??"

The god's finger seemed extremely nervous and alarmed, far more so than Xu Qing was.

Xu Qing was breathing heavily, but his mind remained focused. It was a surprise to find that the god's finger was obviously thinking very clearly this time. It wasn't muddled like before. Suppressing his shock, he calmly projected a message with divine will.

"Didn't you say Crimson Mother isn't awake?"

"It'll happen soon! The awakening will happen soon! Er, hold on. Somethings off here.... He has a human spell formation inside of him? You humans are actually taking the initiative to help Crimson Mother possess him?? In less than a month, Crimson Mother will wake up in his body! Just what are you humans trying to accomplish? This is High God Crimson Mother we're talking about!!!"

The god's finger sent a stream of divine sense out, which helped Xu Qing to scan the area. Upon noticing the excavation work at the Corrections Division, it started trembling violently.

"That's an Immortal Estate! And it's almost open!! A doppelg?nger of Crimson Mother? Opening an Immortal Estate? At the same time...? Y-y-you... you humans are actually trying to feed me to Crimson Mother!!!"

Chapter 513: What Do You Do When You're Not Strong Enough?

The waves of astonishment smashing at Xu Qing forced him to stop walking. The terrified shrieking of the god's finger was clearly based on speculation. The finger was asleep most of the time, and had no idea what was happening on the outside. It could only gain a very cursory surface understanding.

But even when Xu Qing first arrived in the county capital a year ago, he remembered hearing occasional rumors that Forbidden by the Immortal would be opened. Nothing ever came of it. That was one reason why he found it suspicious that it was actually being opened right now, at a time of war. But the explanation provided by the god's finger now caused everything to click into place. In Xu Qing's mind, numerous puzzle pictures connected, and he came to a very clear realization. It caused him to immediately leave the capital city, go back to his sword pavilion, and sit down cross-legged to get his thoughts in order. The god's finger jabbered the entire time, and was clearly deeply shaken by what humans were doing.

Eventually, Xu Qing got all his thoughts in order. Gradually, a general outline of things formed.

It all starts with Zhang Siyun.... Back at the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar, the Captain and I both climbed to 9,000 meters. Because of the mark of the cultivator who died in a god domain, we were both affected to different degrees by Crimson Mother, the red moon. The Captain got the aura, but I also got... the godsource!

These were details that he had pieced together after the fact.

Zhang Siyun also climbed to 9,000 meters, so it's only natural that he would also be affected. But Zhang Siyun was very seriously injured and fell off the pillar. In fact, he nearly died. Afterward, I felt an intense sensation of dread. [1]

From that point on, I could sense the red moon looking for me. Back then, I didn't realize that Zhang Siyun had changed. But looking back, I'd say that the pillar incident must have been when Zhang Siyun was parasitized!

Eyes glittering, he considered everything he remembered. Then he focused on when the Grand Emperor assessed his heart.

Is it possible to hide things about yourself during the Grand Emperor's assessment of the heart? If Zhang Siyun really was parasitized by the red moon at that point, why did that assessment go normally for him? He even came here to the county capital.

After some more thought, Xu Qing realized that, based on what the god's finger had just said, that there were humans helping to speed up the awakening of the red moon within Zhang Siyun, then everything made sense.

They knew from the beginning. And I know just how to confirm that!

He took out his command sword to send a message to the grand elder in the Swordsage Court in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. But then his face fell slightly.

I forgot. After the death of the palace lord, inter-prefectural communications were restricted.

Xu Qing sighed. There was a workaround. Though he didn't have the authority to send inter-prefectural messages on his own, he could purchase the right with military credits. And he had a lot of military credits. Therefore, he paid the fee, and before much more time passed, he had sent the message to that grand elder to ask about Zhang Siyun.

If any other person asked the grand elder about the situation, he wouldn't answer their question. In fact, he probably wouldn't even respond to Kong Xianglong. But that grand elder thought differently of Xu Qing. The response came quickly.

“Back during the Grand Emperor assessment, I did indeed know that he was parasitized by a god. That said, I couldn't confirm which exact god it was. Considering how important of a matter it was, I reported the situation to the palace lord.

“I checked in a few times to see what was happening with the matter. At one point, Palace Lord Kong told me that as long as Zhang Siyun was a swordsage, he refused to allow him to be used as bait! What's more relevant is that the original statue of the Grand Emperor is in the imperial capital. In other words, it's a given that they know about the situation there.” [2]

After providing his explanation, the grand elder's tone turned serious, and at the same time, caring.

“Xu Qing, things are different now in Sea-Sealing County. I heard about Forbidden by the Immortal being opened. Back when the idea was originally proposed, a lot of people were opposed to it, including the governor and the lieutenant governor. But the dharmic decree came from the imperial capital. You can't just defy an order like that. They tried to buy time, but that can only be done for so long. Then war came, and nobody wanted to bring up the subject. I'm not sure why you're asking me about this, but... you need to be careful in everything.”

Xu Qing could sense the concern in the voice of the grand elder, so he responded in kind. Then he asked about the situation with August Spirit Nethersprite, and whether her escape was going to cause problems for the Swordsage Court in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture.

The grand elder cleared his throat, sighed, and then went on to say, *“I take full responsibility for that. I wasn't paying close enough attention, and that led to Nethersprite's escape. The first thing I brought to the imperial prince's attention was the potential awakening of the Ghost Emperor. As for where Nethersprite is now, nobody knows. The other two spiritual souls and the seven physical souls all went missing. We're in such great danger here in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture that not even the imperial prince dares to come here....”*

Something about the explanation seemed strange to Xu Qing. After thinking about it, he started to get the feeling that Nethersprite hadn't escaped after all. The grand elder had probably set her free on purpose. More likely, she wasn't 'missing' at all, and the grand elder had her captive somewhere else. Having reached the conclusion that made the most sense, he actually felt a bit better. After a few concluding messages, he ended the conversation.

The opening of Forbidden by the Immortal is nothing to take lightly. That's why the governor, lieutenant governor, and Palace Lord Kong were all opposed to it. But now the governor is dead and the palace lord was killed in battle. The only member of the old guard still around is the lieutenant governor.

As for Zhang Siyun, he lost the protection of Palace Lord Kong, which likely means that he'll be sent into Forbidden by the Immortal to wake up the red moon within him. He'll turn into a doppelg?

nger of the red moon, which will then devour the god in the forbidden ground. Is that what's going on? But why? How does the imperial prince benefit if that happens?

Xu Qing still lacked enough clues to come to a proper conclusion.

Eventually, the god's finger finished talking, retracted its aura, and went into hiding. Even the fluctuations of sleep stopped emanating out, making it seem like the finger was in a state of death. No matter how Xu Qing called to the finger, he got no response.

Regardless of the details, if the red moon wakes up, I'm going to be in serious trouble!

Xu Qing scowled. The only thing he could think to do was flee the county capital so he wasn't around when Forbidden by the Immortal was opened. However, a moment later, another thought entered his mind.

The best time to catch a big fish is during a big storm! Forbidden by the Immortal is going to be full of all sorts of precious treasures. It will be full of endless good fortune. The danger is the sleeping god. But if the red moon devours that god, then Forbidden by the Immortal will be completely open for exploration.

The red moon is the god of the Nightshades. If the imperial prince really plans to wake the red moon, then he must have an idea of what to do afterward. For one thing, he has to keep himself safe. Plus, he has a lot of people here in Sea-Sealing County. Unless he's planning to do something really insane, like feeding all of Sea-Sealing County to the red moon as a sacrifice....

In any case, if I can avoid being noticed by the red moon, then entering Forbidden by the Immortal will actually be a destined opportunity for me.

After some more thought, Xu Qing sent a voice message to the Captain. After all, the Captain seemed to be an expert in matters related to gods. Unfortunately, the Captain was still in seclusion, and didn't respond to the message.

Forcing his mind to still, he decided to simply focus on meditation. He would just wait until the Captain was out of seclusion, and then discuss the matter with him and decide what to do next.

After all, this was simply too dangerous of a situation. If the red moon awoke, trouble wouldn't just come for Xu Qing. The Captain had previously stolen some of the moon's aura. Though the moon had never gone looking for the Captain, if the Captain suddenly showed up in Forbidden by the Immortal, it could very well lead to his death.

In that manner, time passed. It got closer and closer to the day Forbidden by the Immortal would be opened.

The old Corrections Division had been almost completely excavated. It was a dark hole in the ground, so deep its bottom wasn't visible. It pulsed with endless mutagen. The imperial troops had erected special formations to dispel that mutagen, but it was still possible to hear ghostly screams and cries coming from the depths of the pit. It was almost as if there was hell at the bottom. The cries echoed out into the capital city. Everyone could hear them clearly, regardless of whether it was daytime or nighttime. It left everyone feeling anxious and jumpy.

Xu Qing kept his attention focused on that pit. Eventually, when there were only six days left before the opening, he finally got a reply from the Captain.

“Little Ah Qing! Hahahahaha! I used the Righteous Bestowal Edict to safely open one of my most important seals! This way you and I can finally travel the world together!”

The Captain was obviously very excited, which rubbed off on Xu Qing a bit. Xu Qing could sense how happy he was, and thus offered his sincere congratulations. Then he went on to explain everything he had been wrestling with lately.

The Captain’s laughter gradually turned into heavy breathing. When Xu Qing finished, the Captain severed the jade slip connection without saying a single word.

Xu Qing’s expression was the same as ever as he waved his hand. The door of the sword pavilion opened, and he started counting.

“One. Two. Three.... Seven.”

The Captain raced toward him with speed comparable to Nascent Soul. His hair was disheveled and he was gaunt. In the blink of an eye, he was at the door of the sword pavilion. Without any hesitation, he rushed inside, slammed the door, and stared at Xu Qing with a crazy look of joy in his eyes.

“Little Junior Brother, you surely know that since your Eldest Brother just opened some seals, he’s starving. That must be why you arranged for this special gift for me, right?”

Xu Qing looked the Captain up and down. The Captain looked extremely thin, like the ghost of someone who had starved to death. However, his aura was much stronger than before.

Back at the western front, the Captain had only revealed strength comparable to seven or eight heavenly palaces. But based on what Xu Qing could sense now, he was incomparably close to the Nascent Soul level. All it would take would be half a step, and he would be in that level. But there was more. He seemed to have changed on an even deeper level. The Ancient Dao Righteous Bestowal Edict that the Captain had longed for clearly turned out to be very useful.

Of course, Xu Qing expected nothing less from the Captain. Therefore, after examining the Captain, Xu Qing nodded.

“That’s right, Eldest Brother. I deduced that this breakthrough of yours was going to be very different. Therefore, I decided to put some thought into some of your most challenging obstacles.”

The Captain threw his head back and laughed uproariously. Clearly, he was very pleased with Xu Qing’s wording and attitude. It really made him feel like the Eldest Brother again. Rubbing his hands together, he started pacing back and forth in Xu Qing’s sword pavilion.

“Okay, little Junior Brother. This is definitely an amazing destined opportunity bestowed by heaven. The red moon is coming. To devour the god in Forbidden by the Immortal no less. And after they go at it for a while, the two of us—”

“Can scrape Forbidden by the Immortal clean!” Xu Qing finished with a decisive nod.

The Captain looked at Xu Qing with a very dissatisfied expression. “Little Ah Qing, you’ve been hanging out with that sissy too much lately. What happened to your sense of ambition? How could a crappy place like Forbidden by the Immortal possibly befit people like you and me, who are fathers of a heavenly dao?”

“This time, we can take advantage of the moment when those two gods are fighting... to steal a chunk of flesh from the god sleeping in Forbidden by the Immortal! Based on what you’re telling me, that god seems a bit weak. But a god is a god! Then, the two of us can secretly take a bite out of that red moon. If we succeed, just think of how goddamn badass we’ll be!!”

The Captain’s eyes were fairly glowing red.

In response, Xu Qing was breathing heavily, and his eyes were also red. He had also considered doing something like that, but it just seemed so unrealistic. Suppressing the pounding of his heart, he calmly said, “Eldest Brother, there’s no way the two of us could do that on our own. And if we mess up, it will screw up the plans of the imperial capital, which could affect all of Sea-Sealing County. We can’t let ourselves get too greedy.”

The Captain frowned. “I guess that makes sense. In the final analysis, we’re just too weak. Ai. How horrible to have some lovely meat right in front of you, but not be able to eat it...”

The Captain looked almost frantic as he plopped down in front of Xu Qing and let loose another sigh. Then he opened his mouth to speak, only to suddenly smack his own thigh. “I got it! Little Junior Brother, let’s ask Master to join us! Believe you me, the old man was the one to start this whole tradition back when he was young. Otherwise, why else would I be like this? I mean, isn’t he the one who took me along on a bunch of jobs to begin with? Granted, I got impulsive a few times, but in the end, it was really the old man who led me down this most crooked of paths!”

