

Timescape 521

Chapter 521: A Hand To Create All Things (part 1)

When Xu Qing saw how bright the Captain's eyes were shining, he was just about to nod in agreement when a cold snort suddenly swept over them.

"Check what out? And since when did I become 'the old man'?"

Xu Qing inhaled sharply, and the Captain's face fell. Both of them turned to look in the direction of the familiar voice.

The air there rippled as Master Seventh suddenly appeared.

"This is today's second lesson," Master Seventh said coolly. "Sometimes, what you can see with your eyes isn't real. Going forward, you should move a good distance away before discussing business."

Xu Qing bowed his head and said nothing. The Captain appeared to be on the verge of tears. How could he ever have guessed that his Master, who had very obviously left, would actually be hiding nearby?

"Anyway," Master Seventh continued, "I was thinking about how Fourth Sib's cultivation base is on the verge of a breakthrough, so I came back to provide a reminder. Fourth Sib, it shouldn't be hard for you to break through from Gold Core to Nascent Soul. However, in the Heavenfate Nascent Soul level, cultivation involves provoking five instances of heavenfate tribulation. Each one will make you a lot stronger."

Xu Qing nodded. This information conformed to what he had already learned in the past.

"However, the increase of battle prowess in the Nascent Soul level is of secondary importance. Of more importance is using those tribulations to build up heavenfate for use later in the Spirit Trove level. Based on my experience, if you deploy multiple nascent souls in each tribulation, then despite the fact that tribulation will be more powerful than normal, the resulting success will bring in more heavenfate. If you encounter good fortune in Forbidden by the Immortal, that's fine, but don't provoke any tribulation. I'll explain more about the details later on."

At that point, Master Seventh gave one final glare at the Captain, then turned and vanished.

Xu Qing, meanwhile, considered the advice, which contained some new information.

As he did that, the Captain blinked a few times, grabbed his arm, and pulled him a good distance away.

There, he breathed a sigh of relief. "Master really does treat us well, wouldn't you say, little Ah Qing? I definitely received some enlightenment during today's lesson."

"Me too," Xu Qing said convincingly.

The Captain nodded. "We'll probably never be able to pay back Master's love. Not in this life anyway!"

"The two of us need to work as hard as possible," Xu Qing said solemnly, "so that one day in the future, we can keep Master safe!"

The Captain's face lit up. "That's right, little Junior Brother! We definitely need to make that our goal!"

The Captain and Xu Qing continued walking along, all the while exchanging such words. A few hours later, they looked at each other.

"He's probably gone, right?" the Captain said.

"Most likely..." replied Xu Qing, looking around.

"The old man really does pop in and out randomly!" the Captain said with a wry smile. Lowering his voice, he continued, "Let's get out of here and go back to that spot I mentioned before. There's definitely some good stuff there!"

The two of them flew off at top speed.

Time slipped by slowly but surely.

Three days had passed since the opening of Forbidden by the Immortal. During that time, the first wave of hundreds of thousands of cultivators had already carved out a safe space of roughly five hundred kilometers. That was like a drop of water in the ocean compared to Forbidden by the Immortal as a whole. In fact, even when just considering the eastern district, it barely counted for one percent of the area. The place was just that large.

Considering Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity had thirty-six operations palaces in the past, it made sense that they were all considered minor worlds. What was more, because this one had a god sleeping inside of it, it had never been fully explored. Despite the invasion of mutagen, there were countless unique treasures, ancient records, and reserve powers to be found.

That was especially true given that, in Revered Ancient, great efforts had been made to study and research mutagen. As a result, there were many methods that could be used to disperse mutagen, such as those used to purify taboo treasures.

That was why the imperial capital highly valued Forbidden by the Immortal, and didn't intend for it to be opened for only a short time. The plan was for the exploration to last for several months, and gradually get closer and closer to the imperial hall in the very center of the forbidden ground.

Of course, that was all based on the presumption that there wouldn't always be a god inside.

Right now, the Captain and Xu Qing were about 50 kilometers away from the safe zone, resting atop the roof of a palace hall.

During the days that had passed, they had explored quite a few locations and made some significant gains. They had seen a lot of buildings that were fading from existence, presumably because of the seal on the forbidden ground having been broken.

They had run into a few dangerous situations. For example, the place the Captain had originally gone to had been so infused with mutagen that the only thing left behind was the head of a huge statue. When the two of them got close to the statue, it rushed toward them. It turned out to be a very hazardous incident that they barely escaped from. Thankfully, the concealment blessing from Master Seventh turned out to be very effective, and facilitated their escape. It left the Captain sighing repeatedly. The feeling of being able to see a juicy piece of meat right in front of him, but being unable to eat it, left him with increasingly bloodshot eyes.

They experienced a lot of ups and downs until they eventually reached this very promising-looking palace hall. Unfortunately, they couldn't get inside.

After multiple failed attempts, they went about five kilometers away to a safer palace hall, where they rested on the roof to try to come up with another plan.

The Captain was grinding his teeth as he discarded plan after plan. "This place is just too big, little Ah Qing. And we don't have enough in the way of intelligence reports. I'm convinced there's some treasure in that palace hall, otherwise, why would those four flesh-covered statues be standing guard over it?"

As the Captain spoke, Xu Qing was looking off in the direction of the safe zone. That area had mostly been cleared of mutagen, thanks to the spell formations that had been set up. And it caused light to shine up into the dark sky from that spot. The surrounding mutagen constantly tried to work its way back in, and eventually it would succeed, but not at the moment. On the inside of the glimmering shield created by the spell formations were numerous strange-looking buildings. They were towering pyramids made from spirit stones, and they emanated shocking fluctuations that linked all of them into one huge formation. Small squads of people came in and out constantly; they were groups who, like Xu Qing and the Captain, were on exploratory missions. All of the palaces within the 500-kilometer safe zone had already been cleared out, and had been integrated into the spell formation.

Even more shocking than all of that were the nine 30,000-meter white crystals that hung in the air like floating mountains. Generalissimo Bloodhorror had brought those huge crystals, and originally they hadn't been that big. They had grown over the three days into that shocking size. They floated in midair like black holes sucking in all the surrounding mutagen. More precisely put, they were filtering the mutagen. In other words, they sucked in mutagen then dispersed it. It was an endless cycle that, as it propagated, left tiny golden markings on the crystals.

Xu Qing thought about it for a moment. *It must be taking the god vitality out of the mutagen.*

Based on the expanded knowledge and sense of judgment imparted by his Master, Xu Qing's conclusion was that the crystals were being prepared for use on the front lines of the war.

"Forget those things," the Captain said, sitting up suddenly. "They're not important to us right now. I just got a new idea, little Ah Qing!"

Xu Qing looked away from the crystals and at the Captain. "You're still thinking about that palace?"

"Of course! We've seen a lot of palaces over the past few days, and the ones that aren't guarded are complete trash. The ones that have a single guardian statue are

better. But this is the only one we've found with four guardian statues! Compared to a sleeping god, it probably doesn't count for much. But since we're here, we need to do our best to get some good stuff!"

The Captain licked his lips as his eyes glittered with a crazy look.

Xu Qing thought back to the palace and the four flesh-covered statues that guarded each of its sides. The statues were alive, and only small portions of them had dissipated. The fluctuations they released were completely terrifying. The palace they were guarding was unusual in appearance because of its square shape. Also, Xu Qing remembered that the roof had countless finger-width ventilation holes in it. The strange thing about those holes was that the encroaching flesh clearly avoided them. Xu Qing had no idea what might be inside the palace. His shadow couldn't get inside; he'd tried, and something inside the palace prevented surveillance.

"After the red moon awakens and devours the sleeping god, it should be a lot easier to get inside. Does it have to be now?" Xu Qing looked at the Captain.

"When that happens, a lot more people are going to be inside exploring," the Captain replied. "At that point, even if we get what's inside, we might not be able to keep our hands on it. And once the palace starts crumbling, we'll be out of time. Besides, little Ah Qing, my intuition is telling me that the treasure inside there is incredible!"

The Captain licked his lips.

"My plan is simple, little Ah Qing. In a moment, we'll head over there again. Just like last time, you absorb the surrounding mutagen and get the attention of the statues. Once the four of them are chasing after you, I'll go in and loot the place!"

"Last time you couldn't even get the door open," Xu Qing pointed out. On the previous attempt Xu Qing had put himself in danger to create the distraction, except the Captain didn't work hard enough to get inside.

Eyes bloodshot, the Captain gritted his teeth and said, "It'll be different this time. I have a new way to open that door!"

Seeing how determined the Captain was, Xu Qing finally nodded. "I'll give you thirty breaths of time."

"No problem!" Grabbing Xu Qing by the arm, he dragged Xu Qing in the direction of the palace hall.

Making sure to stay concealed, they headed toward the square-shaped palace hall. After the time it takes an incense stick to burn, they arrived. Seeing the four, flesh-covered statues, and sensing their terrifying fluctuations, caused both Xu Qing and the Captain to breathe a bit more heavily. After exchanging a glance, they split up.

Xu Qing quickly loosened the restrictions on his absorption powers, causing the surrounding mutagen to rush toward him. When it entered him, it created a pleasant, even intoxicating sensation. His soul felt like it was floating, and his fleshly body was getting stronger. On an instinctive level,

he wanted that mutagen to just keep pouring into him. People without great willpower would find it hard to avoid becoming lost in the sensation. Thankfully, Xu Qing had the perseverance to remain cool and collected. As he absorbed the mutagen, the golden threads within him trembled with longing. Slowly but surely, Xu Qing felt himself transforming.

Meanwhile, the four statues outside the palace hall slowly looked up. The flesh-covered faces' features flickered, and their eyes glowed red. Then they all started moving at the same time.

Xu Qing quickly took out the mask from his Master. Speeding along, he kept absorbing mutagen, all the while counting down in his head. After a bit more than ten breaths of time had passed, he felt a sudden sensation of critical catastrophe from above. Without any hesitation, he put the mask on his face, then threw himself down onto the flesh-covered ground and burrowed inside. There, he remained unmoving. The mask covered all traces of his existence.

Intense rumbling sounds echoed out, and terrifying fluctuations spread everywhere. The statues were clearly searching for him.

However, Xu Qing had the mask on and he wasn't moving. In that state of concealment, the four statues didn't even recognize his existence. He and the Captain had tested out how the mask worked with the statues. As long as they were a distance from the hall, it worked normally. But if they were close to the hall, they would eventually sense him. That was a big difference from the other guardian statues they had encountered at other palaces. And it was one way that this palace hall was very unique.

Hopefully the Captain makes it work.

Chapter 521: A Hand To Create All Things (part 2)

After the statues were lured away, the Captain ran pell-mell toward the entrance of the huge palace. This time, he didn't waste time trying to open the door. Instead, he rushed to the roof with the countless holes. Upon arriving, he madly threw himself toward the holes. Bizarrely, his flesh split apart, forming into countless finger-width strips that shot right through the holes.

Of course, those holes weren't just simple ventilation shafts. They had terrifying warding spells within them that instantly erupted, destroying many of the strips of flesh.

Those left over wriggled like worms. As they struggled, faces appeared on them that resembled the Captain, and they gnashed their teeth as they tried to break through the warding spells.

Unfortunately, the warding spells were very strong, and before long, about ninety percent of the Captain's strips of flesh were gone, and there were only about thirty left.

Within the mouth of each worm was an ancient and damaged command medallion. Those medallions were none other than Ancient Dao Righteous Bestowal Edicts. As they glowed with amber light, the wriggling worms began to transform. They glittered with crystalline light, and though more than half crumbled, in the end, four managed to wriggle to the end.

After popping out of the ventilation hole and dropping into the hall beyond, they looked around.

There was only one thing in the hall, and it was right in the middle. Emptiness surrounded it. It was a severed hand with a bit of the forearm attached, fully 300 meters in size. The spot where it had been severed featured a large fleshy growth that ended with countless swaying tentacles. The five fingers were outstretched, and in the palm was a huge mouth filled with countless razor-sharp teeth.

“What’s this thing?”

The Captain’s voice emanated from the mouths of the four crystalline worms as they clumped together and then transformed into a tiny crystalline imp. The imp was, of course, the Captain. However, his face didn’t resemble the Captain’s, as he was wearing a vicious and greedy mask. Without any hesitation, he opened his mouth and unleashed the heavenly dog immortal skill.

A massive dog appeared in the middle of the palace hall. Pulsing with greed, it lunged toward the severed hand and gobbled it up.

The crystalline imp then broke back up into four wriggling worms, which shot back through the ventilation holes. Of course, this entire process took a lot longer than thirty breaths of time, so the four statues had already returned from chasing Xu Qing. As a result, the warding spells in the ventilation holes were even stronger.

The Captain struggled to fight his way through them, but eventually ended up stuck. As the destructive power of the warding spells surged, he started getting very nervous. However, right then, the mutagen in the area suddenly started flowing away rapidly, causing the statues to burst into motion again. The Captain took advantage of that moment to burst free. The four crystalline worms turned into an imp again, and the imp fled at top speed.

After the time it takes an incense stick to burn, the palace area returned to normal, and the four statues returned to take up their guard positions.

Xu Qing was already at the rendezvous spot. He squatted there, spitting blood out of his mouth and looking frightened. When he’d realized the Captain wasn’t coming back, he’d assumed something unexpected happened. Gritting his teeth, he’d once again drawn away the statues. Though he’d managed to hide successfully, the statues were enraged from being repeatedly fooled, and had unleashed random attacks.

Xu Qing’s hiding spot was never revealed, but he still suffered the effects of the attacks. As his heart pounded with lingering fear, he turned his head to see a crystalline imp running toward him that bore the face of the Captain.

Before Xu Qing could ask any questions, the Captain shivered and started to grow larger. Moments later, he was back to normal size, although his face was pale and he looked very weak. Dropping onto the ground, he gasped for breath, all the while looking very excited.

“Thankfully I had that Righteous Bestowal Edict. Otherwise, I would have been done for. In the end... it was worth it!”

Seeing that the Captain was fine, Xu Qing breathed a sigh of relief. “What was inside?”

“I have no idea. But I think it’s a precious treasure.” Looking very pleased with himself, the Captain took out the skin mask and put it on to summon the heavenly dog. The heavenly dog’s throat wriggled as it coughed up a 300-meter severed hand onto the ground along with a shower of saliva.

Before Xu Qing could even take time to examine it, the huge mouth on the hand lunged toward the Captain. In the blink of an eye, the Captain was gobbled up.

It happened too quickly.

Face falling, Xu Qing took out a dagger and slashed it toward the severed hand. The dagger had absolutely no effect on the hand. What was more, the backlash attack from it caused Xu Qing to shiver and stagger backward. Eyes grim, he unleashed his poison to try to invade the hand. However, before he could actually send the poison into the hand, its five fingers glittered with multicolored light accompanied by loud cracking sounds. It was a five-colored light that flowed out of the fingers and back to the severed part of the arm. The light gathered at the fleshy growth there, grew stronger, and then went back to the fingers. From there, the light floated into the air and began to converge into the shape of a heart.

Xu Qing's pupils constricted.

Things weren't over yet, though. As the five-colored light stitched together, Xu Qing's eyes went wide as he realized it was taking the shape of a peach.

The light then faded, and a moment later, the Captain was vomited out of the mouth.

"Precious treasure! Eat, little Ah Qing!"

Looking very excited, the Captain lunged toward the peach with his mouth wide open.

Xu Qing hesitated.

When the Captain bit into the peach, it collapsed, turning into a noxious black sludge that splashed into the Captain's mouth.

The Captain immediately started retching. Dazed, he said, "How could this be happening? Dammit. I got scammed by that thing! It asked what I wanted, and I said I wanted to eat a peach that would turn me into a Smoldering God!"

Xu Qing looked quizzically at the black sludge, and then the hand. Finally, he looked at the bedraggled Captain.

"Captain, what's going on?"

"I got scammed, little Ah Qing!" The Captain ground his teeth. "After that thing ate me, I heard a voice asking me what I wanted it to create. It said it could use life force power to create anything. But after I told it what I wanted, it created nothing but a lump of trash."

Looking angry, the Captain walked over and kicked the hand. That wasn't enough though, as next, he leaned over and bit into it.

He instantly let out a shriek. Pupils constricting, Xu Qing looked over and saw that the Captain's teeth had shattered.

"How could it be so hard??" The Captain's eyes were wide as he looked at the hand, which had a faint bite mark on it. However, the bite didn't come close to penetrating the skin. "It actually broke my teeth! This thing is incredible. Maybe I didn't use it right. Little Ah Qing, you try it out."

After some thought, Xu Qing walked over toward the huge hand's mouth. The mouth opened, and a powerful gravitational force latched onto Xu Qing. He didn't resist, but rather, allowed it to suck

him inside. Afterward, the same five-colored light started to swirl, and eventually it took the shape of a mirror. It was the Seven Blood Eyes taboo treasure. Whether in the appearance or the aura, it seemed completely genuine.

The Captain looked on, his eyes shining with anticipation.

Shortly after, the hand's mouth opened and spat Xu Qing out. The instant he appeared, he looked up at the mirror. Moments ago, he had found himself in a blood-colored world, with a calm voice speaking into his ear. It had said that it could use the power of life force to create anything. Xu Qing had then created the mirror. At the same time, he noticed that his life force hadn't been absorbed. Perhaps it was because the severed hand had been hurt too badly, and didn't have all of its powers.

Xu Qing reached out to grab the mirror, but the moment he touched it, it turned into black sludge that splashed onto the ground.

Xu Qing frowned and the Captain sighed.

"A scam," the Captain said. "I really lost out this time!"

"Eldest Brother, maybe the hand has just been in that palace hall for too long. Maybe back in the days of Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity it... really could create anything."

The Captain pondered that for a moment, then nodded. "I guess too much time has passed. The mutagen invasion probably broke it. But if that were the case, could this thing really be called a precious treasure? No. No! I'm going to give it one more try."

He walked toward the hand and let himself be swallowed up again. And he did that again. And again. He created a wide assortment of things, even things from the mortal world. But all of them collapsed into black sludge.

Xu Qing also tried a few more times, with the same result.

However, their repeated tests revealed another function of the hand: if you entered the hand but didn't use it to create anything, you had a very secure location to stay safe. After some specific tests, they were even able to determine how tough the exterior of the hand was.

"It's as strong as the Void Returning level!" the Captain said through gritted teeth.

Xu Qing nodded. "It almost doesn't seem like it's made from flesh. It's more like some special tool, crafted to be like a shield."

After that, the Captain's eyes glittered brightly, and he felt a bit better.

"Hahaha! The two of us can use it like a shield, and Ning Yan like a meteor hammer! Perfect! Let's go, little Junior Brother. We can use this hand to check out some other locations." [1]

Xu Qing figured using the hand as a shield would be a perfect complement to their concealment abilities.

Before long, it was possible to see a 300-meter hand flying through the mists in Forbidden by the Immortal. By lifting the hand up and smashing it down into the ground, Xu Qing and the Captain had managed to curl the five fingers until it formed a fist. Once inside, they felt a lot safer.

Time passed. As the two of them continued their exploration, the fourth day arrived. The passage to the outside had been opened, and everyone was free to leave if they wanted. Some did, while others stayed behind to explore.

On the evening of the fourth day, the second wave of cultivators arrived. Most of them were made up of imperial troops. Many of them wore black robes, and the moment they arrived, they flew off into the depths of Forbidden by the Immortal.

Xu Qing, who was already about 250 kilometers away from the safe zone, didn't see any of that. Though they weren't incredibly far away, it was too far to see things back at the safe zone with the naked eye. However, a transmissions tower had been erected in the safe zone, which meant that their command swords could again be used to send messages.

Both Xu Qing and the Captain felt their command swords vibrate, and checked them to find that in three days, the third wave of cultivators would arrive.

That evening, a gruish red color appeared in the sky, spreading rapidly.

A strange sense of fear rose up in Xu Qing's heart. What was more, he could tell that his heavenly dao was sending him a warning.

"We need to hurry up, Eldest Brother. I have the feeling that the red moon... is about to wake up. I think it will probably happen in three days, when that third wave arrives." Xu Qing squatted in the severed hand, and the Captain squatted next to him. Nodding, he pointed to the path ahead.

