

Timescape 531

Chapter 531: Follow The Path Your Heart Chooses (part 1)

Seven-colored clouds shone in the dome of heaven, spreading out to fill the sky. They looked like beautiful flowers made of light, their shifting colors laced with gold as they hung over the grand ceremony taking place.

The roars of the four-clawed golden dragon thundered out as it exhaled multicolored clouds. Within the clouds were numerous illusory figures standing tall as they observed; they were all the governors from the history of Sea-Sealing County, there to bear witness to what was to come. Of course, they were just projections created by destiny aura.

Spirit energy gathered in the form of raindrops, which fell to the ground and dispelled the scattered mutagen that had seeped out from Forbidden by the Immortal. Countless plants began to grow vibrantly, while all living beings experienced a boost to their cultivation base, and found old injuries and conditions rapidly improving.

A golden age had arrived. All cultivators in the county capital, and in fact, all people in general, were cheering loudly. The various nonhuman representatives from around Sea-Sealing County who were there to witness the event couldn't help but feel a deep reverence in their hearts. Even the Demi-Immortals respectfully bowed their heads.

Atop the altar, the commanders-in-chief who had come with the imperial prince from the capital all had eyes shining with zealous veneration. Thanks to the leadership of Seventh Prince, they had won a great victory, and had performed unheard-of services to humankind.

That group included the three commanders-in-chief assigned to the three palaces.

The lieutenant governor stood there looking up into the sky. His expression seemed to be a mixture of lamentation and reminiscence. And it was tinged with the sensation of ancient time, as if he had already witnessed someone achieve things such as the imperial prince had achieved, except, on a far grander scale.

It's not a big deal. Everything will return to the way it once was, my Lord. Three days at the most after the Holytides fulfill their agreement, I will sacrifice all the living beings in Sea-Sealing County. I'll squeeze out all of their destiny aura to create a boundless life fruit for you, sir.

The lieutenant governor smiled faintly. He was a man of *rigorous schemes and deep foresight*, and thus, he couldn't stop his heart from swelling. However, he quickly wiped away any expression of reminiscence from his face. The kind smile returned, and the crow's feet around his eyes seemed even more prominent.

Xu Qing was back in the crowd. As he looked up, his eyes were fixed, not on Seventh Prince, but rather, on the huge statue of Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity.

Within his mind echoed a certain collection of words.

"A swordsage can execute judgment on anyone except the emperor!"

Those words had popped into his mind over twenty days ago, and he had been suppressing them for just as long.

Leaning over to the Captain, Xu Qing said, "Eldest Brother, after this, why don't we come up with a good reason to leave this place?"

"Oh, that's simple," the Captain said proudly. "I already figured it all out. It's been a full two years since we joined the swordsages. Normally speaking, new swordsages have to serve in the capital for three years. But you can reduce that time with military credits. Once we're ready to make our move, we can just apply for a position outside of the capital, and I'll grease the right wheels to make sure we end up assigned to Emperor-Receiving Prefecture."

"It's been two years?" Xu Qing said. Time really had flown by.

The Captain sighed. "Yeah, two years!"

"I guess that means I'm twenty years old now," Xu Qing mused.

"That's right, little Ah Qing. You still haven't grown up all the way. Twenty years old!" The Captain chuckled heartily.

Xu Qing also chuckled.

On the altar, Seventh Prince raised his hand, and instantly, the cheering crowd of hundreds of thousands went silent. The entire county capital quieted.

"You fighting men of Sea-Sealing County have had it rough over the past half a year," the prince said quietly. "I've watched your blood flow. The emperor has seen the sacrifices you've made. All humankind has borne witness to your service. The war is over. Humans are triumphant!"

"For tens of thousands of years, the Nightshades humiliated us. Now we've made them pay the price for that. Countless Nightshades died on the field of battle outside the imperial capital. Then we released Dawning Sun in two of their regions, exterminating ten times as many Nightshade as died in the fighting!"

"Humankind's domain treasure shook heaven and earth! But what is most terrifying about our domain treasure is not that initial burst of power; rather, it is the fact that it will remain in Nightshade lands for a sixty-year-cycle, endlessly burning!"

"During that sixty-year-cycle, a hundred times as many Nightshades will die as have already died. Whatever Nightshades are born in the meantime will be altered. Transformed. Granted, they have their own domain treasure. But they only have one. And they don't have the courage to use it at the cost of their own lives. So they will hold back from using it. Their champion, High God Crimson Mother, has fallen into a deep sleep.

"As for us humans, we have already unleashed our domain treasure three times, and can continue to do so. In this war, we have accomplished something incredible, the

likes of which hasn't been seen for tens of thousands of years. Emperor Dark War is now known throughout all heaven and earth!"

Seventh Prince's impassioned voice filled the sky. "Thanks to our hard work, Sea-Sealing County stands strong, just as before! But there's more than that. Though three prefectures were lost, I... have brought them back! In addition to the three prefectures I recovered, we humans have also recovered control of half of the territory in the Holytide Region. That territory includes nine counties and a hundred prefectures!"

An excited wave of cheering swept through the crowd.

As Seventh Prince looked out, his gaze became filled with unswerving determination, and his voice deepened.

"That said, I'm aware that some people believe my methods to be overly cruel. They think my actions are for the purpose of turning Sea-Sealing County into my personal territory.

"That couldn't be further from the truth. I'm aware that Sea-Sealing County needs a leader, and therefore, I submitted a formal petition to the emperor, and received official approval to appoint a new governor for you. And this governor is someone you're very familiar with.

"Soon, I will leave Sea-Sealing County, and in all likelihood, I'll never return. Instead, I will enter Holytide territory, to guard the frontier border!"

He finished speaking, and before the crowd could react, he turned to the statue of Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity and bowed formally. Then he turned to the illusory governors in the clouds, and bowed even more deeply.

"The county of Sea-Sealing cannot be left unguarded. Throughout history, all governors of this county have been outstanding heroes.

"Therefore, on this day, I, Guyue Zhang'an, as the seventh son of Emperor Dark War, would like to nominate a candidate to be the new governor. After his heart has been assessed by heaven, earth, and the people, I will submit his candidacy to the emperor himself, and then await the official appointment. Lieutenant governor!"

The lieutenant governor smiled and clasped hands in his direction.

Seventh Prince looked down the altar. "Your pallid bolus is a blessing to all humans in the county capital. Your actions have freed countless humans from the corrupting pain of mutagen. This is your first accomplishment!

"During your time serving as lieutenant governor, you were cautious and conscientious. From assisting the governor to showing pity on the commoners, your hard work and meritorious service are known to all. This is your second accomplishment!

“During the war, you kept the interior safe, ensuring that the people of Sea-Sealing County didn’t devolve into chaos. You spared no effort to support the front lines. This is your third accomplishment!

“Going forward, you will lead all the cultivators in Sea-Sealing County. You will see to it that the county returns to business as usual. You will oversee the reconstruction. You will return the county to its previous state. This will be your fourth accomplishment!”

As Seventh Prince listed out all of the lieutenant governor’s meritorious accomplishments, the hundreds of thousands of onlookers, and the tens of millions of people in the county capital in general, all looked on, their eyes shining with reverence.

The lieutenant governor stood there with a kind, merciful look on his face.

Down below, Xu Qing looked down. He had no desire to watch any of this. He just kept telling himself that all he had to do was wait seven more days. In seven days, he could go back to Seven Blood Eyes.

The ceremony should be over soon.

After Seventh Prince finished listing out the lieutenant governor’s accomplishments, the crowd roared, and the prince smiled and nodded to the lieutenant governor.

The lieutenant governor then stepped forward. All eyes were on him as he walked up the stairs to the top of the altar, where he stood next to Seventh Prince.

A strong wind swept through the area. It wasn’t the result of a magical technique, but rather, a manifestation of the invisible destiny aura. It came as streams of destiny aura rose up from all of the mortals and all of the cultivators in the county capital. Up above, the clouds seem to grow thinner as the destiny aura formed a massive vortex. The vortex grew increasingly visible.

“That’s the county’s destiny aura,” the Captain said enviously. “It wouldn’t be of much use to me and you. But to a Void Returning cultivator, the destiny aura of an entire county could easily push you up an entire stage. In fact, it might be enough to step halfway into the Smoldering God level!

“With a blessing of destiny aura, he really will be the most paramount figure in all of Sea-Sealing County.”

Xu Qing looked down and said nothing.

Atop the altar, Seventh Prince looked over at the lieutenant governor.

The kind lieutenant governor softly said, “I hereby ask heaven: may I serve as the governor of Sea-Sealing County?”

The most important aspect of the governor’s coronation was the assessment of heaven, earth, and the people. It was a ceremonial tradition started by Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity that had continued to this day. In this case, ‘heaven’ was Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity. And as a

representative of the imperial clan, Seventh Prince qualified to represent heaven. Looking solemnly at the lieutenant governor, he nodded.

“You may!”

As the words left his mouth, thunder rumbled in the sky. It was as if a million lightning bolts all fell at the same time. As the sound spread out, the vortex of destiny aura became even easier to see. Gradually, it was taking the shape of a crown.

The crown of the emperor had twelve tassels. The leaders of the regions had ten tassels. The imperial princes had nine tassels. And the leaders of the counties had five tassels. The regulations had been set in ancient times, and they had not changed. And thus, the destiny aura overhead was taking the shape of a crown with five tassels.

As the thunder rumbled, the crown-shaped convergence of destiny aura overhead echoed with another sound. It was like that of a boy weeping.

It struck Xu Qing to the heart, causing him to suddenly look up. The weeping was extremely clear to him, but no one else seemed to be reacting, as if they couldn't hear it.

“Did you hear that, Eldest Brother?” Xu Qing suddenly said.

The Captain looked over at Xu Qing and shook his head. “I didn't hear anything. Neither did you.”

Xu Qing didn't reply. He knew that the weeping in the destiny aura was the boy from D-132. Considering that he and the Captain were both linked to a heavenly dao, there was no doubt that the Captain had also heard the weeping. The sound seemed to grow louder in his ears, and it struck him to the core.

There are a lot of things I still have yet to accomplish. I need to get back to Seven Blood Eyes... My cultivation base isn't strong enough. I have to stay alive. Everything depends on improving my cultivation base. Everything. There will still be time to fix everything. After I'm strong enough.

However, even as Xu Qing consoled himself, there was another voice in the back of his mind screaming at him that the governor's killer, and Palace Lord Kong's killer, was right in front of him. All of the calamity Sea-Sealing County had faced was the result of a plot carried out over many years by this very person. Of course, that voice was Xu Qing's own voice. He forced it into silence.

It's not my responsibility. Exactly. Not my responsibility... I'm a nobody who needs to focus on staying alive. Besides, I don't want to drag Master and Eldest Brother into this.

As Xu Qing kept looking down, he clenched his hands into fists.

Atop the altar, the lieutenant governor calmly continued speaking. “I hereby ask earth: may I serve as the governor of Sea-Sealing County?”

In this case, ‘earth’ were the lands of Sea-Sealing County, and in a ceremonial and symbolic sense, Seventh Prince qualified to respond.

“You may!”

Instantly, thunderous rumbling erupted overhead, like a million lightning bolts exploding at the same time. More destiny aura converged, and the crown became clearer. It even started floating down toward the altar. The weeping grew more intense, and almost pleading.

Xu Qing's chest heaved and his heart pounded. He looked up. From his angle of view, it almost looked like Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity's hands were placing the crown of destiny aura onto the head of the new governor.

Once the crown was on the head of the lieutenant governor, he would become the governor. He would be blessed by destiny aura, and he would be in charge of the entire county.

From that moment on, the heaven of Sea-Sealing County would belong to Torchlight. The lands of Sea-Sealing County would belong to Torchlight. And the destiny aura of Sea-Sealing County would belong to Torchlight. [1]

If that happened, then Sergeant Thunder's death, Grandmaster Bai's death, and Master Sixth's death would become pure regret.

There was one unknown: would Master Seventh's actions in Forbidden by the Immortal be able to evade the scrutiny of an entire county?

Probably. Master should be fine. Worst case scenario....

Xu Qing's eyes narrowed slightly, and his clenched fists relaxed briefly before falling back into fists. But then the Captain put his hand on Xu Qing's shoulder.

"It's almost time to leave, little Junior Brother," the Captain said softly, squeezing Xu Qing's shoulder.

On the altar, the lieutenant governor smiled kindly as his gaze swept across the crowd of hundreds of thousands. It passed Xu Qing, then focused on something far, far away.

"I hereby ask the people, the fighting men of the county, may I... serve as the governor of Sea-Sealing County?"

This was the final step in the ceremony. In this case, Seventh Prince didn't qualify to respond, as the question was asked to the people of Sea-Sealing County.

"You may!"

"You may!!"

"You may!!!"

The response was immediate. Hundreds of thousands of voices joined together on the altar, and were joined by the even louder convergence of the voices of the mortals in the city. The popular sentiment had been made clear! All living beings were in agreement! Heaven, earth, and the people all approved!

The clouds above seethed, and millions upon millions of thunderclaps rang out. The crown with five tassels, which represented the safety of an entire county, finished forming. The destiny aura converged, causing the lands to tremble and the sky to ripple.

The pleading wail turned into one of despair, and then gradually began to fade from Xu Qing's ears. The crown slowly lowered from the sky as if Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity were placing it onto the lieutenant governor's head.

At that moment, the struggle within Xu Qing reached an explosive level. It felt like heavenly lightning was smashing into him, shattering his thoughts.

Looking up, he sighed. With that sigh, he exhaled the impure vital energy that had been building up within him for more than twenty days. He knew that he was powerless. And in recent days, he had come up with countless logical reasons to convince himself he was doing the right thing.

“I’ve been fooling myself,” he said quietly. “I can’t say those words. I can’t give my approval. Eldest Brother, I can’t hold back any longer.”

The Captain’s pupils constricted, Kong Xianglong gasped, Qing Qiu’s jaw dropped, and everyone else in the crowd looked on in confusion as Xu Qing flew up into the air.

Chapter 531: Follow The Path Your Heart Chooses (part 2)

In front of hundreds of thousands of people, Xu Qing alone rose up, glowing with the light of daybreak. A bluegreen dragon appeared over his head, along with a group of scintillating umbrellas.

Countless people shifted their gazes in his direction. Seventh Prince looked at him. The lieutenant governor stared. Numerous cultivators looked up.

The despairing wail of the boy suddenly disappeared as Xu Qing hovered there looking out at heaven and earth. In the heat of the moment, he wasn’t thinking about whether he’d made the right choice. He wasn’t wondering whether he would live or die. He was just following his heart.

All of the arguments he had been using on himself for the past half a month became powerless. How could they possibly suppress the truth he knew in his heart? Perhaps if another moment had passed, he wouldn’t have done this. And perhaps if he had another chance to do the same thing, he wouldn’t. But right now, he wasn’t thinking about such things.

“I am Xu Qing, who received a 30,000-meter pillar of light when the Grand Emperor assessed my heart. And I object to this!”

In voicing his objection, he had no choice but to mention the 30,000-meter pillar of light and the assessment of the heart. Those were his qualifications. After speaking the words, he felt like a huge weight had been lifted from him. All of the pressure that had been building up on him over the last twenty days or so finally disappeared.

Fuck off, confusion!

Fuck off, deliberation!

Popular sentiment couldn’t suppress his heart. Public opinion couldn’t keep his soul down.

Concerns about good decisions and bad decisions... could all just fuck off!

Xu Qing’s eyes shone brightly, and his entire person seemed to glow. The power of destiny aura in the sky seethed, and unexpectedly, some of it actually shifted away from the crown and toward Xu Qing’s head.

Another crown, slightly smaller, was now taking shape above Xu Qing! It represented the approval of Sea-Sealing County’s destiny aura, and the approval of its heavenly dao! Although many people weren’t able to see it happening, there were definitely some people who could see it!

His words echoed like thunder into the hearts of all who could hear. Instantly, the hundreds of thousands of people gathered in the square went dead silent.

A moment passed, and then gasps could be heard everywhere.

Seventh Prince's gaze focused on the spot above Xu Qing's head, and his heart started pounding. He knew full well who Xu Qing was. What stuck out to him was one single thing. It wasn't the services Xu Qing had rendered, or the fact that he earned the measly title of secretary-general from the old palace lord. Instead... it was the 30,000-meter pillar of light during the Grand Emperor's assessment of the heart!

Never before in history had a person received a 30,000-meter pillar of light in Sea-Sealing County. Most people only had a cursory understanding of what that meant, and that it was rare. To them, a person like that was like an individual with a politically approved family background and education, who could be trusted. And it would ensure they had good prospects for the future.

But given Seventh Prince's status and rank, he had a much deeper understanding. He knew that because of the Grand Emperor's assessment of the heart, Xu Qing's name was now inscribed on the statue of the Grand Emperor in the imperial capital! That statue was not a domain treasure. However, it was a legacy relic that had safeguarded humankind on many occasions. Throughout history, all emperors had prostrated in worship in front of it. People whose names were inscribed on that statue were considered very important to the emperor.

In other words... even Seventh Prince would hesitate long and hard before acting against such a person. And if he killed someone who had received a 30,000-meter pillar of light in the assessment of the heart, it would have a major effect on his reputation.

It was because of that 30,000-meter pillar of light that Xu Qing's voice echoed out for everyone to hear. And all the cultivators who heard it were shaken to the core.

If this were Xu Qing's first day in the county capital, then even the backing of the Grand Emperor wouldn't have been enough for him to be taken seriously. If it was his first day, nobody would know him or understand what he was like. On his first day, people might recognize his name, but nothing else. Anything he said would be meaningless, because though people might have heard he was outstanding, they wouldn't have actually valued him.

Except this was not his first day.

Without doing it intentionally, Xu Qing had worked his way into the hearts of everyone in Sea-Sealing County. He was the one who had brought great aid to the western front. And because of him being the secretary-general, countless people knew about him. What was more, his actions on the front lines of the war had won him the approval and understanding of all his fellow veterans.

He was a part of Sea-Sealing County. And to the swordsages, he was someone who had risked his life along their side, a comrade-in-arms who they trusted completely!

That, plus the 30,000-meter light, became like a glowing halo that made him the center of all attention. He had risen to the top based on his own talent, and had earned the deep trust and approval of the people of Sea-Sealing County, and especially to the Swordsage Palace. In fact, when they looked at him, they instinctively thought about Palace Lord Kong.

Not even someone like Kong Xianglong could do something like that. After Palace Lord Kong died, word began to spread about Kong Xianglong's true identity. And for the most part, Kong Xianglong had been by the palace lord's side during the war. As a result, his words were taken very seriously, and could shake all of the county capital.

However, after everything Xu Qing had experienced, he had come to realize that the most difficult thing to influence was public opinion. To the mortals in the county capital, the lieutenant governor was a person who had truly benefited the people. In that regard, Xu Qing couldn't compare at all.

The cultivators from the other palaces were shaken, and at the same time, puzzled. All of that made it very clear to Xu Qing what he was up against. Being clear-headed was sometimes a big mistake.