Xu Qing’s eyes were already glittering brightly. The Captain’s eyes were shining with just as much brightness.

“Master?” Xu Qing said questioningly.

“Exactly!” the Captain replied. “I haven’t seen the old man in a while. Last time I asked Sir Bloodsmelter about him, he said the old man just made another breakthrough! Which of course doesn’t make sense. The only way the old man could advance his cultivation so quickly is if he’s secretly eating stuff behind our backs!” [3]

The Captain yet again viciously slapped his own thigh, just like a child who had discovered their parents were having a feast in secret.

Chapter 514: But I’m His Master!

The Captain’s words made Xu Qing think back to seeing his Master back at Forbidden by the Zombie. He had been located in a spell formation that indicated his cultivation level was similar to Sir Bloodsmelter’s. Fully convinced of the Captain’s wisdom, he nodded.

Seeing Xu Qing agree to his suggestion, the Captain’s eyebrows danced up and down. “So, we need to go talk to Master. Of course, we can’t send a voice message, nor can we ask the Swordsage Court

to relay a message for us....” The Captain blinked a few times. “We need to trick Master into coming to us! Then we can explain in person.”

“So...?” Xu Qing asked hesitantly. Something about the look in the Captain’s eyes seemed concerning.

“So... we’re going to need to come up with a foolproof plan to make sure Master eagerly comes charging over here at top speed!” The Captain cleared his throat. “Consider everything, little Junior Brother. You might think that telling him one of us is about to die would be the perfect scam. But we need something realistic. If we told him that I was about to die, he would probably drop everything and speed over here immediately. All in all, Master cherishes me the most. But... I can survive with my head alone and no body. So all Master has to do is put some thought into it and he’d probably realize it was a trick.”

Face completely expressionless, Xu Qing calmly said, “Couldn’t we send him a message in code?”

“Code? Of course not! What, you think we have some secret system of code words or something? We don’t!” The Captain sighed, glanced at Xu Qing out of the corner of his eye, then continued, “Sadly, you’re going to have to take one for the team, little Junior Brother. To make things seem very realistic, you have to agree to not fight back. Don’t worry, I won’t hit too hard. You’ll probably recover within a week.

“The worst I’ll do is break your legs in a few places, stab you a few times, shatter eighty or ninety of your other bones, and splatter some of your brains out. That sort of thing. Given how many times we’ve done this, I’m pretty good at it.

“The most important thing is that, when Master sees you, he doesn’t get any indication it’s a scam. Afterward, we’ll explain the whole situation in a very logical manner. Things will definitely go very smoothly. Relax. I’ve handled this sort of thing many times in the past.”

The Captain chuckled darkly, and was virtually dancing back and forth. Whenever he opened seals, he felt it was necessary to reinforce to Xu Qing his authority as the Eldest Brother. That was especially true considering that he had been lagging behind Xu Qing a bit in cultivation. That alone was enough to make him want to make a very big point of establishing his dominance.

In response to the Captain, Xu Qing nodded and took out his command sword. After paying the requisite fee, he sent a voice message to the grand elder at the Swordsage Court in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture.

“Sorry to bother you, Grand Elder, but I’m hoping you can pass a message to my Master.”

Looking the Captain in the eye, he continued to send the message with the command sword. However, this was the type of message that someone couldn’t overhear even if they were standing there.

“Tell my Master that my Eldest Brother is dead set on marrying a cloud troll he met here in the county capital. I’ve tried to persuade him against it, but he won’t listen to me. The wedding is in three days. My Eldest Brother doesn’t dare to say anything to our Master, so I’m officially extending Master the invitation to the wedding.”

“...” The grand elder listened to the message, then suddenly laughed. He could obviously read between the lines. *“Your Master is definitely going to be very happy to hear the news.”*

“Many thanks, Grand Elder!”

Xu Qing replied solemnly. He put away his command sword and looked at his suspicious Eldest Brother.

“Why do I get the feeling something fishy is going on, little Junior Brother? Did you send the message exactly according to the plan we agreed on?”

Looking back at him solemnly, Xu Qing said, “You ought to trust me a bit more than that, Eldest Brother.”

The Captain still wasn’t completely convinced, but he rubbed his hands together nonetheless. Eyes glittering, he said, “Alright, fine. I’m going to go easy on you, little Junior Brother. Remember, I just broke through, so I’m particularly formidable right now. This is a perfect opportunity to get in some practice.” The Captain prepared to make a move.

But then Xu Qing shook his head. “Eldest Brother, the message I sent indicated that I was poisoned, and that I don’t know how to dispel the poison.”

Xu Qing produced a poisonous plant from his bag of holding and put it in his mouth. The Captain gaped at Xu Qing.

Xu Qing looked back at him innocently. “There’s no way Master would believe I was injured. That’s too... commonplace. So I said I was poisoned. As you know, I’m skilled in the dao of poison. So if I can’t dispel it, then it’s obviously a very dangerous poison.”

Next, Xu Qing took out some poison powders and consumed them.

The Captain watched. He was still convinced Xu Qing was pulling a fast one on him, but at the same time, had to admit that what Xu Qing said was logical. Besides, Xu Qing had clearly eaten a lot of the poison already.

But then the Captain thought back to previous situations, and he blinked a few times. An enigmatic smile played out on his face. “Nice try, little Junior Brother. Did you really think I would fall for that?” He chuckled sarcastically, then stretched dramatically. “Even using teleportation portals, it’s impossible to make the journey from Emperor-Receiving Prefecture to here faster than three days. Fine. I won’t beat you up. Keep eating that poison. Eat your fill. I’ll be leaving now. I need to gather some intelligence reports about Forbidden by the Immortal.”

With that, the Captain clasped his hands behind his back. Looking very pleased and extremely confident, he turned to leave.

Xu Qing watched him go, all while shaking his head and continuing to eat poison.

The Captain calmly strutted out of the sword pavilion and back to the city. Eventually, he found an alleyway. Ducking inside, he looked down at his right hand. In the palm of that hand was an eyeball which projected an image of Xu Qing eating poison.

He's still eating? Don't tell me he realized I put an eyeball in place there. No, that's not possible. After releasing the most recent seal, there's no way little Ah Qing could sense me do something like that. Then the Captain hesitated. *I'll just keep watching for a bit.*

Two days passed. It was now the eve of the day someone could arrive at the county capital if they rushed at top speed from Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. The Captain strolled into Xu Qing's sword pavilion, rubbing his belly contentedly. He sat down in front of Xu Qing.

Xu Qing's face was completely expressionless. He had greenish-black blotches all over his body, and looked like he had been seriously poisoned.

The Captain still felt suspicious. Yet for the past two days he had observed Xu Qing and noted him continuously eating poison. "Err... come on, little Junior Brother, there's no need for that!"

"When Master shows up and finds out we scammed him," Xu Qing said loudly, "he's definitely going to be pissed off." Xu Qing took out another poisonous plant and started chewing it. "Therefore, the worse I look, the less angry he'll be."

The Captain was starting to feel quite nervous, and was starting to wonder if Xu Qing's analysis was correct. If so, then the fact that Xu Qing was working so earnestly to sell the act would actually show that he respected Master.

As it turned out, there really was a dao of scamming, and apparently, Xu Qing knew all about it. Long story short, Xu Qing's way of doing things was going to ensure the Master was less pissed off. If that happened, and the Captain was perfectly hale and healthy... then Master would take that as a sign of disrespect. After all, regardless of the reason for scamming one's Master, one had to do it in the proper way. If it was a single person involved, thus providing no way to compare with someone else, then it wouldn't matter. But that wasn't the case here.

Having reached this point in his train of thought, the Captain bitterly looked at Xu Qing. Outside, the sky was already starting to turn bright. Gritting his teeth, the Captain extended his hand in Xu Qing's direction.

"Give me some poison!"

Xu Qing looked back at him quizzically. "You want some too?"

Full of grief and indignation, the Captain continued, "Give it to me!"

Xu Qing silently took out some poison and handed it to the Captain.

The Captain took it, closed his eyes, and ate. Almost instantly, his face turned greenish-black. Seeing that Xu Qing was still eating poison, he howled inwardly and did the same.

And thus, time passed. Two hours later, it was bright outside when Xu Qing's transmission jade slip vibrated. Xu Qing picked up, and Master Seventh's voice echoed out.

"Where are the two of you?"

Upon hearing Master Seventh's voice, the Captain started stuffing more poison into his mouth until he was trembling from head to toe and gasping for breath.

Eyeing the Captain, Xu Qing sent a reply indicating they were in his sword pavilion. Then he waved his hand to open the door.

Shortly thereafter, Master Seventh materialized without a sound outside the sword pavilion. It almost looked like he had been painted there by a giant, invisible paintbrush. Face completely expressionless, he entered.

Xu Qing tried to stand, but only managed to cough up a mouthful of poisoned blood. Bowing his head, he said, "Master..."

"Nice acting. You know scamming your Master is wrong, right? However, it looks like you've been consuming poison for days to sell the act." Master Seventh's gaze softened as he looked at Xu Qing. "Hm. Yes, that's the right attitude."

When the Captain saw that, he struggled to rise, only to vomit.

Master Seventh smiled grimly, walked over, and kicked the Captain. A thump rang out as the Captain flew up into the air and then landed on his butt in a sitting position.

"Your acting skills aren't as good. Just look at you! You hardly ate any poison at all. Why didn't you learn a thing or two from your Junior Brother?"

"Master, I miss you so much!" the Captain said, ignoring his smarting butt to look plaintively at Master Seventh.

Off to the side, Xu Qing just looked on with a pained expression, as if he wanted to say something but didn't dare.

Master Seventh snorted coldly. After one more glare at the Captain, he turned to look at Xu Qing, and yet again, his gaze softened. "Fourth Sib, you've never been the kind of kid who makes a practice of lying. Given that, it's obvious your Eldest Brother forced you into this whole thing. It makes sense, considering your Eldest Brother is a habitual criminal."

Xu Qing bowed his head. "Master, Eldest Brother and I came up with the idea together."

"Even now you're still trying to speak up for your Eldest Brother?" Master Seventh's eyes overflowed with praise. He quickly pulled out some very expensive antidote pills and handed them to Xu Qing. "Hurry up and eat those. Poor child. You're just too honest."

With that, Master Seventh turned and glared at the Captain again. "Look at you! What kind of an Eldest Brother are you? I can't believe you went so far as to force your Junior Brother to do all this. If you want me to come over here, you could just send a message in code! Your Junior Brother became an apprentice much later than you, so he doesn't know all the code words. But you know them, don't you? Wasn't I the one who personally taught them to you when I took you out on all those missions years ago? What, you released another seal so you're all smug now? Or are you just hoping to get a good thrashing again?"

The Captain shivered and shook his head. Then he noticed Xu Qing looked at him silently, and he cleared his throat awkwardly.

Meanwhile, Xu Qing betrayed no facial expression as he put the antidote pills in his mouth and swallowed them. He also took out a few medicinal plants and ate them. Moments later, the poison within him was dispelled. During the two days in which he constantly ate poisonous plants, he had used the principles of mutual augmentation and suppression to carefully make the right mix of poisons. As a result, all he had to do was consume the right medicinal plants, and the poison would instantly be neutralized.

But the Captain had only eaten one portion of poison, which had instantly turned his face greenish-black. When the Captain saw that Xu Qing was already back to normal, his eyes went wide, and he opened his mouth to speak.

“Enough!” Master Seventh said, cutting off the Captain. “Spit it out. Why did the two of you go to this much trouble to scam your Master over here?”

The Captain looked like he was about to launch into an explanation, but Master Seventh shot him a glare. “You can just shut up. Simply hearing your voice is going to piss me off!”

Looking hurt, and somewhat depressed, the Captain thought, *All I did was open a seal! I was just trying to establish some authority with little Ah Qing. How did things end up like this...?*

“You explain, Fourth Sib.”

Looking very respectful, Xu Qing explained everything in detail. He even told his Master about the god’s finger, and how it had transformed him.

It was the Captain’s first time hearing such details, and his eyes went wide.

Master Seventh glared at the Captain again. Though Master Seventh didn’t seem surprised by what Xu Qing was telling him, if you looked at him very closely, you would notice that his eyelids had twitched a few times. When Xu Qing finished, Master Seventh gave a cold harrumph.

“The two of you have really done some daring things in Gold Core. And you’re even plotting against gods! Thankfully, Fourth Sib, you cleverly thought to tell your Master about all this. I understand the situation now. Going forward, don’t put any more thought into it. Just go into Forbidden by the Immortal and act normal.”

With that, Master Seventh turned to walk out. After giving the Captain one more glare on the way, he faded into nothing.

When Master Seventh materialized in the county capital, his aura was masked, and he was struggling to control his breathing. Massive waves of shock battered at his mind and heart.

I recruited a real monster as my apprentice....

Then, he started laughing complacently. A proud expression filled his face.