"Look over there, little Junior Brother. I wasn't paying close attention before, so I didn't realize this forbidden ground had a palace complex like that."

Xu Qing turned to look in the direction he was pointing and saw a flesh-covered palace complex surrounded by a high wall.

"Look at how intact the outer wall is. That's different from anything we've encountered before. It hasn't even started to crumble yet. And even with the flesh covering the buildings, you can see that the complex generally resembles the shape of a phoenix. I wonder if one of the concubines from Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity's harem used to live there.

"Female cultivators generally love cleanliness. You know, taking baths and stuff. If that's a harem palace, then do you think there might be something like an immortal hot spring there? And if so, I wonder if there might be some clothes like Nethersprite had? Maybe even jewelry and ornaments.... Female cultivators always have lots of fun stuff where they live. I mean, that's what it was like with Nethersprite, right? She had all sorts of treasures."

The Captain's eyes were shining brightly. "By the way, we're in the east district. You know, I've read a lot of books that make it very clear the girls in the East Palace are extra special!"

Xu Qing's eyes narrowed with interest. But then, he heard Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior clearing his throat.

"Milord, um... based on the palace intrigue novels I've read, the East Palace is usually occupied by the empress dowager, the crown prince, and the young princesses...." [2]

Chapter 522: Plumdark and a Green Lamp (part 1)

Upon hearing Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior's words, Xu Qing looked thoughtfully at the distant palace complex. Then he looked at the Captain, noting his excited expression, and the fact that he seemed just on the verge of rushing toward the palace. The crazy look in his eye seemed different from how he looked when going after ordinary treasure.

This is how Eldest Brother looked back during the Nethersprite heist. Apparently, he's really obsessed with stealing things from female cultivators.

Surprised, Xu Qing couldn't hold back from asking the Captain for more details.

The Captain smiled proudly. "You don't understand. Let me tell you, little Ah Qing, based on my experience, female cultivators always have a lot of treasures. Especially the really pretty girls. It's the result of countless men competing to give them the best gifts. I saw this thing over and over again in my previous lives. Think back to Nethersprite. She was just like that, right? She had *tons* of treasures."

Xu Qing thought back to Nethersprite's mansion grotto and all of the countless items she had there.

"In the past," the Captain continued in a very meaningful and heartfelt tone, "I would shamelessly give all sorts of gifts to girls to get them to like me. Later on, I made a promise to myself to help female cultivators share the burden of having so many gifts around. Do you know what the most important quality of a good person is, little Ah Qing? It's being helpful! Kind and helpful! And that's what we're doing now. Being very helpful."

Xu Qing was somewhat taken aback. Although the explanation seemed strange, the Captain's facial expression and manner of speaking were very confident. And thus, what he said made a lot of sense.

"Oh, you!" the Captain said. "You're just too young! That's why you don't understand. Trust me, I'm right about this. As your Eldest Brother, do you think I would try to scam you or something?" The Captain patted Xu Qing's shoulder. "Let's go. As you mentioned, we have no more than three days until the third wave is all here and the red moon awakens. We need to make the most of those three days. And we're going to start by finding whatever treasures are in this palace."

Licking his lips, he sent the severed hand flying toward the phoenix-shaped palace complex.

Because of the impending awakening of the red moon, Xu Qing decided not to ask any more questions.

Thus, the severed hand flew over the ground of flesh, getting closer and closer to the palace. At a certain point, a tremor passed through the hand.

At the same time, Xu Qing and the Captain sensed something dangerous up ahead. Through the cracks between the fingers, they could see the huge wall of flesh circling around the palace, creating a barrier to entry. Beyond that wall of flesh was the palace complex, which was made of nine palace buildings. There were no guardian statues, and the roaring of mutant beasts was actually less loud here than in other places.

“It’s too quiet,” Xu Qing whispered.

The Captain nodded. “Something’s off here.”

They exchanged a glance, and then Xu Qing gave orders to his shadow, causing it to stretch out to gather information. The Captain bit off one of his fingers. When he spat it out of his mouth, it turned into a crystalline worm that sped in roughly the same direction as the shadow. Xu Qing wasn’t surprised by this ability, as the Captain had already used it numerous times during their explorations.

By combining their surveillance abilities, they could usually identify dangers and avoid them.

As the seconds ticked by, Xu Qing’s shadow neared the wall surrounding the palaces, while the Captain’s finger, now a worm, veered in a slightly different direction. Eventually, the finger reached the wall and tried to fly over it.

As it did, violet light flickered, and the crystalline worm lurched to a halt midair. Then, it was sliced into ribbons, almost as if invisible blades had slashed at it. The crystalline worm had very strong life force, though, as the ribbons just became smaller individual worms that continued onward. However, there wasn’t just a single line of defense to deal with. Powerful warding spells erupted, and the ribbons were shredded into ash. Then a powerful force of expulsion sent the ashes back to the area outside the wall. And yet, there was more. After the worms were turned into ashes, a sealing power erupted from inside the wall, which clamped down on the area where the ashes had scattered.

The air there rippled and distorted, and an eye which had previously been invisible was suddenly revealed, then squashed out of existence.

The Captain grunted and coughed up some blood.

Frowning, he said, “I can’t believe this place has the power to resist the Ancient Dao Righteous Bestowal Edict. Little Ah Qing, this place is no simple palace complex!”

Meanwhile, Xu Qing was also having trouble. When his shadow reached the wall, it screamed as it was severed by some powerful force. Of course, the shadow was inherently vicious. The portion that had been severed quickly self-detonated, breaking itself into countless smaller fragments that raced in all directions.

Unfortunately, that action elicited a response from an even more powerful set of warding spells. A terrifying shockwave burst out of the wall of flesh, along with violet light. As it swept over the countless tiny fragments of the shadow, they screamed as they were wiped out of existence. And the shockwave continued onward, apparently looking for the source of the shadow fragments.

From a distance, Xu Qing and the Captain saw dazzling violet light and an icy will rushing toward them. As the violet light spread out, it became so dense it started to turn black, until everything in front of them was completely dark.

The two of them were about to flee when, all of a sudden, the violet light tumbled backward, so that the area in front of them turned bright and radiant again.

The surviving portion of the shadow by the wall hastened back to Xu Qing, where it trembled and sent him emotional fluctuations of embarrassment and terror.

“Scared... can’t get... in.”

Surprised, Xu Qing looked at the area beyond the wall of flesh, his heart pounding.

Off to the side, the Captain was panting for breath. “Well, this is annoying, little Junior Brother. I wonder who lived here back in the day. That was really tough, especially the violet light which—”

“Eldest Brother,” Xu Qing interrupted, “I feel like this place... is familiar. Did you hear that just now?”

Stunned, the Captain looked at Xu Qing. “Familiar? Hear something?”

“A sigh came from that violet light just now,” Xu Qing said softly.

The Captain reached out and grabbed Xu Qing’s arm. “Little Junior Brother,” he said in a serious tone, “we don’t have a complete understanding of all the species that exist in this world. After the broken face of the god came, a vast number of grues and other terrifying creatures came to exist. That includes gods, plus other indescribable entities. You might think I act like a crazy person, but the truth is that every single job I’ve taken you on was something I spent a lot of time preparing for, taking into account all sorts of intelligence reports and other clues. But Forbidden by the Immortal is different.

“I actually don’t know much about this place. If we’ve run into something that you can hear, but others can’t hear... well, that seems to indicate this thing is extremely dangerous. That’s especially true considering how unique I am. If I can’t hear something, then... it means we need to be very careful.

“I think we should forget about getting into this place. Let’s wait until the sleeping god is dead, and then we can decide if it’s worth it to come back and try again.”

It was rare to hear the Captain talking like this. In fact, Xu Qing couldn’t remember any other time in which the Captain would hold back from trying to gobble up a juicy morsel. That went to show how unusual the situation was.

Xu Qing nodded. However, just as they were about to leave, he noticed that, beyond the wall of flesh, inside the palace complex, there was a person standing amidst the violet light.

It was a woman.

She wore a violet gown, and the light around her almost looked like a plum flower. She was spectacularly beautiful as she stood there alone, looking straight at him. There was something so familiar about her gaze that Xu Qing’s mind was battered by waves of shock.

“Little Junior Brother!” the Captain said. Noting Xu Qing’s vacant expression, he shook him.

Xu Qing shivered and looked at the Captain. Then he looked back at the palace complex, except the woman was gone. What was more, the entire area surrounded by the flesh wall was turning blurry, almost as if it were about to decompose into nothing.

This wasn't a unique occurrence. The same thing had happened in other places that Xu Qing and the Captain had visited on their journey so far. Apparently, when the ancient seals were broken, and outside energy entered, it had a huge effect. Items which normally wouldn't have survived for so long would finally return to the state they should have reached long ago, and simply disappeared.

Looking somewhat dazed, Xu Qing murmured, "Did you see her, Eldest Brother?"

Seeing Xu Qing in that state got the Captain even more nervous, especially since he hadn't seen a thing.

"Let's get out of here, little Junior Brother. We need to go back, right now. There's something really strange going on here!"

"I'm fine, Eldest Brother," Xu Qing said softly. He was still looking at the decaying area beyond the wall, and thinking back to what just happened. He also thought about how his heavenly dao didn't give him any warning about this place being dangerous. "Eldest Brother, can you help me out with something?"

"What are you planning to do?" the Captain said. He suddenly had an idea of what was about to happen.

"Given how fast that area is decaying," Xu Qing said, "by the time the sleeping god dies, it'll be gone. Therefore... I'm going inside to take a look around. You wait for me here."

"Absolutely not!" the Captain said, shaking his head. "I refuse!"

Xu Qing looked at the Captain. "If I don't go in to look around, I'm going to regret it. Besides, my heavenly dao isn't giving me any warnings. It should be safe."

A long moment passed, and then the Captain sighed. "We'll go in together!"

"Captain, the power in there is dangerous to you. It's dissipating, but it will still affect you. If we stick together, I won't be able to go in."

They went back and forth a bit before the Captain reluctantly agreed. At that point, Xu Qing took a deep breath and had the severed hand swallow him.

Because of the warding spells, it wasn't possible to just walk into the palace complex, so Xu Qing's idea was to enter the hand and then have the Captain throw the hand over the wall. If the area beyond the wall wasn't decomposing, then he would have waited to find a safer means of entry. But right now, he was running out of time.

And the reason was that the figure he had seen was none other than Arch-Immortal Plumdark, who absolutely, positively should not be in this place.

Chapter 522: Plumdark and a Green Lamp (part 2)

After Xu Qing entered the hand, the Captain gritted his teeth. Grabbing the hand, he swung it around as hard as he could and then hurled it over the wall.

The hand became a streak of light that shot into the palace complex. The moment it entered the complex, the warding spells activated again. However, the hand was extremely tough, so its flesh ended up lacerated and cut down to the bone, but it made it into the courtyard intact.

Before long, the hand's mouth opened and Xu Qing stepped out. He looked around.

Of the nine palaces that made the phoenix-shaped complex, the middle one was glowing with violet light. Simultaneously, a similarly colored light was shining in Xu Qing's bag of holding. A jade slip flew out of the bag of holding, moving of its own accord to hover in front of him. It was the same jade slip Arch-Immortal Plumdark had given him, which contained protective power from her. The moment it was out in the open, it pulsed with light.

The light in the palace flickered in response. A blurry figure appeared within the violet light in the palace, floating there and looking at him.

Xu Qing's heart flip-flopped.

It was none other than Plumdark!

But now that he was closer, Xu Qing could see that she wasn't exactly like the Plumdark he remembered. It wasn't in terms of her looks, but rather, her bearing. This person seemed desolate, even emotionless.

Xu Qing stood there for a moment before walking forward. As he approached, the warding spells seemed to make a path for him, allowing him to walk right up to the center most palace. Taking a deep breath, he pushed open the ancient doors.

They opened noiselessly, revealing a pitch black hall.

There were no lamps in the hall, making it very dark and gloomy. In fact, it was so dark the light from outside couldn't enter.

Xu Qing stood there for a while getting used to the darkness, until he was finally able to see the interior. The hall was almost completely empty. There were no chairs or anything else. However, there was a lonely statue in the middle of the hall. It was easy to imagine how, when the door was closed and the hall was sealed, it would feel very much like a cage. There was only that statue there, standing eternally alone.

The statue was of a woman, but she was not Plumdark. However, she was beautiful. And within that beauty was a gracefulness that came with age. The statue didn't seem to want to hide that age, as there were some wrinkles at the corner of her eyes. She had a warm smile on her face, and her eyes had been sculpted in a way that made them seem warm and merciful.

In her hand was a lamp that she held as if it were the most precious object in the world. It was a very unique lamp. It was carved from purple stone, and it resembled a blooming bauhinia flower. On the surface of the flower rested a violet phoenix with its wings outstretched. It looked very lifelike.

Upon seeing that lamp, Xu Qing struggled to control his breathing. It was a life lamp, or more precisely, it was a sculpture of a life lamp. Xu Qing had never seen it before, yet it seemed very

familiar to him. And the reason was because of a dream Arch-Immortal Plumdark had related to him.

“There’s a dream I have occasionally.... In the dream, the world is pitch dark. I can’t see anything except for a lamp, which is right in front of me.... The lamp is extinguished. It has no light. That makes it almost impossible to see. Nor can I touch it. It’s as if it’s too far away, but at the same time, incredibly close to me.

“In my imagination, it looks like a blooming bauhinia flower. And living on it is a little violet phoenix with its wings spread.

“That lamp has always appeared in my dreams, and it’s always extinguished. And there is never any light in that world.” [1]

Xu Qing was visibly stunned.

In the past, he’d assumed the story was just a random dream Arch-Immortal Plumdark had. But then he saw Plumdark outside this hall. And then he saw this carving of a lamp. He had no idea where the real version of the lamp was. In the holy lands? Vanished in time?

Why would Plumdark dream about this lamp? And why did she appear in the violet light outside? What karma connects her to this lamp?

Within the darkness of the hall, the image of Plumdark appeared in front of the statue. She was looking at the statue, her eyes glittering with something like familial admiration, and also extreme bitterness. She looked over her shoulder at Xu Qing, and something flashed through her desolate eyes. She opened her mouth and spoke.

Xu Qing heard nothing. But after she finished speaking, her expression changed. It became sorrowful. All of a sudden, another figure entered the hall, walking forward and through Xu Qing.

Shivering, Xu Qing looked over his shoulder, then back at the figure that had just walked through him.

It was a tall young man wearing an imperial robe with a four-clawed golden dragon on it. He had a nine-tasseled imperial crown, and though he emanated no aura, a mere glance at him gave the impression of mighty strength. [2]

Standing with his back to Xu Qing, he spoke to Plumdark, although Xu Qing couldn’t hear what he was saying.

Plumdark wept as she looked outside of the hall. She seemed overwhelmed with sorrow. That was when Xu Qing realized that, reflected in her pupils was a shattered sky, and an enormous broken face looming there.

Xu Qing suddenly realized that what he was seeing wasn’t real, but rather, was like a recorded image!

Earlier, Plumdark hadn’t been looking at *him*. She had just been looking in the direction where he was standing.

As he watched, Plumdark shook her head and spoke. She seemed to be saying something critical. The figure in the imperial robe eventually extended his hand, as if asking Plumdark to leave with him. Plumdark decisively shook her head. The young man in the imperial robe stood there for a long moment. Then he took a small violet bottle out of his robe. Walking up to the statue, he poured a few drops of liquid from the bottle onto the violet lamp.

The liquid was transparent, like lamp oil.

Having done that, he put the nearly empty bottle down to the side. Then he turned, revealing a face full of grief and bitterness. When Xu Qing saw his face, he was shocked to find that the young man looked very similar to Plumdark. Apparently they were brother and sister.

The young man left, walking through Xu Qing and out of the hall.... After he was gone, the doors of the hall slowly closed.

Plumdark knelt in front of the statue, her face a mask of sorrow. Gradually, the hall started to turn dark again. The lamp carving had oil in it, but the darkness continued to gather until everything disappeared.

Everything turned very cold. When darkness and gloom filled the hall, the only thing that remained was a sigh that echoed out before fading into nothing. A moment later, the darkness vanished. It turned into a violet light that swept back toward the distant wall of flesh.

When the violet light was gone, the coldness disappeared. Everything returned to normal for Xu Qing.

The Captain stood next to him, panting for breath.

“Well this is annoying, little Junior Brother. I wonder who lived here back in the day. That was really tough, especially the violet light which—”

The shadow by the wall hastened back to Xu Qing, where it trembled and sent him emotional fluctuations of embarrassment and terror.

“Scared... can't get... in.”

Xu Qing frowned and looked at the courtyard beyond the wall.

“Eldest Brother,” Xu Qing interrupted, “I feel like this place is familiar. Did you hear that just now?”

“Familiar? Hear something?” The Captain looked stunned.

“It was like a sigh came from that violet light just now,” Xu Qing said solemnly.

The Captain's expression flickered, and he was about to say something when a rumbling sound echoed out from the safety zone about 250 kilometers away. Despite the great distance involved, the sound was very clear, and they even felt the ground tremble. Then their command swords vibrated as a notification came in.

“The third wave has arrived. Furthermore, Seventh Prince has new orders for those who came in the first wave. For seven days, you have been working hard here in Forbidden by the Immortal. Dramatic events may be unfolding, so you may all leave over the course of

the next three hours. Those who came in the second wave may leave after they have been here for seven days. The same pattern holds for the third wave."

Xu Qing and the Captain looked at each other. There was no way they were going to leave, so they put their command swords away and looked back at the wall of flesh.

The Captain had been about to ask Xu Qing about the sigh he mentioned, but before he could, something occurred to him. Eyes widening, he looked at Xu Qing. Xu Qing apparently had thought of the same thing, as he also turned to look at the Captain.

"The third wave is already here?"

"Last I remember, the second wave had just shown up..."

Their pupils constricted simultaneously as they took out their command swords again to review the contents of the notification. Both of them focused on the same thing, and it caused waves of shock to roll through them.

"Seven days?" The Captain's eyes narrowed.

"When we arrived at this palace complex, it was the fourth day, and the second wave had just arrived." Xu Qing's expression became incomparably serious.

"As far as I can tell," the Captain said, "we've only been here for about the time it takes an incense stick to burn. But based on the information from the command sword, it's been three days!" His eyes glittered. "What were we actually doing during those three days?"

Xu Qing's expression was very unsightly as he looked past the wall of flesh at the nine palaces. He suddenly got the sensation that he had forgotten something. At the same time, he felt like this area seemed very familiar. It was a feeling very much like what he had experienced back in D-132. Without any hesitation, he tapped into the power of his D-132 heavenly palace and sent it throughout his body.

The Captain's expression was grim. The image of a face appeared in his pupils and his aura turned very cold as he looked in the same direction as Xu Qing, at the wall of flesh.

A long moment passed, and they slowly backed away from the area. As they did, the nine palaces began to crumble and disappear. Seeing that, Xu Qing and the Captain stopped in place. The moment they did, the crumbling stopped. Eyes blank, they took a few steps forward, which caused the crumbling to reverse. Then they backed up, and it started again. After they had backed up about 3,000 meters, the palace complex had crumbled into nothing, as it would have thanks to the ravages of time. However, there was one thing that didn't crumble. An old statue.

It was in such bad shape it was impossible to tell much about it. Its facial features weren't visible. It wasn't possible to tell if it was male or female. It didn't even have arms. The only thing visible was a lamp.

And next to the lamp was a violet bottle, right there in the middle of the ruins.

Chapter 523: Heavenfate Dao Soul (part 1)

The Captain hesitated. Xu Qing frowned.

Their experiments had confirmed that the phoenix-like palace complex with its nine buildings would crumble when they moved away from them, and then be restored as they got closer. The transformation occurred based on the behavior of whoever came to explore the place. And if they got close enough, even stranger things would happen. They would enter a bizarre, distorted state of reality in which time passed without them realizing it.

“Little Ah Qing,” the Captain said, “remember how you said the place seemed familiar? Was that a really strong feeling?”

Xu Qing nodded. “Very strong.”