Even as Xu Qing's words continued to ring out, the deputy palace lord from the Swordsage Palace, the same one who had watched with tear-filled eyes as Palace Lord Kong perished, rushed out into the open.

"Xu Qing!" he shouted. "Did you actually cultivate that technique I gave you all the way to the first level! Are you daft? I told you not to get greedy, but you just wouldn't listen!" Though the deputy palace lord was yelling angrily, his eyes betrayed how anxious he was. Spinning, he clasped hands in the direction of the altar. "Your Majesty. Lieutenant Governor. Xu Qing clearly ran into some problems in cultivation. Please, take no offense. I'll personally take him away right now to punish him!"

At the same time, Honor Guard Sima and Honor Guard Sun from the Swordsage Palace flew up and bowed in the direction of the altar. Down below, there were other veterans who were about to join them. There were more than 100,000 of them, and they included Kong Xianglong, the Captain, Qing Qiu, and Ning Yan. It didn't matter what happened. It didn't matter what mistake Xu Qing made. They instinctively wanted to keep him safe. After all, Xu Qing would do the same for them. They were comrades-in-arms!

That was especially true of the Captain, who was already glowing with a faint blue light.

However, before anyone could fly up, the deputy palace lord rebuked them angrily, then once again bowed in the direction of the altar.

Seventh Prince's eyes were narrowed and his heart pounded as his gaze focused on the spot above Xu Qing's head. Then he looked down at all the veterans below. At that moment, he realized that if he didn't handle this matter properly, it could lead to a lot of chaos. If that happened, then even if he smoothed everything out, there would be a blemish on the lieutenant governor. After all, Seventh Prince was now dealing with someone with a 30,000-meter pillar of light, plus the approval of Sea-Sealing County's destiny aura. A person like that... would be treated thoughtfully even by his father the emperor.

That said, none of this was really his responsibility. He had fulfilled his part of the agreement. If the lieutenant governor couldn't keep control of the matter, what did that have to do with Seventh Prince? Therefore, Seventh Prince didn't say anything. He just waited to see how the lieutenant governor would handle the matter.

As the lieutenant governor stood on the altar, he looked at Xu Qing and quietly said, "It's no bother. However, I'm curious to hear why exactly you object? By the way, Xu Qing, I haven't forgotten that I had you in my class before."

Before Xu Qing could say anything, the deputy palace lord again clasped hands and said, "Exalted Governor, there's no reason for you to give any weight to the nonsense of children!" Then he turned to Xu Qing and yelled, "What are you standing around for? Get out of here!"

With that, he backed up as if to drag Xu Qing away, while simultaneously releasing the power of his cultivation base in case the imperial commanders-in-chief of the lieutenant governor made a sudden move.

"Stop right there, Li Yunshan!" the lieutenant governor said coolly. [1]

Li Yunshan was the deputy palace lord's name. Upon hearing his name spoken, he stopped for a moment, then continued a few more steps until he was standing next to Xu Qing. Looking at the lieutenant governor, he spoke in a voice that mixed bitterness with decisiveness. "Exalted Lieutenant Governor, Xu Qing was the secretary-general to Palace Lord Kong. He's a swordsage too. He's young and inexperienced, but he doesn't deserve to die. After Palace Lord Kong sacrificed his life, I'm the only one left to take care of Xu Qing. Therefore... I vouch for him!"

Honor guards Sima and Sun released the power of their cultivation bases, as did the more than 100,000 veterans.

Seventh Prince's eyes glittered faintly as he looked at the lieutenant governor.

The lieutenant governor, meanwhile, looked at Xu Qing.

Xu Qing took a step forward, bowed to Li Yunshan and the two honor guards. Then he turned to the more than 100,000 veterans and bowed to them. When he stood straight again, he spoke in a calm voice.

"In the fourth month of this year, after the war broke out, when Palace Lord Kong led the army to the front lines, he gave me a secret mission to investigate the governor's murder!"

Li Yunshan had been just about to rush forward and drag him away, when the words registered and he lurched to a halt. The hundreds of thousands of cultivators present felt their minds reeling as they looked at Xu Qing.

As everyone looked on, Xu Qing expressionlessly took out the jade slip that Palace Lord Kong had given him.

"It took me half a year to complete that mission. Although we already know the role Marquis Yao played, there are still unanswered questions. And there is still a killer at large. Unfortunately, because Palace Lord Kong sacrificed his life, I didn't have a chance to report my findings to anyone. Lieutenant Governor... do you mind if I make my report to you, right here and now? I've uncovered some evidence relating to the governor's death that all humans in Sea-Sealing County should know about. I would love for you to point out any errors I've made, Lieutenant Governor!"

Down below, the Captain sighed. Eyes glittering with blue light, he prepared to release one more of his seals. Kong Xianglong trembled, his eyes bloodshot as he stared at the lieutenant governor. Ning Yan shrank back a bit. Surreptitiously glancing at Seventh Prince, he inwardly breathed a sigh of relief. Qing Qiu maintained silence, but her knuckles were white as she gripped her scythe.

There was also a random swordsage hidden in the crowd who looked at Xu Qing with a gleam of approval in his eyes, even pride. However, there was also a bit of helplessness in those eyes, within which briefly flickered a hint of golden light.

On the altar was Generalissimo Bloodhorror, who had led the operation in Forbidden by the Immortal. Beneath his mask, his eyes glittered.

The crowds were absolutely silent. In response to Xu Qing's words, their gazes shifted to the lieutenant governor. Obviously, the governor's murder had brought sorrow to the entire county. And that wasn't even to mention that Xu Qing was acting on the orders of Palace Lord Kong. Even the mortals in the county capital were paying rapt attention. Already, public sentiment was wavering.

Xu Qing couldn't match up to the lieutenant governor in terms of prestige.

However, the lieutenant governor couldn't match up to the governor and Palace Lord Kong in prestige!

The lieutenant governor looked down at Xu Qing, and he seemed very serious, as if he only just now realized who Xu Qing was.

"Say what you have to say."

Chapter 532: Point Out Any Errors I've Made, Lieutenant Governor! (part 1)

For more than twenty days, Xu Qing had come up with countless reasons to convince himself to stay silent. But he hadn't been able to stop himself from thinking about another possible outcome.

He had known all along that if he stepped out like he did, there were three possible catastrophic outcomes. The first was that the moment he stepped out into the open, he would be struck dead immediately. Although that didn't seem likely, it was a possibility. After all, to most people, voicing an objection wasn't the same as outright rebellion.

The second possibility was that he would be imprisoned, whereupon his life or death could be determined by someone's else's whim.

The third possibility was that everything would go smoothly, but that he would create immense potential calamities that would lead to further catastrophe.

Of course, all of those possibilities were what would happen if he failed.

The moment he stepped out into the open and mentioned the 30,000-meter pillar of light, he ensured that the first possibility wouldn't play out. What was more, he hadn't even considered that the deputy palace lord and others would try to shield him from harm.

Next he had taken out the orders from Palace Lord Kong. With that jade slip as evidence, and as soon as he said he wanted to report the findings of his investigation, he ruled out the second possibility. Although the governor's murder had previously been announced as having been solved, his carefully worded statement did not exempt Marquis Yao from culpability. He simply said there was more to the story, and that he wanted the people of Sea-Sealing County to hear all the details.

Although the lieutenant governor was well-liked, he couldn't surpass the old governor in terms of being loved by the people. What was more, the brilliant services performed by Palace Lord Kong would not be easily forgotten.

Xu Qing had called upon the names of two people who might as well have been mountains in the hearts of the commoners. Then he coupled that with the 30,000-meter pillar of light, and it bought him the opportunity he sought. The former was what shook the mortals. The latter was what shook the veteran cultivators.

And that was why the lieutenant governor looked deeply at Xu Qing, as if he were only finally realizing who he really was. After all, if Xu Qing said anything that even hinted at him trying to protect Marquis Yao or contradict the previous judgment that had been announced, then it would be easy to crush him.

Silence reigned in heaven and earth.

Xu Qing hovered in front of everyone, the destiny aura slowly gathering above his head.

He knew that his every choice of word was vitally important, and that if he said even one wrong thing, he would be *dammned by myriad tribulations*. He let a few breaths of time pass, then looked at the lieutenant governor.

“In the fourth month of this year, the governor mysteriously died, the Holytides invaded, and eight hundred years of peace in Sea-Sealing County came to an end. The Nightshades besieged the imperial capital, prevented the new governor and the relief troops from coming to our aid, and left Sea-Sealing County isolated and without help. We were being *tossed about by the wind and the rain*, and everyone felt deeply alarmed.

“In the face of such deadly peril, Palace Lord Kong accepted the orders to stand in as the governor to safeguard Sea-Sealing County.

“In that same month, I worked closely with Palace Lord Kong to process all war reports and announcements. At the end of the fourth month, the situation on the front lines became critical. The palace lord took command of the Sea-Sealing County army and left to defend humankind. Living up to his oath as a swordmage, he personally went to the front lines. On the day he left, I helped the palace lord don his armor.”

Xu Qing's words were not meaningless in any way. He wanted the hundreds of thousands of listeners to think back to those times. He wanted the mortals to remember what life was like back then in the county capital. He wanted them to clearly remember who it was that had really kept them safe.

“Before Palace Lord Kong left, he told me I wouldn't be coming along. Instead, he took a body double with him so no one would realize I was secretly on my way to Daybreak Prefecture to investigate the governor's death.

“Palace Lord Kong already had a theory about the governor’s cause of death. He believed the murder weapon was something called a lightmost fatehavoc pill. In ancient times, it was a very famous pill, but nowadays you have to study history books to learn about it. It specifically targets people upon whom destiny aura has converged. The stronger the destiny aura, the more deadly the pill will be to them.

“The old governor had all of the destiny aura of Sea-Sealing County. And his death perfectly conforms to how the lightmost fatehavoc poison works.

“Palace Lord Kong’s reasons for concluding that pill was involved can be found recorded in Classified Dossier 19 in the Swordsage Palace. I have no idea if that file even exists anymore. Regardless, before the governor’s death, the Swordsage Palace ran an operation to extract an agent from Holytide territory, and also recover an empty wish box. Quite a few people participated in that mission, and they can all corroborate my story.

“However, there is one very specific item required to make a lightmost fatehavoc pill work. And that is daybreak light. I don’t know if it exists in other regions, but I do know that it exists in Daybreak Prefecture here in Sea-Sealing County. That is what Palace Lord Kong sent me to check on. I needed to look through the records there to see if there was any daybreak light that could have been used in concert with a lightmost fatehavoc pill to kill the governor.

“Acting on Palace Lord Kong’s orders, I went to Daybreak Prefecture. While I was there, I resolved a crisis with the local Swordsage Court. That was when I got to the bottom of the situation. The Swordsage Court there can corroborate my story, and all of the evidence is recorded in this jade slip. What I found in Daybreak Prefecture is that there was some daybreak light that appeared a few years ago, but did not make it into the official records.”

All of a sudden, Kong Xianglong flew up into the air. “I participated in the mission to extract that agent. And I can testify that Classified Dossier 19 did mention that empty wish box. Everything is exactly as Xu Qing has said!”

Countless gasps rang out from the crowd of hundreds of thousands, and the mortals throughout the county capital were trembling. Seventh Prince’s gaze had turned flat as he looked at the lieutenant governor.

Taking a deep breath, Xu Qing continued, “I compiled all of this into a report to give to Palace Lord Kong. However, in that very same month, he died in battle. Therefore, I decided to continue the investigation on my own.”

At this point in Xu Qing’s speech, the lieutenant governor suddenly sighed. “Brother Liangxiu came to the same conclusion as me!”

Xu Qing’s pupils constricted.

The lieutenant governor's gaze left Xu Qing and shifted to the hundreds of thousands of cultivators. Looking hurt, he said, "Xu Qing is giving voice to the very same things I considered. For example, I tracked down Classified Dossier 19.

"You see, it wasn't just Brother Liangxiu who was investigating the governor's death. I was also running my own secret investigation. The matter was too important to entrust to just a single person. I long believed that, given the high level of the governor's cultivation base, it should have been impossible to poison him without him realizing it.

"The governor was not just a colleague, he was my close friend. And he was a hero to all of Sea-Sealing County. Because of that, I very much wanted to find out how he died, and also, get revenge!

"Thankfully, I made some progress in the short time before the war started, reached my conclusion, and announced it publicly. However, what Xu Qing says makes sense. The people of Sea-Sealing County deserve to know the truth."

With that, the lieutenant governor waved his hand, causing a large Go board to appear in midair. There was a complete game on the board, with white and black pieces arrayed against each other in a display of fierce conflict.

"This is the governor's Go board. Normally speaking, the only people who played on this board, other than the governor, were myself, Brother Liangxiu, and Yao Tianyan. Only the four of us ever touched it." The lieutenant governor's eyes seemed to flicker with reminiscence. Sighing, he turned to Seventh Prince and clasped hands. "I hate to trouble you, Your Majesty, but do you mind assisting as you did the day when we revealed the hidden poison? We need imperial blood to expose the fatehavoc element to view."

Face completely expressionless. Seventh Prince flicked his finger, causing a red drop of blood to emerge and fly over to the Go board. That blood contained an astonishing bloodline power that caused all nearby humans to shiver. It landed on the Go board, and it was as if a veil had been lifted. Black energy pulsed off the board, and close examination would reveal that, specifically, it was coming from the game pieces.

"That black energy is the lightmost fatehavoc poison. Under normal circumstances, none of us could see or sense it. It was the same with the Governor. Only those with the blood of Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity, who conquered all of Revered Ancient, have the power to reveal it.

"The culprit used this Go board to poison the governor!"

The lieutenant governor's words caused a buzz in the crowd. After all, everything he was saying seemed completely believable and realistic.

A bitter expression appeared on the lieutenant governor's face as he looked out at heaven and earth and quietly continued, "Truth be told, my plan has always been to use my time as governor to train my successor from among the deputy palace lords of the three palaces. Li Yunshan, you are my top candidate."

The lieutenant governor reached out and touched the imperial prince's blood on the Go board. That blood flowed up his finger, and where it spread, it revealed black energy. After the process was over, it was possible to see black streaks covering the lieutenant governor. He looked... just like the governor had looked in the moment before he died.

"The reason is that I've also been poisoned. I also touched the Go pieces on that board. Not just now. I handled the board numerous times before the war began.

"Xu Qing, do you remember that time you paid me a visit? You saw how tired I was, right? I know full well that this poison cannot be cured. That's why I refused to take the medicine my subordinate gave me. [1]

"The governor perished. Brother Liangxiu perished. And I don't have much longer to live. Yao Tianyan is on the run. Who could the killer possibly be?"

The lieutenant governor grinned bitterly. His words, coupled with the black energy, struck the altar like millions upon millions of bolts of heavenly lightning. Countless people were visibly shaken.

Even Xu Qing felt moved, and his previous confidence diminished slightly.

"You're a good kid, Xu Qing," the lieutenant governor said softly, his expression one of kindness. "Today's events just prove that you deserve that 30,000-meter pillar of light. It's a good thing. Really.

"And now, does that 30,000-meter pillar of light allow you to approve my governorship? Will it allow me to keep everyone safe?"

Xu Qing didn't say anything.

To anyone else, those words would sound like the epitome of benevolence. Only Seventh Prince realized that it made the lieutenant governor seem much more dangerous. He knew that those words... were a death sentence! He knew exactly what the lieutenant governor was thinking right now.

So what if the Grand Emperor gave you a 30,000-meter pillar of light? So what if you're willing to fight your way through entire armies? I didn't fly into a rage and attack you. I never got flustered and exasperated and started killing people. I just talked things out calmly. And then... I demanded that you say the simple words 'you may.' Using popular sentiment, I sentenced your 30,000-meter of light to death!

Everything was dead silent as all gazes shifted to Xu Qing.

The Captain's expression was a bit fierce. Ning Yan huddled in on himself, his expression one of fear. Qing Qiu had no facial expression whatsoever, but she gripped her scythe even more tightly than before. That random unprepossessing swordsmage who had looked proudly at Xu Qing earlier was now frowning and looking at the lieutenant governor with a slightly malevolent expression. On

the altar, the masked Generalissimo Bloodhorror shifted his right foot as if he were about to take a step forward....

But then Xu Qing looked up.

Chapter 532: Point Out Any Errors I've Made, Lieutenant Governor! (part 2)

"After Palace Lord Kong perished," Xu Qing said, "I continued my investigation. After all, I didn't think some measly bit of daybreak light could explain how the governor would fall victim to a lightmost fatehavoc pill. The governor was half a step into the Smoldering God level, so poisoning him wouldn't be an easy task."

Quite a few people frowned in response to Xu Qing speaking. It was almost as if he hadn't been paying attention to what the lieutenant governor just said. Had he not seen that black energy? He had just continued speaking as if he hadn't even been interrupted earlier.

"I started thinking how it might be possible to poison the governor without him realizing. I myself am skilled in the dao of medicine, but not even I could think of an explanation. But then I remembered that wish box, and how it contained the lingering smell of osmanthus flowers.

"Twenty-three days ago, after returning from Forbidden by the Immortal, I noticed the same fragrance in a pallid bolus."

The moment the words *pallid bolus* left Xu Qing's lips, the lieutenant governor's pupils dilated imperceptibly. "I've never claimed that the pallid bolus was some sort of benevolent achievement," he said calmly. "But that doesn't mean you can use it this way in such an insulting manner, Xu Qing. It's like a slap to the face!"

Along with his words, the lieutenant governor released a burst of Void Returning power, aimed right at Xu Qing.

The deputy palace lord's face fell, and threw himself forward to block the power. However, given the lieutenant governor's strength, and the fact that he was blessed with destiny aura, the deputy palace lord was shoved backward. That was when the cloud cover split open and a sound erupted that could pierce metal and stone.

"**CAW!**"

The moment the sound echoed out, a three-headed bird appeared. It moved with shocking speed to arrive right in front of Xu Qing. Its right-side head bent down so Xu Qing could step onto it. Then it lifted him up. After, all three heads loomed over the lieutenant governor. The bird's feathers all stood on end like spikes, and it pulsed with a deadly will as it released another ear-piercing caw.

The soundwave swept out, causing the entire county capital to shake violently.

All of the mortals in the city gasped, and the hundreds of thousands of cultivators looked on with shock. Seventh Prince's expression tightened, and the lieutenant governor frowned.

As of that moment, all eyes were fixed on the great bird Qingqin. Only his caw could shake the clouds in heaven. Only someone that Qingqin viewed as a dear friend and equal could stand there. And right now, the figure standing there wore a white swordmage uniform!

He had four umbrellas glittering over his head, a bluegreen dragon swirling around him exhaling daybreak light, a projection of the Ghost Emperor mountain, and behind him it was just possible to see a faint image of a flowing river of time.

Secretary-General Xu, the representative of Palace Lord Kong, was finally back!

All of the nonhumans who were watching were shaken to the core, as they remembered this person!

Xu Qing's voice then rang out again. "Over the years, countless mortals in the county capital have consumed pallid boluses. Thinking about that, I realized how the governor was poisoned. The killer didn't directly administer the poison. He crushed the lightmost havoc pill into powder and carefully blended it into batch after batch of pallid boluses. And those boluses were consumed by all the humans in the county capital."