But I’m his Master!

Back in the sword pavilion, the Captain looked at Xu Qing, his eyes bleary. “Little Junior Brother, what message did you send to Master? He seemed pissed off the moment he saw me.”

“So, Eldest Brother, as it turns out there *are* code words,” Xu Qing said calmly.

“Heyyy, it’s all good,” the Captain said, getting to his feet. Giving Xu Qing a hug, he produced a very familiar-looking crystal. He pressed it into Xu Qing’s hand. Flashing a very sincere smile full of familial love, he said, “Little Junior Brother, I was just joking around with you! Don’t you feel the bitterness and pain of the battlefield easing away? Ever since we got back, I’ve been worried about you!”

Xu Qing looked at the Captain, stunned.

The Captain smiled back, his eyes full of warmth and kindness. “Oh, you! You take everything so seriously! Your face is always so expressionless! And that’s especially the case when you’re hurting inside. That’s really not the way to do things.

“You’re not alone, little Ah Qing. You have the patriarch. You have Master. You have me. You have Second Elder Sister and Third Sib! We all care about you. We’re a family! Therefore, you don’t need to keep everything inside all the time. You can talk to us!

“I said before that we should travel the world together. I was serious about that. And not just you and me. All of us, as a family! Together, traveling the world!”

In that moment, the Captain truly seemed like a big brother. Xu Qing’s heart swelled with warmth. He was truly moved.

Then the Captain cleared his throat. “And that’s why I was wondering if you could get rid of this poison for me!”

Chapter 515: Broken Sword Life Lamp

Xu Qing finally gave some antidote pills to the Captain, which successfully purged the poison.

Afterward, the Captain happily produced a peach, took a bite, and patted Xu Qing on the shoulder. “We don’t have a thing to worry about now that Master’s here. The old man is a lot more experienced and knowledgeable than the two of us. And he’s even better at knowing the ins and outs of society in general. All we have to do now is just wait until he figures everything out for us. Oh, by the way, little Ah Qing, do you mind asking Ol’ Kong to do me a favor? I’m bringing a good friend to see him later today.”

Xu Qing looked pensively at the peach in the Captain’s hand. “If you’re going to see him, what do you need me to message him for? And who are you taking to see him?”

The Captain cleared his throat, looked left and right, and then lowered his voice. “I went yesterday... and boy is Ol’ Kong stingy. Thankfully, I helped him save Sir Mountain-River. Hmmmphh! He’s obviously just jealous that I’m your Eldest Brother; that’s why he doesn’t like me. Ai. I really have the short end of the stick here. If he’s such hot stuff, why doesn’t he go see if Master will accept him as an apprentice, huh?”

“As for who I’m taking to see him, who else do you think it could possibly be other than my most beloved and amazing Lady Peachy?” The Captain was trying to look very casual and relaxed, but was obviously very pleased with himself. [1]

“You two know each other?” Xu Qing looked at the Captain.

“Of course! I just happened to notice Lady Peachy outside Yao Mansion the other day. When I saw her big boo... ahem, I mean, her depressed and despondent facial expression, I realized there wasn’t even an ounce of happiness in that little face of hers. My heart literally hurt, little Ah Qing! So I went over to comfort her a bit. And I ended up promising to take her to see the Yao Clan people.” Looking anxiously at Xu Qing, the Captain took a big bite out of the peach. “Big talk isn’t going to help me at this point, little Junior Brother.... Look, this is really important. It relates to what could well be the biggest day of your Eldest Brother’s life!”

Xu Qing took out his command sword and sent a voice message to Kong Xianglong. Upon getting a reply, he gave the Captain an expressionless nod.

The Captain laughed heartily, then hurried away looking very excited.

Xu Qing watched him until he’d vanished. The weight he’d been feeling in his heart thanks to the war was finally starting to lessen.

Eldest Brother was right. Getting stronger is the foundation for everything.

He closed his eyes, then opened them a moment later. This time, they looked just as calm and peaceful as they had in the past. Walking out of his sword pavilion, he headed in the direction of the Swordsage Palace.

His plan: buy a new life lamp.

As far as he was concerned, the fastest way to improve his cultivation base and battle prowess was by using a life lamp.

I currently have ten heavenly palaces. I got seven of them through raw cultivation. Three of them were made from life lamps. For cultivators concerned about heavenly palaces, life flames form the foundation for life lamps. Before, I had five life flames, which means I can actually have a maximum of five life lamps.

With such thoughts on his mind, he reached the Treasure Hall of the Swordsage Palace. This was the location where you could exchange military credits for rewards. A lot of military credits had been passed out as rewards for war efforts, and thus, many of the surviving swordsages had come to buy new things at the Treasure Hall. When Xu Qing arrived, he spotted a few familiar faces in the crowd.

There were even some officers and soldiers from the Imperial Region. Though they weren’t swordsages, they qualified to purchase items from the three palaces, although there was a limit to how much they were allowed to take away. That was the result of a petition sent to Seventh Prince by the deputy palace lord.

The Swordsage Palace's Treasure Hall didn't just sell goods. They also bought goods. In other words, swordsages could trade in spoils of war to get military credits.

As a result, the Treasure Hall was in some ways a self-propagating market. Going there, you could find everything from fragments of ancient scrolls to high-tier magical devices and cultivation techniques. They also had... life lamps! Previously, there had been two life lamps for sale.

There was no such thing as high-level and low-level life lamps. That said, they differed in their functions. Upon arriving, Xu Qing found that one of the life lamps had already been purchased, meaning there was only one for sale now. The price listed wasn't in military credits. Instead, it required grade-two battle credits. Xu Qing had enough battle credits to buy one lamp, so he did.

Then he cautiously made his way back to his sword pavilion without incident. It made Xu Qing recall what Kong Xianglong had said about Seventh Prince enforcing military law. It was the same across the board, whether Xu Qing and the Captain handing in the dao fruits, or other people handing over spoils of war. Neither Xu Qing nor Kong Xianglong nor any other swordsage was being treated badly. And no one dared to try to rob them.

Any exchange of military or battle credits, and any sale or purchase, was a personal matter. Just like before, the Swordsage Palace didn't try to take advantage of anyone. The people who came to exchange their credits had all earned them through blood, sweat, and tears on the field of battle. There was no way that the Swordsage Palace, whether the old version or the new, would allow such people to be treated poorly. That was what Seventh Prince had said.

"It's the old balance of kindness and severity. This Seventh Prince is quite formidable. He's obviously not interested in piddling financial profit. He has bigger ambitions." That's what Kong Xianglong said on the subject. Clearly he had mixed feelings about the situation.

When Xu Qing thought about everything that had played out since Seventh Prince arrived, he sighed inwardly. On a personal level, he didn't like the imperial prince. But when you considered the bigger picture, it was true that everything he was doing was for the public interest. As for whether he was ultimately doing the right thing, opinions differed.

Xu Qing shook his head. Stowing such thoughts for now, he took out his new life lamp.

It looked like a black, broken sword. The aggressive energy it emanated contained an astonishing baleful aura. Clearly, whoever had originally created this life lamp had been a prolific killer. When they made the life lamp from their own blood, it contained raw killing intent that made it different from all of Xu Qing's other life lamps.

One difference between getting a life lamp in the Swordsage Palace and taking one by force on the outside was that the former came with a record of the lamp's history. When purchasing the lamp, Xu Qing had also acquired a jade slip with all the details of the lamp.

"This is an immortal-shredding god-devouring lamp. The bloodline of the lamp traces back to the ninth heavenly marshal of the Epoch of Profound Serenity. However, it wasn't the lamp of the heavenly marshal. Instead, it belonged to one of his descendants, a general who lived during the Dark Serenity Epoch and died in battle. It focuses on killing, destroying magics, and drinking blood. Because of the evil will that has converged in it,

those who use it risk being gradually turned into psychopathic killers. Anyone not accustomed to killing should be very cautious with it.

Xu Qing reviewed the information, then looked at the black, broken sword. After some thought, he decided to do an experiment, and used the violet crystal to try to suppress the sword just like he had the shadow. After suppressing it well over a hundred times, he felt a bit less worried. The shadow looked on, trembling. Xu Qing ignored it.

Taking the black, broken sword, he spent a bit more time to think before turning his hand semitransparent, grabbing the sword, and inserting it into his sea of consciousness, very close to his D-132 heavenly palace.

He hesitated briefly, then put it into D-132.

The god's finger was asleep, but Xu Qing put the sword next to it anyway. He poked the finger gently a few times, and it didn't react, which made him feel a bit less nervous. Though he had already attempted to purge the sword, he figured that just in case it wasn't as clean as he thought it was, placing it next to the god's finger could serve as a warning. Whatever evil will existed in the sword should know to behave, otherwise it would be in trouble.

Having accomplished that, Xu Qing next tapped into his heavenly dao bluegreen dragon. After it appeared, it gobbled up the broken sword. Then the bluegreen dragon used its heavenly dao nature to assimilate the sword. After that, Xu Qing placed it next to the violet crystal as if it were a food offering. After all of that, Xu Qing was fairly certain he heard something like a very faint and distant shriek of agony.

He blinked a few times and ignored it. Now he felt a lot better. Taking the broken sword, he absorbed it. An instant later, the life mist above his sea of consciousness vibrated and rumbled as a sword-shaped heavenly palace took shape.

It materialized rapidly, taking no longer than the time it takes an incense stick to burn.

As of that point, Xu Qing had eleven heavenly palaces.

The moment it appeared, powerful fluctuations rolled out in all directions, filling his sword pavilion. His aura became even fiercer, like that of a sharp, unsheathed sword, full of baleful intent that could slaughter heaven and eradicate earth.

If a Nascent Soul cultivator were present to feel the fluctuations coming off Xu Qing, they would be absolutely shocked. Xu Qing's eleven heavenly palaces were completely and utterly stupefying.

The objects people would use for their heavenly palaces were all different, and worked together in different ways. Because of that, there could be vast differences in Gold Core cultivators, even those with the same number of palaces.

As for Xu Qing, whether it was the number or the quality of his palaces, although it was possible there might be someone else in the Revered Ancient who was similar, they would only be outstanding figures with access to destiny aura, and who were the most famous in their species.

Right now I don't need to worry about my last life lamp. For all intents and purposes I'm already in the great circle!

Xu Qing's sea of consciousness now contained eleven complete heavenly palaces. However, he still had one that wasn't yet fully materialized.

Hopefully this trip into Forbidden by the Immortal will be just what I need to finish my final non-life-lamp heavenly palace!

Xu Qing's eyes glittered brightly before he closed them to focus on stabilizing and powering his new heavenly palace.

In that matter, time slipped by slowly but surely.

It was now the very day that Forbidden by the Immortal was to be opened.

When Xu Qing's command sword vibrated, he opened his eyes. They glittered with an aggressive light, which he subsequently reined in. Face expressionless, he got to his feet and left his sword pavilion. Kong Xianglong was waiting for him outside.

Their eyes met, and then they looked in the direction of where the Corrections Division used to exist.

The entire area had been excavated. Mutagen pulsed out of it, along with what sounded like the wail of ghosts and howl of wolves. The sounds were very unsettling. Timid people who heard the screams coming from the depths of that pit would feel an eruption of cowardice within them, and wouldn't dare to get very close.

However, the first wave of cultivators who would be entering Forbidden by the Immortal were Sea-Sealing County swordsages who had lived through hundreds of battles. Some had severe injuries that weren't yet fully healed. However, all of them were extraordinary in terms of character. They had experienced the baptism of war, and had been tempered in the fires of hell....

Every single one had towering baleful auras, and had slaughtered countless foes. Every single one had faced death over and over again, yet weren't afraid. Their temperaments had been refined to the ultimate level.

Other cultivators from the county capital had gathered to watch the proceedings, and compared to them, the group about to enter Forbidden by the Immortal was completely different. Although there weren't very many of them, they were all people who would stand out in a crowd. Now, gathered together in a unified fighting force, they were even more impressive. The officers and soldiers from the Imperial Region, who had not gone through such intense wartime events, only served as foils to them.

As they stood there, they attracted the attention of everyone in the area.

Then Xu Qing and Kong Xianglong arrived.

Both were tall and somewhat thin, and their white swordsage uniforms rippled in the wind, making them seem cold and austere. One had crude facial features and the stubble of a beard on his face. The other had features as fine as jade, and eyes that were tranquil and calm.

When the other swordsages saw them, their eyes glittered. Offering a military salute, they parted to make a path for them. It was the first unified action those swordsages had taken since gathering.

Xu Qing and Kong Xianglong didn't pause for a moment. They walked through the crowd to the front, where they stood alongside the dozens of Spirit Trove swordsages there. They didn't match up to those swordsages in terms of cultivation base, but in terms of the services they had rendered, they definitely could stand shoulder to shoulder with them. Their auras combined perfectly with those of the other veterans.