“In that case, do you think it’s possible that, during the three days that passed, we actually went in and explored the place? Maybe more than once? I have a similar feeling, but it’s not very strong. So maybe I stayed on the perimeter while you went further inside. That would explain why you have such a strong feeling.”

Xu Qing’s eyes narrowed. “If you’re right, then had we not received that notification from the command sword, we wouldn’t have realized time was passing. In which case, the next thing that would have happened would be me thinking to use the severed hand as a protection. And I would have asked you to throw me over the wall. Apparently that method works. Once inside the wall, I would step out of the hand and explore the palace complex.”

With that, Xu Qing looked over at the hand hoping to find evidence to prove his theory. Unfortunately, the regenerative properties of the hand were so impressive that it looked exactly as it always had. That said, upon looking very closely, it was possible to find evidence of newly regrown flesh.

The Captain’s eyes glittered. “So, you *have* explored the place a few times. Except, you don’t remember what happened inside.... Little Junior Brother, think carefully. Are you able to remember even the slightest thing?”

Xu Qing closed his eyes and searched his memories. Unfortunately, he couldn’t remember anything at all. His recollection of the events with the palace complex seemed to make perfect sense, without any discrepancies in the timeline. He frowned. This was indeed very much like his early experience with D-132, although there were some differences.

D-132 had two levels of reality, a superficial one, and a deeper one. Because of the effects of destiny aura, there was balance between the two, leaving most ordinary people to only be able to see the superficial reality. That said, the deeper reality still existed at all times, and its influence still existed. People just didn’t notice it. That was why other guards had died because of the misfortune in D-132. There were also other people who, for a variety of different reasons, woke up and saw past the superficial reality. But when they left D-132, they would forget everything. Because of that cycle, Xu Qing would wake up every day, and then forget everything every day. However, that led to a subconscious cyclical sensation.

In contrast, the phoenix-like temple complex didn’t have a superficial and deeper reality. It only had one level of reality that was part of the endless cycle.

After analyzing the situation for a time, Xu Qing decided to activate his taboo poison core, his Ghost Emperor mountain, his heavenly dao, and the power of D-132, all at the same time. In the blink of an eye, he rose to a higher level of existence.

As winds screamed in the area, the Captain looked over. This was the Captain's first time seeing Xu Qing in such a state. Eyes shining, he smacked his lips.

Xu Qing ignored the Captain. As he continued to power up, he looked over at the palace complex. Everything seemed normal. But then Xu Qing's jaw nearly dropped. Tapping into his god body, he forced the golden threads within him to stir. Then his eyes glittered with golden light as he looked more closely at the temple complex.

This time, he saw something different. The nine palaces were clearly still there. But they seemed blurry. And they were covered by a shimmering layer of violet, a light that seemed illusory, and gave off the sensation of existing somewhere between reality and falsehood. What was more, it contained a sense of flowing time. The sensation was difficult to describe.

A moment later, Xu Qing retracted all his powers. Sighing, he turned to the Captain and shook his head.

"I can't remember."

The Captain sighed.

"Although," Xu Qing suddenly added, "I think I have a way to get that little violet bottle."

The Captain's eyes narrowed.

Xu Qing waved his right hand, causing the stone lion and head to fly out of his D-132 heavenly palace. The head was a quick learner, so the moment it appeared, it plastered a fawning expression onto its face.

"Greetings, my most great, esteemed, paramount, and exalted jailer!"

The stone lion had no head, and thus couldn't speak, but it wagged its tail vigorously and put its chest on the ground like a dog.

The Captain had seen the head before, but not the stone lion, so his eyes glittered as he examined it.

"Is this another friend of yours, little Junior Brother? I remember seeing the head before, and was very intrigued. As for this stone lion, I'd say it looks amazing. It smells a lot like a cloud troll, though. Also... these two friends of yours are very fantastic. Not only do they have destiny aura, but also, they've been cursed. And those two powers exist in a perfect state of balance.

"For a curse to exist in a state of balance with destiny seems to indicate that the curse is from a god.... Little Junior Brother, have you ever heard of the idiom *a ghost helping a tiger*

? In that idiom, the ghost is none other than a tiger-assisting ghost. According to the stories, if a tiger kills someone, they'll become a special kind of ghost that stays by the tiger's side forever. These two friends of yours are basically tiger-assisting ghosts!" [1]

When the stone lion heard that, it shivered. The head's eyes went wide, and it looked suspiciously at the Captain. This was the second time the two had encountered someone who could quickly see how unique they were.

The first was Xu Qing. The second was this person. [2]

He called the Fiendish Xu 'little Junior Brother.' That means they're fellow disciples! Anyone who has such a close relationship with the Fiendish Xu must also be a freakish hellion! The terrified head thought back to when Xu Qing recently summoned it, stomped it, and then put it away after it recovered. In that brief moment, the head's attention had been focused on the terrifying Xu Qing, so it hadn't paid much attention to the other two individuals present. But now, it looked over and examined the Captain closely.

The moment it did, its eyes nearly exploded, and it screamed, "Mouths. Infinite mouths! Chains! Chains from the Nine Serenities.... Sealing marks. Unending seals! Dear lord! What am I looking at? The bones of gods? Innumerable bones of gods!"

All of a sudden, the head exploded.

Xu Qing looked at the Captain. The Captain looked back innocently.

The stone lion shivered, even more terrified than before.

Shortly after, the head was back to normal. Trembling, it inclined itself into a bow, looking incomparably obedient. It didn't dare to look at the Captain or Xu Qing, and was inwardly howling in grief. After all, it was just now realizing that, back when Xu Qing summoned it recently, there had been a third person present.

Xu Qing had quickly whisked it back into D-132. But even back in D-132, it had trembled fearfully for a long time. That group of three people was just too terrifying, so much so that the head was too scared to use any of its powers.

All three of them are completely terrifying!

Xu Qing's curiosity was piqued. Though he knew the Captain had a lot of secrets, the head's reaction was really pushing the boundaries of melodrama. Now wasn't the time to delve into the details, though, so he just looked coldly at the head.

"I want the two of you to go get that violet bottle. If you do well, I'll consider reducing your sentence."

"Oh great and wonderful jailer, the reality is we don't care if our sentence is reduced or not. As long as we—"

Before the head could finish speaking, the stone lion planted its forepaws onto the ground, then burst into motion toward the temple complex. Seeing that, the head instantly got nervous and started rolling along after the stone lion. After picking up some speed, it flew into the air and landed on the lion's neck. Together, they dashed toward the area beyond the wall of flesh.

Xu Qing watched carefully, as did the Captain.

“You think they can do it?” the Captain asked.

“They’re prisoners from D-132. Considering how long they were in that cell block, they should be able to do it.” Xu Qing went on to explain a bit about how D-132 worked.

The Captain’s eyes glittered. “I had no idea the Corrections Division had such an amazing location!”

The Captain noted the look in Xu Qing’s eyes, and realized how much he missed life in the Corrections Division. That made the Captain think about Palace Lord Kong, and how nice things had once been. Sighing inwardly, he clasped Xu Qing’s shoulder then pointed toward the temple complex.

“Very impressive!”

The stone lion, carrying the head, shot toward the wall of flesh and then leaped over it. Because of their unique nature, the warding spells weren’t effective at all against them.

As Xu Qing watched, the stone lion landed in the courtyard and started circling around as if searching for something. Unfortunately, despite the fact that the violet bottle was very close, they didn’t seem capable of finding it.

Xu Qing frowned slightly.

Then things changed. Apparently at the urging of the head, the two of them backed away from each other, then rushed toward each other, slammed into each other, and exploded. They were quickly resurrected. Trembling in excitement, they flew a short distance away, then killed each other again. That cycle continued to play out, getting them closer and closer to the violet bottle.

The Captain chuckled. “Those two are actually pretty smart! Whenever they’re resurrected, the interaction between the destiny aura and the curse gives them a brief moment in which they can see their surroundings clearly.”

Xu Qing nodded.

As the two of them watched, the head and the stone lion died a good dozen times or so. Eventually, they reached the violet bottle. Without the slightest hesitation, the head stuffed the bottle into its mouth, then flew back to the stone lion. As they fled, the area of decomposition reached the remnants of the statue, which started blurring, and eventually crumbled into dust. At the same time, the wall of flesh extended to cover the entire complex.

During the process, the stone lion and the head managed to race back to Xu Qing. The head released the violet bottle, then continued to jabber fawning words. However, Xu Qing just waved his hand and sucked them back into D-132.

The Captain squatted and picked up the bottle. The moment he touched it, he shivered visibly. He recovered a moment later, and then looked at Xu Qing with an expression of complete incredulity.

“This is... a timescape bottle!”

Chapter 523: Heavenfate Dao Soul (part 2)

The Captain instinctively looked left and right, then grabbed Xu Qing and directed the severed hand to leave the area.

Xu Qing already had a lot of questions, but given the Captain's behavior, he held his tongue. Eventually, when they were far away in a safe location, the two of them squatted across from each other in the severed hand. The Captain was breathing heavily, and his eyes shone with brilliant light.

"Eldest Brother," Xu Qing asked, "what exactly is a timescape bottle?"

The Captain exhaled slowly, then once again looked around. Upon confirming they were alone, he performed an incantation gesture to seal the surroundings.

Seemingly overwhelmed with excitement, he said, "This is a major windfall, little Ah Qing!! A timescape bottle! I've seen them described in certain ancient records. Back in the era of Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity, only the imperial clan had these things. Even then, they were very rare. If a new one popped up, it would become the sole focus of the imperial clan. And any group outside of the imperial clan who got one and hid it would eventually be exterminated. Doing so was considered a major crime.

"Supposedly, when Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity took the imperial clan and various other humans out of this world, they took all the timescape bottles with them. Yet right here we have one. An actual timescape bottle!"

Lowering his voice, the Captain continued, "Nobody really knows where timescape bottles come from. From ancient times until now, not one person has been able to identify their true history. However, one known fact is that whenever Ancient Emperors conquered Revered Ancient in the past, they always collected them. According to one legend, and it's just a legend, mind you, the timescape bottles contain the biggest secret of the Revered Ancient mainland. Other people say that they contain the method that lets Ancient Emperors and Imperial Sovereigns break their inner shackles. Yet others say that timescape bottles contain the most supreme and paramount legacy imaginable.

"There's just about every sort of rumor imaginable regarding them. But in the end, only one timescape bottle can come to exist in a given epoch. They're mysteries that belonged only to the imperial clans. Although no one has ever unraveled the secrets of the timescape bottles, not even after all these years, they aren't useless by any stretch of the imagination. They have the power to preserve time itself. You see, they're receptacles, and anything you put inside them is spared the ravaging effects of time.

"Little Junior Brother, now it makes sense why that area was so strange. There was a section of time that was preserved in the timescape bottle, and it was slowly spreading out in the area, creating an endless cycle."

This was Xu Qing's first time hearing about timescape bottles, and the information was quite surprising. However, it also made him think about wish boxes and recording bottles. Therefore, he asked the Captain if they were connected.

“Wish boxes and recording bottles? Both of those things are basically imitations of timescape bottles. One of them copies the timescape bottles’ preserving powers, the other imitates their powers of time preservation!”

The Captain lifted the timescape bottle and shook it back and forth gently. “There’s something inside. It sounds like a liquid!” Eyes shining, he sniffed the bottle, causing an intoxicated expression to fill his face. “Smells lovely! I wonder what it is. Seems consumable. Little Junior Brother, do you think we should drink it?” Licking his lips, the Captain passed the bottle to Xu Qing. “You smell it.”

Xu Qing accepted the bottle, put it under his nose, and inhaled. A strange aroma entered him, becoming an energy flow that swept through him. It didn’t provoke any reaction from his god body, but it did cause the four life lamps in his sea of consciousness to flicker. They seemed to surge with boundless longing, as if the contents of the bottle would be an extraordinary boon to life lamps. And then there was his incomplete twelfth heavenly palace, which rocked back and forth. Apparently, the contents of the bottle would be a big help in the process of materializing a heavenly palace.

Xu Qing was visibly moved, but was also hesitant. After all, he had no idea what that liquid was, and it was a relic of ancient time. That said, as for whether or not it could be consumed, Xu Qing decided to trust the Captain.

He nodded decisively. “Let’s drink it!”

The Captain chuckled, took the bottle, shook it, then lifted it to his mouth and let a single drop of the viscous fluid flow out. There was another drop left in the bottle. The Captain handed the bottle to Xu Qing.

Xu Qing opened his mouth and poured the second drop inside. Then he closed his eyes to focus on absorbing the liquid. He immediately felt like his insides were about to explode. A heaven-shaking, earth-shattering aura erupted in his mouth, shot down his throat, spread through his body, and converged in his sea of consciousness.

The four life lamp heavenly palaces trembled violently, much as the taboo poison core had reacted to god vitality, except that the longing was even more intense. It was as if their long existence had resulted in them being incredibly withered, and only now did they encounter true nourishment. After all, though they existed inside Xu Qing, and were thus bolstered by him, they hadn’t been created using his blood.

After absorbing the liquid, the life flames that burned on the lamps became unprecedentedly brighter. The fire burned incredibly brightly, such that it pierced the mist that hung over the sea of consciousness. As that fire climbed higher and higher, it was possible to see that atop each of the four life lamps sat a small, illusory figure, right in the middle of the flame.

When Xu Qing saw that, he was rocked with astonishment. He knew exactly what those small figures were.

They were nascent souls!

Though they were currently illusory, they were already getting very close to a state of full materialization.

Thanks to the incitement of the liquid from the timescape bottle, the life flames burning on Xu Qing's four life lamps grew vastly brighter. What was more, the small figures sitting in the fire all bore the exact same face as Xu Qing.

After ten breaths of time passed, the first of Xu Qing's life lamps, the black umbrella, started burning so brightly that the figure atop it materialized! It became completely clear to see. Then its eyes opened, and it seemed to be looking right at Xu Qing via divine sense, through the life flame. Xu Qing's mind spun as his cultivation base fluctuations grew even more intense.

At the same time, an umbrella appeared over Xu Qing's head. It looked different than before. It was more lustrous, and seemed even more real. What was more, as it hovered above the cross-legged Xu Qing, he seemed like a young Ancient Emperor. He abounded with majesty.

Things weren't over yet. Next, as the seven-colored wind-chanting lamp emanated deafening sounds, the figure in its flame opened its eyes.

A second umbrella appeared!

Next, a nascent soul formed in the hellspirit bloodwing lamp, and then in the immortal-shredding god-devouring lamp.

Xu Qing sat cross-legged underneath four umbrellas, all of which flowed with dazzling light. There was the black umbrella, the seven-colored umbrella, then the blood wing. After that, his aura became fiendish and deadly. All of that combined with his spectacularly beautiful good looks would ensure that, if anyone was able to see him right now, and didn't know who he was, would assume that he was an imperial prince of humankind.

Four nascent souls appeared, one after another, causing Xu Qing's cultivation base to rise dramatically. His fluctuations reached an astonishing level, and terrifying power flowed through him. Next, his golden crow nascent soul erupted.

At the same time, a sensation of impending heavenly tribulation filled Xu Qing's mind. However, it hadn't reached the point of becoming a reality; the sensation needed to intensify before he could summon the tribulation.

There was still a bit of power left from the liquid in the timescape bottle. Therefore, Xu Qing directed it toward his twelfth heavenly palace. It was close to being materialized, but not all the way. As it absorbed the power, it rapidly materialized, reaching an eighty percent level of completion. Then ninety percent. Then ninety-nine percent!

His twelfth heavenly palace glittered brightly as it rocked back and forth.

All it needed was an item to fill it, and it would be complete!

Xu Qing opened his eyes to see the Captain looking regretfully at the umbrellas.

The Captain's aura was obviously dramatically higher than before. Similar to Xu Qing, he emanated the fluctuations of the Nascent Soul level. However, it was hard to tell exactly how many nascent souls he had.

Upon seeing Xu Qing awaken, the Captain inhaled sharply, his face a mask of regret. "Little Ah Qing, the nascent souls your life lamps have formed are almost on the verge of summoning the first tribulation!"

“Life lamps really are precious treasures. What a pity I don’t have the blood of any Ancient Emperors or Imperial Sovereigns, so I can’t make my own life lamp. And external life lamps can’t be integrated into my blood. Nor can I do as the descendants of the Ancient Emperors and Imperial Sovereigns, and use a life lamp as one of the Spirit Trove ovens, in other words, as the foundation for one of the five secret troves.

“That’s why a lot of almighty cultivators don’t care much about life lamps when they reach Spirit Trove. It’s not that life lamps aren’t good, but rather, we eventually just can’t use them. Ai.”

Xu Qing hadn’t heard about life lamps being converted into ovens in Spirit Trove. But he had sensed that, as his cultivation base climbed, the life lamps were reaching the point of being obsolete.

“There’s no way you can integrate them with your blood?” Xu Qing asked.

The Captain shook his head. “From ancient times until now there have been plenty of people who tried. But sadly, it’s not possible. The only people who can do that are descendants of Ancient Emperors and Imperial Sovereigns who used their own blood to make the life lamp.”

Xu Qing nodded. That said, he wasn’t going to cry about the situation. His life lamps were still helping out when it came to the Nascent Soul level, and he got the sense that they would enable him to reach a peak level of strength.

The Captain patted Xu Qing’s shoulder. “It’s not a big deal. I’ll keep thinking about it, and who knows, maybe I’ll come up with a way to make it happen. Let’s not worry about that now. I doubt Master had any clue that we would benefit from the good fortune of a timescape bottle. Therefore, he didn’t bother giving us much detailed information about nascent souls. I guess I’ll have to pick up the slack.

“The Nascent Soul level is called different things by different species. For instance the Heavenfate level, or the Dao Soul level. And of course, the Heavenfate Nascent Soul level. All of the different names trace back to times when various conquering Ancient Emperors decreed that the name be changed.

“When Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity conquered Revered Ancient, he stipulated that it be called the Heavenfate Dao Soul level. But the reality is that they all mean the same thing. The ‘dao’ was added to unify the understandings of all of the various species. As for ‘heavenfate,’ it refers to a specific type of heavenly tribulation.”

Xu Qing took things he had already heard about the Heavenfate Dao Soul level and combined it with what the Captain had just told him to get an even clearer understanding.

The way humans understood it was that the level required a ‘dao soul’ that had experienced the baptism of heavenly tribulation. After that, it was called a heavenfate dao soul. Truly stepping into that level required experiencing heavenly tribulation. Before you did, it didn’t matter how many dao souls you had, you were still considered to be in the pseudo-Nascent Soul level.

That was how it was in the era of Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity. Though humans no longer controlled the entire mainland, their understanding of the level hadn't changed. Of course, different species had different beliefs and customs. There were even many species who didn't believe that heavenly tribulation was important, so as soon as someone had a dao soul, they were considered to be in a higher cultivation realm.

Humans considered the heavenly tribulation to be a way to deal with the shackles limiting nascent souls. With every new nascent soul that appeared, they would have it face heavenly tribulation, the baptism of which would break that shackle.

The world of Revered Ancient was huge and filled with countless species that had varying beliefs. For instance there were the Demi-Immortals, who looked at things very differently than humans. And there were plenty others like them. As a result, there was no way there would be one unified understanding.

What was more, there were different ways of achieving breakthroughs, depending on the species. As a result, there were plenty of variations within the level, and also some that were stronger than others.

In the final analysis, though, there were basically two main types. In one type, the baptism of heavenly tribulation came starting with the second nascent soul. In the second, which was the rarer type, the cultivator would form nascent souls in all of their heavenly palaces, and then experience all of the tribulations at one time. The latter was the more difficult version, but those who succeeded would have stronger heavenfate, which would be of great assistance in the Spirit Trove level.

Once in the Heavenfate Dao Soul level, rising higher was a different process than in the Gold Core level with its heavenly palaces. It required passing the heaven-fate tribulations. With each nascent soul that experienced that baptism, one rose to a higher level.

Doing so five times was considered the great circle.

There were dangers involved, and thus, it was required to strengthen the nascent souls as much as possible before attempting the tribulation. Otherwise, a failure would involve the permanent destruction of the nascent soul.