His words smashed into the hearts of the hundreds of thousands of cultivators like lightning bolts, and slammed into the ears of countless mortals. Gasps and cries rose up. The crowd stirred chaotically. The chaos that had begun to foment because of Qingqin's arrival was now building.

"Countless common citizens were used to administer the poison. It changed the destiny aura of the county as a whole. The commoners themselves became the agents to carry the poison. It was no longer destiny aura, it was poison aura! And it slowly entered the governor, unbeknownst to him, full of the lightmost fatehavoc poison."

As Xu Qing continued to speak, the county capital was thrown into chaos. Hundreds of thousands of people beneath the altar were all crying out, shaking heaven and earth.

"The pallid boluses are poisonous?"

"Pallid boluses? How is that even possible?"

"But it makes sense! All the pieces fit."

"Pallid boluses were created by the lieutenant governor. They're a commodity unique to the county capital. All the medicine shops here get them from the lieutenant governor!"

"Is this even real? Or is it a lie?"

"What... what is really going on?"

Xu Qing's words were shocking to the extreme, and it caused wild emotions to grip everyone in the crowd. Kong Xianglong gasped. All the other swordmages were trembling. The deputy palace lord's face fell.

The lieutenant governor was simply looking at Xu Qing. From the moment Xu Qing mentioned pallid boluses, it revealed that he knew the truth. It caused the lieutenant governor to sigh inwardly.

Xu Qing stood atop Qingqin's head, looking out at the county capital.

"Everyone in the county capital has been poisoned. I have no idea what will happen later on.... If the poison flares up, it could cause catastrophe. I, Xu Qing, who the Grand Emperor blessed with a 30,000-meter pillar of light, will take full responsibility for every word I have spoken today. Exalted Lieutenant Governor, I've finished with my report. Please, point out any errors I've made!"

Xu Qing's voice spread out through the square. And everyone, whether they believed Xu Qing or not, was now looking in the direction of the lieutenant governor. It wasn't just them. Furious mortals throughout the city were all looking in the same direction. After all, this matter related to the safety of everyone! Whenever a matter relates to a person personally, no matter how small it is, it becomes something major. At the moment, few people were thinking about how the situation would affect others. They just wanted to know what was really going on!

Were the pallid boluses we ate throughout the years actually poisonous?

At the moment, Xu Qing was clearly on the side of the commoners! At first, Xu Qing tapped into the might of the governor and the palace lord took away some of the public approval from the lieutenant governor. That earned him the right to speak.

After that, the lieutenant governor negated his advantage.

But now, everyone sensed that they could be in danger, and thus, their attitude changed. Now, their hostilities were aimed at the lieutenant governor.

Xu Qing hadn't devised this strategy out of thin air. He had learned a lot in the county capital, especially from Seventh Prince, and especially when it came to winning public support. And then Master Seventh opened a door of knowledge to him in *Forbidden by the Immortal*, which was when he realized he needed to stand at a higher vantage point to be able to take in the bigger picture. In the past seven years, he had gone from being a scavenger in the slums to this current point. Over that time, his personality, which had started out like rough, unpolished jade, had slowly been transformed into something magnificent and gleaming.

Back in the slums, the scholar teachers had taught him how to read. That was when his schooling began.

Sergeant Thunder taught him manners. He transformed the lone wolf who didn't trust anyone into someone who felt like he had a warm home to go back to.

Grandmaster Bai taught him about plants and vegetation. People were like plants, in that they came in all varieties. That taught Xu Qing to behave with integrity.

Master Seventh taught him how to strategize, how to behave properly, and how to broaden his horizons.

The Captain's crazy antics helped him understand how to fight for anything and everything, and the manner in which to defy heaven.

Seventh Prince taught him the usefulness of being backed by the people. With that backing, right could be wrong, and wrong could be right. Ambition didn't allow for regrets.

Palace Lord Kong taught him how to do the right thing. He taught him about the swordswage oath, and how sometimes dying was the only way to reach a goal. He also taught him that some ideals were worth defending until your dying breath.

The lieutenant governor taught him how useful it could be to scheme and plot. He taught that all things can transform because of their environment, and that you could affect great change with little effort.

Over the years, many people had been Xu Qing's teachers, whether they knew it or not. And he had grown. It all led down to this day!

All of a sudden, the unfinished crown of five tassels above the lieutenant governor's head shivered. Destiny aura spilled out of it, and though most people couldn't hear it, was accompanied by cheering as it swept toward Xu Qing. As it gathered above Xu Qing, the crown there grew increasingly visible.

Soon, people could see it. As Xu Qing stood on Qingqin's right head, he glowed from head to toe, a crown of destiny aura hovered above the umbrellas atop his head.

It was just barely possible to see a boy in that crown, jumping for joy. It was as if the boy was telling everyone who could see him that *this* was the way things were supposed to be! *This* was where Sea-Sealing County's destiny aura was supposed to converge. *This* was a true citizen of Sea-Sealing County!

Destiny aura surged, countless citizens' hearts were changed. Wild colors flashed in heaven and earth. Winds screamed. And as if the leader of it all, Xu Qing looked at the lieutenant governor.

The lieutenant governor didn't say anything in response.

Seventh Prince's eyes glittered as he looked at Xu Qing. Similar to the lieutenant governor, it was as if he was only just now coming to realize who Xu Qing was.

This kid isn't some random chump!

As Seventh Prince considered that, and as the lieutenant governor opened his mouth to speak, Xu Qing suddenly clasped hands and bowed deeply.

"I bow to you, exalted Lieutenant Governor, to thank you for the kindness of teaching class. After this bow, I can rest at ease, and can finally speak my mind.

"I know you're from Torchlight, Exalted Lieutenant Governor. And Torchlight cultivators disdain lying. They value rationality. That, sir, is why you explained your entire plan in your lecture. You spelled out everything. Considering you did that, and then carried out your plan so meticulously, it only makes sense that you would eventually be exposed.

"And now, please point out any errors I've made, Lieutenant Governor."

Xu Qing looked calmly at the lieutenant governor. In response to his words, Seventh Prince's eyes grew sharper. Before, the lieutenant governor had executed a death sentence on Xu Qing's 30,000-meter pillar of light. But now, Xu Qing had executed a similar death sentence on the lieutenant governor.

Seventh Prince had indeed noticed that, during the time in which they worked together, the lieutenant governor hated lies. And he always acted rationally. When asked a question, he answered. As of now, if he admitted to the accusations, there would be no way for him to escape a guilty verdict. But if he denied the accusations, and thus violated his own principles, he wouldn't have a clean heart, and his will could be affected negatively.

The lieutenant governor once again maintained silence for a time. He looked deeply at Xu Qing. Then he sighed. He suddenly seemed to get much older and much more exhausted. Taking out a pallid bolus, and transforming himself into a huge projected image so that everyone could see him, he consumed the pill.

“Pallid boluses are not poisonous.”

The crowd was shaken.

“Xu Qing, I'm not sure why you're so dead set on slandering me. However, considering your accomplishments in the war, I can't bear to kill you. Instead, I'll imprison you in the Swordsage Palace. Later on, we'll get answers via interrogation. We've reached my bottom line. Li Yunshan, you handle the arrest and interrogation. Men!”

Calls of affirmation rose up as numerous figures flew up into the sky and surrounded Xu Qing. One of them was the lieutenant governor's servant that Xu Qing had encountered previously. Looking regretfully at Xu Qing, he erupted with the fluctuations of second-stage Void Returning.

The lieutenant governor waved his hand, causing a vortex to appear. Out stepped a puppet in black armor, with a face of mangled red flesh. An aura of death spread everywhere as it looked around coldly, pulsing with the fluctuations of fourth-stage Void Returning.

“So, you aren't the Crown Prince of Violet and Cyan,” Xu Qing whispered.

Face completely expressionless, the lieutenant governor calmly said, “Arrest him.”

Chapter 533: Apprentice of the Crown Prince, Bai Xiaozhuo (part 1)

Things were getting very dramatic in the county capital.

High in the dome of heaven, the four-clawed golden dragon looked down with coldly glowing eyes, peering first at the lieutenant governor, and then at Seventh Prince, whose face was completely expressionless. After a moment, a somewhat dejected gleam appeared in its eyes, and then it flew back into the clouds. A draconic hiss echoed out, as if the dragon were furiously attempting to shatter the clouds and bring the light of the sun to all creation.

Unfortunately, despite the fact it was high noon, the fluctuations emanating from the city distorted the sky, ensuring that the canopy of heaven was as dark as evening. The statue of Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity became darker, as if it had been covered with a layer of obscuring dust.

As for the countless humans in the city held in the Ancient Emperor's hands, their expressions were those of confusion, and their hearts pounded with fear. The nonhumans backed up a bit, their eyes glittering. They had absolutely no interest in participating in human affairs during this scenario.

Everyone was waiting to see how things would play out on the square in the county capital.

The lieutenant governor did not reveal any of the imposing boldness of the Crown Prince of Violet and Cyan. Instead, when the critical moment came, he admitted to nothing and instead used force to try to control the situation. In his heart was the evidence of a deep blow, struck by the death-sentence sword of Xu Qing's condemnation.

As the sky went dark, and intense rumbling sounds echoed out in all directions, the lieutenant governor issued his orders. And the puppet he'd summoned emerged from the vortex, pulsing with the battle prowess of fourth-stage Void Returning. As soon as it was out in the open, it walked toward Xu Qing.

The fourth stage of Void Returning was nothing to take lightly!

In all of Sea-Sealing County, people with cultivation bases like that were *as rare as phoenix feathers or qilin horns*. Each and every one was a famous and important person.

Someone like that who had been transformed into a puppet could only be described as spectacularly terrifying. What was more, the puppet's mangled face, which made it impossible to identify any distinguishing features... ensured that there was no way to deduce who this person was.

The moment the puppet stepped out, thunder crashed and countless bolts of lightning manifested about Qingqin. They became countless projections of minor worlds that overlapped like mountains in a mountain range.

In the middle of them all was the puppet.

It looked down at Xu Qing without a scrap of emotion on its face. Then it reached out and lowered its hand, causing the terrifying might of heaven and earth to crush down, ignoring Qingqin.

Qingqin shivered as the countless minor worlds surrounded him. Apparently, they contained some power of law that suppressed nonhumans, and thus, he was rendered immobile. Deputy Palace Lord Li Yunshan, as well as Honor Guards Sun and Sima, were not completely suppressed by the terrifying power, yet were incapable of reaching Xu Qing to help him. Their anxious fury mounted.

Meanwhile, the moment the vortex appeared and the puppet walked out, Xu Qing had already sent his thoughts into his bag of holding. A severed hand appeared, surrounding him protectively. This was the same severed hand he and the Captain had acquired in *Forbidden by the Immortal*. And during the past twenty or more days, he had decided to keep it ready in case a scenario similar to this popped up. [1]

Immense pressure weighed down. In response, the hand shivered. Flesh was flayed off its surface, and its fingers began crumbling. Cracks appeared on its surface. However, it didn't completely collapse.

Taking advantage of the moment, Qingqin managed to slough off the bounds confining him. Flicking his right head, he threw the severed hand behind him. Then he threw all of his three heads back and let loose a thunderous cry.

“CAW!”

The explosive sound shattered many of the minor world projections, and then Qingqin lunged toward the puppet.

He had promised his Eldest Brother to keep Xu Qing safe as long as he was in the county capital. He hadn't been willing to go to the front lines, but they weren't on the front lines right now. They were in the county capital, which was his territory. And he happened to like this little munchkin who could harness light just like himself, and what was more, had taken Qingqin out for some lovely meals. What was more, he had never seen anyone who would foolishly walk out of the crowd and make a stand the way that this person had. And therefore, even though Qingqin's cultivation base was not on the same level as the puppet, he was going to keep Xu Qing safe! [2]

Intense rumbling sounds echoed out.

The severed hand, within which was Xu Qing, thumped to the ground.

The lieutenant governor's old servant shot toward it.

The deputy palace lord moved to block him. "Back down! This is a Swordsage Palace matter!"

The servant's eyes narrowed as Honor Guards Sun and Sima also neared.

Then, hundreds of swordsages also flew over and took positions around the severed hand.

Rumbling sounds echoed out as all of the cultivators in the lieutenant governor's personal command also rushed out and faced off against the swordsages by the hand.

The swords were drawn, and the arrows were nocked. The lieutenant governor stood atop the altar looking at the scene, his expression one of disappointment.

"Since the Swordsage Palace is defying my orders, then I'll have to stand in for Brother Liangxiu to point out the errors made by his secretary-general."

Striding off the altar to hover in midair, he flicked his sleeve.

Large amounts of destiny aura converged, along with the power of fourth-stage Void Returning, which forced all nearby cultivators away, even Li Yunshan and the honor guards.

The old servant now had no obstacles in his path, so he shot toward the severed hand, a strange glow in his eyes as he reached out.

As the onlookers stood by, shocked and furious, the Captain suddenly glittered with blue light, and he reached up to his forehead. It looked like he was about to rip something away.

But then the old servant's face fell. Pupils constricting, the servant lurched to a halt and lunged backward.

Seemingly out of nowhere, a golden net had appeared in the dome of heaven. Intense rumbling sounded as the net spread out, glittering with dazzling light. It was the net of taboo treasures that, thanks to the war, was something all people in Sea-Sealing County were familiar with. Just before Palace Lord Kong died, he gave Xu Qing the authority to use the taboo treasure net one time. The moment the taboo power appeared, all the mortals in the county capital were overwhelmed with amazement, and the cultivators on the altar were shaken to the core. Golden light descended, shrinking down as it swept toward the severed hand.

The servant's expression flickered as he shot backward at top speed.

However, the golden net did not harm the servant. Considering that Xu Qing only had the authority to use that power only one time, he didn't want to waste it on the servant.

Under the eyes of all present, the golden light spread out over the severed hand. At the same time, Xu Qing emerged from within it. Face pale, he coughed up a huge mouthful of blood. His chest was partially caved in, and he felt pain from head to toe. Despite the protection of the severed hand, he'd still suffered serious injuries. Yet he still stood there on the severed hand to accept the golden net.

In the blink of an eye, the golden net covered him, becoming like a shield of golden fire. Compared to all heaven and earth, that fire seemed like little more than a spark, something that wasn't remotely capable of igniting the world.

Xu Qing looked around, his heart pounding. He knew that the moment he stepped out from the crowd earlier, he had rebelled against the leadership of Sea-Sealing County. And rebels would suffer the consequences of their actions. He hadn't anticipated that the deputy palace lord and honor guards would side with him. Nor had he anticipated Qingqin's actions. Xu Qing hadn't asked any of them for help.

Yet they had all stepped forward, one after another. As for the more than one hundred thousand veterans of the war, they were all looking at him with keen determination. They... trusted him.

Xu Qing wiped the blood from his mouth, and suddenly felt courage swelling within him.

Only about a third of the cultivators present were swordsages. The other seventy percent, those from the other two palaces and the Lieutenant Governor's Mansion, seemed hesitant.

But Xu Qing felt no fear. That was just his personality. It didn't matter how hesitant and cautious he had been before, now that he had thrown caution to the wind, he had rejected fear along with it. His only regret was that the enemy closest to him was the old servant, and not the lieutenant governor. That meant it would be difficult to utilize his true trump card. And his previous preparations would need to be altered. As for the fourth-stage Void Returning puppet, it was also something he hadn't factored into his plans.

I'm only going to have one shot at this....

He was going to have to create a situation that would get the lieutenant governor closer to him.

With that plan in mind, he took a deep breath.

"Lieutenant Governor, since you aren't willing to admit that you're with Torchlight, then I guess I have to keep calling you 'lieutenant governor.' In reality, you shouldn't have to rely on others to apprehend me. As a mighty Void Returning expert, a mere pseudo-Nascent Soul cultivator like myself should be easy to handle. In fact, it's actually a surprise to me that I've managed to stay alive this long."

Blood oozed out of the corners of Xu Qing's mouth as he spoke.

"Lieutenant Governor, we all know the extreme methods Torchlight employs. They love their Blood-Soaked Performances. Presumably this scenario is *your* Blood-Soaked Performance? Sadly, it's quite disappointing." Xu Qing shook his head. "To be clear, what's disappointing isn't the performance. It's *you*. You're obviously defying your own heart and violating the principles of reason. You... do not deserve to be in Torchlight."

The lieutenant governor betrayed no reaction as he looked at Xu Qing and calmly said, “Because of your service to Sea-Sealing County, and the 30,000-meter light from the Grand Emperor, I’ve held back from slaughtering you. There’s no need for you to continue down this path of rebellion and death.”

Xu Qing smiled calmly. “For a schemer like you to talk so much is revealing. You’ve obviously come to realize that my clumsily chosen words are all an attempt to get you to approach me. I might not be a member of Torchlight, but the more I think about it, the more I admire how all of you stay so calm. So I’m going to stay calm too. You see, the truth is that I have a way to kill you, as long as you get close enough.

“Therefore, oh exalted Lieutenant Governor, are you truly afraid of a puny pseudo-Nascent Soul cultivator? Do you dare to get close to me? I know the answer. You don’t. After all, you don’t even dare to tell us who you really are.” Xu Qing shook his head. “Who are you putting this performance on for? The Crown Prince of Violet and Cyan? If so, then he’s probably shaking his head at your timidity. How could one of the Crown Prince’s people act like this? Although, if his followers are all like this, then I suppose it’s no wonder he ended up dying before he could accomplish anything significant.”

Xu Qing laughed. “Or could it be that you just don’t deserve to be a follower of the Crown Prince of Violet and Cyan?”

Throughout Xu Qing’s speech, the lieutenant governor was completely calm. However, Xu Qing’s last sentence caused his eyes to glitter with a cold light. The ‘death sentence blow’ Xu Qing had inflicted earlier was now becoming more serious.

The lieutenant governor looked up into the sky and spoke, his voice hoarse. “It’s time to end this farce. I’m sorry this has turned into such a joke, Your Majesty.”

Seventh Prince didn’t respond. He just kept watching, a smile on his face.

The lieutenant governor lifted his right hand, and another vortex sprang into being. A second wave of fourth-stage Void Returning power erupted from inside, and then the sound of footsteps rang out as a second puppet appeared. It looked exactly like the other puppet. It wore a suit of armor, had a mangled face, and was completely terrifying. Everyone present felt their hearts pounding with astonishment. One puppet was bad enough. But now there was a second puppet, also in fourth-stage Void Returning.

The lieutenant governor then spoke in a voice that reached the ears of all the countless mortals in the county capital. “Swordsage Xu Qing obstinately persists in going about things the wrong way. He foments rumors, creates trouble, and sows chaos in Sea-Sealing County. His rebellious behavior is not befitting of a 30,000-meter pillar of light. Therefore, his swordsage status is hereby revoked, and he will be executed on the spot, as demanded by the people!”

As the lieutenant governor’s words rang out, the second puppet charged toward Xu Qing!

The lieutenant governor was not going to approach him!