The observers were all shaken, including the soldiers and officers from the imperial capital, as well as various nonhuman cultivators.

A moment later, Seventh Prince arrived. As he hovered in the air above, the people who stood out to him first were Xu Qing and Kong Xianglong.

"That's the Xu Qing I've heard so much about?" Seventh Prince asked.

The lieutenant governor nodded. "Yes, Your Majesty. Xu Qing was previously serving as the palace lord's secretary-general. During the Grand Emperor's assessment of the heart, he earned a 30,000-meter pillar of light, making him the top figure in Sea-Sealing County. When we urgently needed supplies on the front lines, he got them to us. He was also the one who arranged for the forces of two prefectures to arrive at the western front to provide critical relief. He's performed amazing services for our Sea-Sealing County. He was one of the few people to earn grade-two battle credits during the war."

Seventh Prince didn't seem to care about the other services Xu Qing had performed. Upon hearing the lieutenant governor's introduction, he only said four words.

"A 30,000-meter heart assessment?"

"Yes, sir," the lieutenant governor replied with a faint smile.

Chapter 516: Forbidden by the Immortal

The people standing in front of the crowd of roughly a hundred swordsages were all Spirit Trove experts. They were middle-ranking cultivators in the Swordsage Palace, and had been officers in the various battalions during the war. Because of surviving countless battles, they were all extraordinary cultivators. During the war, even if they were taken out of their unit and assigned somewhere else, they would quickly gain approval because of their ferocity and bravery.

However, that led to a unique state of affairs. There were many people who approved of them, but few people *they* approved of. Being a comrade wasn't enough for them. They would only respect people who had accomplished great things and had respectable statuses. Xu Qing had accomplished great things. And Kong Xianglong had a respectable status. That was why those two had the tacit approval to stand among the Spirit Trove cultivators.

When they arrived, the other cultivators exchanged glances, then quietly looked at the huge pit in front of them. The depths were pitch black, and it was impossible to see the bottom. The mutagen was clearly very strong. However, when that mutagen got close to Xu Qing, he actually felt comfortable, as if he could absorb it.

That made his pupils constrict slightly, and he could only assume it had to do with his body being remolded by the god's finger. However, now wasn't the time to study the situation. He didn't want to reveal his secrets publicly.

Therefore, he held back from absorbing it. However, he did release a bit of the power of his D-132 heavenly palace, creating something of a barrier around himself.

The sound of howling and weeping was more intense, and it battered at their minds and hearts like attacks. More swordsages were gathering. Qing Qiu and Ning Yan were among them. The Captain was, too. The other swordsages didn't part to make way for them. Qing Qiu and Ning Yan simply lined up in the back.

The Captain didn't care about formalities, so he shouldered his way through the crowd, calling out greetings to people he knew along the way. The surrounding swordsages were all a grave and expressionless lot, but even they had a hard time maintaining their composure with the Captain around, and quite a few wry smiles could be seen. All of them were very familiar with this Chen Erniu. Chen Erniu's name had spread far and wide on the front lines. After all, he was the type of person who liked to make friends. Therefore, just about every survivor of the war had at least met him. That was especially true considering that the Captain had, for at least a time, been assigned to go back to the battlefield during lulls in the fighting, to retrieve corpses. Quite a few heavily wounded and unconscious swordsages had actually been saved by him.

"Coming through, Brother! I've got to get past you!"

"Well, if it isn't Ol' Cao! Don't think you can block my path just because you have a higher cultivation base. Remember, I'm the one who dragged you out of that pile of corpses. I even stuffed your intestines back into your gut!"

"Hey, Little Apricot! Your arm is certainly taking its time growing back. Once we're back from this mission I'll give you some medicine that will help. Trust me, I have experience with that sort of thing."

The Captain didn't have much trouble carving a path through the crowd until he was eventually standing next to Xu Qing and Kong Xianglong. He even called out greetings to some of the Spirit Trove cultivators he knew. The Spirit Trove cultivators had odd expressions on their faces when they glanced at the Captain. A few of them had also been saved by Chen Erniu, and some had eaten meat that he gifted to them.

Kong Xianglong's eyelids twitched. Though his attitude toward the Captain had changed now that they were fellow war veterans, he still hadn't completely shaken his original negative impression.

The Captain didn't notice Kong Xianglong's reaction. After calling out greetings, he threw his arm over Kong Xianglong's shoulder. Kong Xianglong tried to brush the Captain's arm off, but it didn't work. The Captain chuckled darkly.

"Now now, Ol' Kong. Your facial expression seems to indicate you're annoyed with me. Don't forget that I carried Sir Mountain-River to safety on my own back!"

Kong Xianglong didn't say anything in response.

Seeing that, the Captain felt very pleased. Turning to Xu Qing, he gave him a manly hug, then winked and lowered his voice. "Have you seen the old man? He hasn't shown up at all for the past few days. I guarantee you he didn't leave, though. Maybe since we scammed him, he's planning to return the favor?"

The Captain looked around at the cultivators present, hoping to spot Master Seventh.

Xu Qing was secretly surprised. Along the way, he'd been looking around as well, but hadn't spotted any signs of his Master's presence.

Around the time that the Captain arrived, a faint ripple of conversation swept through the group of about a hundred cultivators, as Seventh Prince appeared overhead along with notable leaders from the county capital.

Seventh Prince wore a yellow robe and had long, flowing hair. He was unusually handsome, with slender eyes and a noble aura that surrounded him. Flanking him were the lieutenant governor, the three commanders-in-chief of the three palaces, the deputy palace lords, and other generals and officers.

One person among the group wore blood-red armor and had a vicious helmet that made his facial features impossible to discern. The only thing visible through the mask were cold eyes. As he stood there, he pulsed with a bloody, baleful aura.

With the arrival of this group, the swordsages all stood at attention. The mutagen coming from the old Corrections Division was stifled, and the howling from inside ceased temporarily.

All eyes were on Seventh Prince as he landed on the ground.

There weren't just swordsages gathered by the huge pit. There were also officers and soldiers from the imperial capital. All of them were in the first wave to enter the forbidden ground.

After looking over the group, Seventh Prince said, "Forbidden by the Immortal is deeply connected to the war currently being waged.

"You, the first wave to enter the place, are the most outstanding talents in our species. Your task is to clear out any vile fiends you find so that the second wave can enter safely. You have four days. After the second wave enters, you'll be free to leave. That is your mission.

"Generalissimo Bloodhorror."

In response to Seventh Prince's words, the figure in the blood-red armor stepped forward and knelt.

"Here, sir!"

Seventh Prince took the sword from his side and handed it to the kneeling figure. "I hope you win a quick victory."

"Thank you, Your Majesty!" Bloodhorror said, reaching up with both hands to formally accept the sword. Then he stood, turned, and spoke in a voice as cold as winter. "Let Forbidden by the Immortal be opened!"

An intense rumbling sound echoed out from the depths of the old Corrections Division. The sound drifted far and wide, and shockwaves spread out in all directions. The ground quaked, and it was even possible to see distant mountains shifting. Some collapsed as though subterranean dragons were on the move. Crevices opened up in the ground, and green smoke billowed out. The sun and moon were obscured, and all heaven and earth was cast into darkness.

The reason was that opening the depths of the old Corrections Division was like opening the doors of hell itself. The mutagen levels skyrocketed instantly. Although spell formations had been prepared to mitigate the effects, and immediately kicked into effect to cleanse the surroundings, it wasn't possible to instantly drive away the mutagen that had been building up for years and years.

That said, Seventh Prince had clearly prepared well in advance for this event. Troops poured into the area, and all of them carried fist-sized cages. When they opened the cages, figures flew out from inside that rapidly grew larger until they were the size of people.

These were Holytide prisoners of war, and all of them had been specially implanted with unique devices designed for this specific situation. Looks of terror appeared on their faces as they became like black holes, sucking in all of the surrounding mutagen.

A moment later, the Holytide cultivators' screams filled the area.

Thanks to the devices implanted in them, they didn't explode from the mutagen. Instead, they mutated, turning into mindless mutant beasts that the surrounding imperial cultivators then chained up and dragged away to be put into new cages. When the first round of prisoners was exhausted, more were brought. The scene playing out was shocking to all the onlookers.

From beginning to end, Seventh Prince simply stood there, his face completely expressionless. Eventually, more than two million prisoners of war had been turned into mutant beasts. Only then did the mutagen levels finally drop to about eighty or ninety percent.

Voice cool, Seventh Prince said, "Take the two million mutant beast soldiers and send them to the front lines. Give them to the Holytides as a little gift. In the coming days, bring the rest of the prisoners of war here and have them continue absorbing the mutagen. Do not let the mutagen here affect Sea-Sealing County in any way!" With that, Seventh Prince turned to look at the assembled cultivators. "Suitable, no?"

The lieutenant governor nodded. The three deputy palace lords bowed their heads. Everyone else offered tacit agreement by maintaining respectful silence.

"In that case, the first wave shall now enter." As he turned and left, everyone present offered respectful salutes.

The lieutenant governor and the three commanders-in-chief floated up into the air, but didn't leave with the imperial prince. Instead, they stayed behind to oversee the proceedings and ensure nothing dangerous happened.

Meanwhile, the person responsible for leading the event, Generalissimo Bloodhorror, made the final arrangements to enter the forbidden ground.

The four honor guards of the Swordsage Palace would also be going along. They included Daoist Sima and Honor Guard Sun, plus two imperial swordsages who had come with Seventh Prince, both of whom were in the second stage of Void Returning. Honor guards from the Justice Palace and Administration Palace were also coming.

After they flew into the pit, the rest of the cultivators entered, including the officers and soldiers from the imperial capital.

Xu Qing moved with the Swordsage Palace group.

It didn't take long for hundreds of thousands of cultivators to follow Generalissimo Bloodhorror into the pit. After, spell formations flared to life to completely seal the area, including many that had been set up by the imperial forces. Down in the pit, cultivators flew along at top speed. The vanguard was responsible for checking the area ahead thoroughly. Those in the rear followed in a very orderly fashion.

The lower they got, the colder it became. The mutagen levels rose as well.

When they reached the bottom, Xu Qing caught sight of a massive stone spell formation that looked extremely ancient. It was made of numerous stone obelisks covered with complicated magical symbols. The middle of the formation had collapsed, and was now nothing but a gaping hole surrounded by rubble. Inside of that hole was what appeared to be another world.

That was Forbidden by the Immortal, which of course was once an operations palace of Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity. Long ago, it hadn't been located under the ground. But in later years, after the humans sealed it, it was buried in the bottom of a huge pit.

As Xu Qing examined the area, the Captain stood next to him doing the same. Further back, Qing Qiu and Ning Yan were among the forces that were still arriving and getting into formation.

When the Captain noticed Ning Yan, his face lit up. Hurrying over, he threw his arm around Ning Yan's neck and dragged him over to where Xu Qing was. Trying to look very sincere, the Captain said, "Do you know how much I missed you, Little Ningning? Did you miss me too?"

Ning Yan smiled enigmatically. "No, I didn't."

Back in the capital city, in a certain mansion, Ning Yan slowly opened his eyes. He looked around blankly for a moment. Then his eyes snapped open even wider, and he raced out of the mansion.

Moving at top speed, he soon reached the edge of the capital city. Looking down, he saw the spell formations around the old Corrections Division, and noted the lack of any people in the area. He immediately started howling inwardly.

I'm finished! How could I have overslept? This is impossible! I want to go into Forbidden by the Immortal too! W-w-what... what do I do now?

Scowling on the verge of tears, he looked around and then hurried back toward the mansion, worried that he might be spotted and branded as a deserter. However, along the way, he came to a very terrifying realization.

And that was... he had apparently lost his identity, his name, and even any sense of existence. It was a very strange feeling. Simply put, everyone he knew seemed to have forgotten his name and who he was. They treated him like a complete stranger. It was as if his identity and name had been taken away from him!

A god magic!

The realization caused Ning Yan to shiver. Then he vaguely remembered someone telling him to go find a place to hole up for a few days, after which everything would go back to normal.

Chapter 517: It's Not Easy To Disobey Master

Deep in the old Corrections Division, cultivators were gathering around the stone obelisks.

Xu Qing was among the first to arrive, but he didn't get close to the hole in the middle of the formation. He kept his distance, and took time to warily assess his surroundings.

Within that hole was Forbidden by the Immortal, and it was dark and full of mist. Obviously that was a result of the mutagen. Within the swirling mists, it was just barely possible to see palaces and other buildings. There were howls and shrieks that floated about as well, making it seem as if they were standing in front of the gates to the Yellow Springs.

As Xu Qing looked around, the Captain looked in surprise at Ning Yan.

His response from moments ago left the Captain with the distinct impression that Ning Yan could use a good biting. Smiling mysteriously, he tousled Ning Yan's hair and licked his lips.

"How very naughty of you, little Ningning!"