That was where life lamps showed their true advantage in this level. That was because if a life lamp failed a tribulation, the lamp wouldn't be destroyed. In turn, that meant that multiple attempts were possible with them.

As he contemplated those things, Xu Qing examined his twelfth heavenly palace and tried to decide what to do with it. That was when the Captain unexpectedly tossed him the timescape bottle.

“Put this thing into your twelfth heavenly palace!”

Xu Qing looked up at the Captain.

“It's a real treasure, and I can't use it. My cultivation involves undoing seals.” The Captain chuckled and winked.

“Thank you, Eldest Brother.” Xu Qing felt warmth in his heart. Over the years that had passed, the Captain and Master Seventh had become like a family he couldn't do without.

His experiences as a youth had resulted in him developing a cold personality, but deep inside, he had always longed to have family. He and the Captain had gone through a lot together. They had risked their lives together. And unconsciously, Xu Qing had started to think of him as a big brother.

Without any hesitation, Xu Qing put the timescape bottle into his twelfth heavenly palace.

The palace rumbled as it became complete. It was very different from his other heavenly palaces; the twelfth palace pulsed with the power of time. As it did, Xu Qing could just barely make out something like a sigh coming from the ancient past. That sigh caused his eyes to widen.

It was... Arch-Immortal Plumdark's voice.

He was just about to try to figure out what was going on when, all of a sudden, a deafening rumbling sound filled the dome of heaven. Cracking sounds rang out, and rifts opened up overhead, filling the sky. The canopy of heaven suddenly resembled a spider web. Bright red light began to spread out everywhere.

Both Xu Qing and the Captain looked visibly surprised.

Chapter 524: Crimson Mother Arrives (part 1)

The canopy of heaven in Forbidden by the Immortal was lit with crimson light, making it seem like a world of blood. What was more, it was full of rifts. Thanks to the bright red sky, it was possible to see that the rifts were very deep. And they didn't look like they'd formed naturally. They looked constructed, such that they resembled a massive magical symbol! A mere glance at that symbol would cause feelings of uncontrollable terror to rise up in a person, something instinctual and from the depths of one's life force.

It wasn't just Xu Qing and the Captain who were shaken. All of the cultivators in the safety zone were also affected. Everyone felt deeply moved, and sensed as if a great catastrophe was looming. The army of cultivators was made mostly of people from the second and third wave. Most of those who'd made up the first wave had already left.

The source of the dramatic scene in the canopy of heaven was the central region of Forbidden by the Immortal. At that location was the main imperial palace hall of Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity for this particular operations palace.

What had once been a magnificent and incomparable palace hall was now very different. It was now covered in a gigantic, cancerous growth of flesh. From a distance, it looked like a massive ball of flesh some tens of thousands of meters in size, covered with thick blood veins that stretched all over it. What was more, it pulsed, almost like a heart.

Thump thump. Thump thump.

Every time it moved, it sent a thunderous noise rippling out in all directions.

That noise distorted the air, turning it blurry. Mutagen levels soared, becoming like a mist. It also created gruish figures who hovered in the air and bowed to the ball of flesh. The blood vessels stretched out from the flesh and across the ground in the area.

About 500 kilometers away, there was another strange sight. It wasn't a ball of flesh, but rather, something like a spike rising into the sky. It was pitch black, incredibly sharp, and pulsed with a cold aura. It looked like some sort of consummate, deadly weapon. It was a godly weapon, and

there wasn't just one of them. Another 500 kilometers away was another spike that looked exactly the same. Yet another 500 kilometers away was a third spike! If you could look down on Forbidden by the Immortal from a very high vantage point, you would see that there were a total of twenty-seven spikes. Starting from the imperial palace, they stretched out toward the west. It was almost as if there were some huge beast buried underneath the operations palace, and the thorns were spikes coming off of its back.

The 'heart' covering the imperial palace was directly above that beast, and hovering above it in the sky was an octagonal spell formation that looked like it was set into the sky itself. It pulsed with red light. There was a natural cadence to the way it flickered and turned the sky red. It was impossible to tell what the spell formation was made from. It was only 3,000 meters across, so compared to the beast below, it was insignificant other than the red light it cast.

That said, it was clearly the source of the rifts, as they spread out from the formation to fill the dome of heaven.

Inside the octagonal spell formation were 361 black-robed figures. 360 of them sat cross-legged and were chanting some sort of complicated and indecipherable enchantment. It wasn't a human language. It sounded gruish and bizarre. What was more, every so often as they chanted, they would lift a hand, plunge it into their bodies, and pull out one of their organs. Then they would hold the organ high overhead, dripping blood, as if it were an offering. The organs would rapidly wither, turning into black energy that converged in the middle of the spell formation.

That was the location of the 361st person. Though he also wore a voluminous black cloak, he was trembling so hard that the hood had fallen back to reveal a face criss-crossed with red blood vessels.

He was none other than Zhang Siyun. He knelt there, his head thrown back so he faced the sky, his expression one of agony. The blood vessels on his face wriggled, and were seemingly trying to take the shape of a crescent moon. Tears of blood leaked out of his eyes. His left eye had burst out of the eye socket, leaving an open hole. Countless blood vessels snaked out of that hole and connected to the spell formation, whose blessing allowed them to continue growing outward. If you traced those blood vessels further, you would find that the rifts in the sky were actually extensions of the blood vessels from Zhang Siyun's hollowed-out left eye!

As the sound of the enchantment rang out, the wriggling of the blood vessels on his face increased in intensity, and the shape of a red crescent moon became more clear. Meanwhile, the black energy converging around Zhang Siyun was sucked into him, where it became red, and was fed into the growing moon.

Then Zhang Siyun's hands slowly rose. It seemed as though he would soon rip out his right eye and then cover both eyes with his hands, which would conform exactly to the figure atop the moon that Xu Qing had seen in his sea of consciousness. [1]

The 360 black-robed figures surrounding Zhang Siyun started chanting with increased fervor, all while continuing to rip out their organs and offer them as sacrifices. The smell of gore abounded in the most gruish fashion, accompanied by a boundlessly vile aura.

Xu Qing and the Captain were deeply shaken, and were no longer seeking new places to explore. Instead, they were looking for somewhere with a lot of built-up flesh. Though there was magenta flesh everywhere, it seemed better to find a place with a lot of it.

About two hours later, as Xu Qing's anxiety was really starting to build up, they saw some distant ruins that had been covered with so much flesh it looked like a mountain. Eventually, they found a spot in one of the massive, flesh-covered walls that seemed to be an opening.

"Let's hole up in here, little Junior Brother," the Captain said quietly after looking around.

Xu Qing also scanned the area, then nodded. The two of them entered. As they did, they spotted a fallen placard with the character East on it.

"East Palace? Normally a crown prince's residence is called the East Palace." The Captain looked around regretfully. "It's too bad the place is in ruins. Normally speaking, the crown prince's residence would have a lot of good treasures in it."

Xu Qing also felt it was a pity. They had seen a lot of palaces as they traveled, which gave a good sense of the wealth during Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity's time. They hadn't even explored all of the east district yet, much less gone beyond it. Forbidden by the Immortal was so huge that completely exploring it would require a huge group of people, and even then would take many months.

"I wonder if we'll get a chance to come back in later," the Captain said.

After looking around, they selected a rather remote side chamber. Clearing out the flesh, they started digging a little cave. The flesh was in almost constant motion, so as soon as they cleared the flesh, it started growing back. Therefore, as soon as they had a little tunnel dug, they burrowed in.

As the flesh closed up behind them, they kept digging in. Eventually, when they felt they were deep enough, they settled down cross-legged amidst the flesh and the mutagen.

"I wonder how Master is planning to profit from all of this," Xu Qing said as he looked around at the darkness. He still couldn't stop thinking about the sigh he'd heard when he integrated the timescape bottle into his heavenly palace. It seemed to still echo in his mind.

"Hey, little Ah Qing, want to see a battle between gods?" The Captain chuckled, then extended his hand to reveal an eyeball in his palm. It blinked a few times, then projected an image of a red sky.

Xu Qing's pupils constricted.

"I put a few eyes in place outside, all for the purpose of being able to witness this battle between gods. That said, I know it brings a certain element of risk. So let's wait until the red moon is awakened and in the middle of devouring the local god. Things will be a lot safer then."

Looking very pleased with himself, the Captain closed his hand, covering the eye.

Xu Qing nodded. "Yeah, let's wait. It shouldn't be very long now."

With that, he put on the skin mask with its concealment powers. He settled the power of his taboo poison over his violet moon heavenly palace. He also added in the power of his heavenly dao, the Ghost Emperor mountain, and the daybreak light. With all that, he was confident the violet moon wouldn't be revealed. Having accomplished these things, he closed his eyes and settled down to wait, all while mentally reviewing everything that happened with the phoenix-like temple complex.

In that matter, time slipped by slowly but surely.

About six hours later, intense rumbling sounds once again echoed out in the sky outside. They were so intense that Xu Qing and the Captain could hear them even in their hiding spot in the flesh.

Shaken, and still a bit fearful, they continued to wait. They didn't try to look at what was happening. Xu Qing knew for sure that the red moon... was about to wake up.

The red color in the sky was even more intense than before, casting all of the buildings and flesh in a deep crimson light. There was some violet in it, but it was overwhelmed by the blood-red color.

The twenty-seven spikes trembled, and the racing heart seemed to pulse with an aura of awakening.

Meanwhile, in the canopy of heaven, all of the black-robed individuals in the octagonal spell formation, who had already sacrificed their five yin organs and their left eyes, dug out their right eyes. As they held them aloft, Zhang Siyun's right eye withered into nothing, and a host of blood vessels exploded out of his eye socket.

More rifts opened up in the sky.

Then Zhang Siyun's hands slowly covered both of his eyes. His facial expression didn't reveal any hint of pain. The corners of his lips twitched upward slightly. A terrifying and paramount will suddenly erupted from Zhang Siyun. Both heaven and earth were all stained red by that will.

Then a red moon rose in the sky of Forbidden by the Immortal, right above Zhang Siyun!

Chapter 524: Crimson Mother Arrives (part 2)

The ground shook as a voice erupted from below that sounded like it had been wrenched from sleep.

"Crimson Mother!"

Countless palaces crumbled, and the flesh that filled Forbidden by the Immortal shivered. The twenty-seven spikes all started emitting bright light. In the location of the heart, the wriggling flesh opened up to reveal a 30,000-meter golden eye inside, which was open. The ground trembled violently, the sky rippled, and mutagen exploded out everywhere. The entire world blurred. The prostrating figures all around screamed and scattered. And the subject of the eye's vision, the octagonal spell formation up in the sky, instantly crumbled into ashes.

The 360 black-robed figures experienced instant mutation, and then exploded, becoming a rain of blood that showered down. Shockingly, the raindrops mutated in midair! They became numerous golden eyes that swirled around the huge 30,000-meter eye. And they were looking up at the only entity left in the sky!

They were staring at a kneeling figure, floating there with both hands covering its eyes. It almost looked like a statue.

It was none other than Zhang Siyun. He was very conspicuous as the eye of the god stared at him. But it didn't seem to affect him at all, as if the power of that gaze were insignificant. The red moon behind him glittered with blood-colored light, becoming the only thing clearly visible in the entire Forbidden by the Immortal. The corners of his mouth rose further. Though it seemed a given that he should seem sinister and terrifying, there was also something very elegant about him. Keeping his hands in front of his eyes, he slowly rose to a standing position. As he did, something about him changed.

Terrifying fluctuations rolled off of hēr, filling heaven and earth. Long black hair became as red as blood, spreading out to cover the lands and fill the sky. A crown of thorns settled onto the head of 'Zhang Siyun'; clearly visible on it were three vicious faces, sealed inside, howling in agony. From the fluctuations emanating from the crown, it was obvious those three faces all belonged to gods. They had been used to create the crown.

The blood vessels on the face flowed together, converging on the forehead in the shape of a red moon. Hēr eye sockets were now like seas of blood that glowed with an extremely disturbing light. The black daoist robe covering hēr body crumbled into ashes, and was replaced by a flowing gold robe, so voluminous it spread out in all directions, covering the surrounding lands.

From a distance, the scene was spectacular and shocking. Hair filled the sky. The clothing covered the land. Shē hovered between heaven and earth, like the ruler of the world. The good looks of 'Zhang Siyun' seemed supremely holy. It was enough that, anyone who looked at this scene would feel their blood vessels collapsing, and anyone who heard what was happening would descend into an endless sea of pain.

The only way to live would be to offer obeisance. As of this moment, godly might raged. The distortions created by the huge eye below were wiped out of existence and replaced. The mutagen pouring out transformed, becoming a red mist that imprinted itself on hēr robe, becoming a complex red design.

"How amusing," Crimson Mother said softly.

All of the humans' plans were coming to fruition now that shē was awake. Gods didn't need to sit around conjecturing and analyzing. With a single glance, a god could understand anything and everything. All information existed within a god. Nothing from the mortal world could be hidden from the sight of such a being. Everything was transparent.

That said, the human emperor's scheme was still working. When Crimson Mother woke up and saw the god sleeping in Forbidden by the Immortal, that god was like a juicy piece of meat, just waiting to be devoured.

"A unique body. Excellent." Crimson Mother did not speak the language of humans, but that didn't matter. All species could understand words spoken by a godly voice. It caused Forbidden by the Immortal to show signs of immediate collapse. Cracks spread out on the ground, and the sky seemed like it might shatter. Black soil was revealed outside, but it quickly turned red. It was as if Forbidden by the Immortal itself couldn't sustain the sound of hēr voice.

As the ground trembled, golden blood flowed out of the eye in the imperial palace. The twenty-seven spikes released flickering fluctuations, and a thunderous roar echoed out.

“High God Crimson Mother, my lord and master is Flawless Hell, Celestial Manager and Fifth Star of Cruelty, to whom was burned the godfire of the Land of Cruelmurk, well-deserving of the title High God!”

Crimson Mother looked down, blood-colored eyes fixing onto the huge eye below. Golden saliva oozed out of the corners of hēr mouth. Every drop that fell became like golden meteors that smashed into the ground and ate out enormous craters. Anything the golden saliva touched, it dissolved.

It was as if Crimson Mother was completely ignoring the words spoken by the huge eye. As the saliva fell, shē extended her right hand, then pushed it down toward the ground. That gesture caused the ground of Forbidden by the Immortal to tremble with unprecedented intensity. Starting with the imperial palace at the center, five enormous crevices appeared.

Each one was a different length, with the shortest being 100-150 kilometers long, with the longest being about 250 kilometers. The ravines stretched in a fan-like shape, stretching to the northwest, true north, and northeast. They were like five fingers! Behind them was a large portion of the land that sank down to a depth of 30,000 meters, and was covered with countless smaller gullies in the southwest, due south, and southeast.

Looking at it straight down from high above, it was obviously a huge palm print some 500 kilometers in size. It was as if a massive hand were falling from the sky into the middle of the forbidden ground. The five huge fingers were visible right where the twenty-seven spikes stretched out.

As the ground trembled and shook, hēr open right hand slowly closed. At the same time, the five fingers of the enormous hand did the same thing, digging huge furrows into the ground. Dirt exploded everywhere, and Forbidden by the Immortal shook violently.

The god of Forbidden by the Immortal howled, and as the cries drifted everywhere, the twenty-seven spikes glowed with dazzling godly light, becoming beams that shot upward. From a distance, it was possible to see that every single spike contained the power to pierce through heaven and earth. They were like twenty-seven godly weapons, all targeting Crimson Mother.

The red moon on Crimson Mother’s forehead glittered, and the red moon higher in the sky radiated dazzling light. That light became a sea of blood that slammed into the twenty-seven beams of golden light, and transformed into twenty-seven blood-colored vortexes.

The vortexes spun endlessly and could not be pierced through. The twenty-seven beams of golden light were obviously going to be assimilated by the red vortexes.

Divine will tinged with terror erupted from the ground. Saliva continued to drip from Crimson Mother’s mouth, while hēr blood-red gaze emanated fluctuations of greed and hunger. Then shē lifted her right hand with great force. Cracking sounds rang out as five huge furrows grew deeper, until they reached the true form of the god below.

Gold and red collided, laying waste to countless palaces and collections of flesh. The ground was pulverized as the god resting beneath the surface of the ground thrashed violently. Deafening

rumbling sounds rang out as soil exploded everywhere. Crimson Mother's smile continued to grow as she wrenched her right hand up.

The ground for 500 kilometers in all directions collapsed as the massive invisible hand latched onto the god of Forbidden by the Immortal. As the lands collapsed, something huge appeared. It was a gigantic tentacle of flesh, almost like a snake, that whipped about as it was wrenched violently out of the ground.

Crashing sounds rang out as a 5,000-kilometer gully formed.

Countless red lightning bolts filled the dark sky as the god of Forbidden by the Immortal was pulled into the open. The god resembled a snake or dragon, with no scales, but instead, a body formed from magenta flesh. As the god twisted and writhed, a host of twenty-seven spikes was visible, with a distance of 500 kilometers between each one. They were like a line of twenty-seven needles going down the back.

This was the god sleeping in Forbidden by the Immortal. As the god howled, the twenty-seven spikes stabbed toward the hand, but could not penetrate it. However, they did manage to surround the hand and thus reveal the hand's general shape.

The scene was profoundly shocking to anyone who could see it. Even to the cultivators, it seemed like something out of myth or legend, and filled them with intense reverence. Because of the shockwaves, much of the lands behind were destroyed. But the place least affected was the east district. Clearly, that was why the humans had chosen to make their safe zone there. Everything... had been part of the plan.

Xu Qing and the Captain were both stunned. Once the action started, the Captain had opened his hand, and they had been able to use his eyes to view the event from different angles, giving a very comprehensive view. However, the power of the gods was too much for the Captain's special eyes, and they kept exploding. Therefore, the view wasn't as clear as it could have been. That said, it didn't change the terror they felt regarding Crimson Mother. If anything, it increased it. To them, the god of Forbidden by the Immortal had seemed astoundingly mighty, to the point where even getting too close was risking death. Yet Crimson Mother was easily able to drag the god out of the ground.

The struggling of that god made it very clear how vast the differences could be between the strength of different gods.

Eyes glittering, the Captain took a deep breath and said, "The gods of the Revered Ancient mainland are far, far stronger than most people can even imagine. Strong beyond comprehension. And these entities that even cultivators call gods are, to the mortals, creators. Each and every one! I really feel like eating red moon, little Junior Brother..."

Xu Qing's heart was pounding with fear, but he didn't show it. He wasn't surprised at all to hear the Captain say something like that. It was just the type of crazy thing he was always saying.

"Sure," Xu Qing said. "Good luck with that."

"Can't you support me a bit more, little Junior Brother? I'm already devising an amazing new plan. Actually... I worked out a similar plan in a previous life. It didn't work."

Eyes glittering, the Captain licked his lips.

Chapter 525: Snatching Food From the Tiger's Mouth (part 1)

At the moment, the Captain and Xu Qing were hiding, not moving a muscle.

Other than them, all other cultivators had fled, terrified, into the safety zone in the east district. All of them sat cross-legged with their eyes closed, not even daring to look at what was happening outside. In fact, they didn't even dare to directly *sense* what was happening. They stayed in place in the defensive spell formations that had been erected specifically to use in this moment. A fight between gods was something they fundamentally didn't qualify to even observe. A mere glance could end with them killed in body and soul. Even using alternative methods to watch, such as the Captain was doing, required some boost on a substructural level, or perhaps a special item.

Considering the elite nature of the cultivators who had been part of this expeditionary force, it was a given that some of them had such qualifications or items. Thus, there were a few who were able to use such means to see what was happening.

Outside of Forbidden by the Immortal, in the mouth of the bottle that was the canopy of heaven, there were people waiting at the crumbled spell formation in the depths of the old Corrections Division.

Shockingly, one of them was Seventh Prince. With him were the lieutenant governor and the commanders-in-chief from the palaces. There were also numerous powerful experts from the imperial army. All of them looked very serious. Even the four-clawed golden dragon in the dome of heaven was paying close attention to what was happening. All were looking down at the world that existed beyond the spell formation. Of course, the opening had been sealed tight, but there was now a glowing screen there that showed a projection of Crimson Mother and the god of Forbidden by the Immortal.