However, right then, a sigh could be heard, seemingly from nowhere.

The sound caused Seventh Prince and all of his commanders to suddenly look up. The lieutenant governor's pupils constricted.

A figure appeared out of nowhere, as if being painted into existence by a master artist. As the figure appeared in front of Xu Qing, it extended its right hand and walked toward the puppet.

A massive boom swept out. The puppet stopped in place and looked woodenly at the figure in front of Xu Qing.

Xu Qing's mind spun as he realized who this figure was.

Chapter 533: Apprentice of the Crown Prince, Bai Xiaozhou (part 2)

Xu Qing's eyes turned bloodshot, and then, just like a child who had been caught misbehaving, he bowed his head.

"Master!"

The person who had appeared was none other than Master Seventh, who had been hiding in the crowd the whole time. He had told his apprentices that he left to go into hiding, and the reality was that his hiding spot had been the most dangerous place of all, the county capital itself. Considering what had played out in Forbidden by the Immortal, there was no way he could just leave behind his own apprentices and not worry about them. As such, he had decided to stay behind. He had told Xu Qing and Chen Erniu to wait for a month before leaving, because he had already decided to secretly stay behind and watch over them. And now he had chosen to reveal himself.

Noticing Xu Qing's bloodshot eyes, and chastened demeanor, Master Seventh sighed inwardly. "Keep your head up!"

Xu Qing shivered and looked up.

"Xu Qing, as your Master, I don't think you've done anything wrong. In fact, I'm proud to have an apprentice like you! I don't know what the fallout will be for all of this. But I'm still your Master! And there's no way a Master can stand around indifferently while his apprentice puts his life on the line. You kowtowed to me. You offered me tea. Starting then, it became my responsibility to keep you safe."

"Same here!" Blue light glittered in the crowd as the Captain emerged. He had been ready to step in all along, except his little Junior Brother always seemed to have another move ready to employ. Thus, he'd been waiting for the right moment to do so. After he saw their Master reveal himself, it was without the slightest hesitation that he rushed out to stand next to Xu Qing. Grinning, he said, "Why'd you go and try to do something this big without asking me along?"

Countless eyes focused on the Master and two apprentices. At the same time, even more destiny aura converged above Xu Qing. In fact, it affected the canopy of heaven, creating a huge vortex that even the mortals could see, filled with lightning and the roar of thunder. Everyone was deeply shaken.

Xu Qing took a deep breath as he felt like his head was spinning.

Meanwhile, Master Seventh looked at the lieutenant governor. “I’ve seen the Crown Prince of Violet and Cyan!”

The lieutenant governor’s eyes suddenly flickered in a way that didn’t seem calm at all.

“And my fourth apprentice is right. You really don’t deserve to be a follower of the Crown Prince. Why? Because you like to hide in the shadows. You don’t have any courage!”

The lieutenant governor closed his eyes for a few breaths of time. When he opened them, they were calm again.

“The Eight Sect Coalition from Emperor-Receiving Prefecture is guilty of fomenting rebellion. Let everyone in Sea-Sealing County be notified that this sect is sentenced to extermination!”

Master Seventh laughed. “You think you can scare me with words like that, fool? Fuck off with your talk of extermination!”

He took a step toward the lieutenant governor. Instantly, the puppet moved to intercept him, and a moment later, the boom of combat echoed out. Master Seventh wasn’t a match, but he had plenty of assets to call upon. God magics erupted! Though he couldn’t possibly defeat a fourth-stage Void Returning puppet, he could at least fight it for a time.

The entire situation had been turned on its head. There had been so many twists and turns in this event that it was hard for everyone present to wrap their minds around it.

As rumbling booms swept through the county capital, killing intent surged in the lieutenant governor’s eyes. He knew full well that he needed to end things as quickly as possible. Thus, he strode forward to personally put an end to everything.

However, that was when Master Seventh, even as he fought the puppet, shouted, “I know you’re here! Even my apprentice figured out who you are. So why the fuck aren’t you doing anything? Don’t tell me you’re going to let my two apprentices risk everything while you just watch???”

A blood-colored streak of light shot from the altar, moving at top speed. No one in the crowd could have possibly predicted that this would happen. In the blink of an eye, that figure shot down and joined Qingqin, who was still dealing with the first puppet. This figure wore a blood-red suit of armor, and had a blood-colored mask, all of which shone with crimson light. It was the very same subordinate of Seventh Prince who had presided over the operation in Forbidden by the Immortal. It was Generalissimo Bloodhorror!

The other commanders-in-chief were clearly surprised to see him interfere. However, Seventh Prince didn’t betray even the slightest reaction.

Xu Qing turned to look at Generalissimo Bloodhorror.

As the onlookers shouted exclamations of shock, Generalissimo Bloodhorror performed a double-handed incantation gesture, then pushed his hand toward the puppet fighting Qingqin.

“Palace Lord of the Justice Palace. Brother Hengxin: wake up!!” [1]

Generalissimo Bloodhorror's shouted words caused the hundreds of thousands of cultivators present to feel shaken to the core. Xu Qing was similarly taken aback. The cultivators from the Justice Palace felt like their hearts were breaking, and rage began to burn within them. That was even more the case of the mortals. After all, it had been announced that Zhang Hengxin, palace lord of the Justice Palace, had died on the northern front during the war!

In response to Generalissimo Bloodhorror's shout, the puppet shivered. Its listless eyes seemed to twitch slightly, and tremors swept through its body. Then its hands lurched up, seemingly of their own accord, and started performing an incantation gesture that perfectly mirrored that of Generalissimo Bloodhorror.

Their hands slammed into each other, and a deafening shriek rang out from the puppet's mouth. The puppet's armor shattered, revealing that its body was made of countless pieces that had been sewn together.

Then, a discarnate soul floated up, which bore the semblance of a burly, mighty man. His fleshly body had been ravaged beyond recognition, but his soul would always look the same. And the face of that soul... was that of one of the three palace lords of Sea-Sealing County, Zhang Hengxin of the Justice Palace!

Everyone in the county capital who was watching these events play out were visibly astonished.

The discarnate soul couldn't survive for very long before dissipating. Nor could the soul speak. All it could do was look with melancholy at Sea-Sealing County, in much the same way as the governor and Palace Lord Kong had done.

The rage of the Justice Palace cultivators was rising to heaven-shaking, earth-shattering proportions as they all glared at the lieutenant governor.

Meanwhile, Generalissimo Bloodhorror turned to face the lieutenant governor, reached up, and grabbed his mask. When he removed it, he revealed a very familiar face.

"Long time no see, Lieutenant Governor!"

The lieutenant governor looked back and sighed. He had done a lot of sighing today. "Yao Tianyan! I'm surprised you would dare to come out of hiding!"

The hundreds of thousands of cultivators were rocked to the core. As it turned out, Generalissimo Bloodhorror was really Marquis Yao, who had gone missing from the battlefield and then been branded a traitor and rebel! The series of stunning events that were playing out in the county capital left everyone blank from shock.

Xu Qing struggled to control his breathing as he looked at the remaining puppet, hoping to be able to make out some identifying features. From what he could tell, it wasn't Palace Lord Kong....

"I didn't want to reveal myself so soon," Marquis Yao said softly. "The old governor showed grace to my clan, and I still haven't accomplished the task he assigned me. But I had no choice. Who could have guessed things would turn out like this?"

"An adult like me couldn't possibly let a human child be murdered in front of me. I've experienced a lot of things in life. I reached the peak of my career. I've been pursued, cursed, and have been considered both brilliant and infamous. If I die, then I die.

But... it was the words of this child that kept the few remaining members of my clan safe. And that's a favor I can't forget."

He gazed warmly at Xu Qing for a moment before shifting his attention to the lieutenant governor.

"As for you, Lieutenant Governor, this plot of yours was amazing, I'll give you that. You pulled the wool over everyone's eyes, to the point where none of us even trusted each other. However, you also slipped up. While on the front lines, Brother Hengxin, Brother Rongyu and myself all used soul-hexing magics on each other so that we could truly trust each other.

"You coveted their physical bodies, and thus turned them into puppets after they died. But the soul hexes allowed their discarnate souls to wake up. Although it would only allow for a moment of clarity before the discarnate soul dissipated, that... was more than enough evidence."

Marquis Yao's words were heard by everyone present. They were borne witness to by heaven, earth, and the people! Flames of rage began to burn brightly throughout the county capital. Countless eyes began to flicker with killing intent. In a completely unprecedented turn of events, all of that killing intent was focused on the lieutenant governor.

Xu Qing looked up, and he could sense that, though he himself was little more than a spark, he had managed to set the entire world ablaze. Everything made sense now. All the pieces of evidence fit together.

"And now I'll just have to quote Xu Qing," Marquis Yao said calmly. "Lieutenant Governor, you carried out your plan so meticulously, it only makes sense that you would eventually be exposed. So, do you dare admit to your crimes? Please point out any errors I've made."

The lieutenant governor was silent for a long moment. Then he exhaled some impure vital energy. Seemingly very calm, he turned to Seventh Prince.

Seventh Prince looked back at him expressionlessly. It was no surprise to Seventh Prince that Marquis Yao had been hiding amongst his commanders. After all, it was Seventh Prince himself who had secretly saved the marquis. He had multiple reasons for doing so. One of them was to have someone to keep the lieutenant governor in check. The second was in case his father the emperor started to suspect that he was up to something. Saving the marquis would be evidence to prove that he was cooperating with his father's plan, and that he was doing everything for the sake of humankind. Based on what he knew about his father, as long as he could prove such a thing, he would be safe. Compared to the potential losses, the potential gain had been immense: to become a hero of humankind, to expand human territory, to bring the Holytides back into the fold. All could be considered unparalleled achievements.

Given what was at stake, there was no chance he would come out the loser. At the moment, he actually hoped the lieutenant governor would try to expose him. After all, it didn't matter what the lieutenant governor said at the moment, no one would believe him. That said, he didn't think the

lieutenant governor would actually do that. The deal with the Holytides wasn't complete, which meant that the bowl he wanted had not yet been secured.

Besides, Seventh Prince had no intention of going back on his word. Everything that was playing out was the responsibility of the lieutenant governor. It had nothing to do with Seventh Prince. Thus, he had refrained from helping either party. He just stood back and watched. As he did, he focused more and more on Xu Qing.

After looking at Seventh Prince, the lieutenant governor turned away. There were countless gazes fixed on him, full of killing intent. Glancing around, he eventually focused on Xu Qing. It was this person, who he had never taken very seriously, that suddenly wrecked everything and delivered a death blow to his heart.

He had recognized Xu Qing from the first moment he saw him in the Swordsage Palace. He knew that his lord and master had a younger brother in this current life. That said, the lieutenant governor had never felt Xu Qing was worth paying much attention to. How could a person who had seen a massive dragon care about a tiny snake?

He had always assumed that the younger brother was just a minor accessory attached to his lord and master, as far separated from the other as mud was from the clouds. But now he didn't think that way at all. Now he realized that there was much about Xu Qing that reminded him of his lord and master.

"Xu Qing," he said softly, "I can tell you who I really am now, and my name." The lieutenant governor's eyes glittered with reminiscence. "I was the governor of Sea-Sealing County back during the days of the Sovereign Kingdom of Violet and Cyan. My name is Bai Xiaozhuo. Tens of thousands of years ago, I was the governor of this very place. It belongs to me." [2]

His words caused the minds of all the natives of Sea-Sealing County to tremble. Xu Qing's gaze sharpened.

The name 'Holytide Region' had come into use after the betrayal of Grand Duke Holytide. Before, it had a different name. It was the Violet and Cyan Region. Another ancient name was associated with this location, one that stretched back to the time of Emperor Mirrorcloud. Back then, it was called the Sovereign Kingdom of Violet and Cyan. The king of that kingdom had been weak and feeble, so its crown prince ended up taking control of national affairs. During that time, Sea-Sealing County... bore the same name as it did now: Sea-Sealing County. In the year 315 of the Violet Cyan calendar, its crown prince perished in the southern continent. That same year, the Sovereign Kingdom of Violet and Cyan crumbled.

Bai Xiaozhuo, the apprentice of the crown prince, who had been the last governor of Sea-Sealing County, stood by when all of the other cultivators in his county died. Weeping tears of blood, he disfigured half his face to make himself look like the broken face of the god.

Then, he spoke his final words before dying. *"I will accompany the crown prince in death. Then I will awaken a thousand years before him, to pave the way for him as his dao protector."*

Chapter 534: Back from Antiquity (part 1)

The hundreds of thousands of cultivators beneath the altar reeled in response to the lieutenant governor's words. The mortals in the city were mostly confused, as not many of them were familiar with the history involved.

Xu Qing himself had only learned about the history of the human species after becoming a swordmage and attending a class taught by the lieutenant governor. That was also his first time learning of the role played by the Crown Prince of Violet and Cyan in human history.

Marquis Yao, who hovered in midair, the three deputy palace lords, and all the other important people present were looking at the lieutenant governor with complicated expressions that seemed mostly dazed.

Although the lieutenant governor's true identity was unexpected, it also made sense. The services he had performed over the years, and also the way he kept the county going during the war, hinted at past experience with government affairs. In fact, if you looked at what he did during the war, and ignored the fake exhaustion he'd employed to enhance his cover story, then the reality was that he had handled everything with skill and ease.

And that wasn't even to mention how smoothly the reconstruction work had gone after the war was over. Every single government decree issued by the lieutenant governor had been the perfect order to give at the time. He really was good at his job. Perhaps that was why, in the past, many people had believed him to be a bit more skilled than the governor himself. Talent like that wasn't something everyone possessed. Not only did someone in that position need to be very familiar with how to issue government decrees, but also, they needed to be able to view Sea-Sealing County as a whole.

Because of all that, Xu Qing believed the lieutenant governor's story. However, there were other things he was suspicious about. For example, why had he been reincarnated? What did he sacrifice to make it happen?

Regardless, none of the unrevealed information could possibly erase the crimes he had committed as the lieutenant governor. Whether it was murdering the governor, throwing Sea-Sealing County into chaos, colluding with the Holytides, orchestrating Palace Lord Kong's death, his every single action was soaked with blood.

In the briefest of moments, the killing intent in the county capital surged to an even higher level.

"Xu Qing," the lieutenant governor said. He ignored all of the murderous gazes. He didn't pay attention to Marquis Yao and the others. It was as if the only person who was worthy of his attention in all of Sea-Sealing County was Xu Qing.

The Captain, who had been standing right next to Xu Qing, eased a few steps backward. He knew that on this day, Xu Qing was the focus of attention.

"I gave you the answer you were looking for," the lieutenant governor said tranquilly. "Now I have a question that I want to ask you. This place belongs to me. It's my territory. Isn't it reasonable for me to take it back?"

Xu Qing shook his head. "Your territory was destroyed along with the Sovereign Kingdom of Violet and Cyan." He looked out at the hundreds of thousands of people gathered below the altar, and also, the rest of the capital city. "To all these people, Sea-Sealing County is home."

As his words drifted out, the eyes of those present glittered, and their hearts surged with approval.

The lieutenant governor smiled. "Then why are you the only person who stepped forward to object? As I recall, you're not from Sea-Sealing County. You're from the continent of South Phoenix."

Xu Qing didn't answer the question. No one in the county capital answered the question. No one in heaven and earth answered the question. The words struck Xu Qing's heart and mind like a lightning bolt, creating great waves that threatened to overwhelm him. But they couldn't possibly overwhelm a certain blood-soaked figure in his memories.

"There's an old man I respect very much," Xu Qing said quietly. "He died in battle. But in my heart, he's still alive."

Grief simmered in the hearts of the war veterans. They knew who Xu Qing was talking about. None of them would ever forget the image of Palace Lord Kong dying in defense of Sea-Sealing County. The image of him fusing with the net of taboo treasures, and the way he slowly froze before shattering, was something every cultivator from the western front would grieve over for the rest of their life. The words he had spoken, 'I will defend my home,' had been branded into the hearts of all swordsages. [1]

"That's it?" The lieutenant governor seemed surprised.

"What else did you expect?" Xu Qing said calmly. "Some big speech?"

The lieutenant governor chuckled.

Xu Qing said nothing further. He just looked up into the sky. It was as if he could clearly see Palace Lord Kong. There was actually something else that remained unsaid, in his heart. And that was the fact that Palace Lord Kong, through both words and actions, had taught Xu Qing what it really meant to be a swordsage. Therefore, Xu Qing took a deep breath and spoke in a grim voice that spread through all heaven and earth.

"Swordsages. We have conclusive evidence. And we have the right to execute anyone but the emperor."

In response to his words, heaven and earth rumbled. Lightning crashed in the sky, and countless streams of killing intent rose from the veteran swordsages, all of whom had bloodshot eyes. They were all familiar with the words Xu Qing had spoken.

The cultivators from the Justice Palace and the Administration Palace, despite not being swordsages, were all familiar with the authority and responsibilities of the swordsages. They weren't the only ones who knew. All the mortals in the county capital also knew.

A screaming wind sprang up. Through the county capital, people from all households stepped out into the open, and their garments flapped in the wind. As they did, destiny aura rose from them and swirled in Xu Qing's direction.

As of this moment, the people all felt the same thing!

As of this moment, heaven and earth trembled in unison!

As of this moment, all the destiny aura was converging above Xu Qing, creating a resplendent crown so incomparably distinct that even the mortals could see it!

The weight of the crown and the blessing of the destiny aura caused Xu Qing's bluegreen dragon to roar as it directly transformed into a nascent soul. That nascent soul was an embodiment of destiny aura, and it caused heaven to shake and the earth to tremble. Up above, the vortex grew in size. This was Xu Qing's ninth nascent soul!

Daybreak light erupted within Xu Qing, spreading out resplendently in all directions and transforming into a seven-colored nascent soul! The daybreak soul shone with such brilliance that all light dimmed in heaven and earth. This was his tenth nascent soul!

Things weren't over yet. As the destiny aura continued to converge, D-132 trembled. The destiny aura eventually became a tiny figure. It looked very much like the young boy from the early days of D-132, except his facial features were those of Xu Qing. With his arrival, D-132 was complete. The head, the stone lion, and Sir Inkwell all shivered as they kowtowed to the eleventh nascent soul!

Finally, the river of time outside of Xu Qing became so clear that a figure could be seen emerging from it. At first, the figure's features were indiscernible. It did not seem elegant and magnificent, but instead wore shabby clothing, and had a face caked with filth. It almost looked like a child who had climbed out of the grave. But there was a tenacity and determination in the child's face, as if none of the bitterness of life could force him to bow his head. He would continue onward, no matter what. He would keep on living! This was Xu Qing's twelfth nascent soul.

The arrival of this nascent soul seemed to cause the entire county to resonate. Among the crowd of hundreds of thousands was Qing Qiu, who shivered from head to toe. The mere sight of that nascent soul left her stupefied.

"Big Bro Kid...."

Although Xu Qing was hardly aware of it, the fact that he had suddenly added four nascent souls to his cultivation base created a sudden increase that pushed him to the twelve-soul level.