Ning Yan smiled back just as mysteriously. Then he lifted his right hand, and it was hard to tell if he intended to strike a blow or struggle free from the Captain's arm. Then he looked around and seemed to get himself under control. Turning his head, he ignored the Captain.

The Captain seemed pleased with his behavior. Naturally, he didn't think Ning Yan would ever dare to hit him, which in turn meant that he'd been thinking of struggling free. But then he'd come to the conclusion that it was in his best interests to abandon such thoughts.

"That's much better, little Ningning. You see, I really, really missed you. Really!"

Chuckling darkly, the Captain dragged Ning Yan in front of Xu Qing. There, the Captain winked. Though few people would understand what he meant by such a facial expression, Xu Qing understood instantly. He was telling Xu Qing that their tool was ready to use.

Xu Qing glanced at Ning Yan and was about to speak when a group of cultivators arrived wearing black robes with deep hoods, and who pulsed with strange fluctuations. Most of them seemed cold and sinister in a way that was very different from ordinary cultivators. It was as if they all cultivated unique techniques that, though different from each other, merged together perfectly. Anyone who looked at them would feel a strange sensation that would prompt them to keep as much distance as possible.

It was very telling that most of the imperial cultivators in the area backed away to give them space. What was most noteworthy was that there was one cultivator in this group whose aura was different from the others. The others clustered around him, almost as if they were guarding him, but at the same time, were keeping him prisoner.

This figure stumbled a bit as he walked. His cultivation base was in the Gold Core level, and as he neared the huge hole in the spell formation, the wind created by the mutagen lifted the corner of his hood to reveal part of his face.

It was none other than Zhang Siyun. He looked a lot different than he had half a month ago. Before, he had been wan, sallow, and dispirited. Now, though, his face was covered with a shocking display of red veins, almost like a spider web. He seemed very gruish, but at the same time, appeared to be in a lot of pain.

Xu Qing quickly looked away. At the same time, he thought back to what the god's finger had told him.

The red moon is about to awaken.

He quietly took a few steps backward.

When the Captain saw all that, his smile vanished, and he also backed up, dragging Ning Yan with him. It was hard to tell if Ning Yan did it on purpose, but when he backed up, he made sure to stand in a way that blocked the line of sight between the black-robed group and Xu Qing and the Captain.

After arriving, the black-robed cultivators scanned the area, then took up a position off to the side.

Eventually, Generalissimo Bloodhorror flew out to hover above the giant hole. As his baleful, bloody aura spread to fill the area, he glanced at the hole and then said, "Void Returning will go in first. Then Spirit Trove."

The honor guards from the three palaces as well as the generals from the imperial capital unhesitatingly stepped forward and entered the hole. The mists within seethed, and howling sounds echoed out briefly. Then everything went quiet, and a glittering white light could be seen inside the hole.

"Now, all other forces will enter!" he barked. Stepping forward, he entered the hole. The other cultivators followed.

Xu Qing and the Captain were among them, as were Qing Qiu and Kong Xianglong.

After dropping into the hole, a new world opened up in front of Xu Qing. Everything was so hazy it wasn't possible to see how far the world stretched out. Structures were visible in the mists, but because they were high in the sky, it wasn't possible to make out many details. That said, they seemed old. Mutagen levels were high, and faint shrieks and howls could be heard in the distance. There was no natural sky. Rather, the dome of heaven was the work of human hands.

It looked almost like a huge mirror. However, it wasn't flat. Instead, it was distorted in an odd way. And those distortions were even more pronounced in the spot where they had just entered. There, the canopy of heaven looked almost like a funnel leading into a passage. In fact, it resembled the inside of a bottle.

As Xu Qing noted all these things, he realized he suddenly felt an intense discomfort, like a longing to absorb his surroundings. Now wasn't the time to do something rash, so he suppressed the sensation.

Keeping his arm locked tight around Ning Yan, the Captain looked around and projected a message to Xu Qing.

"Little Junior Brother, do you think we're actually inside of a bottle?"

As Xu Qing considered that, he looked to the side as the black-robed cultivators whisked Zhang Siyun off into the distance. They obviously had a specific destination in mind, as they quickly disappeared into the mists.

Seeing that, Xu Qing and the Captain exchanged an anxious glance.

"What gives, little Junior Brother. Where's Master?"

Xu Qing considered the question, then replied, "Maybe he's using a special technique to come here. Or perhaps he's in such a good disguise that we have no way of identifying him."

The Captain nodded. *“That would make sense. The old man has always been a shady character. He probably used some unknown method to sneak in. Based on what I know of him, the moment he heard the word ‘god’ he probably started drooling like a waterfall. In other words, the two of us should head inside and help ourselves to some initial refreshments.”*

The Captain’s eyes glittered as he looked down at the swirling mists.

Xu Qing thought about it for a moment, then nodded.

During their conversation, the Captain kept a tight grip on Ning Yan, as if he were worried about him fleeing. When the nearby mist seemed to flow past Ning Yan’s face as if to avoid it, Ning Yan looked at the Captain out of the corner of his eye. Neither Xu Qing nor the Captain noticed that. After finishing their conversation, they dropped down with the rest of the cultivators.

The Captain kept a firm grip on Ning Yan, leading the way, with Xu Qing following. Before long, they were down within the mists, along with the rest of the cultivators. Almost immediately, the rumble of combat started echoing out.

It was possible to see huge mutant beasts in the mists, which were already attacking the Void Returning and Spirit Trove cultivators.

This far down, they were able to see the surrounding buildings more clearly. It was a very large location that resembled a palace complex. Palace halls, temples, and other structures created a huge city. Everything seemed very ancient and gruish.

The reason for that was that the structures were all covered with wriggling, purplish-black flesh. In fact, it wasn’t just the buildings that were covered with that horrendous flesh. It was the ground too.

Then a cold voice echoed out through the mists. “Everyone, purge this area and create a safe landing zone!”

It was an order from Generalissimo Bloodhorror. Instantly, the hundreds of thousands of cultivators who had come on the mission got to work. There were many tasks at hand. Some piloted war puppets to kill the enemies in the mists. Others started setting up spell formations. Still others focused on purging the mutagen and the flesh from the area. Most operated in small teams.

Xu Qing and the Captain were among them. Qing Qiu, Kong Xianglong, and the others had been pulled into other teams, and were nowhere to be seen.

Things went according to plan. Before long, a small area had been completely cleared. Then they started expanding that area outward. Whenever a team ran into a situation they couldn’t handle, they would report the matter. It would go up the chain of command, and then a powerful expert would arrive to help. Under Generalissimo Bloodhorror’s leadership, everything went smoothly.

Xu Qing and the Captain finally got a good look at the mutant beasts. They had blackish-violet skin, and weren’t intelligent at all. However, they pulsed with mutagen, and had extraordinary battle prowess. Furthermore, they were huge.

Sometime after arriving, when they had established a rather large area of safety, they stopped to rest. For one thing, the strong mutagen meant that everyone had to take time to purge themselves, lest they risk mutation.

During the rest period, Xu Qing and the Captain accepted a reconnaissance mission so they could leave. They took Ning Yan with them.

“There’s no point in sticking around here,” the Captain said. “We don’t have to worry about mutagen, so we need to go find some refreshments. Otherwise this whole trip will be a waste. With Ning Yan here, things should go very smoothly.”

Xu Qing glanced at Ning Yan and felt a bit sorry for him. For this entire time, the Captain hadn’t relaxed his grip on Ning Yan one bit. He was obviously worried about their ‘tool’ escaping. Ning Yan seemed to have simply accepted his fate, and mostly maintained silence.

Seeing how Ning Yan was acting, Xu Qing eventually said, “Eldest Brother, isn’t your arm getting tired? Maybe you should let Ning Yan go for a bit.”

“Tired?” the Captain said solemnly. “Are you kidding? I’m just trying to keep Little Ningning safe!” He looked at Ning Yan with a very sincere expression. “Don’t worry, Little Ningning. Since you’re coming along, I’ll make sure you get some nice meat to eat!”

The Captain suddenly reached out and tousled Ning Yan’s hair again. He wasn’t sure why, but after tousling Ning Yan’s hair that first time, he’d fallen in love with the action. It felt strangely good.

Ning Yan struggled to control his breathing as he stared fixedly at the Captain. “You’re here to get some good loot, right? Before coming in, I got my hands on some intelligence reports, so I know the exact direction to go. There should be some nice stuff there. Why don’t you let me lead the way?”

The Captain blinked a few times, then smiled happily. At the same time, he secretly projected a message to Xu Qing. *“Little Junior Brother, there’s something suspicious about Ning Yan, isn’t there?”*

Xu Qing’s facial expression remained the same, but he was indeed starting to feel a bit suspicious. The truth was that Ning Yan’s reaction right now seemed very unusual. After all, upon returning from Daybreak Prefecture, he had seen to it that Ning Yan was assigned to his Secretariat Division. He was quite familiar with Ning Yan’s manner of speaking. And there was indeed something very unusual about the way Ning Yan was talking. It didn’t seem like Ning Yan.

He was just about to project a message back to the Captain when he heard a very cold snort in his mind.

It was a cold snort that contained a warning. Hearing it, Xu Qing shivered, then somberly projected a different message to the Captain.

“Eldest Brother, I spent some time with Ning Yan when I brought him back from Daybreak Prefecture. I know him pretty well. He was sort of traumatized by what happened in Daybreak Prefecture, and thus, his personality changed a bit. Right now... he’s acting completely normal!”

After saying that, Xu Qing heard a very familiar, and very pleased, sound of approval in his mind.

Xu Qing bowed his head and sighed inwardly. Never could he have imagined that their Master had actually been with them the entire time. And that cold warning snort from moments ago had made it clear that their Master wanted to teach a lesson to Eldest Brother. Xu Qing looked sympathetically at the Captain, and was tempted to somehow warn him. However, that cold snort from his Master brooked no such interference.

In response to Xu Qing's explanation, the Captain looked suspiciously at Ning Yan.

'Ning Yan' looked back with a cordial smile. "Captain, I did my research before coming here. Besides, as you know, I have a unique bloodline, and as such, I'm able to sense that there's something really amazing not too far away."

The Captain blinked a few times and then looked at Xu Qing.

Xu Qing cleared his throat and was about to secretly signal the Captain that something was going on, only to notice 'Ning Yan' smiling enigmatically in his direction.

Looking very serious, Xu Qing said, "Eldest Brother, we should get moving. I trust Ning Yan!"

The Captain was starting to get even more suspicious. Tossing Ning Yan's hair again, he said, "Little Ningning, you—"

"Eldest Brother!" Xu Qing interrupted, his heart pounding as he watched his Eldest Brother continue to court death. "Eldest Brother, you should really give poor, poor Ning Yan a break. There's no need to keep your hands on him all the time. Let him go for a bit. I know you're treating him like this because of the mean things Ning Yan said about our Master a while back. You feel the need to punish him, right?"

"Huh?" the Captain said. However, his surprise only lasted a moment. Being as shrewd as he was, his eyes quickly went wide, and his hand, which had been in the middle of tossing 'Ning Yan's' hair, suddenly stopped moving. He was now starting to suspect something was going on with Xu Qing also. Looking cautiously at 'Ning Yan,' he pulled his hand back. Then his gaze shifted to 'Ning Yan's' belly. Not able to take the suspense, he decided to make a final check. Without any further warning, he smacked 'Ning Yan's' belly.

WHACK!

Xu Qing closed his eyes.

'Ning Yan' did absolutely nothing to stop the Captain from striking him. No vine appeared.

The Captain gasped, and despite how cold it was, beads of sweat broke out on his forehead.

As 'Ning Yan' stared, the Captain shivered and backed up a few steps until he was standing next to Xu Qing.

"Little Ah Qing, why have you always made me hit Ning Yan's belly on missions like this?" the Captain said loudly. "It's so impolite! Is that how Master taught us to act?"

Have you forgotten what I told you before? Master treats us so well! Like a father! In fact, we'll never be able to repay him for that, not in our entire lives! Therefore, we have to solemnly abide by everything our Master tells us. Remember that. Whenever we make some bad decisions, just think back to what Master taught us. That's the best way to pick the right path in life!"

Xu Qing looked at the Captain, gave a sarcastic chuckle, and then looked away. He had already acted with *extreme humanity and utmost virtue*. If his Eldest Brother wanted to court death, then Xu Qing would let him.

"Want to smack me again?" 'Ning Yan' asked coolly.

The Captain cleared his throat and shook his head. He looked quizzically at Ning Yan. Then he started worrying about Ning Yan noticing him staring at his belly. Shivering, he shifted his gaze to Ning Yan's face. But then he worried that doing so wasn't the best move, considering he had just been tousling Ning Yan's hair.

When 'Ning Yan' noticed the Captain's shifting gaze, he calmly said, "Want to do a bit more hair tousling?"