Standing next to Seventh Prince was a person in a voluminous black robe, who spoke in a sinister, piercing voice. "Your Majesty, everything is going as planned. As predicted by His Imperial Majesty and the imperial preceptor, the first thing High God Crimson Mother did upon awakening was attempt to devour the god of Forbidden by the Immortal.

"Now we just need to wait and see if the second phase of the plan goes smoothly. It won't take Crimson Mother long to devour the other god.... After that, if Crimson Mother escapes into the outside world, then I fear that all of Sea-Sealing County..."

Upon hearing those words, the surrounding Sea-Sealing County cultivators bowed their heads to conceal the mixed emotions on their faces.

Seventh Prince kept his gaze fixed on the screen as he softly said, "Before I came here, my father the emperor asked if I was afraid of dying in this place. Do you know what I told him? I said that I was more than willing to give my life for a great cause!

"I'm not strong enough to stop Crimson Mother from escaping. However, not even a god would be able to do much after getting out, and would end up dying along with Sea-Sealing County. Kong Liangxiu could have seen that happen, and I, Guyue Zhang'an, can do the same thing.

“When I told my father the emperor that, he looked at me and said, ‘Gods are just like us, except on a much higher level. Their so-called omniscience and omnipotence only apply to life forces weaker than their own.’ In other words, gods can also be plotted against. Tricked. Crimson Mother is definitely not going to be satisfied....”

Back in Forbidden by the Immortal, the long, almost rope-like god was still struggling mightily. Its twenty-seven spikes pulsed with the power to destroy the heavens and extinguish the earth, and they shone with brilliant golden light that wrapped around Crimson Mother’s invisible hand and stabbed into it. Every single one of those spikes would have been a precious treasure if it surfaced in the Revered Ancient mainland of ancient times. But now, when unleashed against Crimson Mother, they couldn’t put up a serious force of resistance. Grating sounds echoed out that could shred the souls of ordinary people. At the same time, godly howls echoed out in heaven and earth.

From a distance, the god of Forbidden by the Immortal looked like a snake that had been dragged out of the ground, and was being slowly pulled toward the red moon. Its every twitch shattered the air, and its every howl caused the surroundings to collapse. Both land and sky in the area around the conflict were being reduced to rubble.

Up in the canopy of heaven, Crimson Mother, whose physical form was that of Zhang Siyun, looked at the other god with mouth open so wide it stretched from ear to ear. The mouth looked completely vicious and horrifying. Within it were countless razor-sharp teeth, as well as a huge tongue made of countless hairs that slowly stretched out. On the tip of the tongue was a blurry face that appeared to be the face of a woman, whose eyes were closed, and yet looked extremely greedy and hungry. Saliva dripped off the tongue, splashing down into the craters below.

The scene could hardly have been more grisly. Taking the image in as a whole, it was almost impossible to describe. This was a level of power that surpassed cultivators by many times over. As the golden light and the blood-red glow neared, they were filled with hundreds, thousands, or even tens of thousands of god magics, all combined into one force.

When they formed, they instantly collapsed, then formed again in the blink of an eye. Apparently, they didn’t even need to consciously unleash any god magic; such god magic naturally formed automatically.

In the final analysis though, it was clear that of these two most primordial of beings, one was about to consume the other. There was none of the holiness one would expect of gods. Yet any who saw it would, for a variety of reasons, feel a sense of holiness rising within them. It was as if the meaning of the word ‘holy’ had, many countless years ago when the broken face of the god arrived, been carelessly twisted into something else.

What was more, any observer would be able to sense that the god that had been sleeping in Forbidden by the Immortal, which possessed the power of misfortune, did have godly authority. Yet in the face of Crimson Mother, that godly authority wasn’t doing it any good. The difference between the two was apparent; it was almost like an encounter between a toddler and an adult. It wasn’t that the god in Forbidden by the Immortal wasn’t strong; rather, Crimson Mother was just a higher-level being!

As the snake-like god from Forbidden by the Immortal was pulled inexorably closer to being devoured, it suddenly let loose a powerful roar. As a result, the god’s entire body exploded.

A massive boom ripped through heaven and earth. That god's body, which was more than 10,000 kilometers in length, shattered into a river of flesh, a stream of golden light that swept across the canopy of heaven. In that manner, the god slipped out of Crimson Mother's grip.

The river of flesh then converged in another spot, where it quickly stitched back together. This time, it didn't resemble a snake, but rather, something else.

It looked vaguely like a fish.

And the twenty-seven spikes that had been on its back were now inside of it, and resembled the skeleton of a fish. Meanwhile, the shockwaves sweeping through Forbidden by the Immortal caused the magenta flesh covering the various palaces and buildings to vibrate. Then they peeled off in strips, flew up, and fused with the fish-shaped body.

From a distance, it was possible to see countless strips of flesh rising up and building into the shape of a fish. That included the spot where Xu Qing and the Captain were hiding, and as the flesh lifted away, their hiding spot was revealed.

Xu Qing sat there stock still, focusing completely on staying concealed. The Captain did the same.

The aura coming off that fish was profoundly important to Crimson Mother. Just like the sun would ignore the stars, Crimson Mother ignored everything else and focused fully on the fish. That was only truer as the strips of flesh filled in the colossally monstrous creature, until the appearance of the thing was that of an enormous, magenta fish. The fish was scaleless, with a huge mouth full of incredibly vicious razor-sharp teeth that emanated godly might. The fish also had two whiskers that undulated on either side, and they were the color of gold.

Most strange was the fish's tail, which was not smooth and flat. It spread like a peacock's tail, with the feathers like sharp thorns that gradually assumed the shape of a face. It was not the face of a male or female. In fact, it wasn't even human. Its face had four eyes, no nose, and a closed mouth beneath the eyes.

There were also complex designs that covered everything, making the face difficult to see clearly. That said, there was godly might on display that caused a sense of holiness to again rise in the hearts of any observers.

Beyond that, boundless information streamed from the god's body and into the minds of anyone looking on. Those who did would feel madness rising within them, as well as a sense of impending amnesia. Any who looked for too long would find their memories disappearing, and ultimately replaced. This was the true form of the god sleeping in Forbidden by the Immortal.

Crimson Mother's saliva flowed as shē stared at the fish and strode forward, surrounded by glowing red light that deepened the rifts in the sky.

All of a sudden, golden light erupted from the eyes on the fish's tail, and the face's mouth opened wide. Golden bubbles spewed from the mouth that contained major worlds. Countless lives proliferated within them, creating generation after generation of life force. Little did they know that the world they lived in were mere bubbles spat out of the mouth of a god. When the bubbles reached the end of their flight path, they popped, releasing boundless force which smashed into Crimson Mother. The fish god took advantage of that moment to suddenly turn transparent. The air around the fish then sank in on itself, as if it were turning into a black hole. It was hoping to flee this place.

Crimson Mother's eyes shone with greed. Clearly, shē had no intention of letting this fish flee, and thus blurred into motion, sending out fluctuations that turned everything bright red. As for the popping bubbles, they became sealing marks that landed on Crimson Mother's clothing and formed a design.

Crimson Mother's right hand waved through the air, and the air sank, turning into a sea of blood that swept over everything. The transparent fish god had no choice but to appear in the open, its facial expression one of terror. The fish god clearly wanted to flee, but then Crimson Mother arrived, ready for food.

Red beams of light swept out from the red moon, filling the canopy of heaven as they swept endlessly toward the fish god.

The fish god had no opportunity to flee. The red beams of light swept forth from every direction, creating an inescapable prison. The fish god struggled mightily, even roaring, yet none of that did any good.

The moment Crimson Mother arrived, it was truly nothing more than a fish.

Crimson Mother closed in on the fish god, pulsing with a sensation of intense hunger. Hēr eyes glittered with joy as shē opened her mouth unnaturally wide. Hēr tongue then stretched forth like a snake toward the trembling fish god. The woman's face on the tip of the tongue opened her eyes, and they glowed bright red. At the same time, a godly voice echoed out into heaven and earth.

“Open the entrance.”

The echoing words provoked an unprecedentedly shrill howl from the fish. The fish's flesh and bones ignited, burning with golden flames that rose into the sky and took the shape of a well. In the blink of an eye, the well went from illusory to corporeal.

The pitch black interior led to the Land of Cruelmurk!

How could a single fish make Crimson Mother so happy? After all, the fish's paltry body could only be an appetizer to hēr.

The reality was that the true feast was to be found beyond the entrance to the Land of Cruelmurk. All along, Crimson Mother had been planning to take advantage of the fish's relationship with Flawless Hell, Celestial Manager and Fifth Star of Cruelty, to open that entrance.

Crimson Mother's true form was about to enter the Land of Cruelmurk... to devour the godfire of High God Flawless Hell! This was the second phase of the emperor's scheme, which Seventh Prince had discussed earlier! The subsequent length of slumber would be determined by the food devoured.

Chapter 525: Snatching Food From the Tiger's Mouth (part 2)

As Xu Qing and the Captain observed these things happening in the projection in front of them, they were left reeling.

The eyes of all observers couldn't help but be focused on the possessed Zhang Siyun, who was now a mere godly doppelgänger of Crimson Mother. At the moment, shē was glowing with incredibly bright light.

The countless rifts in the sky that formed a magical symbol were glittering brightly. The entire canopy of heaven was bright red, and seemed to be stirring in motion. The sky spun, faster and faster, until it gradually became a blood-colored vortex. Rumbling sounds echoed out as moonlight emerged from within the vortex. It was as if the vortex connected to some unknown land, a place where, high in the sky there hung a huge blood moon!

This was the *real* red moon! On that moon was a kneeling statue with its hands covering its eyes. But now those hands were slowly lowering. The statue's mouth stretched wide in a greedy grin.

This was Crimson Mother's true form!

Entering the Land of Cruelmurk to devour a High God by means of a doppelg?nger wasn't enough. Crimson Mother was actually coming in person. Shē rose to her feet on the red moon, and wild colors flashed in heaven and earth. Rumbling sounds echoed out, and destructive power rocked everything as shē strode forward. Every step surpassed space and time. The step surpassed the vortex, emerging from the other heaven and earth, to arrive... right in front of the well formed by the burning of the golden god fish.

The moment the true form appeared, the doppelg?nger blurred. Then, almost all of the energy within the doppelg?nger swept out of the top of its head in a haze. After taking most of the energy out of the doppelg?nger, Crimson Mother's true form stepped into the ancient well, thus entering the Land of Cruelmurk!

Violent rumblings emerged from the well, mixed with the anguished howl of the fish, who was enraged at having been forced to create the well to begin with.

As for what exactly was playing out in the Land of Cruelmurk, no one knew. However, splatters of golden blood flew out of the ancient well, and horrifying chewing sounds echoed out through Forbidden by the Immortal and into Sea-Sealing County. It then spread through the entire Holytide Region, into Nightshade Region, and even into the Imperial Region.

They also echoed into the regions controlled by other major species. Over forty regions were all inundated by that sound which seemingly came from nowhere. That part of the Revered Ancient mainland was completely shaken.

Meanwhile, beneath the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture, golden blood seethed. It was the same in the depths of the cavern at the bottom of the Forbidden Sea. In other prefectures, counties, and regions through Revered Ancient, there were over eight thousand ghastr hollows, and in all of them, god blood seethed.

All living beings were left trembling and astonished.

That wasn't the end of it, though. All of the forbidden regions and forbidden grounds were deathly silent. No sounds emerged from them. Countless streams of terrifying divine will from actual gods stirred in all corners of Revered Ancient, and they were all paying very close attention to what was happening. High above the dome of heaven, the broken face of the god, moved slightly, as if about to look down. However, the eyes did not open.

They were paying attention, not to some location in Sea-Sealing County, but rather, what existed beneath it, yet it was not some location that could be considered simple to find... The Land of Cruelmurk.

Not much attention was being paid to Forbidden by the Immortal in Sea-Sealing County, despite that being where everything started. The devouring of a god was noteworthy, but didn't count for much when compared to the devouring of a High God.

After the red moon's true self entered the Land of Cruelmurk, the doppelgänger was left behind in Forbidden by the Immortal. Zhang Siyun turned, saliva flowing, and began devouring the fish god. Zhang Siyun's mouth opened dramatically wide and gulped at least half the fish down, then began chewing. Next, Zhang Siyun turned toward the blood-colored portal, as if planning to take the god fish into it.

It seemed that everything was over. No one would dare to interfere with the red moon eating. Even the doppelgänger, whose power had been taken away by the true form, wasn't something anyone would dare to trifle with.

The human forces inside Forbidden by the Immortal were all in a daze thanks to the shockwaves of the event. Their mutagen levels were rising so quickly that some of them even died. So of course, none of them would dare to do anything. Even Seventh Prince and the others waiting outside of Forbidden by the Immortal were just standing there.

However, that was when something unexpected happened!

After Crimson Mother's doppelgänger swallowed half of the fish god, then prepared to return to the blood-colored vortex, a rift opened up in the sky. That rift created a very obvious contrast with the surrounding blood-colored sky, as its color was very different. It erupted with white light.

Then, a huge hand emerged, dazzlingly bright, and as white as fresh snow! The hand, fully 3,000 meters in size, couldn't have been more pure and fair. In fact, it was like white jade, and seemed just as holy as any god.

The surroundings pulsed in response to the presence, while at the same time, a mutagen that corresponded to the hand spread out in all directions. Without hesitation, the hand stretched forth and grabbed the fish that was currently clamped between the teeth of Crimson Mother's doppelgänger.

Off in the distance, Xu Qing was able to see this happening through the projection created by the Captain. And when he did, waves of shock rolled through him, the reason being that... he had seen this hand before! Back when he fought Chu Tianqun, the father of Master Shengyun, in the minor world of the Smokewights, his opponent had used a shocking god magic that summoned this very hand. Xu Qing would never forget that hand stretching out from Chu Tianqun's body. Nor would he forget that he would have died at that time were it not for Ling'er sacrifice. [1]

Back then, the hand wasn't as large, but from what Xu Qing could sense, they were one and the same.

As his mind spun, a word suddenly popped into his mind: Torchlight.

As Xu Qing reeled, the hand of white jade stabbed into the fish, grabbed some of its bones, then pulled viciously. It was an instance of *snatching food from the tiger's mouth!*

Rumbling sounds echoed out as three of the fish's twenty-seven bones ended up clumping together as the hand grabbed them.

Strangely its actions didn't attract the attention of Crimson Mother's doppelgänger. Now that the main course had been served, she apparently didn't care that much about the appetizer.

What was most noteworthy was that the white hand chose this exact moment to take action! It was a moment in which Crimson Mother's true self was distracted while eating in the Land of Cruelmurk, and much of the doppelgänger's power had been extracted, resulting in a state of incredible weakness. Of course, there was another possibility, which was... that Crimson Mother tacitly approved of what was happening. As for what was truly the case, no one could possibly know.

In any case, whatever karma was involved, the white hand successfully grabbed the three bones and pulled them out. It was a completely astonishing scene for all the onlookers. That included everyone outside the entrance of Forbidden by the Immortal. Every one of them was visibly taken aback, with one exception. Seventh Prince. His eyes only narrowed very slightly.

After the jade hand grabbed the three bones, another dramatic transformation occurred in the canopy of heaven.

Another rift opened next to the fish god!

Rumbling sounds echoed out as more snow-white light erupted from that second rift. Then, another hand of white jade emerged, which looked just like the other, except much smaller, being only 300 meters in size.

The timing of arrival for this hand was even more precise. It appeared in a perfect time and position, right underneath the god fish, where the fish had an unhealed wound. The white hand jabbed into the wound, moving at the perfect angle and speed to grab a fish bone and then yank it out.

Rumbling echoed out as the bone was jerked out from inside the fish. That hand was obviously much weaker than the other. It immediately trembled as if it might collapse, yet it endured. With a surge of craziness, it threw everything to the wind as it pulled. Apparently, this hand was determined to get that bone even if it died in the process. After the hand dragged the bone out of the fish, it retracted into the rift. The process was so rough on the hand that much of it collapsed in the process.

But the craziness in the hand was so intense that before it crumbled, it successfully pulled the bone all the way into the rift.

Then, it disappeared!

It came quickly, and vanished even more quickly. And everything about its actions, from its timing to its position, had been perfect. It was only then that the much larger hand with the three fish bones realized what had just happened. It paused for a moment.

At the entrance of Forbidden by the Immortal, the onlookers were visibly taken aback. And for the first time, a glitter of suspicious curiosity flashed through Seventh Prince's eyes.

Xu Qing and the Captain both gasped. The way that white hand appeared, and its method of stealing the fish bone, had seemed very familiar to both of them. It seemed to correspond perfectly to the style of the Seventh Peak.... That, of course, was to wait in hiding until the right opportunity arose. When that opportunity came, it went crazy, snatched the target, then fled at top speed. The two of them looked at each other, and could see the suspicion and excitement in each other's eyes.

After pausing momentarily, the first white hand above dragged the three fish bones back into the rift.

When the rift disappeared, Crimson Mother's doppelgänger leaped into the blood-colored vortex with the rest of the fish god and disappeared. The vortex slowed, and the deep red color faded. It gradually faded from view, and then the sky went back to normal.

Without the power of a god at play, the countless rifts in the sky shattered, and began to fall to the ground in pieces. The lands of Forbidden by the Immortal also seemed like they were about to collapse, and were almost immediately riddled with damage. In many areas, the lands were already in complete ruin. The one thing that didn't weaken was the mutagen, which spread out rapidly, turning everything dark.

However, any sense of fear within Xu Qing and the Captain disappeared along with Crimson Mother. They both breathed sighs of relief.

"Hurry up and start absorbing, little Junior Brother! We don't have much time. I bet Seventh Prince will be arriving soon. He'll probably stabilize everything, but will also seal the place up and make everyone leave. The only other possibility is that the entire place will collapse!"

Xu Qing didn't reply, as he had already come to the same conclusion. And thus, he opened himself wide and began absorbing all of the mutagen in the area!

Chapter 526: Lord of Forbidden by the Immortal!

Ever since entering Forbidden by the Immortal, Xu Qing had been longing to absorb the mutagen here. Back when he had experimentally absorbed some in the presence of his Master, he had benefited a lot from only a moment before he suppressed his instincts and stopped. It had made him like a hungry person, filling him with longing. Yet he had forced all of those feelings down.

There hadn't been any doubt that if he let loose and absorbed the mutagen, it would attract, not only the attention of the mutant beasts, but also the human cultivators nearby. Besides, absorbing a lot of mutagen while the god of Forbidden by the Immortal was still present would have been risky. Then the red moon showed up, and that added additional variables that made the situation too difficult to control.

He did have the violet crystal to offer some degree of protection, but it couldn't solve all problems. And it didn't seem like a good idea to become overreliant on the violet crystal, especially in situations that weren't really life-threatening. But now, there were no such obstacles.

During the fighting, Crimson Mother's true form had absorbed all of the magenta flesh, as well as the mutant beasts that it produced. What was more, the fact that Forbidden by the Immortal was crumbling meant that the human cultivators weren't going to be paying such close attention to everything.

An unprecedented opportunity had arrived.

Without the slightest hesitation, Xu Qing started absorbing mutagen. In the blink of an eye, mutagen swept toward him like tidal waters, streaming into his pores and filling him. He felt completely at ease as every fiber of flesh and drop of blood participated. In the shortest of moments, a vortex sprang into being around Xu Qing.

As rumbling sounds echoed out around the cross-legged Xu Qing, he heard the Captain speaking to him.

“Little Junior Brother, I can sense through the rifts in the sky that the cultivators on the other side are repairing the canopy of heaven. Given their speed, I'd say we have the time it takes an incense stick to burn. I'll stand as dharma protector for you, and also keep all fluctuations masked. Hurry up!”

There was no way for Xu Qing to respond at the moment. Inside of him, the golden threads spread, and they absorbed the nutrients like dry, cracked ground absorbing water. All he could do was nod faintly.

The mutagen was different from before. Previously, it just had the aura of the local god, but now it also had the aura of Crimson Mother. And because Crimson Mother's true self had passed through, the mutagen was even stronger than it had been. To any other person, it would be extremely poisonous, and they would need to immediately consume medicinal pills to stave off mutation.