High in the dome of heaven, lightning began to gather, which was none other than the power of tribulation. Because of the arrival of a twelfth nascent soul, the heavenfate tribulation was forming. Though it wasn't a convenient time, it was still there. Within the darkness of the sky above, lightning flowed like millions upon millions of silver snakes.

The hundreds of thousands of cultivators below the altar were shaken, and the countless mortals in the county capital trembled in fear.

It seemed like heavenly tribulation was about to strike. However, just before it finished forming, something happened with the crown of Sea-Sealing County that hovered above Xu Qing's head. Within the crown was a young boy who looked up.

"Begone!" he shouted.

As the word rang out, Xu Qing's twelve nascent souls flew up into midair, looked at the heavenly tribulation, and also let loose a shout.

"Begone!"

As those two shouts harmonized, the hundreds of thousands of cultivators below the altar all thought the same thing in their hearts.

"Begone!"

The destiny aura had offered approval. The people had given their blessing. The heavenly tribulation crumbled and retreated. As a result, boundless heavenfate had no obstruction as it surrounded all twelve of his nascent souls and baptized them. The heavenfate blessed Xu Qing, who reached over his shoulder to grab an invisible sword.

“I have a sword!”

Upon hearing those four words, the more than 100,000 swordsages below the altar thought back to the blood-soaked figure in their memories. Right now, it was almost as if that figure was superimposed over Xu Qing. Thus, one voice after another spoke, their voices dripping with blood and death.

“I have a sword!”

“I have a sword!”

The words converged, echoing louder than heavenly thunder. One by one, all the swordsages were drawing their swords.

Streams of sword light erupted, sweeping toward Xu Qing and gathering in his hand in the shape of a sword. It was The Emperor’s Sword of the swordsages, which glittered with blinding light.

However, things weren’t over yet. In one particular house in the capital city, a crippled old man limped out into the open. His clothes were neat and tidy, and his eyes shone with the desire to do battle. He was none other than the jailer from Unit C in the Corrections Division, Ghost Hand! Back when the Corrections Division collapsed, he held back from using his sword. And he’d told Xu Qing he was saving it to use on the culprit behind the disaster. This was the day he had been waiting for.

Reaching over his shoulder, he loudly said, “I have a sword!”

As the words left his mouth, an Emperor’s Sword emerged from behind his back that had been powering up for eight hundred years. It became a heaven-shaking, earth-shattering beam of light that shot toward Xu Qing. That was a sword that could devastate Spirit Trove and shake Void Returning. When it merged with Xu Qing’s Emperor’s Sword, that sword erupted with many times more power than before.

Eyes flashing, Xu Qing looked at the lieutenant governor. “I have a sword, and I will defend my home!”

He slashed the sword down. Sword light shone into heaven, and sword energy erupted that could devastate anything and everything. Backed by the oath of the swordsages and the ideals of Palace Lord Kong, it shot toward the lieutenant governor.

Master Seventh shot toward the lieutenant governor. Eyes burning with killing intent, Marquis Yao also burst into motion, pulsing with blood-colored light.

Qingqin let loose a piercing cry as he also launched an attack. The three palace lords, the honor guards, and all the cultivators from the Administration Palace and Justice Palace unleashed the power of their cultivation bases to attack the lieutenant governor.

This was a blow that couldn’t possibly be blocked.

The lieutenant governor lowered his eyes and stood in place.

Things were about to end!

His old servant backed away looking shocked. However, there had been so much power unleashed that he didn't qualify to evade it.

As the sword light glittered, the old servant's head flew off his shoulders. His body exploded. And as the head tumbled through the air, the skin dripped off of it like melting ice, revealing the true facial features beneath.

Shockingly, it was Night Dove! [2]

He wasn't the only one to die. The lieutenant governor's other forces had no means to escape, and were killed in body and soul. Then the power rumbled toward the lieutenant governor.

The lieutenant governor hovered in midair, making no move to evade. Power which could destroy heaven and extinguish the earth surged toward him. He looked past the sword light at Xu Qing briefly, then closed his eyes. The sword light, which was the gathered power of countless individuals, and was filled with the will of the entire county capital and its destiny, neared.

In the blink of an eye, it landed on the lieutenant governor. He shivered. His expression became pained. His hair turned into ashes, and his clothing and skin melted together. The force weighing down on him caused his body to slowly be crushed. His flesh was quickly wiped out of existence. His chest caved in, and his bones became visible. But not even his bones could stand up to this level of power, and they were scraped away, shattered, to reveal his organs.

It happened in the time it takes a spark to fly off of a piece of flint.

That was all the time it took for the lieutenant governor to no longer even resemble a human. The same process happened with his legs. The flesh was wiped out, the bones shattered. His torso was destroyed. His limbs were wiped out. The only things left behind were his spine and his head.

It was a horrendous sight. But not even his spine could last, and it soon vanished, leaving behind only the skull.

Half of his face remained. But then a golden light shone from that half of a face, spreading out to create a broken, golden mask. It glittered indestructibly.

Marquis Yao, Qingqin, and Master Seventh, as well as all the cultivators present, as well as the power of Xu Qing's sword, slowed to a halt in front of that broken face. No amount of destructive force could do anything against it.

From a distance, that broken, golden face seemed very familiar. Anyone who looked at it would feel shock rippling through them. Then the broken face of the lieutenant governor opened its eyes.

Chapter 534: Back from Antiquity (part 2)

The lieutenant governor's gaze fell on the county capital.

In the blink of an eye, wild colors flashed in heaven and earth, winds screamed, destiny aura howled in grief, and mortals wept tears of blood. Immeasurable mutagen cascaded down. It instantly filled the plants, vegetation, people, buildings, and everything else. The sky blurred and the lands rippled. It was as if the end of days had come.

The scene was familiar, and everyone knew why. The broken face of the lieutenant governor... looked exactly the same as the broken face of the god in the sky, down to the wounds and the general shape. Only the specific facial features were different. Other than that, there were no differences.

The hundreds of thousands of cultivators were shocked to the core, and the mortals in the city were rendered speechless.

The dome of heaven shook. The clouds parted. It was as if the hands of an unseen god had pulled apart the sky, revealing the evening horizon, and also, the broken face of the god that had hung there eternally since the final days of Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity.

Hīs hair hung down freely. Hīs size rivaled that of the sun and moon. Hē floated outside of the Revered Ancient mainland, for all living beings there to look up and see. Because of that, many people were simply used to hīs presence. But right now, everyone instinctively looked up at hīm as the pain coursed through their bodies. Hīs eyelids twitched. But in the end, those eyes did not open.

Down below, the broken face of the lieutenant governor did look around with open eyes, and heaven and earth trembled.

In the past, the Crown Prince of Violet and Cyan had opened a box in the Eight Sect Coalition. As of this moment, the lieutenant governor’s gaze was even more astonishing than that box. Heaven and earth quivered. All living things blurred. Howls of grief echoed about everywhere. And then, the lieutenant governor’s broken face shifted its gaze to focus on Marquis Yao.

Marquis Yao shook from head to toe. A three-colored flower appeared over his head, seated atop which was the image of a heavenly marquis. However, Marquis Yao apparently didn’t have appropriately pure blood, because the image wasn’t complete. A moment later it faded from existence, and two of the flower’s petals fell off. As for the remaining petal, it withered listlessly. Rumbling sounds echoed out as Marquis Yao coughed up blood and staggered backward.

“You actually sacrificed yourself to become a partial domain treasure!” the marquis said.

The broken face of the lieutenant governor didn’t react in any way. Instead, he turned to Qingqin. Qingqin let loose an anguished cry as his body blurred. Behind him appeared a figure from antiquity, something that could devour heaven and earth. Though Qingqin’s blood was pure, it existed at too low of a level. Qingqin tumbled backward, splattered with blood.

Next, the lieutenant governor’s broken face turned to Master Seventh. A hand of white jade appeared behind Master Seventh, radiant and scintillating. It seemed to have a similar origin as the lieutenant governor’s broken face, and thus avoided the judgment cast by the face. However, Master Seventh’s cultivation base was too low, so blood oozed out of his eyes, ears, nose, and mouth.

As he staggered backward, he glared at the lieutenant governor and said, “Before, I only had suspicions. It made sense that the Crown Prince of Violet and Cyan would be reincarnated due to his spectacular deeds. But why would Bai Xiaozhuo be reincarnated? Now I understand. You... are so cruel!”

The lieutenant governor shifted his gaze to the deputy palace lords, whose souls suffered grievous injuries. Next came the honor guards, whose skin turned greenish-black as they headed toward mutation.

All of the Void Returning experts had been summarily crushed. All cultivators and all mortals were moaning in anguish. The county capital was rapidly being pushed toward a forbidden region transformation.

Blood-colored rain fell, accompanied by crashing thunder. The rain even fell on the statue of Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity, running down the forehead of the statue, and through the eyes, then streaming down like tears of blood. If that statue could open its eyes, it would see all of the county capital turning into a realm of ghosts. And it was all happening because of the broken face of the lieutenant governor.

Meanwhile, the two puppets the lieutenant governor had employed no longer had discarnate souls in them. The souls had long since faded away. Therefore, the puppets automatically reverted to their original orders, and rushed toward Master Seventh, Marquis Yao, and Qingqin.

Being soaked with the rain, it was now possible to see something in the puppets that hadn't been visible before. Shining out through the stitched seams of the puppets' bodies... was light.

Each puppet had a box inside of it.

Just like Chu Tianqun, these puppets were actually experimental god bodies. And clearly, progress had been made in their construction. If Bai Li was the first generation of the experimental god body, then Master Shengyun could be considered the initial attempt at the second generation. Chu Tianqun was the complete version of the second generation, while these two puppets were the third generation. That was why their cultivation bases were in the great circle of the third stage of Void Returning, yet they had the battle prowess of the fourth stage. That said, they couldn't form major worlds, only countless minor worlds. It was something Master Seventh had noticed when the first puppet attacked Qingqin.

The sound of combat once again rang out as the lieutenant governor continued to send his gaze sweeping about.

Xu Qing hovered in the darkness, looking around at the agony around him. He could hear the cries of anguish. A spark could start a prairie fire, but a rain of blood could extinguish it. When faced with raw strength, ideals were nothing but a joke.

Only the Captain seemed to be reacting differently than everyone else. Blue light radiated off of him as he looked deeply into Xu Qing's eyes. It was almost as if he were bidding farewell. He was about to take action.

But Xu Qing reached out and gripped the Captain's shoulder. Looking at him, he quietly said, "Eldest Brother, this is my affair. If I survive at the cost of losing you, I'll regret it for the rest of my life."

The Captain said nothing in response, but his eyes flickered as he struggled to maintain control.

Meanwhile, the power of the violet moon erupted within Xu Qing. His taboo poison core surged, and the power of D-132 appeared. The Ghost Emperor mountain rose up behind him. Inside, Xu Qing sighed. Rebels had to pay a price, and in this case, the price was immense. He advanced

quietly. As he did, he grew taller and larger. As he bore the weight of all the surrounding mutagen, he looked at the broken face of the lieutenant governor hovering in the sky.

The lieutenant governor's eyes focused on Xu Qing, while his voice echoed out in all directions via divine will.

“Xu Qing, did you know that this place... is where I originally died? When the crown prince perished in the southern continent, I was right here looking up at the broken face of the god, while simultaneously carving up my own flesh to resemble him.”

“I pleaded to allow me to see my lord and master again in the future.”

“Xu Qing, you said before that I don't deserve to be a follower of my lord and master. You're right. People said the same thing back then. A lot of people. That's why I didn't evade your attack right now. I deserve to be punished.”

“But I still need to accomplish my mission. I can't flee. Therefore, I decided to reveal the blessing of a god. I've polluted the aura of Revered Ancient, making it impure, and thus ensuring that neither my past, present, nor future self can ever be reincarnated again. The previous moment was my past. This is my present. And the next moment is my future.”

“I, Bai Xiaozhuo, am not the type of person who explains myself to others very often. But I think you're worthy.”

He looked out at the county capital.

“Sadly, I don't have time to wait for the appropriate moment. I failed to become the governor, so I don't have the blessing of Sea-Sealing County's destiny aura. That means there are many things... that I will have to accomplish via force. Ai.”

The lieutenant governor sighed because his attempt to deceive the living beings of Sea-Sealing County had failed. He had longed to be acknowledged by heaven, earth, and the people as the governor, and thus be blessed by the county's destiny aura.

His plan had been to rely on the aid he had provided to humankind to strengthen the destiny aura of humankind. After all, human territory had finally been expanded, and the Holytides had been brought back into the fold. In that manner, he could use the destiny aura of Sea-Sealing County to tap into more of the destiny aura of humankind. That was the last step in his plan. Sadly for him, he had failed.

“You succeeded, Xu Qing. Even if I killed everyone here, I would never be able to see my plan to fruition. I can only use force now.”

“You forced me to harvest the fruit before it was ripe, spoiling everything. And thus, you've forced me to break my word to my people.”

Xu Qing said nothing, as he could tell the lieutenant governor still had more to say.

“Back then, I sacrificed myself to the god above in the hopes of getting another chance to be a follower of the crown prince. The god ignored me. Therefore, I allowed myself to be transformed into a domain treasure. I gave up my soul to do it. I gave up everything. The god still ignored me.

“I have no idea what the god wanted. It was only in the very end, when the Sovereign Kingdom of Violet and Cyan was destroyed, that I realized what hē wanted. With tears streaming down my face, I killed all the people in the county. It didn’t matter if they were cultivators or mortals. Old or young. They didn’t resist. They let me do it. Finally, after I killed everyone, hē gave me a nod.

“Back then, I promised to bring back all the people I’d killed. And now, my people, you will all come back. From the Land of Cruelmurk!”

His voice seemed to thrum with ancientness, as if it came from tens of thousands of years in the past, as if it had floated up the River of Ancient Time.

As the blood rain fell and the mutagen flourished, the people of the county capital shivered. Their pain turned into numbness as life force streamed out of the tops of their heads, forcibly extracted along with destiny aura. Their bodies withered. Their skin sank in. And yet, they didn’t die.

It wasn’t just the people. The entire county capital trembled. Lands, rivers, plants, mountains. Boundless life force and destiny aura was ripped out and sent streaming toward the capital city. In the rest of the prefectures of Sea-Sealing County, with the exception of the three prefectures that had previously been lost, and those which had been immolated, the ancestral lands in all sects and organizations trembled. It was the same in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture.

The earth quaked throughout Sea-Sealing County. One mountain range after another crumbled. They were all mountain ranges that had risen up in modern times. And in the spots where they fell, mountains of antiquity rose up.

In the tens of thousands of years that had passed since the Sovereign Kingdom of Violet and Cyan existed, the topography of Sea-Sealing County had changed. But now, it was reverting to what it had been before. The landscape of the Sovereign Kingdom of Violet and Cyan was returning. Rivers formed. Mountains rose up. If you could stand at a very high vantage point and look down, you would find that the mountains which made up the county in ancient times actually formed a massive magical symbol.

As that symbol became complete, and as the hearts of the people in the county filled with astonishment, three massive spikes appeared. They were bones of a god fish, and they rose up from three locations in the county, rising high into the sky. When they stabbed into the canopy of heaven, ripples rolled out, covering the sky in the county, creating something like a second canopy of heaven. And that canopy of heaven looked like a painting. The world in that painting was not the Revered Ancient mainland. Instead, it was pitch black.

The aura was familiar to Xu Qing, allowing him to instantly identify what he was looking at. The world in that painting was the very same world that all cultivators would briefly encounter when they were reaching Foundation Establishment.

To reach Foundation Establishment, one needed something akin to a life lamp to stay safe. Without that protection of burning, one would attract terrifying entities. It was a fact that all cultivators came to realize before they reached Foundation Establishment. However, no one knew what world those entities came from.

Years ago, the Mute had experienced an accident when trying to reach Foundation Establishment, and had been possessed by an evil soul. Xu Qing had ended up saving him.[1]

As of now, Xu Qing knew what world those things came from. It was called the Land of Cruelmurk. And it was also where Crimson Mother currently was!

Chapter 535: Xu Qing's Trump Card! (part 1)

The key to opening the Land of Cruelmurk were the three fish bones!

Xu Qing recognized those bones. They were the same spikes taken by the hand of white jade from within Forbidden by the Immortal. Only now did he realize their function.

Rumbling sounds echoed out as the ripples from the three bones created a second canopy of heaven. Black mist swirled, and the soul-shaking wail of ghosts emerged. Within that black, misty painting were innumerable evil souls. When they looked up and saw everything on the outside, the lieutenant governor's summons became like countless karma threads.

On one end, they connected to the broken face of the lieutenant governor. The other end stretched into Cruelmurk, wherein lurked the souls of the countless dead of Violet and Cyan's Sea-Sealing County. And those threads began to pull. The evil souls began to follow the karma threads, burrowing out of the second canopy of heaven and looking down on the lands below, and the living beings within them, with open greed.

This was the lieutenant governor's master plan. This was his offering to his lord and master. It wasn't just the life force and destiny aura of all the living beings in Sea-Sealing County. It was also... a return of the entire county itself! This was how he planned to atone for his past mistakes.

The living beings of Sea-Sealing County were to be hosts possessed by his true people, who were currently in Cruelmurk. That said, the moment he had planned for never came. The fruit did not ripen. He did not fool the living beings of Sea-Sealing County into making him their governor and freely giving him all the destiny aura of the county.

Therefore, he did not become the protector of his people that he wanted to become, thus ensuring their smooth and unhindered return. He had to forcefully summon the deceased souls. When they appeared, the aura of Revered Ancient would fight back against them, destroying nine out of ten. But there were just too many evil souls. Though large numbers of them would be wiped out, there were still an innumerable amount that could descend on Sea-Sealing County.

That said, the lieutenant governor was the type of person who kept his word. As per the agreement, he would make sure none of Seventh Prince's people were affected.

Meanwhile, Seventh Prince was flabbergasted. It had never occurred to him that the lieutenant governor would have a plan like this. He had assumed he was going to be dealing with some minor sacrifice. And how could he have ever guessed that the three fish bones would be used for this purpose?

“Bai Xiaozhuo!” Seventh Prince said, eyes narrowing. As he stood on the altar struggling to control his breathing, he very nearly took a step forward. This matter was quickly getting out of hand. The commanders-in-chief around him looked at him with glittering eyes. Up in the dome of heaven, the four-clawed golden dragon growled and also looked at Seventh Prince. Down in the crowd, Ning Yan looked at Seventh Prince, his eyes bloodshot. But Seventh Prince looked at the lieutenant governor for a long moment, and then... did nothing.

As an imperial prince, he was privy to many secrets. The way he had grown up had left him with a unique sense of judgment, and as a result, he knew what was going on. He understood that no ordinary type of power could defeat the lieutenant governor right now. A higher level of personhood would be required to vanquish him.

In other words, a Smoldering God or someone like Zhang Siyun. After all, in his current state, the lieutenant governor might as well be a snack for someone like Crimson Mother. Sadly, Crimson Mother was asleep. And after everything that happened with Crimson Mother before, most other gods were in hiding.