The Captain shook his head as vigorously as a rattle drum. He was already howling inwardly with anguish, especially when he thought back to that wonderful sensation from earlier. Shivering violently, he turned to Xu Qing.

"Little Junior Brother!" he berated. "I have to offer you some constructive criticism. Last time when Ning Yan said those very mean things about our Master, I was planning to beat him black and blue, but you stopped me! Ah, whatever. This time, Ning Yan, I won't go very hard on you. But I have to warn you. If you ever say bad things about our Master again, I won't show you a scrap of mercy!"

"I, Chen Erniu, am the type of person who, if someone disrespects my Master, I will track them down no matter how far away they are to deliver severe punishment!"

"Therefore, little Junior Brother, in the future, you'd better not interfere like you did in the past. Otherwise you and I are going to have a *very* big problem. I, Chen Erniu, will put my life on the line for the sake of our Master!"

'Ning Yan's' expression softened a bit.

Meanwhile, Xu Qing expressionlessly pointed off into the mists. "Eldest Brother, see that mist over there? Isn't that the cloud troll you ran into a while back?"

The Captain looked in that direction and blurted, "Cloud troll? I didn't realize this place was so dangerous!"

He then lunged in front of 'Ning Yan' protectively, making it seem like, if even the slightest bit of danger cropped up, he would throw caution to the wind to provide a defense.

However, the Captain's words actually provoked a cold snort from 'Ning Yan,' who then glared at the Captain.

The Captain looked back at 'Ning Yan' with a fawning expression.

"You two, come with me," 'Ning Yan' said, and then he shot into the mists.

Xu Qing followed, ignoring the Captain.

The Captain gritted his teeth and went after them. When he caught up to Xu Qing, he looked over innocently, produced a green stone, and tossed it over.

Xu Qing's expression eased a bit.

And thus, the three of them traveled through the palaces covered with flesh. 'Ning Yan' led the way. They encountered occasional grues and mutant beasts, but they were easy to deal with. They were all roughly in the Gold Core level, so it was only a question of who could kill them first, Xu Qing or the Captain. Occasionally mutant beasts would appear with battle prowess so terrifying the two of them couldn't handle them. But such beasts would almost instantly start to wither as if aging, and within moments would crumble into ashes.

When Xu Qing and the Captain saw that, they were deeply shocked.

There was one mutant beast they encountered which was 300 meters long and pulsed with the aura of the great circle of first-stage Void Returning. Even that one quickly collapsed into dust. Xu Qing was stunned.

The Captain blinked madly. Then the two of them exchanged a look.

Although both of them now realized that they were with their Master in disguise, neither of them were aware of his true battle prowess. The fact that he could so casually destroy a first-stage Void Returning enemy went to indicate that his cultivation base was at least in second-stage Void Returning.

"He's probably beyond that level!" the Captain projected.

Fully convinced of that, Xu Qing nodded. Up ahead, 'Ning Yan' looked over his shoulder and smiled at them proudly. The Captain grinned back flatteringly, while Xu Qing blinked a few times and tried to look as charming as possible.

The further they traveled, the stronger the mutagen got. Xu Qing was already shivering from the effort of keeping himself under control. A sensation of longing now filled every fiber of his being. He knew full well it was because his body had been remolded by the god's finger.

Before, he had been in front of too many eyes to try to absorb anything from his surroundings. But now he was in a much safer position. After one more brief moment of hesitation, he relaxed his control slightly and started absorbing some of the surrounding mutagen. As it flowed into him, a tremor passed through him, and then an unbelievably pleasant sensation filled him. His pores opened, and mutagen flowed into him, nourishing him and strengthening him!

The tiny golden threads within him began to flow, becoming more active. As they did, they began to take the form of something like a thread of golden spirit energy. It seemed like spirit energy, yet wasn't. Xu Qing scanned it with divine sense, and could sense something like the aura of a god.

"This..." he murmured, feeling deeply shaken.

There was only one single such golden thread. But the moment it came into existence, his poison core, violet moon, and Ghost Emperor mountain all trembled and unleashed forces of absorption. That was especially true of the taboo poison core, which seemed like parched lands longing for sweet dew, or a starving person who had encountered delicious food. It immediately pulsed with a terrifying aura. That aura caused the violet moon and the Ghost Emperor mountain to tremble.

The taboo poison core absorbed the largest portion. It got about fifty percent, while the violet moon got thirty, and the Ghost Emperor got about ten. After the taboo poison core finished the absorption process, it seemed more than ever like it might awaken. The violet moon glittered with more intense violet light, as if it had finally received some powerful nourishment. The Ghost Emperor mountain reacted similarly, as its eyes glowed.

Xu Qing was shocked. At the same time, the sensation of longing within him grew stronger. Gritting his teeth, he loosened his control a bit more, and a vortex sprang up around him as mutagen rushed in his direction. At the same time, all the howling and shrieking in the area suddenly ceased.

Xu Qing's heart leaped in his chest, and he quickly tightened up his control.

At the same time, the Captain turned to look at him, visibly surprised. 'Ning Yan' stopped in place and looked at Xu Qing in delight.

Xu Qing blinked a few times and prepared to offer an explanation. Before he could, the ground shook, and the surrounding mists seethed as a host of mutant beasts charged in their direction. They contained tremors of greed and were filled with madness. It was as if they had sensed something indescribably delicious, and were determined to devour it.

A sensation of intense crisis erupted in Xu Qing's heart.

'Ning Yan' shot toward Xu Qing and the Captain, grabbed them, and then leaped up into the air. All of them disappeared.

A moment later, the spot they had just occupied became filled with snarling mutant beasts. The beasts began searching the area, but it didn't do them any good. Before long, they calmed down and dispersed.

Meanwhile, about 50 kilometers away, 'Ning Yan' appeared with Xu Qing and the Captain.

The Captain immediately turned to Xu Qing. "Little Junior Brother, y-y-you—"

"Shut up!" 'Ning Yan' said, glaring.

The Captain shrank in on himself.

'Ning Yan' then snorted coldly and turned to look at Xu Qing. Looking very pleased, and even admiring, he softly said, "Fourth Sib, was it that body of yours which caused that scene just now?"

Xu Qing had been scared witless by the sensation of all those mutant beasts wanting to devour him. And he saw no reason to try to fool his Master.

"Yes, Master. As I mentioned to you before, this body was remolded by that god's finger." Back when Master Seventh had first arrived, Xu Qing explained everything in

detail. After all, it was all related to how he knew about the red moon wanting to devour the god in Forbidden by the Immortal. “Master, I can keep it under control. I won’t attract the attention of any more mutant beasts.”

Xu Qing still felt lingering fear based on what had just happened.

“Well done, Fourth Sib. But those mutant beasts weren’t there to devour you. They were driven by instinct to allow *you* to devour *them*. The reason is that they’re manifestations of the very same aura that your body is formed from. That said, now is definitely not an appropriate time. Because... the source of that finger is a sleeping god. Not a dead one.

“When hē’s dead, then you can eat to your heart’s content. Otherwise, you’ll be creating potential calamities because of that god’s will. By the way, have you produced any god vitality yet?” Master Seventh’s eyes glittered brightly. “It’s something golden that looks like spirit energy.” He waved his right hand, and a golden power appeared in his palm. “Like this.”

Master Seventh looked at Xu Qing with keen anticipation.

Xu Qing waved his hand, tapped into his heavenly palaces, and produced a golden power that looked very much like that held by Master Seventh, except smaller.

Master Seventh looked at Xu Qing. Xu Qing looked at Master Seventh. A moment later, Master Seventh let loose a stream of unsurpassably contented laughter.

“Amazing. Amazing! Just what I would expect of an apprentice of mine. Later on, the two of us can rebuke heaven and earth together, as Master and apprentice! Hahahahaha!”

Off to the side, the Captain waved his hand a bit, hoping to do the same thing, but nothing happened. He cleared his throat. “Master, what about me? Remember, sir, I’m your highest-ranking apprentice....”

Chapter 519: Human Immortal Skills

“You? If you don’t work harder, then you’ll become Fourth Sib and Xu Qing will become Eldest Brother!” Master Seventh snorted coldly. The sound of it resounded like millions upon millions of bolts of heavenly lightning, crashing into the Captain’s mind and causing his eyes to go wide. The mere thought of something like that happening....

The Captain shivered, and his countenance became very serious. “Don’t worry, Master. I’ll definitely work very hard. Henceforth, I, Chen Erniu, will forget all about girls. I will focus solely on cultivation, and on working hard to accomplish big things!”

Pleased, Master Seventh nodded. Then he turned to look at Xu Qing.

Xu Qing blinked a few times, then plastered a look of surprise on his face as he looked at the golden power in his Master's hand. Although his reaction came a bit too slowly, it was always better to be late than never.

Seeing Xu Qing's attitude caused Master Seventh to look even more pleased.

"This is god vitality, Fourth Sib. I managed to extract it after studying Master Shengyun's body, and also after gaining enlightenment from numerous gruish plants from both Emperor-Receiving Prefecture and South Phoenix. Needless to say, the techniques Torchlight have gained mastery of are shocking.

"So-called gods are really nothing more than beings who exist on the same cultivation paradigm as us. They're just on a vastly higher level, and are much stronger. What's more, they're not invincible. In fact, I have a very daring speculation that I will confirm later when I track down certain long-lost ancient records.

"What a pity that most ancient records have disappeared over the countless years that have passed. In some cases, our only hope of getting such information is finding it in the random and varied wish boxes that have been scattered through heaven and earth. In any case, once I find evidence confirming my theory, I'll let the two of you know."

In that moment, Master Seventh looked truly mysterious and enigmatic.

Xu Qing, moved with admiration for his Master, quickly bowed.

The Captain rushed to do the same.

Seeing his apprentices act so obediently filled Master Seventh's heart with incomparable contentment.

"Let's go," he said. "We need to keep moving. I'm planning to take you to a very amazing place. You see, I had a chance to explore another of Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity's operations palaces one time, and I happen to know that they all have this very unique place in them."

Master Seventh led the way.

After about an hour of constant travel, they were deep within the palace complex. The palace complex was so huge that they were still within its east district. In fact, they were still in the central part of the east district. Thankfully, the place Master Seventh was leading them to was just ahead.

It was a very special palace. Although it was covered with flesh, the shape of that flesh was unique. It looked like a huge face. The face seemed neither male nor female. It had no hair, and it was magenta in color, as if it were filled with blood vessels. It pulsed with a very strong mutagen that had the power to influence emotions. Any living being who saw this face would be unable to control the emotions that rose within them. They would influence the mind and drive a person mad.

Even the Captain, who had such an extraordinary body, felt the influence. He started breathing heavily as mouths appeared all over his body, shifting position constantly in a very gruish display.

Xu Qing had it a bit better off. The god's finger inside of him was part of the clone of the god that dwelt in this place. And since that finger had remolded Xu Qing's body, not only could he absorb the local mutagen and turn it into god vitality, but also, he had the ability to disregard some of the powers present in this place.

"This is the place," Master Seventh said, stopping outside the hall with the face of flesh. "This is the location of great good fortune. In a moment, you'll understand why."

Master Seventh's entire person suddenly flared with golden light, making him seem extremely holy. However, not a scrap of aura emerged from him. It remained completely hidden. In fact, just looking at him with the naked eye, it seemed impossible to commit his features to memory. That caused waves of shock to rise in the hearts of the Captain and Xu Qing.

Xu Qing had seen a few gods, and knew full well that gods had such a power. Being able to make people forget about you was one of the best ways to stay hidden.

This was actually more shocking to Xu Qing than when his Master had casually destroyed a first-stage Void Returning beast. "Master, you—"

"The god vitality I extracted in my research has the power of ancient time in it," Master Seventh said calmly as he walked forward. "As well as concealment functions."

As he neared the palace hall, the face undulated as if it were alive. Its expression of pain became more pronounced, and the flesh almost looked like it was aging. In the blink of an eye, wrinkles appeared on it and began spreading out. This face seemed to be acting differently than the mutant beasts and grues Xu Qing had encountered so far. It seemed to be struggling to resist.

But as Master Seventh advanced, it grew weaker and weaker, until it began to collapse, starting at the edges.

Xu Qing was completely astonished, and the Captain even rubbed his eyes to make sure he wasn't seeing things.

"Little Ah Qing," the Captain whispered, "how can our Master be so strong? In fact, given this, why are we working so hard? Why not just stay in Seven Blood Eyes and have everything handed to us? Little Junior Brother, as of this moment, I have such a sense of safety..."

Before Xu Qing could say anything in response, Master Seventh snorted coldly.

"Sense of safety my ass! If this place was safe, I wouldn't have been forced to sneak in here. This Seventh Prince is no simple person. And all of his subordinates are exceptional. I even suspect Generalissimo Bloodhorror might have even realized who I really am! By the way, I sense the auras of other interlopers here. We're not the only group who came to this place.