Generally speaking, Xu Qing had to be careful when absorbing the mutagen of other gods. But that wasn't the case with Crimson Mother's mutagen. Because he had his violet moon godsource, there was hardly anything more suitable for him than the red moon. Therefore, he rapidly absorbed all the mutagen available. As he sucked it in, streams of golden god vitality proliferated within him.

His taboo poison core, his violet moon heavenly palace, and his Ghost Emperor mountain all needed god vitality to exist, and thus, they shivered, becoming like black holes that gobbled it up.

It created a repeating cycle within Xu Qing. The first step was the mutagen entering him. Then the golden threads created god vitality. That was the second step. As every stream of god vitality was snatched up, that made the third step. And every step of that cycle required him to absorb more mutagen.

The taboo poison core, violet moon, and Ghost Emperor mountain were like three furnaces, constantly burning madly, and the force with which they sucked in the golden threads seemed to spread outside of Xu Qing.

As a result, mutagen surged toward him with even greater speed. The vortex around him soon spread 300 meters, only to keep growing. It eventually reached 1,500 meters. 2,400 meters. 3,000 meters! That entire area was a spinning vortex. It was shocking to the extreme! Boundless mutagen rushed toward him in wave after wave, creating seemingly unstoppable momentum.

Now that there was no god in Forbidden by the Immortal, it was almost as if Xu Qing himself had become the lord of the place.

Off to the side, the Captain, who was nearly overwhelmed, looked on with wide eyes.

“Off the charts!” he murmured. Gritting his teeth, he pushed down onto his forehead with both hands, causing blue light to surge from within him. Frigid coldness spread out in all directions, linking with the vortex around Xu Qing and bolstering the concealing effect. In any other location, a bolstering like that wouldn't have worked well. It would have stood out like a bright torch on a dark night. But a torch in the

middle of a sea of fire wouldn't attract much attention. Forbidden by the Immortal was in such chaos that it was just like that sea of fire.

Thus it was just as the Captain had said. As long as they didn't stick around for too long, they would be safe.

Xu Qing knew that time was of the essence, so he wasn't holding back. As he absorbed the mutagen, god vitality flourished within him.

The golden threads felt wonderful. And they had grown larger than before, by double. As golden light flowed across him, countless magical symbols appeared on his skin, all of which pulsed with holiness. It was almost as if he was no longer a mortal. Instead, he pulsed with the aura of a god.

Seeing that change in Xu Qing, the Captain started salivating, and his nose twitched.

Smells even better than Ning Yan!

The Captain's eyes glittered.

I wish I could have a bite. Just one little bite....

The Captain swallowed, only to find himself salivating even more.

As the Captain vacillated inwardly, Xu Qing's taboo poison core absorbed so much god vitality that, for the first time, it experienced a transformation. Popping sounds rang out from the pitch-black gold core, and cracks appeared on its surface. As they spread out and became more numerous, fluctuations of awakening began to spread out. Nearby, the violet moon heavenly palace and the Ghost Emperor mountain, though slightly slower, also exhibited similar signs of transformation. Half an incense stick's worth of time passed, whereupon the taboo poison core was almost covered with cracks. Then, a loud pop rang out as the outer shell collapsed.

A black imp emerged from within. It looked exactly like Xu Qing, and was the dao soul form of his taboo poison core. After flying out, the black imp opened its mouth and devoured the shattered shell of the taboo poison core. A tremor passed through it, and then it erupted with such a terrifying taboo poison power that it was obviously an entire level higher than before.

It pulsed with black light that spread out over Xu Qing's sea of consciousness and filled his body.

The Captain, who had been paying close attention to Xu Qing the entire time, noticed the change.

A different flavor? It seems more delicious, but I can also tell that if I ate it, this current life of mine would be over. W-w-what... what poison is that?

As the Captain's eyes widened, and his heart pounded, Xu Qing's aura once again climbed higher. This time, the source of the increase was the violet moon heavenly palace!

Previously, Xu Qing had used his taboo poison power and his own mutagen to suppress the projection of the red moon in his sea of consciousness, thus taking some godsource. Because it had then become a part of Xu Qing himself, it became violet in color. From ancient times until now, it was rare for such things to happen. And normally speaking, it happened only when one high-level god devoured another.

Back then, the red moon had sensed some of hēr godsource go missing, and had briefly awoken. Despite being on guard, not even the omniscient and omnipotent god had been able to pick up on

any clues about what happened. That godsource had vanished without a trace. Hēr first inclination was to believe that some other god was responsible.

Now, inside of his violet moon heavenly palace, the godsource that had once belonged to the red moon was rapidly transforming. Within the violet moon, it became something else. Out from within the violet moon stepped a figure in a long violet robe, with long violet hair. Though it somewhat resembled the god in the red moon, its face was the same as Xu Qing's!

This was Xu Qing's violet moon dao soul! The moment it appeared, he made a beckoning gesture toward the violet moon behind him. The moon then transformed into a symbol that settled on his forehead. He then walked to the far end of the heavenly palace, where he sat down on the throne there, then gazed out of the sea of consciousness at Xu Qing.

Xu Qing looked back with divine sense. When he looked at each of the dao souls, it made him feel like he was staring at himself. That sense of linked self made Xu Qing realize that the essence that had once belonged to the red moon truly had become a part of him, and was now growing. If it kept growing, and things continued as expected, then in the years to come, he might eventually push the violet moon dao soul to the highest level. At that point, it could theoretically usurp the red moon, and become a High God in its own right.

When that happened, Xu Qing might be able to change all living beings, ensuring that, in their memories, there was never a red moon. They would believe... that the violet moon was the only true existence starting in ancient times.

Master was right. Gods... are just like us, except they exist on a much higher level. They can be supplanted!

As that realization hit him, he continued with the absorption work. After the dao souls of his taboo poison core and violet moon heavenly palace formed, Xu Qing had seven in total! Four of his other dao souls were from his four life lamps. And he also had one that was the manifestation of his imperial-class technique, Golden Crow Assimilates Myriad Spirits. Adding in the taboo poison and violet moon, it meant he had the power of seven dao souls. His battle prowess was now vastly superior to before. In fact, it wasn't even possible to compare the current version of himself with the one that entered Forbidden by the Immortal.

And yet, things weren't over yet.

As the Ghost Emperor mountain continued to absorb the god vitality, and as the incense stick's worth of time reached its end, the heavenly palace rumbled, and the Ghost Emperor within it shook violently. The old body cracked, and finally crumbled, and a dao soul emerged. Just like the nirvanic rebirth of a phoenix, a new life was born out of death. The eighth nascent soul had formed!

Eight-soul power erupted from Xu Qing, causing him to tremble. As his aura skyrocketed, his eyes opened. The first thing he saw was the vast devastation in Forbidden by the Immortal. The second thing he saw was the Captain, looking at him with a face full of conflict and regret.

"Eldest Brother?" Xu Qing asked, surprised.

"You smell better, little Ah Qing. But there's too much poison in you to make you taste good..." The Captain sighed.

Face completely expressionless, Xu Qing ignored the Captain and got to his feet. “Stow it, Eldest Brother. We need to go.”

Chapter 527: Seems Familiar

The moment Xu Qing stood, the surrounding mutagen surged away from him, creating a cloud of mist. He currently stood at about three meters in height, looking very mysterious. Extraordinary fluctuations rolled off of him, causing the mutagen to roil as if it were crawling away from him. Based on what Xu Qing could sense, he was at the point in which he could cause the mutagen to erupt if he wanted. Now that the god of Forbidden by the Immortal had perished, he was gradually becoming the lord of the place.

Sadly, my current cultivation base isn't enough to sustain much more of the local mutagen. Shaking his head, Xu Qing suppressed his desire for more mutagen. He could theoretically absorb some more, but they were running out of time, and doing so could reveal their position.

There was another reason that had prompted Xu Qing to cease absorbing mutagen. And that was... he had sensed the god's finger stirring in D-132.

The violet crystal is too weak to fully seal the god's finger. And if the finger gets the local mutagen, it's entirely possible it could break out from inside of me....

He sighed at how seemingly useless the violet crystal was right now.

Meanwhile, the Captain was off to the side, looking up at the 3-meter-tall Xu Qing, and comparing his own height. His eyebrows were fully raised.

Xu Qing understood what he meant by that look. A tremor passed through him as he shrank back down to his normal height. Afterward, he felt different. Before, he'd known that his remolded body was unusual. However, he had been unable to control the golden threads inside of him, and as a result, hadn't been able to control the god body. As of now, he had enough control that he could reach a height of three meters. When transforming from his normal height to that three-meter height, he was in a completely different state. In the latter, he was vastly stronger.

The Captain seemed pleased to see Xu Qing back at his normal height. Earlier, when he realized Xu Qing had become larger, he had very nearly released one of the seals inside of himself so he could do something similar.

However, right then, intense rumbling sounds filled the dome of heaven. As the rifts above shattered and fell, a white net appeared overhead. Upon looking closely, it was possible to see that above the net were quite a few cultivators from the army. They were unleashing the net, which was now spreading out across the sky.

Meanwhile, the fourth wave of cultivators was already coming through the entrance.

From a distance, it was possible to see that Seventh Prince wasn't leading the way. Instead, the group was being led by the three commanders-in-chief from the three palaces. Behind them were masses of imperial cultivators, who quickly spread out to purge the mutagen, or worked on repairing the shattered sky. By working on both fronts, they were attempting to quickly stabilize the area. Apparently, that was why they had taken a bit of time before entering.

At the same time, Xu Qing and the Captain both felt their command swords vibrating. An order had come in, requiring all cultivators from the first three waves to leave within two hours. After that,

Forbidden by the Immortal would be converted into a special region that could not be entered without special orders. What was more, anyone who didn't leave in the required time would be considered an interloper.

"If Master was right," the Captain said, "then Seventh Prince must have accomplished his mission here. Now, he considers all of this to be his personal reward." A crazy look suddenly appeared in his eyes. "You leave, little Junior Brother. I'm going to wait around just a bit longer."

Xu Qing eyed the Captain. Noting the crazy look in his eyes, and also knowing his Eldest Brother, he didn't bother trying to persuade him to leave. That said, the risks of staying outweighed the benefits for Xu Qing. After all, with Seventh Prince in charge of everything, and if something went really wrong in Forbidden by the Immortal, it would be hard to make an escape.

After a moment of thought, Xu Qing nodded. "Alright. In that case, I'll leave now. Master already got the best loot, and he's probably outside waiting for us. I'll go work to make sure we get our fair share from the old man. Don't worry at all, Eldest Brother. You just have fun."

With that, Xu Qing turned to leave.

Stunned, the Captain ran over to Xu Qing's side.

Xu Qing looked at him in surprise. "Eldest Brother, I'm heading back to the camp. What are you doing?"

The Captain laughed heartily and threw his arm around Xu Qing's shoulders. "I changed my mind! The old man is ruthless to the core. I'm worried that you might not know how to deal with him. Ah, whatever. For your sake, little Junior Brother, I'm going to forget about the other treasures up for grabs here!"

"Oh," Xu Qing replied, looking the Captain up and down.

The Captain blinked a few times very sincerely, then urged Xu Qing to hurry up and get moving. Thus, the two of them raced along, making sure to keep their concealments in place all the way until they reached the safe zone.

The magical devices in the safe zone purged mutagen. However, the mutagen levels were so high that it was possible to see occasional gory remains of cultivators who had mutated and died in the process. After the fight between Crimson Mother and the local god, the surviving cultivators were all dealing with various degrees of mutagen. For now, all they could do was suppress it and wait until they were outside to take steps to purge it. Quite a few people were already flying up to the exit.

Xu Qing scanned the crowd, and though he saw a few familiar faces, he didn't spot Qing Qiu or Kong Xianglong. Therefore, he took out his command sword and sent messages to them inquiring how they were.

He soon learned that Qing Qiu had left as soon as the initial seven days were up, whereas Kong Xianglong only just now left.

Upon getting Xu Qing's message, Kong Xianglong said he would wait outside to meet up. Xu Qing breathed a sigh of relief knowing that both of them were fine. Because of the situation with his

Master, he hadn't been able to tell anyone what was really going on. He'd been forced to just follow his Master's lead. Besides, if they had gone with him, they would have been in a lot more danger. Considering how busy Xu Qing had been, he hadn't been able to check in with them. Thankfully, he'd managed to let them know ahead of time that something dramatic was going to happen, and that they needed to be careful.

Clearly, Qing Qiu had taken the words to heart. And though Kong Xianglong hadn't left early, he'd been able to keep himself safe.

Xu Qing and the Captain exchanged a glance, then their eyes shone with determination as they shot up into the sky. As they rose higher and higher, Forbidden by the Immortal became smaller and smaller beneath them. Far off in the distance, Xu Qing could see the scars left behind by Crimson Mother's massive hand. He also saw the gigantic ravine that had once housed a sleeping god. The palm print was very clear, and the terrifying mightiness that pulsed from it gave a clue as to how powerful Crimson Mother was. Xu Qing felt lingering fear just looking at it.

"Crimson Mother will sleep after eating," the Captain said, "but will be even more terrifying after awakening. I just wonder how the emperor plans to deal with things after that."

Xu Qing had been wondering the same thing, and didn't have any answers. With that, the two of them flew through the gigantic bottleneck. Leaving Forbidden by the Immortal, they reached the depths of the old Corrections Division, and the crumbled spell formation there. Along the way, they had passed the web formed by dozens of spell formations, which was designed to isolate the mutagen.

Looking up, beyond the pit that was the old Corrections Division, they saw that the sky was dark. It was night time.

About a dozen breaths of time passed, after which they flew out of the old Corrections Division. They were met by a refreshing breeze that lifted their hair and caused their garments to ripple. Compared to the sealed world of Forbidden by the Immortal, the outside was a much more welcoming place.

The moon in the sky was not red. That alone caused Xu Qing and the Captain to subconsciously breathe sighs of relief.

One thing they noticed right away was that the old army camp was gone. There had been millions upon millions of troops in that army, so they hadn't all gone into Forbidden by the Immortal. Based on what Xu Qing had estimated, it didn't seem that more than a million imperial troops had gone in.

As Xu Qing took that in, he spotted Kong Xianglong, seated cross-legged nearby, waiting. Upon noticing Xu Qing, he stood and flew over. His mutagen levels didn't seem to be very high, so he had obviously used various methods to purge himself after leaving. Noticing Xu Qing looking in the direction of where the army camp used to be, Kong Xianglong offered a quick explanation.

"They left. Five days ago, from what I heard. They used the county teleportation portal to go back to the front lines. I only found out after I left earlier. My guess is that something big is happening on the battlefield.... About an hour ago, Seventh

Prince also teleported away. This time, he didn't conscript any Sea-Sealing County cultivators."

Xu Qing thought back to his Master's speculation that everything was part of the emperor's plan related to the war. And now, right after the Crimson Mother plan wrapped up, the army suddenly left for the front lines?

"There's definitely something big going on!" Xu Qing took a deep breath and looked at the Captain. The Captain was looking back at him. Both of them were speculating about the same thing. And that was... that humankind was going to announce that it had a domain treasure.

"All fogs of confusion will soon be lifted," the Captain said. "We'll know the truth in short order."

Kong Xianglong sighed. "Xu Qing, I feel like there are a lot of things going on that we have no clue about. If you figure anything out, don't forget to give me a heads up."

With that, Kong Xianglong took out two medicinal pill bottles which he offered to Xu Qing and the Captain.

"These are pallid boluses. Although a lot of preparations were made before opening Forbidden by the Immortal, there was still a lot of mutagen released. Since so many people are coming back with high mutagen levels, pallid boluses have sold out just about everywhere. They're basically impossible to buy. Those are some of the stockpiles I built up earlier. Take them."

Chuckling, the Captain took a bottle, opened it, dumped out two pallid boluses, and consumed them.

The process caused a medicinal aroma to spread out, clearing the area of mutagen.

When Xu Qing smelled that aroma, it seemed familiar, as if there were some other fragrance in addition to the normal smell of the medicine. It was very faint, and gave him a vague sense of déjà vu. Reaching out, he took the other bottle.

Pallid boluses were an improved version of white boluses, which the lieutenant governor had created years ago. They were twice as effective as white boluses, and were considered a blessing for humankind, especially Sea-Sealing County. Unfortunately, some of the main ingredients were very difficult to produce, and thus, the supply had always been limited to the county capital. Despite that, many people had benefited from them, especially since they were actually cheaper than white boluses. As a result, many mortals could consume them.

Although Xu Qing didn't need pills like that, there were some secrets he wanted to keep as tightly as possible, which was why he accepted the bottle. Next, he conveyed some of his Master's speculations to Kong Xianglong.

There were many finer details he had to hold back, but he was able to give Kong Xianglong a general idea. Upon hearing the theories, Kong Xianglong shivered and then struggled to control his breathing. His eyes were already bloodshot, and his hands kept clenching and unclenching. Clearly

he was thinking about Palace Lord Kong's death. Eventually, he opened his mouth to speak, only to close it again.

Finally, his hands settled into fists and he said, "I just hope we humans come out victorious!"

Looking bleak, he gave a farewell wave of the hand, then turned and left. Kong Xianglong was obviously very young, but right now, he seemed like he was aging rapidly.

The Captain watched him leave and softly said, "Kong Xianglong really is a great person!"

Chapter 528: The Fragrance of Osmanthus Flowers

Xu Qing said nothing. He knew why Kong Xianglong felt so bleak and lonely.

Back in Forbidden by the Immortal, Xu Qing himself had felt similarly upon hearing his Master's analysis of the situation. Palace Lord Kong, the governor, and all of Sea-Sealing County were essentially game pieces in a huge game of Go. Everything leading up to Palace Lord Kong's death on the battlefield made that abundantly clear.

That said, the palace lord had lived a life of bravery and courage, and had been a "larger than life" figure. Dying in battle for the sake of humanity was something he'd done without a single regret. Apparently, he had already come to a conclusion about what was happening. But as long as he could guarantee the safety of his people, his family, his subordinates, and especially his grandson, and the fact that his death would not have an overall negative effect, then he had been more than happy to offer salvation to Sea-Sealing County.

"As long as Sea-Sealing County lives, I won't hesitate to sacrifice myself for it."

Xu Qing had thought back to Palace Lord Kong's words many times, and pondered how decisive he had been in his final moments. [1]

Sure enough, right after Palace Lord Kong died, an army arrived led by Seventh Prince. The prince saved the day, and became a popular hero as a result.

How could Kong Xianglong not have mixed emotions after realizing the truth of it all? But in the end, he made a similar choice as his grandfather. He states his hope that humans would achieve a great victory in the war. By doing so, he honored his grandfather's sacrifice.

Sighing, Xu Qing turned and went to his sword pavilion. The Captain followed.

Along the way, the Captain didn't say anything. Once they were in, they sat down cross-legged, and the Captain squeezed Xu Qing's shoulder.

"Little Ah Qing, you—"

"Wait. No!" Xu Qing interrupted, looking up. His eyes glittered with a mysterious light.

The Captain's eyes narrowed.

"Master was right," Xu Qing continued, "but there's more to the story..... That white jade hand. I've seen it before!" Thinking back to past events, he confirmed that he was right.

The Captain didn't say anything.

Back in Forbidden by the Immortal, he had seen both of the hands of white jade. One was big, one was small. The small one was obviously created by his Master, after having done research on that experimental god body. The big question was who summoned the larger hand. Up to this point, the Captain hadn't brought it up, as he was worried about upsetting Xu Qing.

There was no expression on Xu Qing's face as he bowed his head and said nothing further.

The Captain sighed. There were certain things his Master had explained to him, and because of that, he could guess what was bothering Xu Qing. Therefore, the best thing he could do was sit there and offer company. Eventually, the sun rose. Seeing that Xu Qing was still not saying anything, the Captain cleared his throat.

"Little Junior Brother, why do you think Master hasn't come back yet?"

Xu Qing shook his head.

"Little Junior Brother, based on how well I know the old man, I suspect that he's probably here already."

Xu Qing suddenly looked up, his eyes flickering.