Based on the information in various classified files in the imperial capital, Seventh Prince knew that there had been plenty of species throughout the years that made deals with the broken face. However, those deals didn't involve the opening of the face's eyes. Throughout all of history, there had only been one instance in which the god's eyes opened for a person. And that person was the Crown Prince of Violet and Cyan.

If Seventh Prince took action right now, he might be able to prevent a tragedy from ensuing. But the cost to be paid by him would be far, far too immense. He would have to risk his life, and would also have to waste his most valuable reserve powers.

Sea-Sealing County alone wouldn't be worth going back on his word, risking his life, and losing his best resources. This was not the time and place to lose his reserve powers. As a result, he did nothing. He waited. After everything played out, he would have to scramble to think of how to deal with the aftermath, and turn things to his advantage.

As far as whatever catastrophe struck Sea-Sealing County... amazing things couldn't be accomplished without a bit of chaos.

In the end, Seventh Prince ignored all of the people that were looking in his direction.

As for Xu Qing, he had never spared a glance for Seventh Prince. He had known all along that it would be naive to expect help from the imperial prince. The four-clawed golden dragon let loose a cry of sorrow, and instinctively looked down at Xu Qing.

Xu Qing slowly lifted his hand, and the fire from the county's taboo treasure rose off him. It turned into a golden net that climbed into the sky, much the same as it had before when keeping Sea-Sealing County safe. This time, it blocked the souls coming down from above.

“That won't do you any good,” said the broken face of the lieutenant governor.

“Crimson Mother devoured the god of Cruelmurk, leaving the place without anything

suppressing it. That's why this is going to work so smoothly for me. You can't stop me."

Xu Qing looked at the lieutenant governor. "Now that you've revealed your true form, do you dare allow me to approach you?"

The lieutenant governor looked deeply at Xu Qing. "Unless a god shows up, or perhaps the emperor, then no one exists at a level high enough to do anything to me. I know you always seem to have some trick up your sleeve, but fine. I'll give you your chance. Let me see what this trump card of yours is. You may attempt to approach me."

Xu Qing advanced.

Everything blurred. The sky rippled. Even the Void Returning experts were having trouble because of the immense pressure. The two experimental god bodies pulsed with godly might as the blood rain fell. They blocked every attack.

The Captain, who was now behind Xu Qing, suddenly laughed. "Little Ah Qing, if you and Master die fighting the good fight, then I'll join both of you!"

"Great!" Xu Qing replied softly, without even looking back.

The Captain smiled. *Little Junior Brother is rarely impulsive. He probably has a trump card ready to go. But as the Junior Brother, I'm honestly shocked that he would block my path. I'm the Eldest Brother! Hmph!*

Ah, whatever. Considering how much he cares about me, I won't waste time worrying about it. If he doesn't want me to release my seals right now, fine. But if he ends up failing, he won't have any logical basis to stop me.

Let me think. If I have to make a move, what pose should I strike? And what should I say? How can I end this life in a really amazing blaze of glory?

After all... who frickin' knows if I'll have any lives left this time after releasing the final seal.... The Captain made some calculations on his fingers. Probably not. What a pity. I'm still so young! Lady Peachy is waiting for me, and Lil' Sis Five Fingers still has her eye on me. Who knows how many other girls might show up in the future. I never even got married....

The Captain sighed.

Meanwhile, Xu Qing was floating up into the air toward the broken face of the lieutenant governor. The closer he got, the harder it became. There was only 300 meters between them, but it was like the difference between heaven and earth.

He progressed 30 meters, and lacerations covered him. Blood oozed out of his mouth, and he staggered in place a bit. Then he waved his hand, and his twelve nascent souls erupted with power, bolstering him. He continued.

After 39 meters, the black umbrella nascent soul dimmed. After 48 meters, the seven-colored wind-chanting nascent soul blurred. After 57 meters, the hellspirit bloodwing nascent soul became hard to see. After 66 meters, the immortal-shredding god-devouring nascent soul distorted.

Xu Qing stopped in place, gasping for breath. It took some struggle, but he looked up at the broken face of the lieutenant governor.

The lieutenant governor was looking back at him. "234 meters to go."

Xu Qing nodded. The golden crow's nascent soul form bolstered him, and daybreak light lit his path. He moved on.

The bluegreen dragon appeared, throwing its head back and roaring. He progressed a few more meters.

And thus, Xu Qing's nascent souls revealed their power. The taboo poison nascent soul. The violet moon nascent soul. The projection of the Ghost Emperor. With all of these blessings, Xu Qing continued onward.

Eventually he reached 90 meters. 120 meters. 150 meters.... The image of the boy appeared, superimposing with Xu Qing. At that point, he passed 168 meters.

"Is that your limit?" the lieutenant governor said from 132 meters away, shaking his head slightly.

Xu Qing's eyes glittered with cold light. Stretching his hand down toward the ground, he growled, "Come here!"

Down in the county capital, the ground trembled, and countless sword pavilions collapsed, as if a subterranean dragon were on the move. And the source of it all was in the depths of the Corrections Division. Specifically... Forbidden by the Immortal.

While in Forbidden by the Immortal, Xu Qing had already come to realize that after the god there was gone, he could absorb the mutagen that was left behind. That said, he only had limited control, and was also worried that the god's finger in D-132 would awaken as a result. As a result, he had always restrained himself.

But right now, he had no intention of restraining himself. That was because he was intentionally going to awaken the god's finger from D-132!

In response to his call, rumbling sounds erupted from Forbidden by the Immortal, filling heaven and earth. The power of the mutagen erupted from the entrance, breaking through all the spell formations, and turning into a black mist that rose from the pit of the Corrections Division. From a distance, it looked like a black dragon racing toward Xu Qing.

It took only a moment for the mutagen to surround Xu Qing, then madly pour into him. An expression of pain covered his face as cracking sounds rang out within him. After a certain limit was reached, he began to grow taller. He was soon 3 meters tall. 6 meters. 9 meters....

Eventually, he was 30 meters tall, like a giant. The air around him distorted, and the aura of a god pulsed off him. Within him, the god's finger sleeping in D-132, which was in the midst of all the golden threads in him as well as the surging mutagen... suddenly woke up.

The moment it did, Xu Qing's entire person pulsed with an even stronger aura of a god. At the same time, something like a howl rang out within him. His eyes changed, turning blank, and his expression became one full of godly might. He shot toward the lieutenant governor.

“Agh! What are you doing?” The finger had been prodded awake, and the first thing it saw afterward was the broken face of the lieutenant governor. The lieutenant governor’s aura and fundamental personality left it feeling shaken. What was even more relevant was the second canopy of heaven and the three fish bones from its true form. Then it saw everything that was happening in the surroundings. The way everything was distorted and blurry left it feeling alarmed.

As immense fear rose up within it, Xu Qing stepped forward 90 meters.

“Do something. Now!” he shouted.

Chapter 535: Xu Qing’s Trump Card (part 2)

The furious finger wanted to flee. But the violet crystal made that impossible. It wanted to fight back, but it was being imprisoned in Xu Qing. Although the mutagen pouring into the finger was its own mutagen, which meant it might have been able to break free from Xu Qing, the fact that Xu Qing had experienced the beginning of a nascent soul tribulation, and boosted his cultivation base so much, meant that the violet crystal was even more effective than before.

Because of all that, though the god’s finger still wanted to be free, there was no way it would happen in a short time. The finger knew that it would need an incense stick’s worth of time, whereupon it could be free, and might even be able to turn the tables and possess Xu Qing. Except, that wasn’t going to happen.

After it awoke, it sensed that its true form had already perished. That left it with mixed feelings. On the one hand, the terrifying situation in the outside world was very worrisome. On the other hand, it now had a much better chance of developing a new true form. Seeing how Xu Qing was rushing forward toward the small-scale broken face, and noticing the shocked look on that face, the finger’s thoughts raced. However, no matter what ideas it came up with, there was only one path moving forward; this dangerous situation had to be dealt with.

This brat is giving me an opportunity! For the sake of freedom, I have to go for broke! Afterward, I can devour the little punk!

Throwing caution to the wind, the finger released rumbling god power, which caused Xu Qing to rapidly grow another 30 meters. Xu Qing extended his right hand, and the god’s finger converged in his index finger. In the blink of an eye, Xu Qing’s index finger glittered with brilliant golden light as he pointed it toward the lieutenant governor’s broken face.

At that exact same moment, the two puppets fighting with Master Seventh, Marquis Yao, and Qingqin spun. Ignoring any injuries they sustained as a result, they launched attacks to interfere.

Qingqin erupted with magenta light that became a sea, which rumbled toward the broken face of the lieutenant governor.

Behind Master Seventh was a 300-meter hand of white jade surrounded by rippling distortions. It swept forward.

Marquis Yao had the highest cultivation base of anyone involved. A decisive gleam could be seen in his eyes as a blood-colored flower appeared above his head. It swayed, the stem twisting into the shape of a huge bow. Then it withered as a blood-colored arrow took form. The arrow shot forth,

pulsing with astonishing might, becoming a streak of light that headed toward the lieutenant governor with mountain-toppling, sea-draining force.

The lieutenant governor didn't evade. He just looked at Xu Qing, seemingly disappointed.

"As it turns out, you didn't exceed my expectations. You have that god's finger in you. That's your trump card. Xu Qing, your cultivation base isn't sufficient. You thought you were keeping that hidden the whole time, but my eyes saw the truth clearly.

"If that finger's true form appeared, then I would be crushed. But it was devoured by Crimson Mother. What a pity. I gave you your chance, Xu Qing, and you failed anyway."

Golden light shone off the lieutenant governor's broken face, forming into the outline of a body. The left hand of that body then lifted high, and more golden light swirled into the shape of a golden umbrella.

As the umbrella blocked the might of Marquis Yao, Master Seventh, and Qingqin, the lieutenant governor reached out with his newly formed right hand and pushed toward Xu Qing's index finger.

They collided.

A huge boom rang out as the hand collapsed.

The power of the god's finger could crush anything in its path. However, right then, a hand of white jade emerged from within the lieutenant governor. It started out small, but rapidly became enormous. And it grabbed Xu Qing's finger. The god's finger shivered, unable to move forward, and unable to fall back. Terrifying force erupted from the hand of white jade, surging through the finger and into Xu Qing.

The god's finger was absolutely terrified. Blood sprayed out of Xu Qing's god body as it started rotting, with many portions falling off. Blood splashed everywhere, and many golden threads shattered.

Before Xu Qing could even regret that loss, the god's finger filled with so much pain that it howled, and released an eruption of power. It needed to keep this body safe. However, all it could do was buy time, not resolve the situation.

Xu Qing didn't say a thing.

In that critical moment, the golden umbrella above the lieutenant governor thrummed loudly. Then the attacks of Marquis Yao, Master Seventh, and Qingqin hit, and the umbrella collapsed.

But then a second hand of white jade emerged from within the lieutenant governor, and pushed back against the light coming from Marquis Yao's arrow, Master Seventh's god power, and Qingqin's light. Intense booms rang out. The lieutenant governor ignored all of that. The entire time, his gaze was fixed on Xu Qing alone. He shook his head, looking regretful as he prepared to speak.

"Finally," Xu Qing interrupted. "I got close enough."

The lieutenant governor was stunned, and the pupils of the eyes in his broken face constricted. Within the mangled remains of Xu Qing's left hand was a talisman of black iron. It had a single purpose: it could complete a teleportation to a very specific place. Because of the teleportation

destination, the talisman contained a higher level of personhood. It was a treasure, and was a rare thing in the world.

It was called a spirit abyss talisman. Its fixed teleportation destination was a spirit abyss.

There was no god there, nor any human emperor. But that place did contain an entity who was vastly superior to the human emperor of those times. It was an entity far superior to an Imperial Sovereign. That entity once conquered all of the Revered Ancient mainland. In those days, Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity had not yet arrived, and there was no broken face of a god in the dome of heaven. After that entity died, the countless species of Revered Ancient devolved into chaos. That was when humankind rose to prominence, and eventually, gave rise to Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity.

That entity was Emperor Ancient Spirit, who had led the Ancient Spirits to conquer Revered Ancient! The spirit abyss contained the dead of his species. What was more, he... was still awake.

Xu Qing had encountered the enormous eye of Emperor Ancient Spirit, and had threatened him with the terror of Crimson Mother. He was no weaker than the god in Forbidden by the Immortal, and in fact, was actually a bit stronger.

This was Xu Qing's trump card!

Everything he had done up to this point had been a feint. He obviously couldn't trust anything the lieutenant governor said. What was more, he needed to be right in front of the lieutenant governor to employ his trump card. Therefore, he unleashed the god's finger to distract the lieutenant governor and get as close as possible. As long as the lieutenant governor thought the finger was his secret weapon, then Xu Qing would be able to unleash his real trump card. He would only get one chance to make it work.

Xu Qing wasn't a prophet, so he had no way of knowing what the lieutenant governor would do during the process. And he could only guess at how strong he really was. But regardless of how strong he was, Xu Qing could still make the trump card work.

Xu Qing had originally hoped to use this trump card on the Crown Prince of Violet and Cyan. The lieutenant governor was not the crown prince, and thus, Xu Qing had hesitated at first. He wasn't sure if it would really work. And he wasn't sure if things would go as smoothly for him as they had before with Emperor Ancient Spirit.

But he figured that if gods could devour each other, as Crimson Mother had devoured the god in Forbidden by the Immortal, then since Emperor Ancient Spirit was like a god, he would surely be willing to devour something else like himself. After all, Emperor Ancient Spirit must have been hungry for a very, very long time.... There was no way some random souls that came along every so often would be satisfying.

Those were all the things that had run through Xu Qing's head earlier. And right now, as he crushed the talisman, a massive gravitational force erupted from his palm. He quickly visualized that imperial palace made of flesh, where he had seen the eye of Emperor Ancient Spirit. The innkeeper from Plankspring Way had explained to Xu Qing how to use the spirit abyss talisman, and the method by which to fix a destination. [1]

Because the power of the talisman existed at a higher level, Xu Qing couldn't resist it. Nor could the lieutenant governor. After all, the lieutenant governor's hand of white jade was clamped firmly onto the bait Xu Qing had thrown out, that being the god's finger. They were still touching.

In the blink of an eye, the gravitational force locked onto them and swept out in all directions.

The surrounding mutagen was driven away. The light of evening appeared again. The images of an entire nation were visible in the lands, and a powerful gravitational force spread out everywhere.

The lieutenant governor's face fell, and he sought to flee, but he was too late. He had been overconfident.

The gravitational force expanded, and the two of them vanished!

The Captain inhaled sharply, and rapidly performed an incantation gesture in the hopes of figuring out where they went.

Master Seventh's expression was grim as he looked over at Seventh Prince, who hadn't done a single thing the entire time.

Marquis Yao looked surprised, and Qingqin let loose a sharp cry.

With the lieutenant governor gone, there was no source for the mutagen. The ripples and distortions faded. The blurriness to the land disappeared. The dramatic transformations to Sea-Sealing County ceased. The taboo treasure net above glittered brightly as it blocked the souls from above. Many people were awakening from their dazes. The ancient mountains that had risen up trembled.

However, things weren't over yet. The two puppets were still powerful enemies; they would not go still unless the lieutenant governor died and the connection to him was severed.

Seventh Prince looked at the two puppets.

If the two puppets went silent, and ceased to follow their orders, that would be the moment for the prince to step in and save the day.

Who's actually going to win? The teleportation talisman Xu Qing crushed had an extremely high level of personhood. Definitely not something to underestimate. Seventh Prince decided to continue waiting. He wouldn't side with either party until the final outcome was concluded.

In the Spirit Abyss, which was filled with countless souls of the Ancient Spirits, everything was completely still and quiet. The sky above was filled with an eternal darkness of evening. The lands were the same. Everything was so quiet it almost looked like a painting.

Off in the distance was an imperial palace. It was surrounded by countless vicious souls. Inside the palace was a mountain of flesh whose summit was high in the sky. Above it floated a huge eye.

It was closed, as though there were nothing in the world worth looking at, and it contained nothing that could disturb its tranquility. There were fresh souls nearby that had been offered up as sacrifices. They emanated soul strands that floated up and merged into the eye. Golden dragons flew around the eye, swirling into the shape of magical symbols that accompanied the soul strands into the eye.

The surrounding souls would occasionally shiver, look up at the eye, and then bow deeply.

Countless zombies were scattered about, vicious in appearance, and pulsing with a sense of blood and madness. However, they stood in place, and didn't move at all except to bow along with the souls.

This was not the only imperial palace in this place. There were others in distant locations. Each of them had mountains of flesh, and huge eyes that all looked exactly the same.

At the imperial palace that Xu Qing had once visited, the eye surrounded by the countless deceased souls suddenly twitched atop the mountain of flesh. Its peace had been disturbed. The eye snapped open and glared out into the sky. Then a stream of divine will erupted that seemed like it could fill all of the Ancient Spirit world.

“How dare you come back here, scoundrel!”

Chapter 536: Bai Xiaozhuo's Grand Finale (part 1)

Although the divine will was only coming from the imperial palace that Xu Qing had previously visited, all of the eyes above all the imperial palaces in the entire Ancient Spirit world were twitching.

The reality was... that encounter had been more frustrating to Emperor Ancient Spirit than anything since the destiny aura of Revered Ancient destroyed his species and banished them to this place. Given his personhood, and his former glory, it was possible to guess his state of mind when he ended that encounter by screaming, “Screw off, NOW!” [1]

In his eyes, Xu Qing was a bug. For a bug to attract the attention of Crimson Mother to use as a threat and take a soul that had been offered to him... well that was one thing. But then Xu Qing extorted some of his Ancient Spirit destiny aura. It was such an incredible offense and disrespect that it took him months to calm down after Xu Qing left.

And now, this person dared to return?

Emperor Ancient Spirit was nowhere close to as glorious as he had been in the past, and his mental faculties had suffered after his fall. He couldn't think as deeply, and his thoughts were simpler than before. However, he was just as proud as he'd always been. And in terms of his personality, he was still an Ancient Emperor of Revered Ancient. To him, Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity was a member of the younger generation.

As such, upon sensing this familiar aura, his first reaction was to fly into a rage. As his divine will surged out into the Ancient Spirit world, everything shook violently.

The souls in the sky all looked up. Sensing the emperor's rage, they howled noiselessly, creating invisible sound waves that rolled out. On the ground, the countless vicious zombies raised their bone blades over their heads. The Underworld River churned as numerous colossal and monstrous creatures rose up from the waters. The clouds in the sky churned just as violently as black war banners appeared and a magnificent army with thousands of men and horses appeared out of nowhere. Hostility raged in all parts of the Ancient Spirit world.

Then a massive vortex appeared above the mountain of flesh in the imperial palace that Xu Qing had previously visited. That was the very same location where Xu Qing had sent Ling'er away, and it was right in front of Emperor Ancient Spirit's massive eye.

Rumbling sounds emerged from the vortex as two figures appeared.

One was large, one was small. One was on the left, one was on the right.

The large one was roughly 90 meters tall. The small one was the size of a normal person, and was holding the large one's finger. They almost looked like intimate friends who had stepped into the vortex hand-in-hand!