"We need to get this job done quickly, then I'll find a place for us to lie low until the fuss dies down. You two are mere Gold Core cultivators, yet you're plotting against a

god. That's pushing things almost too far. Once we're finished, you two need to think of a way to get out of the county capital for a while. Then you can go back to Seven Blood Eyes and wait for me."

Xu Qing looked very serious. Meanwhile, the Captain obviously wanted to take advantage of the moment to curry some favor, so he said, "You're so mighty, Master! It's only because we have you, oh venerable Master, that we dared to hatch a plot like this!"

"All you know how to do is brown nose!" Master Seventh said coolly.

The Captain didn't take that as a rebuke, and in fact, looked very pleased with himself.

As Master Seventh walked onward, the face struggled with even more intensity. A moment later, Master Seventh was right in front of it. A wave of frigid energy swept across the face, which howled begrudgingly. Then, as the three of them looked on, it collapsed into ashes, revealing that it had been covering a bright red temple. The temple exuded an ancient aura, and its main gates were tightly closed. No noise came from within. There was something gloomy and sinister about the place, but at the same time, it almost seemed alive. The red color didn't look like fresh blood, but rather, like high-quality wine.

It was somewhat contradictory. However, it somehow created a sense of hunger in Xu Qing, and he even felt his stomach rumbling. The Captain's eyes went wide, and he started salivating.

"Back up, both of you," Master Seventh said.

Xu Qing flew backward. Then, seeing that the Captain was hesitating a bit, Xu Qing grabbed him and dragged him 300 meters back. Master Seventh approached the main door of the red temple, his expression very serious. Extending his right hand, he pushed on the door.

Rumbling echoed out as the door opened. Red light erupted from within, transforming into a huge illusory face that lunged toward Master Seventh to devour him.

Master Seventh snorted coldly, and golden light surged out from him. Pushing forward with his right hand, he hit the illusory face, which shattered into countless blood-colored butterflies. Wherever the butterflies flew, they caused corrosion to spread. The aura that reached Xu Qing and the Captain filled them with shock.

"Okay, come on over," Master Seventh said coolly as he stepped into the temple.

Xu Qing and the Captain hurried over and entered. It was magnificent. There was an amazing statue inside. It didn't depict Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity, but rather, some unfamiliar person, apparently someone whose name hadn't been recorded in the annals of human history. He wore a blood-colored daoist robe, and stood with both hands raised high as if to embrace the entire temple.

Filling the rest of the temple were hundreds and hundreds of masks. There were large masks and small masks, and they depicted a wide variety of people. Old and young, men and women were all represented. And their expressions included happiness, anger, sorrow, and joy. They were affixed to the walls everywhere, and if you looked closely, you would find that they were all made from human skin.

The fact that so much skin had been used to make the masks filled the area with a very gruish atmosphere. When Master Seventh, Xu Qing, and the Captain entered, the faces all looked at them, their vacant eyes glowing with faint light.

Xu Qing's expression flickered, and the Captain inhaled sharply.

"This place is called the Immortal Skills Hall," Master Seventh said. "Every one of Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity's palaces had a place like this. Stored here are large numbers of very unusual immortal skills. Immortal skills are not as wonderful as you might imagine them to be. In fact, they're not beautiful at all. Instead, they're terrifying.

"Each of these skin masks is an immortal skill. You don't need to gain enlightenment or cultivate them. You just put on the mask to use it.

"Magic like this naturally comes with a price. Whenever you use an immortal skill, it absorbs some of your life force. And every time you put one of the masks on, it sticks on tighter than before, until eventually you can't take it off. And after it's sucked out all of your blood and life force... it turns you into a new skin mask."

Master Seventh spoke calmly, but his words filled Xu Qing's heart with waves of shock.

Apparently, the Captain already knew a bit about immortal skills, as he wasn't very surprised. However, a complex look appeared briefly on his face before he suppressed it.

"There's no need to feel nervous," Master Seventh continued. "Generally speaking, immortal skills are all very impressive. They contain mysterious daos, so as long as you use them carefully, they can be beneficial. Any given person can only take one immortal skill. Try to take more, and you'll be cursed. What's more, after you take one, you can't go to other Immortal Skill Halls to get more." Master Seventh looked at the statue in the hall, and he seemed to sigh inwardly. "This statue is one of the human emperors who has been forgotten in the histories, who created many immortal skills in his life.

"Based on some of the clues I dug up in various ancient records, it seems that this person was stricken from the histories by Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity in an attempt to make humankind, and immortal skills, seem more palatable.

"The immortal skills were gathered and stored in his thirty-six operations palaces, where they were branded as forbidden magics. That said, the ancient records indicate that, even then, the immortal skills created by this emperor were considered a boon to humankind, and they saved countless human nations from destruction. Any species that rises to prominence will have bright aspects and dark aspects. It's only natural."

With that, Master Seventh turned to look meaningfully at his two apprentices, especially Xu Qing.

Chapter 520: The Truth About the Opening of Forbidden by the Immortal (part 1)

Looking at the statue, Master Seventh said, “Big Sib. Fourth Sib. Hurry up and offer respects.”

Xu Qing was just about to clasp hands and bow when the Captain suddenly said, “I don’t need to offer respects.”

Xu Qing blinked a few times and stopped to look over at the Captain. Master Seventh did the same, his eyebrows raised.

“What bull crap are you up to now?”

Eyes gleaming fanatically, the Captain looked at Master Seventh. “Master, you are the only existence in my world. You are the most paragonic being, surpassing anything and everything else. When I encountered that Grand Emperor before, I had no choice but to bow. But when I encounter you, Master, I also bow. And I’ve bowed to you so many times that, in my most deepest of hearts, you have long since surpassed any Grand Emperor. Therefore, any sincerity I show to other Grand Emperors nowadays is a sham. That’s why I say that I don’t need to pay respects. Only you exist in my heart, Master. Bowing to other people is literally pointless!”

The words flowed out of the Captain’s mouth very naturally, and didn’t betray any hint of insincerity. Apparently, these words came straight from his heart. And as he spoke to them, his face was lit with reverence. It seemed that, to him, his Master was the same as a Grand Emperor, or even a god.

The veneration on his face even seemed to contain a very healthy and appropriate dosage of admiration, the type a child would feel for a parent. In fact, his facial expression had reached the pinnacle of perfection.

Hearing the Captain’s words caused Master Seventh to snort coldly. And his eyes seemed as cold as ever. However, someone who examined him closely would notice that his eyebrows had twitched slightly, and he seemed to be very pleased. What was more, his gaze had softened slightly as he looked at the Captain. Apparently, he knew that this apprentice of his had some faults. But when all was said and done, he had a good attitude. He knew how to respect his Master, which was one of the most important qualities and merits. It was a case of *blemishes not obscuring the jade’s luster*.

With such thoughts on his mind, Master Seventh coolly said, “You’ve grown up, haven’t you? You have a smooth tongue and like to jabber, but overall you behave well. Fine. I understand what you mean. If you don’t want to offer respects, then just forget about it.”

With that, Master Seventh turned to start looking for a specific skin mask.

Trembling with excitement, the Captain bowed deeply to Master Seventh, then flashed a pleased grin in Xu Qing’s direction.

Seeing this scene play out, Xu Qing felt his admiration for the Captain growing even deeper. He also realized that before he joined as an apprentice, the Captain must have been their Master’s favorite. After all, who *wouldn’t* approve of someone who could deliver such endless flattery at any time and place?

Considering that, Xu Qing clasped hands and bowed to the statue of the Grand Emperor, and then turned and bowed three times to Master Seventh. The solitary bow was one of respect toward an outsider. The three bows were a display of deep familial love.

Upon seeing that, the Captain chuckled.

The corner of Master Seventh's mouth lifted slightly. Then he made a grasping gesture, and one of the skin masks flew off the wall and into his hand. It resembled a young man with a vicious facial expression. The mask emanated a deep longing to devour flesh, and seemed like it wanted to start eating Master Seventh's hand.

"Big Sib, this one is perfect for you."

Master Seventh tossed the mask into the air, and it flew toward the Captain.

The Captain grabbed it.

The mask immediately flipped around and wrapped up the Captain's right hand. A moment later chewing sounds could be heard, as if the mask were trying to eat the Captain's hand. The Captain flicked his hand, but the mask wouldn't come off. At this point, most people would look horrified as they realized the mask was trying to eat them. But the Captain didn't seem worried at all. In fact, he looked curious, and just let the mask do what it wanted.

"What a surprise. *It* wants to bite *me*?" The Captain seemed very amused, so much so that he lifted his hand to bring the mask closer to his face.

Noticing that, the mask unwrapped itself, revealing a hand covered in bite marks and blood. Pulsing with vicious greed, the mask lunged toward the Captain's face. In the blink of an eye, it wrapped around the Captain's face, becoming a true mask that covered his facial features. The Captain's aura immediately skyrocketed, and his features changed to resemble a stranger. And he pulsed with something sinister and cold that made him seem like a different person. A tremor passed through him and he closed his eyes.

Seeing all this, Xu Qing's eyes glittered with curiosity, and he cast his senses out to try to learn more about what was happening. He quickly discovered that, based on how deeply he knew the Captain, after putting that mask on, he didn't seem familiar at all. In fact, if Xu Qing hadn't witnessed the transformation himself, he would have no way of identifying him. With the mask on, the Captain's aura had changed, but even more significant, his soul fluctuations were totally different.

"These skin masks with their immortal skills are inherently useful as disguises," Master Seventh said to Xu Qing.

Xu Qing nodded. At this point, the Captain's eyes opened, and he looked coldly at Xu Qing. Then he shifted his gaze to Master Seventh.

Xu Qing's facial expression didn't change, but Master Seventh snorted coldly.

"Aren't you done playing around? Or should I give you a good thrashing?"

The Captain chuckled, and as he did, his aura transformed again. Although it still seemed different, there were some familiar elements to it.

"Master. Little Junior Brother. This mask is really interesting. I can tell that it wants to fully fuse with my face. And it contains deep malice. I can also hear the sound of

many men and women all speaking together, uttering two words that echo in my mind.”

“That’s the name of the immortal skill,” Master Seventh explained. “Speak the words, and you’ll be able to use the immortal skill. That said, the results will differ based on the level of cultivation base of whoever uses it.”

After a moment of thought, the Captain spoke the words.

“Heavenly Dog!”

The Captain shivered as the mask exuded a red mist that pulsed with incredible grandeur. The mist swirled out around him until he disappeared, then converged into the shape of a huge crimson dog. It salivated greedily, its eyes bright red, and its coarse breathing something that would strike fear into the heart of anyone who heard it. It looked like it was starving and was looking for someone to devour. [1]

Xu Qing instinctively took a few steps back. The heavenly dog threw its head back and howled, causing the surrounding temple to shake. Then the dog faded from view, and the Captain became visible again. He reached up to take the mask off. There seemed to be no special process involved in taking it off, though there were thin red tendrils that stretched out between the mask and the Captain’s face as he pulled it away. It took some effort, but he managed to pull it off.

The Captain didn’t seem worried at all about the mask, and in fact, looked excited and happy.

“Master, this immortal skill is amazing! It even has a dimensional space inside. If there’s something it can’t digest, it’ll store it inside. This is perfect for me!”

Hearing that, Xu Qing nodded, fully convinced of how amazing the mask was.

Master Seventh laughed. “Yes, it’s indeed perfect for you.”

Master Seventh reached in a different direction and made another grasping gesture, causing another mask to fly toward him.

This one looked like an old man with a wrinkled face and a bitter expression. It was obviously completely different from the heavenly dog mask, as it didn’t show any signs of struggle or malice when it landed in Master Seventh’s hand. It just sat there quietly and let loose a soft sigh. Sensing that, Master Seventh shook his head slightly.

“Fourth Sib, your Elder Brother’s heavenly dog mask is the best one in this place. Sadly, this mask here isn’t suitable for you. Well, I’ll have to pick another one for you. What a pity none of the others are as good as these two.”

Xu Qing looked more closely at the mask. “Master, what kind of immortal skill is it?”

“Mercy.” Master Seventh sighed as he looked around at the other masks. He really didn’t like the idea of Big Sib getting such a nice mask while Fourth Sib got something inferior.

Meanwhile, the Captain offered the heavenly dog mask to Xu Qing. "Take it, little Junior Brother. It's a nice immortal skill, but honestly, it's not going to help me much."

Xu Qing knew that the Captain was just trying to be nice, and it brought some warmth to his heart. After politely refusing, he looked at Master Seventh.

"Master, what does the immortal skill of mercy do?"

"It allows you to share half of the injury and pain of whoever you look at." As Master Seventh provided the explanation, he continued to study the masks in the hopes of finding one better-suited to Xu Qing.

Meanwhile, the Captain chuckled. "Master, what are you wasting time for? Mercy is perfect for me! I'm very merciful."