"Trust me, little Ah Qing. Master loves eavesdropping. Back before we had you around, I experienced that firsthand. I bet Master was actually here in the sword pavilion before we got here. Either that, or he left a message here for us."

The Captain had actually brought this up in the hopes of just getting Xu Qing to start talking. But as he blathered on, his eyes widened as he realized what he was saying made a lot of sense. Inhaling sharply, he shot to his feet and looked around.

Fixating on one corner of the room, he hurried over, clasped hands, and bowed excitedly. "Master! Master, you can come out now. I see you!"

Xu Qing looked on suspiciously. He had been in a rotten mood before, but the Captain's antics had already squashed that bad mood.

Unfortunately, no matter how the Captain bowed, nothing happened. The Captain blinked a few times, then went to another corner in the room. There, he continued bowing.

"Hahaha! Truth be told, Master, I didn't see you before. But I can sense your aura! As you know, sir, I'm very sensitive to such things."

Nothing happened in that corner of the room either.

As Xu Qing watched quizzically, the Captain looked around, thought for a moment, and then turned to Xu Qing.

"Little Junior Brother, do you still have that mask Master gave you?"

Xu Qing inhaled sharply as he realized what the Captain was getting at. Taking the semitransparent immortal skill mask out of his bag of holding, he put it down to the side, then got to his feet and bowed to it.

The Captain also somberly clasped hands and bowed.

A long moment passed in which nothing happened. The two of them looked at each other.

“Maybe you’re overthinking this, Eldest Brother...”

“Trust me, I know our Master.” The Captain looked supremely confident. However, as time passed, and morning turned to afternoon, and then afternoon turned into evening, things remained the same in the sword pavilion. Master Seventh never showed his face. Nor did they receive any message from him.

Xu Qing looked hesitantly at the Captain.

The Captain looked at the mask and gritted his teeth.

“We have no choice at this point, little Junior Brother. I have to resort to a trump card!”

As Xu Qing watched attentively, the Captain cleared his throat.

“Okay, little Junior Brother,” he said loudly, “I have a secret I want to reveal to you. Do you want to know why I’m so keen on helping girls resolve their issues with having too many gifts? It’s because many years ago, there’s an old person that both of us know—you know who I’m talking about, but I’m not going to mention the name out loud—who gave a bunch of gifts to a female cultivator. Later on, he went back in the middle of the night, bringing me along, to take back the—”

“Shut UP!” a voice interrupted angrily from the semitransparent mask.

Xu Qing gasped. The Captain flashed a pleased look at Xu Qing, then dropped to the ground in front of the mask, plastering a pained expression onto his face.

“Master, you scared me! I was deeply concerned about your safety, so I had no choice but to use this method to confirm your whereabouts. Now that I know you’re fine, I can rest at ease!”

“I said to shut up, fool!” Master Seventh roared from within the mask. “I’m fleeing for my life here!!”

Xu Qing’s expression turned serious. The Captain’s face fell, and he refrained from making a sound. Worried, both of them just waited, not saying a word. Tension mounted. Xu Qing was starting to get really worried, and the Captain’s expression turned so serious he started looking somewhat vicious.

An entire night passed. The following morning at dawn the mask twitched, then floated up from the ground. As Xu Qing and the Captain looked on nervously, Master Seventh’s voice again spoke from the mouth. He sounded hoarse.

“I got away. Finally. I just took one little bone! Was there really a need for a full-on manhunt?”

Upon hearing Master Seventh’s words, both Xu Qing and the Captain breathed deep sighs of relief.

“The two of you need to find an opportunity to get back to Seven Blood Eyes. I really made out like a bandit this time. I’m going to refine this bone and create some amazing treasures with it. I mean, it’s the bone of a god! An actual, authentic item from a real god!

“Hm.... Actually, the two of you should wait a bit before coming back to the sect, otherwise you might blow our cover. How about this? Come back in about a month. By that time I should be nearly done with refining the bone.

“By the way, going forward, I can’t afford any distractions. The two of you better not stir up any trouble. Incidentally, Big Sib, you need to devour this mask and hide its aura in your belly! Alright, I need to go now. I’m going to find a place to hole up for a bit. See you back in Seven Blood Eyes.”

When Master Seventh finished speaking, the mask clattered to the ground.

“Eldest Brother, do you think Master’s okay...?” Xu Qing asked, looking at the Captain.

The Captain chuckled, picked up the mask, and stuffed it into his mouth. After chewing it up and swallowing it, he burped and looked at Xu Qing.

“The fact the old man could give such a detailed message goes to show that he’s alive and kicking. He’s fine. Don’t worry. Master might not measure up to me when it comes to pulling off big jobs, but when it comes to fleeing.... Let’s just say I’ve never seen anyone as good as him. Think about it! What kind of person does it take to research an experimental god body that has the power of time in it, or create such powerful concealment magics?”

The Captain sighed inwardly. He wasn’t trying to pull a fast one; he really did have full confidence in his Master. With that, the Captain looked outside to check the time, and was about to say something further when his transmission jade slip vibrated.

Xu Qing watched as the Captain, his eyes glittering, licked his lips and grinned.

“I need to take off, little Ah Qing. Lady Peachy is looking for me.”

The Captain hurried away toward the Administration Palace. Along the way, he bought a peach. After taking a bite, he used the eyeball in his palm almost like a mirror to check his appearance. After confirming his good looks, he sped up.

Xu Qing watched the Captain go and mentally wished him luck. Then he glanced back at his now-empty sword pavilion. Earlier, he had been in a bad mood because of Torchlight, but now he’d reached a state of equilibrium.

In a month, I’ll be back in Seven Blood Eyes, and I can ask Arch-Immortal Plumdark about everything that happened.

Thinking about the timescape bottle, he sighed inwardly. Shortly thereafter, he closed his eyes in meditation to stabilize his cultivation base. When that work was done, he took out the bottle of

pallid boluses that Kong Xianglong had given him. Back when the Captain consumed the pills, Xu Qing had noticed another fragrance that seemed familiar. He knew he'd encountered it before. However, after telling Kong Xianglong the details of Master Seventh's analysis, he hadn't been in the mood to dig into the matter.

Now that his mood was stable, he figured it was a good time to check the pill again. It seemed unlikely to be important, but given his cautious personality, he didn't want to just ignore it. After opening the bottle, he inhaled the fragrance to confirm what medicinal plants were in the ingredients.

There are a lot of plant fragrances....

One by one, he began identifying the different smells, taking time to repeatedly inhale the fragrance of the pill as he did. It took some time, but he finally identified that unique and familiar fragrance. It was very faint, to the point where he wouldn't have noticed it unless he had his remolded god body.

It's... the fragrance of osmanthus flowers?

All of a sudden, his pupils constricted, and he looked down at the pallid boluses. His expression became one of complete and utter incredulity.

"It's the fragrance of osmanthus flowers!" Xu Qing felt like his mind was being struck by countless lightning bolts. In order to confirm that he was right, he crushed the pallid bolus into a powder, then carefully analyzed it. The fragrance of osmanthus flowers grew even stronger. For a long moment he sat there in a daze, medicinal powder dribbling off of his fingers.

It's the same fragrance from that empty wish box....

Waves of astonishment rolled through Xu Qing's mind and heart as he realized why the smell was familiar. Back on the mission with Kong Xianglong, they had recovered an empty wish box.

When he handled that wish box, he had noticed the fragrance of osmanthus flowers. And it was the exact same fragrance that was in the pallid bolus! [2]

Over the years, pallid boluses had become one of the necessities of life for cultivators and mortals in the county capital. Countless people had consumed them!

Chapter 529: The Truth, Revealed!

Xu Qing sat there quietly. Eventually, he looked up, his heart and mind trembling as wave after wave of shock crashed into them.

"The lieutenant governor..." he murmured.

Xu Qing hadn't dealt much with the lieutenant governor, but he had always respected him.

The reason for that was his skill in alchemy, which reminded Xu Qing of Grandmaster Bai and the grand elder from the Swordsage Court in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. He remembered how kind the lieutenant governor had been when he first arrived in the county capital, and also what Honor Guard Sun had said about the 'virtuous achievement' of inventing the pallid bolus. Once the war started, Xu Qing had noticed repeatedly how exhausted the lieutenant governor seemed. Back when dealing with the Demi-Immortals, the lieutenant governor had almost immediately picked up on Xu

Qing's ruse, and had played along. True, the lieutenant governor had quickly fit in to the new arrangement when Seventh Prince arrived, but that alone didn't mean much.

Later, the lieutenant governor was responsible for many things that benefited Sea-Sealing County. He worked with the deputy palace lords for the three palaces to successfully submit many official requests to Seventh Prince. After Xu Qing had just returned, it was the lieutenant governor who dealt with the cabal of nonhumans who had protested Xu Qing's conscription orders.

After Seventh Prince took over and sought to make changes to the Swordsage Palace's rules and reward systems, it was the lieutenant governor who negotiated with Seventh Prince on the swordsage's behalf.

The lieutenant governor's influence was present in so many things.

Palace Lord Kong had trusted him with the safekeeping of the capital city. Even if the palace lord had suspected him, he still had a lot of trust in him. During the war, the lieutenant governor never procrastinated in anything. He worked diligently to serve the front lines, earned the confidence of the mortals, and became a pillar of stability. The only reason the front lines had been able to hold strong as long as they did was because of the lieutenant governor's hard work.

He really had accomplished many virtuous achievements. He really was someone who kept the interior safe during a time of war. He really was someone who fought for the rights of Sea-Sealing County even after Seventh Prince came and took over.

Given all of that, Xu Qing had a hard time believing that he could be some sort of villainous mastermind. Previously, there had never been a single thing to lead him to suspect the lieutenant governor. He certainly hadn't come across any evidence implicating him.

As Xu Qing sat there, he suppressed his shock. This was too important of a matter, and he couldn't do anything rash. Therefore, he took this new clue and tried to fit it in with everything he had uncovered up to this point.

He thought back to the information in Palace Lord Kong's jade slip, and also what he had uncovered at Mount Daybreak.

According to Classified Dossier 19, the empty wish box once contained a lightmost fatehavoc pill. Palace Lord Kong was aware of that, which was why he was certain the governor died because of that pill. After all, there are few things that could kill someone as strong as the governor in such a quiet, nondramatic way. The only exception would be someone at least as strong as a Smoldering God. But if someone like that were involved, what would be the point of the war? All those factors indicate that a lightmost fatehavoc pill had to be the murder weapon.

Xu Qing was mentally laying out all the clues in the most logical fashion possible.

However, to use a lightmost fatehavoc pill, one would first need a stream of daybreak light. That was what Palace Lord Kong wanted me to investigate. That, and the method by which the poison was administered.

Back when Xu Qing and Kong Xianglong had discussed this matter, they hadn't even been able to come up with a theory about how the poison was administered. How could the governor, who was blessed with destiny aura and was halfway into the Smoldering God level, not notice someone trying to poison him?

I got to the bottom of the daybreak light. I proved that there was some daybreak light whose existence didn't make it into the official records. And that made it seem even more likely that we were dealing with a lightmost fatehavoc pill. As for how it was administered....

Xu Qing looked down at the powder that was all that remained of the pallid bolus he had just crushed. Then he took the remaining pallid bolus out of the pill bottle. He had previously studied this pill. Back then, he had come to the conclusion that it was just a more effective version of the white bolus, and that its function was to extrude mutagen. The concoction method for the pill was unique, such that despite Xu Qing's skill in the dao of alchemy, he couldn't figure it out by merely studying the pill.

What was more, the pill contained many medicinal plants that didn't seem to be well-matched. They only seemed to become effective after having been transformed in some way. That actually conformed to the lieutenant governor's unique dao of medicine. He would transform medicinal plants by altering their environment.

Xu Qing's eyes hardened as he thought about that. It was as if a huge hand were clearing the fog in his mind. He suddenly recalled the first time he had seen the lieutenant governor, which was when he taught a lesson to all the new swordsages.

"If you want to affect a medicinal plant, you can't be bold and decisive. You don't need to make yin-yang adjustments to change it. You just water it quietly."

"If you gradually change its environment, as well its diet, you can exert a huge influence on the plant without it even realizing it."

"To put it plainly, you're not actually transforming the plant. It's using its own power to transform itself. All you're doing is giving it the proper environment in which to change."

That was what the lieutenant governor had said in his lecture. Upon hearing those words, Xu Qing had felt deep admiration. He couldn't help but respect the lieutenant governor after learning that he had come up with such a useful method of alchemy. After all, it was that method which led to the transformation of the white bolus into the pallid bolus, which had been such a blessing for people in the capital.

But now that Xu Qing thought back to that lecture, it made him feel like lightning bolts were slamming into his mind.

If you take the lieutenant governor's lecture, and replace the word 'medicinal plant' with the word 'governor,' then... everything makes sense.

If you wanted to poison the governor, you couldn't do it in a bold and decisive way. You would need to do it just like quietly watering a plant. You would need to gradually change the environment around the governor without him even realizing it.... And the environment is the population of the county capital.

Without the governor ever realizing it, you could change his diet.... In this case, his 'diet' would be the most crucial element of the lightmost fatehavoc pill. Destiny aura! As the governor slowly absorbed the destiny aura, he would be affected from the inside.

The lieutenant governor didn't actually do anything to the governor specifically. The governor did it to himself through his normal routine. The lieutenant governor just created a way to influence the governor's environment and diet.

Xu Qing trembled, and his heart pounded.

In other words, the lieutenant governor didn't actually administer any poison at all. He treated the governor like a plant. To poison him... he used all of the humans in the county capital!

The harmless and inexpensive pallid boluses were the carriers. They had the power of the lightmost fatehavoc pill in them. As the years passed, and countless people consumed those pills constantly, they transformed the destiny aura, and by extension, the governor's diet.

By using the destiny aura of all humans in the county capital, he transformed and influenced the governor, all for the purpose of ultimately poisoning him. How utterly devious....

Xu Qing struggled to control his breathing as he realized that everything made perfect sense. The empty wish box had once contained the lightmost fatehavoc pill. Because it had been in the box for so long, the fragrance of osmanthus flowers remained in the box even after the pill was taken out.

That mission had revolved around an agent who was in Holytide territory. After uncovering a monumental secret, that spy had fled back to human territory. Looking back, Xu Qing realized that the agent had probably been dead all along. The wish box that Xu Qing and the others had recovered had been in the hands of his son.

And then there was Classified Dossier 19, which contained the evidence Palace Lord Kong needed to verify the governor's cause of death.

Everything made sense. Everything.

Next, Xu Qing thought about the boy in D-132, who was a manifestation of Sea-Sealing County's destiny aura. It was only after they brought the wish box back to the county capital that he suddenly became listless and seemingly sick.

Back then, Xu Qing had assumed that listless state came because the boy had somehow encountered an unclean thing. However, the boy recovered very quickly, and thus, Xu Qing never thought more about it. And why should he have, given the scant information he had back then?

Later, the governor died, the Corrections Division exploded, and the boy went missing. Xu Qing had assumed the boy went missing because of the collapse of the Corrections Division. But now that he looked back, he realized that obviously wasn't the case!

After completing Classified Dossier 19, Palace Lord Kong had already started investigating the matter. Sadly, in the end, he was not omniscient and omnipotent. Before he had a chance to solve the mystery, the governor died, and the war started. And in the end, he had to suspect everyone.

Xu Qing felt his scalp tingling. Then he thought about how so many humans thought of the lieutenant governor's pallid boluses as a virtuous achievement. What was more, the lieutenant governor had openly, perhaps even brazenly, revealed his tactics publicly. And yet... not one person caught on to what was really happening.

The 'pallid bolus' was a pack of lies! The lieutenant governor had made a mockery of the people of Sea-Sealing County!

Xu Qing felt like he was being struck by 10,000,000 lightning bolts as he thought back to the lieutenant governor's eyes when he looked out at the class and delivered that lecture. He had seemed so kind. But now that Xu Qing thought back, he realized that within that kindness was mockery. Scorn. It was like he was playing some cruel guessing game.

"I'm telling you the truth. Every little aspect. But... none of you have realized it, have you?"

This was the truth, revealed. And after putting all the pieces together, Xu Qing didn't just feel enlightened. He felt scared.

Why would the lieutenant governor do this? Could it be that he and Torchlight...? He stopped for a moment to think. I should have realized the truth even before Chu Tianqun died.

Xu Qing had never forgotten what Chu Tianqun said in the moments before his death, when Xu Qing asked him about the whereabouts of Night Dove and the Crown Prince of Violet and Cyan.

"Do you know how to change the color of the sea? When you figure out how, you'll get your answer."

Xu Qing looked out into the night at the capital city.

The color of the sea. Based on the lieutenant governor's method of enacting change, the way to change the color of a sea would be to change the countless streams flowing into it. It would happen so slowly that, before the sea realized what was happening, it would be a different color.

"That's the answer," Xu Qing murmured quietly.

The lieutenant governor is probably the Crown Prince of Violet and Cyan. Either that, or he's Night Dove. And he's the one who murdered the governor. The mysterious figure in the black cloak who appeared on the battlefield wasn't Marquis Yao. It was the lieutenant governor.

Xu Qing understood everything now. He understood the truth. Except, he wasn't sure what to do with this information. The person who had assigned him to investigate the mystery was dead. The lieutenant governor was now the heart and soul of Sea-Sealing County. All the leaders looked to him for guidance. Given his 'virtuous achievement' with the pallid bolus, he was thought highly of by the emperor and had won the hearts of the people.

He was like a sun shining in the sky. Given the circumstances surrounding Seventh Prince's arrival, it seemed obvious that the two of them were working together.

The reason that white jade hand appeared in Forbidden by the Immortal is because they had already worked out a deal....

Sighing, Xu Qing opened the door of his sword pavilion, walked out, and looked out at the night sky. Eventually, a glimmer of light appeared on the horizon, which gradually illuminated the dome of heaven. It was the sign that dawn had come. The light seemed to spread faster than ever. Along with the light came waves of heat. It was at that moment that all cultivators in Sea-Sealing County received a message from the lieutenant governor.

"Twenty hours ago, Emperor Dark War unleashed a domain treasure into the heart of Nightshade territory!"

Chapter 530: Human Domain Treasure; Dawning Sun! (part 1)

During the end of the tenth month in the year 2,932 of the Dark War calendar, the 3,915th descendant of Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity, Guyue Zhang'an, the seventh son of the magnificent and glorious Emperor Dark War, received imperial orders to save Sea-Sealing County by opening the ninth operations palace of Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity.

Seventh Prince summoned the Nightshades' Crimson Mother into that operations palace to devour the vile god sleeping therein. Thus, a potential calamity was expunged, assuring a thousand years of peace and security for Sea-Sealing County.

Because that dharmic decree of the magnificent and glorious Emperor Dark War was carried out, humankind could walk the path to victory in the war. It was a matter that shook the countless species of Revered Ancient to the core. The myriads of species in Sea-Sealing County cheered in delight. Humans all looked up to Seventh Prince; the emperor himself praised the prince for the services he had performed.

In the same month, after the ninth operations palace of Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity in Sea-Sealing County had been opened, the magnificent and glorious Emperor Dark War, who had been besieged in the imperial capital for months by the Nightshades, finally revealed his heavenly might by unleashing Dawning Sun into the heart of the Nightshade Region.

The immense, spherical sun was just like a real, scorching sun. It represented humanity's drive to rise to prominence, and when it exploded in the darkness of the Nightshade Region, it released boundless light that filled heaven like burning fire.

All of Nightshade Region was lit ablaze. The sky there collapsed, and the ground cracked open everywhere. Countless Nightshades died, and all Nightshade cultivators were seriously injured.

A tempest came into being, spreading out far and wide, like an eternal sea of fire that drew the attention of all eyes. The Nightshade's pitch-black region was now filled with radiance and light.

Rough estimates indicate that the burning sun will remain in place for a full sixty-year-cycle. However, its effects will continue to play out for much longer than that. For the next thousand years, the dark night of the Nightshade Region will be replaced with bright fire.

Countless lives were lost, but at the same time, humankind had a new lease on life.

The news was a huge shock to Revered Ancient. All species were shaken. The allied army that had besieged the imperial capital of the humans fell into retreat. Back home, they sealed their borders and trembled in fear. Even the most powerful species on the mainland were absolutely flabbergasted.