"You brought an accomplice?"

The massive eye opened wide, causing golden light to brighten heaven and earth. Everything rippled and distorted as a unique mutagen spread out, dissolving all outside powers and suppressing them. The godly authority of Emperor Ancient Spirit erupted from the eye. The power of that godly authority, when focused on an enemy, would make any injuries inflicted ten times worse! A minor injury would become a serious one. And a serious injury would result in death!

Before those two figures could fully materialize out of the vortex, they shivered as the godly authority started affecting them.

The one on the left had a god body that started crumbling.

The one on the right had a transparent body that instantly disappeared, revealing a broken face. The broken face, upon sensing his surroundings, looked unprecedentedly shocked. In fact, it was the first time such a distorted expression had ever appeared on the face of the lieutenant governor. Even before, when all of his plots and schemes had been publicly exposed, he had not reacted like this.

There was no way he *couldn't* be shocked and moved. After all... upon seeing this gigantic eye, he could sense the startling personhood radiating off it. Although it didn't measure up to Crimson Mother, it surpassed the sleeping god in Forbidden by the Immortal. For all intents and purposes, this gigantic eye *was* a god.

It took only a moment for the lieutenant governor to deduce the identity of this god.

Emperor Ancient Spirit??

Never could he have imagined that Xu Qing's trump card would be Emperor Ancient Spirit! This was not something he could have anticipated. After all, Emperor Ancient Spirit had been hidden for so long that, if it weren't for Ling'er, there was no way Xu Qing could have known about him.

Thus, the lieutenant governor was left reeling. Then, without the slightest hesitation, he shot backward, golden light spilling out around him as he tried to initiate a return teleportation to leave this terrifying place.

But how could Xu Qing possibly allow him to do that? The moment the broken face of the lieutenant governor started moving, and even as Xu Qing's body collapsed, filling him with intense pain, he respectfully bowed at the waist to Emperor Ancient Spirit.

"Oh great Emperor Ancient Spirit, I of the younger generation have come here today to deliver some food to you. Sir, this is the first round of interest I owe you for that Ancient Spirit destiny aura. After you finish digesting this bit of food, I'll bring you the second round of interest!"

"Interest?"

Emperor Ancient Spirit's enormous eye was visibly taken aback. Widening, it looked behind Xu Qing at the fleeing broken face of the lieutenant governor.

Previously, his attention had been focused on Xu Qing. But upon shifting focus to the lieutenant governor, a heartbeat like that of heavenly thunder filled the Ancient Spirit world.

Thump-thump. Thump-thump!

The Underworld River seethed, almost as if it were the saliva of Emperor Ancient Spirit. Surging over its banks, it began spreading rapidly in all directions. Then it abruptly disappeared. A sound like saliva being sucked back into the mouth echoed out in terrifying fashion.

The lieutenant governor, furious and alarmed, held nothing back as he fled, causing cracks to spread out over his broken face. Golden light surged around him as he raced like mad in the opposite direction.

That golden light hit Xu Qing, causing his body to crumble even further. Inside of him, the god's finger wailed in anguish and fought back in an attempt to save the body.

Meanwhile, the golden light coming off the lieutenant governor became like sharp spikes that stabbed into the vortex and tried to get it to rotate in the opposite direction, thus opening a way out. However... in the lieutenant governor's current state, he would have been a tasty meal even to Crimson Mother, much less Emperor Ancient Spirit, who had been starving for countless years, and could only absorb the souls of random other Ancient Spirits who stumbled into his presence.

The Underworld River was virtually boiling. There was simply too much saliva to be swallowed back, causing the river to rise into the air and speed toward the vortex.

Emperor Ancient Spirit was too hungry.

Meanwhile, the light shining from the massive eye illuminated all of heaven and earth.

The opening the lieutenant governor was trying to carve out collapsed under the gaze of Emperor Ancient Spirit. It was replaced by the Underworld River, which quickly surrounded the lieutenant governor.

A swallowing sound erupted from the far end of the river. It was a terrifying sound filled with greed, excitement, and anticipation. And it exerted a gravitational force that dragged the delectable lieutenant governor down to be devoured.

When the lieutenant governor realized he was being dragged down, his broken face glittered with light, and two enormous hands of white jade appeared. The hands reached out to rip the river apart. The power of ancient time waned, the gravitational force ended briefly, and the lieutenant governor struggled to escape.

But then, a majestic pulse of divine will echoed through the entire Ancient Spirit world.

"In my world, there is no ancient time!"

The divine will pulsed with godly might and an indescribably tyrannical dao, which caused the Underworld River to return to its previous state. The gravitational force grew even stronger, and the broken face of the lieutenant governor couldn't stand up to it. Cracks spread out across the surface of the face.

The two hands of white jade began crumbling, sending pieces splashing down into the river, where they were devoured.

The lieutenant governor shrieked as more cracks spread out over his broken face. Holding nothing back, he tried to send more golden light out. As he put everything on the line, light spread out, revealing a totem tattoo on his broken face. The totem had always been there, it just hadn't been visible. But because of the pressure weighing down from Emperor Ancient Spirit, it was revealed.

Tattooed on his face was an image of the Sea-Sealing County of antiquity. It looked exactly as the transformed version of the county on the outside. That was the core essence of the lieutenant governor's return from ancient times. Back then, before he died, he used the blood of the common people to tattoo that image onto his face!

Now it was revealed within the surrounding sea of light. Sea-Sealing County, which had been a magnificent place in the days of the Sovereign Kingdom of Violet and Cyan, appeared like a mirage.

This was not simply the power of ancient time. This was the result of all the lieutenant governor's plans and schemes, to snatch a section of time from the River of Ancient Time, and combine it with the existing Sea-Sealing County to activate the tattoo on his face to bring antiquity back to the present.

Using that blessing, he was able to suppress the Underworld River. Waves surged across the river as it neared the point of being destroyed. The water within it began to dry up and disappear.

The Sea-Sealing County of antiquity appeared in the golden light, and seemed as if it might descend into the Ancient Spirit world, block the mouth of Emperor Ancient Spirit, and thus give the lieutenant governor his chance to escape.

"In here, everything is food."

The divine will echoed out lazily, carrying with it something like a command as it approached the sea of light.

The Sea-Sealing County of antiquity in the sea of light couldn't persist, and began to fade away.

The rivers in the county collapsed. The mountains crumbled. Intense rumbling sounds spread out as the endless evil souls of the Ancient Spirits lunged toward it with mad greed. The souls didn't fear destruction as they swarmed the sea of light. The lieutenant governor fought back, destroying them in swaths, but there were too many. They surged into the light with pure insanity, descending on the Sea-Sealing County of antiquity in a scene very reminiscent of what had played out earlier on the outside.

The evil souls of the Ancient Spirits began to devour everything. Land. Air. Living beings. Everything was targeted. After all, their emperor had told them that everything was food!

The seething of the Underworld River grew more intense.

Seeing all of that, the lieutenant governor sighed. An irregularly shaped chunk fell off of his broken face during that sigh, which then became a golden beam of light that shot up into the dark sky.

In the blink of an eye, that beam of light vanished, and a loud rumbling sound echoed out that shook everything in existence. At the same time, golden light flashed, revealing the tip of a sword.

The sword was gold, and it looked like it was stabbing through the canopy of heaven toward the lands below. It landed on a mountain in the Ancient Spirit world.

The mountain collapsed, revealing a 30,000-meter sword.

Winds screamed in a tempest, and countless evil souls howled. Emperor Ancient Spirit didn't stop the sword.

Before long, a second chunk fell off of the lieutenant governor's broken face. Then a third and a fourth. They also flew up into the sky, and when they pierced the canopy of heaven, thunderous rumblings echoed out. A second 30,000-meter golden sword descended and stabbed into the ground, followed by a third, a fourth, and a fifth.

As more chunks fell off the lieutenant governor's broken face, the face grew smaller and smaller, until it finally collapsed. All the pieces floated up.

A total of thirty-three chunks became thirty-three swords. Heaven trembled as they stabbed into the ground.

All of this happened in the shortest of times. The light of heaven dimmed as thirty-three massive swords stabbed into the ground in a rough circle surrounding the broken face. All thirty-three of them glowed with golden light, which turned into golden threads that linked the swords together.

It was a massive, deadly spell formation.

Within the formation, the thirty-three swords thrummed, causing the power of ancient time to surge toward them from all directions. The Underworld River stopped moving, and a figure began to take shape in the spot where the lieutenant governor had just disappeared from.

Chapter 536: Bai Xiaozhuo's Grand Finale (part 2)

The figure was no broken face. Instead, he was a whole person.

What was more, he looked a lot younger, and he was wearing different clothing. There was something ancient about him. It was as if this wasn't the lieutenant governor, but rather, the true form of Bai Xiaozhuo from Sea-Sealing County in the Sovereign Kingdom of Violet and Cyan. As he stood there in the middle of the thirty-three swords, looking out at heaven and earth, he eventually turned to the huge eye of Emperor Ancient Spirit. Expression bleak, he bowed to the eye.

"I am a minister from the Sovereign Kingdom of Violet and Cyan, which came to exist in later generations. I offer greetings, Emperor Ancient Spirit. Since you aren't willing to let me leave this place, sir, and are determined to devour me, then I have no choice but to employ the methods I'd intended to use on the outside."

Emperor Ancient Spirit's huge eye remained the same as ever, but deep inside, something mysterious flickered briefly.

Bai Xiaozhuo then pointed at Xu Qing.

"Emperor Ancient Spirit, I will now open the door to Cruelmurk. When Cruelmurk and your Ancient Spirit world combine, the catastrophic consequences are not due to my wishes, but rather, are the fault of this child."

Xu Qing was currently safe in the Underworld River. Earlier, he had found himself being pulled toward the chewing sounds at the far end of the river. But as the river slowed to a halt, he also stopped moving. During the entire time, he continued to bow at the waist. He did not fight back, and he remained outstandingly respectful.

Even when Bai Xiaozhuo pointed at him accusingly, he didn't look up.

Although he understood the implications of Bai Xiaozhuo's words, and had seen Bai Xiaozhuo employ such tactics earlier, Xu Qing didn't feel the need to do anything. His purpose in coming had already been made clear, and he knew that he couldn't do anything to control the situation. He had already done everything he could do. Therefore, he kept his head bowed and even closed his eyes. There was no point in paying attention to what was happening.

Emperor Ancient Spirit also paid no heed. He just looked at the lieutenant governor, all while the sounds of swallowing got louder in the area.

Bai Xiaozhuo stood there feeling increasingly uneasy. Regardless of anything, though, he had to do something. Throwing both hands overhead, he began to chant.

“By means of my karma, I call to Cruelmurk, and to my people there.... Return to me!”

As the words left his mouth, the second canopy of heaven above Sea-Sealing County in the outside world, which was restrained by the golden net, suddenly began to vibrate. The ancient mountains that had risen up collapsed. And as the living beings in Sea-Sealing County recovered their senses, that second canopy of heaven started fading from existence, and the evil souls that had emerged went back to where they came from. A moment later, that second canopy of heaven was gone.

Meanwhile, in the depths of the Spirit Abyss, Xu Qing could see that, in the sky above the corpse of the huge snake that was the Ancient Spirit world, a vortex had appeared. It spun endlessly, as that second canopy of heaven appeared again.

The giant snake shivered.

Howling erupted from the second canopy of heaven as hordes of souls flew out. This time, the aura of Revered Ancient didn't interfere with them. And thus, there was nothing to stop the deceased souls from the Sovereign Kingdom of Violet and Cyan from rushing toward the giant snake.

However, just as they appeared, the giant snake's eyes opened. They were listless and pale, but at the same time, a terrifying pressure erupted from the snake's body, which sent the Ancient Spirit world atop its head straight toward the vortex. When they slammed into each other, there was no rumbling boom. There was no shock wave. There was only silent destruction.

The giant snake crumbled. The Ancient Spirit world atop its head... crumbled. As it turned out, they were nothing but illusions.

At the same time, the second canopy of heaven and the countless deceased souls from Violet and Cyan also crumbled. So did the Land of Cruelmurk within the vortex. Like a bubble popping, they were annihilated into nothing. None of them existed any longer. The formation made from thirty-three golden swords was nowhere to be seen.

Xu Qing wasn't surprised.

Within the gigantic eye of Emperor Ancient Spirit, a faint light glittered.

The lieutenant governor looked up at the sky above him, and when he saw that it looked no different from before, he knew his tactic had failed. He felt pain deep in his heart. It was almost as if he could see the countless commoners of his county, wailing in anguish as they were wiped out of existence. He breathed in and out a few times, and as he did, he suddenly seemed to age dramatically.

Sighing, he looked at Xu Qing. "You previously tried something like what I just attempted?"

Xu Qing looked back at him and nodded. Considering that Xu Qing had used a very similar method against Emperor Ancient Spirit, he had predicted that the emperor would be on guard against such methods, and would make sure not to fall victim to anything like that again. As for how exactly things would play out, Xu Qing hadn't been totally sure, but he'd assumed it would involve some manner of concealment or illusion.

From the expression on the lieutenant governor's face, Xu Qing could guess that Emperor Ancient Spirit hadn't just concealed the true Ancient Spirit world, but also, he had set up counterattacks.

The lieutenant governor didn't say anything in response. The thirty-three golden swords were gone. The suppressed Underworld River began to flow strongly again. The gravitational force returned with a vengeance.

A bitter expression overtook the lieutenant governor's face. All of his plans. Everything he had prepared. They did no good. Right now, he felt much the same way as the god in Forbidden by the Immortal upon encountering Crimson Mother.

And the reason for this unexpected twist... was Xu Qing.

The lieutenant governor turned and looked at Xu Qing. The bitterness on his face turned into calmness.

"I lost," he said softly. He didn't try to call out to the broken face of the god. He knew it wouldn't do any good. The god's eyes wouldn't open because of him. Their deal had been concluded the moment he awoke.

He also didn't try to call for the help of the Crown Prince of Violet and Cyan. He had lost. He had brought shame to his lord and master, and felt too humiliated to face him. Nor could he bring himself to plead for help. He didn't want to be the reason his lord and master clashed with Emperor Ancient Spirit.

Thankfully, I already arranged for my master's skull to be returned. Though Seventh Prince loves to sit around weighing the pros and cons of everything, after everything he's seen me do, he won't go back on the agreement we made.

Sighing, the lieutenant governor closed his eyes.

The thirty-three swords faded completely as they were swept over by the boundless Underworld River. The lieutenant governor himself was carried away by the rushing water. In the depths of that river was an enormous mouth, into which the water flowed. It got closer and closer.

The lieutenant governor was moments away from being devoured.

But then a violet bolt of lightning crashed down from beyond the canopy of heaven. Moving with incredible speed, it pierced through half of the Ancient Spirit world's canopy of heaven. It looked like the sky was going to be ripped in two.

Xu Qing looked up. The lieutenant governor shivered.

The eyes above all the imperial palaces in the Ancient Spirit world opened and looked toward the sky. More mouths appeared in the lands, and more Underworld Rivers swept through heaven and earth. The entire Ancient Spirit world was trembling. Vastly more evil souls, zombies, and war banners appeared than ever before. Gigantic figures climbed from the depths, pulsing with terrifying auras. Some were hundreds of meters tall, some thousands, some tens of thousands, and they all howled toward the sky. It was as if the Ancient Spirit world was coming alive.

The ground quaked, as if some massive being that lived beneath it were moving. And all of the howling seemed to be telling that lightning bolt something.

All of this is my food, and no one can take it away from me!

Heaven and earth were in a confrontation!

Xu Qing's eyes glittered with cold light as he looked into the sky. Killing intent swirled in his eyes. Meanwhile, the god's finger within him was trembling uncontrollably.

It was truly afraid.

It had originally assumed that after an incense stick's worth of time passed, it could wrest control of the god body. When it sensed how formidable the lieutenant governor was, it decided to hold back a bit, to save some power until Xu Qing was dead, then flee. There was no way it could ever have guessed that Xu Qing would bring it here.

Emperor Ancient Spirit's eye hadn't just shaken the lieutenant governor, it also shook the god's finger.

Emperor Ancient Spirit's hungry eyes, and the sound of swallowing, filled that finger with infinite fear. And the fact that its true form was already dead pushed its fear to the ultimate level.

And now, this aura had arrived.

If this brat manages to survive this day without getting devoured... then as soon as I'm free, I'm going to possess the god body! I definitely cannot allow him to just run around getting into trouble with it!!

As the finger trembled, the lieutenant governor looked initially excited, then ashamed. Bowing to the sky, he cried out, "My Lord!"

The violet lightning bolt grew brighter, and then, a familiar voice spoke from within it.

"Senior, I want the time that belongs to him."

"*You can't have it!*" Emperor Ancient Spirit replied with divine will that resonated with a tyrannical dao.

"I already took it." The violet lightning bolt flickered in the sky.

Emperor Ancient Spirit's eye grew colder.

“Then screw the hell off!”

The violet lightning bolt coalesced in the sky, turning into a face that very much resembled the broken face of the god. The face looked down at Xu Qing.

Xu Qing looked up at it. It was a very, very familiar face.

“You’ve really grown up, lil’ bro.”

In response to those words, Emperor Ancient Spirit’s eye shivered. At the same time, the god’s finger inside of Xu Qing trembled violently and wailed, *“I don’t want my body after all! I need to get away!”*

Xu Qing’s face remained expressionless. He said nothing.

The broken face in the sky similarly said nothing further. After looking at Xu Qing for a short time, it faded into nothing.

Inside the Underworld River, the lieutenant governor kowtowed respectfully.

“I, Xiaozhuo, am unable to follow you, Crown Prince. I wish you... peace and security.”

With that, Bai Xiaozhuo looked up into the sky, his eyes filled with reluctance and reminiscence. Finally, he stood, and without any urging from the Underworld River, flew toward the huge mouth. His expression was one of placid determination, as if he were dying for a just cause. As he neared, he didn’t look back. But he did speak.

“Sea-Sealing County belongs to you now, Xu Qing. Take good care of it.”

With that, Bai Xiaozhuo flew into the huge mouth. The chewing sounds that emerged made it clear that the original governor of Sea-Sealing County from the Sovereign Kingdom of Violet and Cyan had been destroyed in body and soul. He had been devoured by Emperor Ancient Spirit.

Explaining the story of his life wouldn’t be an easy thing to do. And it would very much be based on the perspective of who told it. Was he loyal, evil, crafty, or ruthless? No simplistic explanation would suffice.

Before long, a contented sigh echoed out in the Ancient Spirit world. It was the sigh of someone who hadn’t eaten food for a very, very long time, then tasted something delicious. Emperor Ancient Spirit’s eye narrowed and shifted to focus on Xu Qing.

“Is the second batch of interest that thing you have inside your body?”

Chapter 537: Trampling Thistles On The Way To The Throne (part 1)

Emperor Ancient Spirit’s divine will echoed out like booming thunder through the Ancient Spirit world. The words could be heard with ears and felt in the mind and heart. Even the soul would tremble in response to it. It was an intimidation from a higher level of life, and also pressure because of the differences in personhood involved.