Master Seventh ignored the Captain's gibberish. He knew that his senior apprentice specialized in fleshly body recovery. And he also knew that although his apprentices were always messing with each other, they actually had a very good relationship.

Just as he was about to say something, Xu Qing spoke. "Master, that skill is actually very suitable for me."

"Since when are you merciful, little Ah Qing?" the Captain asked, sounding surprised.

Master Seventh's eyes also glittered with curiosity.

"I have a friend who's very merciful," Xu Qing explained earnestly. "That mask looks ideal for that friend."

His D-132 heavenly palace vibrated, and the extremely bored and despondent head vanished from inside, then plopped onto the ground in front of Xu Qing. The head rolled over a few times, then looked around blankly.

"What's going on?"

Before the head could gain its bearings, Xu Qing stomped it, causing it to explode.

Both the Captain and Master Seventh were stunned.

"That's your friend?" the Captain asked, looking at the bloody sludge on the ground.

Xu Qing nodded. Meanwhile, the sludge slid back into the shape of the head. Scowling on the verge of tears, the head looked at Xu Qing.

"What did I do wrong, exalted one?" the head wailed. "I didn't even curse you today!"

Face completely expressionless, Xu Qing waved his hand, sending the head back into the heavenly palace. Then he looked at the Captain and Master Seventh, both of whom had very strange expressions on their faces.

"That's my friend," Xu Qing said solemnly, "who is very merciful."

The Captain blinked a few times and Master Seventh cleared his throat. Then Master Seventh handed the mask of mercy to Xu Qing.

“Since Fourth Sib’s friend is so merciful, this mask should be a perfect fit!”

Xu Qing accepted the mask, thought for a moment, then said, “Master, I have some other friends who are also very merciful. Since an individual can only get one mask, is there any chance there are other immortal skills of mercy in this place that *they* could use?”

Xu Qing’s suggestion caused the Captain’s eyes to glitter. Master Seventh mulled the matter over, then looked around at the masks. Finally, he shook his head.

“Based on all of the things I’ve experienced through the years, I’ve learned that it’s worse to push things too far than to not push them far enough. That’s especially true of immortal skills. Each one contains significant karma, and their strange creation method contains mysterious cursing magics. You really shouldn’t casually take too many of them.

“If all of those friends of yours take a mask, then in the final analysis, they’ll be bringing all of that karma onto you.

“That’s even more the case if they’re not human. There’s really no way to know what would happen if all that karma came to rest on you, or what hidden curses might be within the immortal skills.

“My suggestion is that you wait for the next time you find a place like this. Then get someone you don’t like to try something out like you’re suggesting. If they survive, and don’t suffer any repercussions, then you’ll know it’s safe, and you can just steal the immortal skills from them.

“Or if you don’t feel like stealing them, then at least you know it’s generally safe. Remember, immortal skills can’t run away, and this isn’t the only operations palace out there.”

Xu Qing had learned quite a while ago that Master Seventh always liked to do things the safe way. Therefore, he completely agreed with the advice, and realized he could learn a thing or two from his Master in that regard.

On the other hand, the Captain didn’t agree at all, but didn’t dare to say anything out loud. *Master is getting a lot more cowardly as he gets older.*

After taking the immortal skills, they didn’t waste any time. Master Seventh led Xu Qing and the Captain out of the hall. Once they were outside, the mutagen caused the flesh to start growing back over the entrance. In the blink of an eye, that distorted face was back, and it opened its mouth and started howling. Master Seventh looked at the face, then glanced up at the black, mirror-like sky above them.

“It won’t be long before the red moon awakens. I have the feeling the two of you won’t obediently go back to the camp, will you? Ah, whatever. There’s plenty more good fortune to be had in Forbidden by the Immortal. Be careful and don’t do anything too rash.

“In a moment, I’ll go ahead by myself to make some preparations. After you explained the situation to me, I did some of my own research, and have a good idea of what’s coming.”

Chapter 520: The Truth About the Opening of Forbidden by the Immortal (part 2)

Xu Qing and the Captain were paying very close attention to Master Seventh’s every word.

That was especially true of Xu Qing. He really wanted to know the truth behind the opening of Forbidden by the Immortal. He didn’t understand why it was being opened now, and why the sleeping god was being given to the red moon to eat. What did it all mean? The red moon was the god of the Nightshades, who were currently at war with humankind. As far as Xu Qing could guess, the only reason to give a sacrifice to the red moon right now would be to curry favor.

But what was the ultimate reason? Given his limitations, he felt like he wasn’t able to get to the bottom of the matter, as if his vision were obscured by fog.

“What do you think is going on, Master?” Xu Qing asked.

Master Seventh stared off toward the central part of the temple complex. “I don’t think Seventh Prince is doing this on his own. True, he’s an imperial prince with countless powerful experts working for him and an entire army under his command. He seems impressive, but the reality is that the emperor still sits on the throne, and is hale and healthy. According to the rumors, he’s extremely decisive and has great ambitions. Granted, those are just rumors, but rumors don’t spring up out of nowhere. Regardless, the point is that we’re not in a time period in which imperial heirs could even think about trying to usurp the throne.”

Master Seventh’s gaze grew more intense. “That said, this Seventh Prince is obviously ruthless and decisive. However he did it, he managed to break through the blockade set up by the Nightshades and the cmony species helping them. That alone eased some of the tension weighing down on the imperial capital.

“In other words, his actions have benefited both the emperor and humankind in general. Forget what sacrifices were made or whatever other clues are at play. The important thing to consider is the big picture.

“The bottom line is that what’s going on right now in Forbidden by the Immortal is a matter related to gods. And that’s not something Seventh Prince has the authority to deal with on his own. Long story short, the opening of Forbidden by the Immortal had to be ordered by the emperor. Seventh Prince is simply carrying out the orders! With that knowledge, the fog begins to lift a bit.”

Both the Captain and Xu Qing were now starting to understand things a bit better.

“If you look at things from the perspective of the emperor,” Master Seventh continued, “you’ll realize that he’s obviously trying to accomplish something that relates to the war. Maybe it’s to just end the war, or maybe it’s to win it. It doesn’t matter. What could you do that would either end the war or win it?” Master Seventh’s

eyes glittered with profound light. "It would be to use the most dangerous and majestic weapon of war humankind could ever have. A domain treasure!"

Master Seventh's voice rang with decisiveness that could *sever nails and chop iron*.

"Of course, things aren't as simply stated as that. The Nightshades have the red moon god on their side. All their high priests have to do is make the right sacrifices and employ the right god magics, and they can summon a projection of that red moon. Therefore, thinking of a way to get a domain treasure is only one element. The second is thinking of a way to prevent that red moon from being summoned.

"And how could that be accomplished? Well, humans can't control the red moon. Nor could we trust the fate of our species to some sort of business transaction with the red moon. Therefore, since a deal is out of the question, how could we prevent hē from coming, or at least, ensure shē comes too late to matter?"

Master Seventh looked at Xu Qing and the Captain.

"Create a situation the Nightshades couldn't predict," Xu Qing said. "For instance, put the red moon to sleep."

"Whenever I'm stuffed," the Captain said, "I instinctively want to slumber..."

Both Xu Qing and the Captain inhaled sharply as the implications hit them.

Master Seventh chuckled in a way that made him seem especially wise. "This is only one line of reasoning that leads us to this conclusion. We can also analyze things from a different angle.

"For example, consider why the emperor would open Forbidden by the Immortal just as the situation with the war seemed to be easing up? Why would he intentionally rouse the red moon in Zhang Siyun? Before, that didn't seem to make much sense. But everything became clear thanks to that god's finger outright stating that its true form was going to be devoured. Xu Qing, you're still young, so no matter how carefully you think about a matter, it's normal for you to overlook certain things."

Master Seventh looked at Xu Qing and clearly hoped that he would come to the correct conclusion.

Meanwhile, Xu Qing's mind was in high gear as he thought back to what the god's finger told him.

"Master," he said, "do you mean that it's important that the god's finger immediately realized that the red moon wanted to devour its true form?"

Master Seventh's eyes glittered with praise as he nodded. "Exactly. That level of certainty provides the explanation. Clearly, it was absolutely confident that the red moon would devour its true self. That bit of knowledge itself contains deeper elements to consider. Obviously, it's not uncommon for powerful gods to devour weaker gods.

"Couple that with the fact that the god in Forbidden by the Immortal is in a state of sleep, then the chances our conclusion is correct rise to over eighty percent. As I

mentioned to you before, my research has led me to the conclusion that gods are nothing more than higher versions of people like you and me.

“When mortals stuff themselves with food, they get tired and lazy. They don’t want to do anything. It’s the same with cultivators. When Big Sib gets stuffed, he instinctively wants to sleep. That goes for both me and you as well. Of course, it doesn’t necessarily require sleep; going into secluded meditation might also work. And the length of time spent in seclusion or sleep depends on the type of food.”

Xu Qing was mentally reeling, while the Captain was licking his lips. One thing was clear, both lines of reasoning led to the same conclusion.

“So, does everything make sense now?” Master Seventh asked quietly. “The emperor is taking the initiative to awaken the red moon, place it in Forbidden by the Immortal, and devour the god here. Then, the moon will be forced to enter a digestion period!

“During that time period, the red moon won’t pay any attention to the Nightshades, even if something goes wrong for them. To the moon, the Nightshades are nothing but servants. And there’s no way shē’ll forgo food or sleep for servants!

“What’s more, the digestion period will last for a while. During that time... the Nightshades won’t have any protection from their god!”

“The emperor must have been waiting for an opportunity just like this!” Xu Qing said. He felt like he had experienced a sudden revelation, as if the clouds had parted, making everything incredibly bright. In fact, as his thoughts coalesced, his twelfth heavenly palace began to materialize even faster, and got very close to the great circle!

With Master Seventh’s guidance, Xu Qing suddenly came to a much deeper understanding of the big picture. No longer were his thoughts limited to what was right in front of him.

Master Seventh could have refrained from helping out in this way. But thanks to his help, Xu Qing’s powers of cognition improved. Having Xu Qing logically think through the situation had been an instance of immense good fortune. Moral and practical instruction could really be given at any time.

Xu Qing’s eyes glittered with reverence as he clasped hands and bowed deeply to Master Seventh.

Master Seventh smiled faintly. The truth was that he was very proud of Xu Qing.

The Captain was also shaken. Looking reverently toward his Master, he said, “Okay, well what about the domain treasure? What do you think about that, Master? Should we steal it?”

Master Seventh’s smile wavered. The Captain had actually asked about something Master Seventh hadn’t considered. Then he realized that Xu Qing was looking at him with keen expectation, and he suddenly felt a headache coming on. Considering how hard he had worked to build up his image just now, he obviously couldn’t say that he hadn’t thought of stealing the domain treasure....

“How could you be so short-sighted, Big Sib?” Master Seventh said, doing nothing to show his displeasure. “I already made a decision about that. That said, I can’t just go around explaining every little thing to you all the time. Therefore... let’s consider that the homework assignment for this class. Take some time to think about it on your own, and see which of you can figure it out first. Whoever does will be rewarded.”

Xu Qing nodded, feeling more admiration for his Master than ever.

The Captain, however, looked suspiciously at Master Seventh.

Seeing that Chen Erniu was about to say something, Master Seventh gave a cold harrumph and decided that he wasn’t going to forget this. Quickly taking out a special semitransparent skin mask, he handed it to Xu Qing.

“This item is the immortal skill that I got years ago. It has one use: concealment. Extreme concealment.

“Fourth Sib, when the red moon awakens, you need to put that mask on. That’s your first layer of concealment, but not the only one. You also need to find a place with a lot of flesh built up, and dig your way inside. That will hide the god’s aura that you carry with you. That’s your second layer of concealment.

“Whatever other assets you have will be the third layer. And finally, I’ll bolster you with a god magic of concealment. That’s the fourth layer. That way, unless the red moon specifically starts looking for you, you should be fine. The awakened moon is definitely going to be attracted to the sleeping god, so be cautious and you’ll be okay.

“Remember, after you put that mask on, you can’t move. Your cultivation base isn’t high enough, so if you move, it will break the concealment effect.”

Xu Qing was touched by his Master’s concern, and quickly clasped hands and bowed his head. “Master, make sure to take care of yourself as well.”

Master Seventh smiled warmly. He really did like this fourth apprentice of his. Clapping Xu Qing’s shoulder, he bolstered him with the god magic, then turned to leave.

“What about me, Master?” the Captain said. “What about me?”

Master Seventh didn’t bother looking at the Captain. “Compared to the aura of that sleeping god, yours is like nothing. Who would even notice you?”

Despite his words, Master Seventh waved his hand and sent a god magic of concealment to the Captain. Then he turned and vanished.

With Master Seventh gone, the Captain shivered and looked at Xu Qing, his eyes shining brightly.

“Little Ah Qing, I saw something really amazing on the way here. The old man was moving too quickly, so I didn’t say anything. Come on, let’s go check it out!”