It marked the beginning of a time of prosperity the likes of which hadn't been seen for many tens of thousands of years.

Emperor Dark War became so famous that his name was known to everyone from all species. By unleashing Dawning Sun, the human emperor was making a clear announcement to everyone: from this day on, humans are no longer prey. We... have the power to defend ourselves!

And that was because of the humans' domain treasure, Dawning Sun! That domain treasure was not created by a god; it was the work of human hands!

The Nightshades suffered heavy losses. However, their fury overshadowed their terror, and they did not surrender. In fact, they started fighting back even harder. They unleashed *their* domain treasure, ultimately destroying a third of the human imperial capital. They stubbornly insisted that the humans were actually bluffing. Their narrow-minded assertion was that the humans hadn't actually created a domain treasure. They believed that Dawning Sun was nothing like traditional domain treasures. In fact, they were sure that it was a single-use magical technique, or some lone relic of the ancient past.

War horns continued to sound.

In the eleventh month of the year 2,932 of the Dark War calendar, seven days after the first unleashing of Dawning Sun, Emperor Dark War once more revealed his heavenly might, as he again unleashed his domain treasure on another of the Nightshades' regions, plus the neighboring Holytide Region!

The second usage of Dawning Sun created a destructive sea of flames and an eternal light. In the blink of an eye, the Nightshade's other region collapsed. The lands were set aflame, and the sky burned red.

Countless Nightshades howled in anguish as the light melted their skin and dissolved them into ashes. Cultivators and mortals alike, as well as any species that adhered to them, were thrown into the ultimate distress. The death toll was too high to count. It was as if godly might had been unleashed.

The Holytide Region was also affected. Tempests of fire swept through it, crushing anything and everything. The countless species of the Revered Ancient mainland watched in silence.

The Nightshades trembled. Countless members of their species were sacrificed as god magics were unleashed and they beseeched their god Crimson Mother to come and punish the humans. Such efforts... completely failed.

They made three attempts to summon their god. They failed three times.

Completely demoralized, the Nightshades had no choice but to retreat. However, the imperial army gave chase, causing Nightshade blood to fill heaven and earth. The Nightshades... were routed. It was only by using their domain treasure to cover their own retreat with a canopy of frigid cold that they managed to stop the human counter assault.

The war caused a sensation among the countless species of the Revered Ancient mainland. The prestige of humankind was once again on display. Emperor Dark War had truly lived up to his name.

Despite the great victory won by humankind, Emperor Dark War didn't greedily take the war into Nightshade territory. What was more, he informed all interested parties throughout Revered Ancient that the creation of Dawning Sun had been proposed tens of thousands of years in the past by Emperor Mirrorcloud. [1]

There had been many twists and turns in its creation, and construction was only finished recently. As for its operating principles, Emperor Dark War didn't keep them a secret. Besides, now that Dawning Sun had been unleashed, it would have been hard to do so, and ultimately, the secret

would have been revealed. Instead, he courageously chose to reveal the truth himself, thus revealing the spirit of what it meant to be human, and simultaneously striking fear into the hearts of the lowly.

Dawning Sun was connected to the Lightborn species!

Everyone knew that the Lightborn were close allies of the humans. The Lightborn had special eyes that could absorb and store sunlight. Because of that, there was an entire industry in Revered Ancient focused around the sale of Lightborn eyes. [2]

That said, few people knew that, tens of thousands of years in the past, there was no such species as the Lightborn in Revered Ancient.... They were actually a hybrid variety of humans created by Emperor Mirrorcloud. And their eyes were actually miniature versions of Dawning Sun.

When that news started to spread, it was difficult to tell what was the truth and what wasn't. The idea that the humans had hatched a plot that took tens of thousands of years to come to fruition left many species trembling in fear.

The war wasn't over yet, though.

In the same month that the Nightshades were defeated, Emperor Dark War's seventh son, who was stationed in Sea-Sealing County, unsealed the county and led an army of 60,000,000 to wage war against the Holytides. The human army crushed everything in their path. They reclaimed three prefectures which had recently been lost, then advanced into the depths of the Holytide Region. Their warpath carved out rivers of gore and caused blood to rain from the sky.

The Holytides experienced setback after setback, suffered countless casualties, and lost vast swaths of territory.

Seventh Prince possessed godly power, heavenly genius, and a courageous heart. Ignoring his own safety, he slaughtered the enemy, expanded human territory, and conquered half of an entire region! The four Holytide emperors were enraged.

In the moment of greatest crisis, the Holytide ancestral emperor experienced a breakthrough in cultivation. He emerged shouldering a major world. Having stepped into the Smoldering God level, he completely transformed the Holytide Region by severing his species' bloodline connection with the Nightshades. From that moment on, the Holytides no longer adhered to the Nightshades, and were completely free.

The arrival of a Smoldering God changed everything. Seventh Prince's rampage was brought to an end, and in the ensuing deadlock, Seventh Prince revealed his magnificent benevolence by kindly offering the Holytide species clemency. The Holytides, having already come to hate war, and convinced by Seventh Prince's boundless sincerity, were deeply moved. At the behest of their ancestral emperor, they agreed to return to the fold of humankind.

The momentous turn of events caused a huge commotion among the court and common people alike. That, of course, was something the emperor had expected. The return of the Holytides wasn't something that could be affected in a short time; there were still plenty of aspects to be negotiated.

As the person in charge of the affair, Seventh Prince remained in the Holytide Region to see the matter to its conclusion.

It was in that manner that a war which had lasted for half a year was brought to a conclusion.

The Nightshades had suffered crippling losses. The humans won a great victory, and made a huge impression on the countless other species that existed.

Seventh Prince had saved Sea-Sealing County, carried out imperial orders to a tee, expanded human territory, and overseen the return of the Holytides. His numerous accomplishments earned him widespread fame. He became a hero to all, and was even rumored to be named the crown prince in the future.

Humans in Sea-Sealing County and the other counties were very excited to read the official reports about the resolution of the war. All households had shrines in which to make offerings to Emperor Dark War and wish him longevity. But now, such shrines also had a plaque to wish longevity to Seventh Prince. After all, this was the first time during the Dark War calendar that humans had ever expanded their territory! In fact, tracing back the history, it was also the first time since Emperor Eastglory's spectacular defeat that humans had expanded their territory! [3]

The implications were impossible to overstate.

What was more, the betrayal of the Holytides during the Dao Life calendar had brought unending pain to Emperor Dao Life, and to humankind as a whole. But now, during the Dark War calendar, Seventh Prince guided them back to the right path, thereby accomplishing something downright amazing!

Thus came to an end a skirmish that had long been playing out on the Revered Ancient game board.

But what most people saw was only what lay on the surface. As for what happened behind the scenes, opinions were mixed on whether or not things had been handled properly. And it wasn't the sort of matter that could be decided with a few casual words.

That was simply how war worked. War was not just about fighting and killing. It was not about one person attacking and one person retreating. Wars like that were either children's games, or fiction. The reality was that war was brutal. What most people saw was simply the blood spilled on the battlefield, not all the other countless elements involved. Few people understood the truth, not even the majority of people in Sea-Sealing County. Only those who actually participated in the war had an inkling. And frankly speaking, it was better that way.

Not understanding the truth left the commoners happier.

Xu Qing currently sat in his sword pavilion, gripping his command sword and taking in the reports and news. It had been twelve days since he learned the truth. Nowadays, reports were released every day, and they inevitably caused lots of cheering and rejoicing.

The county capital was swept up in the moment. The mortals were all visibly exuberant, and even swordsages who had witnessed Palace Lord Kong die in battle seemed relieved and impressed.

Kong Xianglong hadn't made a public appearance in days. He spent all of his time drinking alone.

Xu Qing was also drinking at the moment. He had a jug of alcohol at his side from which he would sip.

More days passed.

As the dust settled, Seventh Prince finished his initial negotiations with the Holytides, then returned to Sea-Sealing County. Because of how he had won the hearts of the people, he was received much more formally. The grand celebration thrown in his honor rivaled any celebration thrown for the sake of the emperor.

It lasted an entire day. Later that evening, in a building in the Governor's Mansion, Seventh Prince stood looking out at heaven and earth.

"I offer my thanks for all of this," Seventh Prince said calmly.

As his words echoed out, a figure appeared next to him.

Chapter 530: Human Domain Treasure; Dawning Sun! (part 2)

The figure that appeared next to Seventh Prince had a face full of wrinkles, along with very kind eyes. He was none other than the lieutenant governor.

"I helped you," the lieutenant governor said. "You helped me. It was very fair. There's no need for thanks." He smiled as he looked out at the scenery along with Seventh Prince.

Seventh Prince didn't speak for a moment. Then he said, "I wanted to win acclaim. The Holytides wanted a magic to purge the Nightshade blood from their species, as well as a chance to reach the Smoldering God level. Both of us got what we wanted. But what about you? Do you really just want that item from the imperial palace that once belonged to Emperor Mirrorcloud?"

The lieutenant governor smiled kindly. "Of course. I'm not a liar. Also, you forgot something. I want to be the governor of Sea-Sealing County." Lowering his voice slightly, he continued, "So, the emperor had that domain treasure all along, but didn't use it. Very devious. Very clever. No wonder you wanted to work with me. The reality is that, normally speaking, you shouldn't have won any acclaim in this war. The emperor was behind everything. Your mission was simply to save Sea-Sealing County, open Forbidden by the Immortal as bait for Crimson Mother, and give humanity the right opportunity to unleash its domain treasure."

It was almost as if Seventh Prince hadn't been listening. Face completely expressionless, he coolly said, "Why is the destiny aura of Sea-Sealing County so important to you?"

"Having been baptized by the lightmost fatehavoc pill, the destiny aura is very important. And the old governor was the perfect person to give his life to purge it of poison. As of now, the destiny aura is fine. Think of it as a fruit that's only just ripened. It's a gift from me to you." The lieutenant governor spoke in a mild and straightforward manner. The truth was that he was worried Seventh Prince might renege on their agreement.

Seventh Prince's eyes narrowed. "Who are you, really?"

"I'm a nobody," replied the lieutenant governor, smiling.

Seventh Prince stood there for a moment before nodding. "During the big ceremony in three days, I'll publicly announce that you're the new governor. Going forward, Sea-Sealing County belongs to you, so handle things here as you see fit. As for that item that once belonged to Emperor Mirrorcloud, I can simply add it to the list of goods we're sending to the Holytides as part of the deal governing their return. Even if my father notices it, given the bigger picture, I'm sure he'll still agree to hand it over to you. Besides, he's the only person that can open the ancestral land to retrieve it." Seventh Prince turned to look at the lieutenant governor. "That said, I'm very curious. Why did you hatch this extremely complicated conspiracy just to get a bowl?"

The lieutenant governor smiled. "I can answer that. But there's also something I'm curious about. What happens later on if I give the people of Sea-Sealing County and its destiny aura to my lord and master to devour? What will you do then?"

"On a personal level," Seventh Prince replied calmly, "I couldn't care less. The county belongs to you now, after all. But from the perspective of humankind as a whole, I'd have to stop you."

Hearing that, the lieutenant governor turned to leave.

"You haven't answered my question," Seventh Prince said, his face expressionless.

The lieutenant governor didn't look back. He just said one thing. "If I told you that bowl is actually the skull of my lord and master, would you believe me?"

Seventh Prince's eyes glittered. The imperial palace had been constructed by Emperor Mirrorcloud. In other words, it was very, very old. It contained many secrets, some of which could actually be traced back to the time of Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity.

Emperor Mirrorcloud had been the type of person who liked collecting things. However, there was only one thing that went with him into his grave, and that was a bowl. It was a bone bowl, and it had been interred with him. It was put into a coffin of the exact same measurements as his own, such that it looked as if two emperors had been entombed there. No one knew what that bone bowl did, or whose skull it was made from. And there was no information about it in any records. The truth had been erased in the countless years of time that had passed, so the only thing that remained were conjectures. There were even some people who claimed that the skull was that of Emperor Mirrorcloud's closest friend, the crown prince of the Sovereign Kingdom of Violet and Cyan.

Seventh Prince didn't ask any more questions.

The lieutenant governor left.

A moment later, numerous streams of energy appeared around Seventh Prince, which resolved into a host of figures in black cloaks. They looked exactly like the cloaked figures who had been with Zhang Siyun not so long ago. The figure in the forefront looked at Seventh Prince, clasped hands, and bowed, then spoke in a sinister voice.

"Your Majesty, if you give us the order, sir, we'll kill him on the spot. We've already determined his origin. He's from an organization called Torchlight. As for his identity —"

Seventh Prince shook his head. “Whatever information you uncovered is what he wanted you to uncover. I’m standing by my agreement with him. See to it.” Kneading the bridge of his nose, Seventh Prince continued, “By the way, have you found any traces of my younger brother?”

The black-robed figure bowed his head. “Your Majesty, we’ve already scoured all the counties looking for Twelfth Prince, but haven’t found him. We found some clues indicating he came to Sea-Sealing County. But his trail goes cold here.”

Seventh Prince digested that information briefly, then shook his head and left.

News began to spread about the grand ceremony that was to take place now that Seventh Prince had returned. All human sects and organizations knew about it, as did all the countless species.

Everyone was talking about the event because it was a coronation. Seventh Prince was going to crown the new governor.

Once that happened, the new governor would be the most paramount entity in Sea-Sealing County. His every word and deed could affect the lives of countless people. The three palaces, all the cultivators, and all the swordsages would have to listen to his commands. All it would take would be a single dharmic decree, and any one of Sea-Sealing County’s thirteen provinces or countless sects and organizations could be wiped out of existence.

He would be blessed by the destiny aura of Sea-Sealing County, which would help him break through all the shackles tying down his cultivation base, and enable him to reach the highest of heights. He would exist at the pinnacle of the county.

Of course, along with that great power came corresponding responsibilities. He would be in charge of safeguarding both humankind and Sea-Sealing County. Although no public announcement had been made regarding the identity of the new governor, everyone could already speculate who it was. After all... there was only one person who, after having gone through so many dramatic events, qualified to take the spot. And that was the lieutenant governor!

The lieutenant governor’s virtuous achievement with the pallid bolus had earned him the veneration of the masses. During the war, he had been cautious and conscientious. He had kept the interior of the county safe. And after Seventh Prince arrived, he fought hard for the rights of the county.

Everything he had done ensured that people loved him dearly.

If Palace Lord Kong had been alive, then he would obviously have been the best choice. The other two palace lords would similarly have qualified. But now they were gone, and only the lieutenant governor was left. He represented the heart of the people, and also the old guard of Sea-Sealing County. Obviously, the people would have no qualms about someone like him becoming the governor.

Xu Qing was drinking in his sword pavilion when he heard the news. He’d gone through quite a few jugs, but had plenty more.

In nine days, it’ll have been a month. In nine days I can go back to Seven Blood Eyes. I really need to pay a visit to Arch-Immortal Plumdark.... And Ling’er as well. Before I leave, I should go see her. She’s probably awake by now. As for Master, I wonder if he’s already done creating that treasure.

Eldest Brother must have other big jobs in mind for the future. I wonder what the next one will be. I should really work on my cultivation. I need to get stronger. The two of us haven't even come close to traveling the world together.

I have to tend to Sergeant Thunder's grave and pay respects to Grandmaster Bai as well. I should leave some offerings at Master Sixth's gravestone too. There are so many important things to handle.

Huang Yan! I wonder how he's doing. And also... who is he? I still don't know for sure. Sir Bloodsmelter is getting so old. And then there's Elder Brother Zhang San, and Yanyan, and also Ding Xue! I haven't seen any of them for such a long time. With so many things to do, I can't just stick around the county capital. I should just go out and do something.

He took a long drink.

Yeah, that's totally right. My cultivation base is too weak to accomplish anything important. At least I don't have any regrets about fighting in the war. Perhaps the swordsages... aren't a good fit for me. I guess it doesn't matter. I grew up alone in a brutal world, fighting to survive. There have always been plenty of things beyond my control. From the time I was small, the most important thing was to just stay alive....

Xu Qing kept drinking. Eventually, it was only about seven days before the appointed time to return to Seven Blood Eyes.

That was the day that Sea-Sealing County held its big ceremony.

At first, Xu Qing wasn't planning to go. But then he thought about how he and the Captain would be leaving in seven days. When the bells started ringing, and his command sword vibrated, he put down his jug of alcohol, walked out of his sword pavilion, and went up into the city. Soon, he found himself standing in the very same square where he had sworn his oath in front of the souls of the county heroes.

There were a lot of people present, but everything was very orderly. Cultivators from all three palaces were there. Hundreds of thousands of people were all congregated. Everyone was dressed in fresh, clean clothes, and they all looked very excited. That included the three deputy palace lords, who didn't look anxious and worried like before. And all the swordsages who were veterans of the war seemed to be in great moods.

Humankind had won a historical victory. They had a domain treasure, which meant they were no longer prey for other species. Everyone's spirits were lifted by all of the good news.

More than half of the Holytide Region now belonged to humans, and a golden age was starting. Besides, the fact that the Holytides were returning to humankind essentially meant that humans would soon control an entire region. It was something that hadn't happened for tens of thousands of years.

It was little wonder everyone was so worked up!

What was more, it would only be a short time before everyone got to see their new governor. Everything was playing out perfectly.

The Captain was in the crowd, as were Kong Xianglong, Qing Qiu, and Ning Yan.

When the Captain found Xu Qing, he threw his arm around his neck, leaned toward him, and sniffed a few times.

“What’s wrong? Last time I messaged, you said you were in seclusion. Why do you smell like booze? How drunk are you?”

Xu Qing shook his head and chuckled. “I’m fine.”

The Captain looked suspicious, and was about to ask a question when the bells started ringing. The golden dragon in the dome of heaven roared, spewing out colorful clouds. Seventh Prince floated down from above, clad in a yellow robe, a nine-tasseled crown on his head. He moved with power and grace, and his mere presence caused the crowds to erupt into wild cheering.

“Victory!”

“Victory!”

“Victory!”

Seventh Prince smiled and nodded as he proceeded to the altar. He was flanked by dozens of followers, all of whom were clad in the robes of government officials.

Among them were the three commanders-in-chief from the three palaces and the other commanders-in-chief and generalissimos from the imperial army, including the one who had presided over the operation in Forbidden by the Immortal, Generalissimo Bloodhorror.

Also present was the lieutenant governor. Just as in the past, he looked kind, with merciful eyes. There also seemed something wistful about him. From the look of it, he was very grateful that humans had finally achieved this victory.

The group floated down to the altar, until they landed in front of it. The imperial prince strode to the highest position of all, then turned so that his back was to the statue of Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity, and he was looking out at everything below him.

The hundreds of thousands of cultivators below the altar went completely silent. Expressions somber, they looked up at the prince, and behind him, Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity.

Xu Qing did the same. As he did, his heart pounded, and he struggled to remain still and unmoving. Over the past twenty-three days, he had become accustomed to drinking. However, there was no alcohol to drink at the moment. He sighed inwardly.

Once this ceremony is over, I’ll go buy some medicinal plants. I still have some military credits, and a few days to spend them. Who knows how long it will be before I’m back in the county capital? Yeah. I might as well get some magical devices and other things as well.

He tried hard to think about what things he should do before leaving, and thus keep himself under control.

Meanwhile, Seventh Prince looked out at the hundreds of thousands of gathered cultivators. Clasping hands, he bowed.

“Sea-Sealing County is here today, not just because I defended it. It is here because all of *you* defended it. *We* defended it. Together!

“As such, the victory belongs, not just to me, but even more so, to all of you. And especially to the fine officers and troops who gave their lives on the front lines! Therefore, on this day of ceremony, I wish to pay my respects to them! Please, join me as I bow to the souls of all the heroes!”

Expression somber, Seventh Prince turned in the direction of the front lines, clasped hands, and bowed deeply. Hearts swelling in response to his words, the gathered cultivators turned in the same direction, clasped hands, and bowed.

“I hope that we humans can live for all eternity in peace and security! And I also hope that we can once again capture the glory of our past!” Seventh Prince’s words resounded in all heaven and earth, causing the clouds to swirl into auspicious formations!