The god’s finger went rigid. Terror flooded through it, which quickly transformed into grief and indignation.

The divine will locked onto Xu Qing’s ravaged body, causing his flesh to vibrate. Despite his extraordinary body, it was still rapidly crumbling away. His wounds were worsening, and the god

power he had left couldn't keep him going much longer. Right now, though, Xu Qing didn't have time to worry about his injuries. He had to work hard to just stay cool-headed. He knew full well that he couldn't afford to do anything to anger Emperor Ancient Spirit.

Before he could speak, Emperor Ancient Spirit lost patience. Divine will rumbled into the dark sky, and the Underworld River below roiled, revealing countless dead bodies within it. A boundless gravitational force erupted, like a vortex, which swept toward Xu Qing with greed and longing.

Xu Qing shivered as chunks of his flesh were ripped away, and his life force began to scatter. From head to toe, he started decaying.

Inside of him, the god's finger wailed in grief as its soul collapsed under the power of the gravitational force. The soul turned into streams of black energy that seeped out of Xu Qing, then started taking the shape of an illusory finger. To the god's finger, it was a process of agonizing pain. Emotions of grief and bitterness filled the finger as it bemoaned its extremely miserable existence. After all, the finger was also a god....

However, the finger's true form had been devoured by Crimson Mother, and now it seemed escape was impossible from this situation. It really wasn't sure what was going on. It clearly had the godly authority to control misfortune, and yet, it was the one who was struck by misfortune. It struggled in anguish, but no such efforts amounted to anything. It had become prey in the mouth of a predator, and struggling only made the teeth bite down harder.

More soul mist emerged from Xu Qing.

From a distance, the soul mist of a god caused everything around Xu Qing to ripple and blur. The aura of a god was now starting to pulse from the finger outside Xu Qing, which was rapidly transforming from illusory to corporeal.

Xu Qing maintained silence. Emperor Ancient Spirit wasn't just interested in absorbing the god's finger; Xu Qing's life force and god vitality was also being drawn out. As that happened, Xu Qing's personhood was dropping from that of a god to that of an ordinary cultivator.

Xu Qing wasn't surprised at all that Emperor Ancient Spirit would reveal such malicious intentions.

He and Emperor Ancient Spirit weren't exactly on good terms. And a bit of food wasn't going to turn things around in that regard. That was one reason why he hadn't wanted to use the spirit abyss talisman unless he had absolutely, positively no other options.

Those who would *pit the lion against the wolf* ended up walking on the edge of the cliff. And the slightest mistake could end with them plummeting to their death.

However, because of the bit of good faith from earlier, at least Xu Qing had the chance to speak up for himself.

"Your Majesty," he said calmly, "were you pleased with the interest I paid earlier?"

Emperor Ancient Spirit ignored him. The emperor seemed completely focused on the snack that was taking shape above Xu Qing's head.

In fact, Emperor Ancient Spirit wasn't even paying much attention to extracting Xu Qing's life force. That was how attractive that sweet morsel was.

Seeing that, the god's finger fell deeper into despair. As the shape of the finger became more and more clear, Xu Qing once again spoke, his voice devoid of any emotional fluctuations.

“Your Majesty, what you are absorbing isn't the second batch of interest. Sir, what you're absorbing is a tool that I need to temporarily borrow from you. If you take it back now, I won't be able to pay any more interest.”

Xu Qing's previous words had vanished as surely as if they were *a stone ox thrown into the ocean*. Emperor Ancient Spirit didn't respond to them at all. But this time, Emperor Ancient Spirit's huge eye looked curiously at Xu Qing.

Countless evil souls swirled through the air, circling around Xu Qing and pulsing with malicious longing. It became an aggressive pressure that spread out into the area and weighed down on Xu Qing.

Xu Qing looked up calmly at the huge eye. He ignored the fact that his body was collapsing, and that his own blood was seeping out everywhere. Previously, he had been about 90 meters tall, but now he was back to the size of a normal person, except covered with gaping wounds.

“Your Majesty, there's a lot of food on the outside. But there aren't many people willing to deliver that food to you in here. In fact, I might be the only one. If you consume that tool, and me as well, then you won't get any further interest payments.”

Xu Qing's expression was one of open honesty. He wasn't lying. He had just shifted his wording when it came to who actually owned the god's finger, simply to make it easier to communicate with Emperor Ancient Spirit. He was certain that an entity like Emperor Ancient Spirit would be able to sense his sincerity. And he was right. The reality was that the god's finger had performed perfectly in that critical moment, allowing Xu Qing to get close to the broken face of the lieutenant governor. Without that, he wouldn't have been able to successfully teleport into the Ancient Spirit world.

The gravitational force coming from the Underworld River suddenly ceased.

That said, the sound of swallowing still echoed out everywhere. Though it was under control, the sensation of hunger and greed it conveyed was hair-raising. It was something that would cause terror to well up in any living being who heard it, and would make them feel like food that was about to be devoured.

The god's finger was already eighty percent complete above Xu Qing's head. When the despairing finger heard Xu Qing's words, and realized he was trying to protect it, it felt indescribably excited and nervous. That mixture of complex feelings swelled within the finger, quickly overwhelming any hatred it felt for him. After all, it knew that the only chance of salvation in this situation rested in Xu Qing's hands. As it floated in the air, it exuded a sensation of approval with divine will.

Emperor Ancient Spirit's huge eye was fixed on Xu Qing. Gradually, everything went quiet. The sound of swallowing and heavy breathing drifted with the wind.

Shortly after, the gravitational force that had locked onto Xu Qing faded away. The vortex in the Underworld River vanished, and the river returned to its normal state.

The restraints on the god's finger relaxed, allowing the finger to fly back inside Xu Qing.

After everything it had experienced, it felt like it had barely escaped with its life, and could still sense lingering fear. Because Xu Qing's body had collapsed, resulting in a huge reduction of god vitality, it had no interest in stirring up trouble. In fact, it felt completely exhausted, and was already having trouble thinking clearly and even staying awake. At the same time, the incredible danger it sensed on the outside turned into a powerful seed that took root inside. All it wanted to do now was go back to that familiar spot in D-132. It was used to the surroundings there, which made sense considering most of its life had been spent there.... And it was a safe, quiet place where it could sleep comfortably.

Meanwhile, Emperor Ancient Spirit's divine will echoed out.

"The next interest payment must be a crippled god! If you don't come with a crippled god, then you won't be welcome in this world."

As the divine will echoed out, a host of soul strands swirled out from the nearly evil souls. Gathering together in front of Xu Qing, they turned into a talisman. It was the same spirit abyss talisman Xu Qing had crushed earlier.

"And now, screw off!"

A vortex opened up behind Xu Qing. On the other side of it was the very same abyss that Xu Qing had been to in Wood Spirit territory.

Xu Qing looked at the vortex, then the talisman. Finally, he looked up at Emperor Ancient Spirit. He was actually surprised. He had previously assumed that before leaving, he would be marked with a branding symbol or a warding spell. Yet, unexpectedly, that didn't happen.

Hē doesn't think it's worth it. Also, hē doesn't seem worried that I'll summon another god here.... Combine that with the lieutenant governor's failure to summon Cruelmurk, I'd say it means that Emperor Ancient Spirit has hidden the Ancient Spirit world even better than I imagined.

Xu Qing looked around thoughtfully, and suddenly wondered if he was actually standing in the same Ancient Spirit world he had been to before. Was it possible that no one would ever be able to find the real Ancient Spirit world again?

Regardless, Xu Qing could sense a bit of the daring and nerve that Emperor Ancient Spirit must have possessed when conquering Revered Ancient. Clasp hands and bowing, he took the talisman and then turned to the vortex.

Before he could enter, Emperor Ancient Spirit's divine will once again echoed out.

"Given that you really did bring me some nice food, human child, I'm going to give you a friendly reminder. Those life lamps in you have enabled you to stand out as brilliant in that low level of yours. But they're a rickety amalgamation. They're not made from your own blood. Each one is packed with differing karma, and you'll have a hard time using them to reach the highest level."

Xu Qing stopped in place and looked over his shoulder at Emperor Ancient Spirit's huge eye. "How can I resolve that issue, Your Majesty?"

"Bring me the food I want, and I'll tell you." With that, the huge eye closed.

Xu Qing nodded. He remembered his Eldest Brother mentioning something similar to this, and now he was getting the same information from Emperor Ancient Spirit. [1]

Bowing one last time to Emperor Ancient Spirit's huge eye, Xu Qing entered the vortex. Rumbling sounds swept out as he disappeared. Then the vortex vanished.

After Xu Qing was gone, the Ancient Spirit world blurred.

The land, the sky, the evil souls, the zombies, the Underworld River. All of them vanished like a popping bubble. The entire world became a pearl, which then dropped down into the boundless depths of the Spirit Abyss. After a time, a withered, mottled hand appeared in the depths of the Spirit Abyss. It pulsed with an aura of rot as it reached out and grabbed the pearl. A moment later, chewing sounds could be heard. Shortly after that, a sigh of contentment could be heard.

"Scrumptious! I hope the little punk brings something good to eat next time. As for his delicious flavor... I'll wait until he grows up a bit before I devour him. Now, that Crown Prince of Violet and Cyan... is quite interesting."

Near the altar atop the Spirit Abyss, a figure could be seen slowly climbing up the cliff.

Xu Qing's wounds were influencing his speed. However, given how he had just survived by the skin of his teeth, he found enough energy in himself to keep moving. Slowly but surely, he kept climbing toward the top. Blood flowed from his wounds, which dripped down the cliff walls of the Spirit Abyss.

Xu Qing gritted his teeth as he struggled against the abyss's gravitational force. It took all the effort he could muster. Unfortunately, there are sometimes things that will never happen no matter how much you want them to, and similarly, many things that *will* happen no matter how much you *don't* want them to. Xu Qing felt himself gradually losing consciousness.

He didn't want to. But he was so exhausted, and was so physically weakened, that unconsciousness gradually started to sweep over his mind like the tide.

His vision blurred, and darkness began to take over everything. But then, just barely, he saw a figure in white rushing toward him.

Chapter 537: Trampling Thistles On The Way To The Throne (part 2)

Back in Sea-Sealing County, the moment Bai Xiaozhuo died, the mountains and rivers of antiquity that had risen up throughout the prefectures trembled. When the second canopy of heaven disappeared earlier, they had begun to collapse. However, there was a will sustaining them that prevented them from falling apart. But now, they trembled so violently that they collapsed into pieces. Those pieces turned into dust and then disappeared, as if they were fading away into the past of tens of thousands of years ago. The sky became clear, and the lands returned to their previous state.

That said, the entire county was a disastrous mess. Ghastly scars crisscrossed the lands of Sea-Sealing County. There were seas of dead among all species, and many small nations and sects belonging to humankind had been wiped out of existence.

The war itself had taken a huge toll on the population. Then the lieutenant governor's rebellion brought further calamity. Sea-Sealing County, which had only just begun to recover, experienced *hail added atop snow*.

Dead and wounded victims could be seen throughout all the prefectures. The survivors looked around blankly, many of them completely unaware of the reason for the catastrophe. The wails of the mourners filled heaven and earth. It was the same in the epicenter of the dramatic event, the county capital.

Grief filled the city. Although the blood rain was coming to an end, the casualties here were worse than anywhere else. Eventually, the night sky was revealed, and the moon looked down at everything below.

Two puppets that were experimental god bodies hovered in the air above the altar. Violent cracking sounds emanated from within them. As the sounds spread, the puppets' aura faded. When the lieutenant governor died, and they lost their source, they opened their eyes, revealing that they had lost all of their energy.

When that happened, Seventh Prince looked out at the county capital and spoke in a voice that reached the ears of all the despairing mortals.

"The Lieutenant Governor's Coup seriously harmed Sea-Sealing County. Heaven and earth are both furious. This is something that cannot be tolerated! Officers and soldiers, heed my command: crush all rebel elements from the Lieutenant Governor's Mansion! Bring brightness and clarity back to the lands of Sea-Sealing County!"

In response, the commanders-in-chief rose into the air and shot in unison toward the two puppets.

In the blink of an eye, dozens of commanders-in-chief closed in, causing intense booms to shake heaven and earth.

Bursting with courage and determination, Seventh Prince seemed to erupt after having been forced to keep control for so long, and also attacked one of the puppets. Because he was going all out, a massive projected image appeared behind him, ensuring that all the mortals in the county capital could see clearly what was happening.

The commanders-in-chief attacked with lightning speed, and thus, the two puppets quickly lost their battle prowess and fell to the ground.

Next, Seventh Prince's massive illusory body threw its arms up, thus preventing the blood rain from falling onto the city. The blood rain fell on him instead, leaving streaks of rot as it streamed down him. However, because Seventh Prince had blocked the rain with his own body, the golden dragon could unleash a roar that scattered the rain.

Meanwhile, the millions upon millions of troops outside the county capital flew up into the air and unleashed magical techniques and huge spell formations that drove away the mutagen.

Seventh Prince, who was widely regarded to be benevolent and generous by nature, issued orders for his troops to spread through the county capital to save the mortals. Because of his quick thinking, many mortals who had been just about to experience mutation, ended up saved. As a result, the scale of the mutation disaster was greatly reduced. Before long, excited cheering and songs of praise directed toward Seventh Prince could be heard in all directions....

That said, the people in the capital were not blind and deaf fools. The hearts of the people couldn't be won so casually, and thus, there were many people who didn't cheer and sing. That was especially true of the hundreds of thousands of cultivators from the three palaces who were present below the altar. All of them were looking coldly at Seventh Prince, their eyes filled with disappointment, anger, and derision. Also visible in their eyes was bitterness.

Many people were thinking about Palace Lord Kong. And many people were thinking about the words used to eulogize Palace Lord Kong after he fell in battle: he was the paragon of loyalty and responsibility. [1]

But now, all of the credit and glory for the current victory was being given to Seventh Prince. It was as if the performance that began when Palace Lord Kong died was still playing out. After all, only those people present knew the truth of what happened. And though there were hundreds of thousands of them, compared to the population of the county capital, or of humans in general, they were like a tiny ripple on the surface of a massive body of water.

Of course, the limitations of mortals meant that they were even more easily influenced. What was more, it was human nature to easily forget the past. Before long, their memories of the event would be hazy, and their attention would be focused on other matters.

And Seventh Prince could easily use the pallid bolus as a way to turn everything to his advantage. After all, when it came to the lieutenant governor's crimes, the fact that the pallid boluses were actually poisonous was something that affected everyone in the city. As for people outside of the county capital who had no idea what happened, they would be even more easily swayed. They would only hear one version of events.

Seventh Prince, who had just expanded human territory and presided over the return of the Holytides, and who had just saved Sea-Sealing County from imminent crisis, had again accomplished the most amazing of deeds. Because of his glory, which already made him shine like gold, even more people would believe whatever he said.

The hearts of the people would be overwhelmed by the drama, and any doubts would fade into nothing, eventually becoming meaningless in a historical context.

That is... unless Xu Qing came back alive. Immediately!

If that happened, then everything would change. The hearts of the people would have something else to focus on, and when the destiny aura converged, everything would be different. That said, most people didn't think that was very likely to happen.

High in the air, Marquis Yao watched everything happening. Closing his eyes, he sighed. He knew that his entire existence, and any future success, depended on Seventh Prince. After all, he had been saved by Seventh Prince, and had then revealed himself while disguised as one of the prince's commanders-in-chief. The three deputy palace lords could only stand by silently. Qingqin released a despondent cry, as he was also powerless to do anything.

Master Seventh dropped to the ground to stand next to his senior apprentice. The Captain opened his mouth to speak, but Master Seventh shook his head.

"Just wait!" Master Seventh said in a loud voice that could be heard by everyone in the county capital. "Before Xu Qing made his stand today, he personally told me that he

had a way to purge the pallid bolus effects from anyone who consumed them. He can ensure that no one in the capital city is harmed! If I ate a pallid bolus, and some random person told me they could purge its effects, I wouldn't trust them. But you know who I would trust? The one person who stepped forward and exposed the truth!"

Master Seventh's words stirred the thoughts of countless people, and caused Seventh Prince's pupils to constrict.

The Captain's eyes glittered, and he thought, *Now this is what my Master's like! Ginger gets spicier the older it is, as they say!*

Nodding, he chose not to say anything.

Master Seventh's words caused all of the hundreds of thousands of cultivators to look in his direction. Marquis Yao's eyes glittered brightly. Qingqin's expression became one of hope. The three deputy palace lords all looked at Master Seventh. If there was anyone who truly understood Xu Qing, it would naturally be his Master.

Thus, Master Seventh's words struck the hundreds of thousands of cultivators deeply. That was especially true considering the hidden meaning in his words. Although some people might not have realized the truth of what Master Seventh said before, now, they did.

Up in the dome of heaven, Seventh Prince took a moment to calm himself inwardly. Then he spoke in a calm voice.

"You people are letting your imaginations run wild! From the way you're looking at me, I can tell what you're thinking. You believe that I didn't do anything to help today. But is that true? No, it's not. I did help!

"I'm the one who rescued Yao Tianyan. I didn't stop him from interfering earlier, which means I approved of his actions. If Yao Tianyan hadn't provided the final bit of evidence, would Xu Qing's enthusiasm have been enough?

"I admit that I was slightly suspicious of the lieutenant governor's true identity. But that's why I saved Yao Tianyan to begin with. My plan was to oversee the return of the Holytides, and ensure that humankind was in a stable position. Then I would handle the situation here.

"Considering how many of us fellow human cultivators sacrificed their lives, considering the heavy price paid by our heroes, considering all the hard work the emperor put into unleashing the power of our Dawning Sun, I absolutely could not allow us to lose any momentum!

"At a time when our armies are on the move reclaiming our homeland, we can't afford to have any chaos in the interior. Therefore, I forced myself to be patient.

“Though you have no way of knowing this, I can tell you that the puny Bai Xiaozhuo couldn’t possibly have done all of this by himself. He obviously has a huge network of allies, plus the lord and master he himself mentioned! After learning the truth of what was going on, I chose to wait and see if that lord of his would show up. What’s more, there’s another possibility to consider. It’s very likely that, as long as I didn’t step in, his lord and master wouldn’t step in. I... was a lurking threat keeping you safe!

“Perhaps you won’t be able to understand all of this. Perhaps you will still be suspicious of me. But you can’t deny the significance of my choices here.”

Below the altar, the hundreds of thousands of cultivators maintained silence. None were giving stock to anything the imperial prince was saying.

Seventh Prince sighed. Then his eyes hardened. “I can see why you’d like to stand there waiting. But we can’t wait for the reconstruction of Sea-Sealing County. We can’t wait for the humans in the county capital to recover. We can’t wait to save the tens of thousands of humans who need saving! At a critical moment like this, when nonhumans are definitely thinking of sowing chaos, our families, our sects, and our homes are all in critical danger.

“Marquis Yao, heed my command. Cultivators of the three palaces, heed my command. Officers and soldiers of Sea-Sealing County, heed my command! All of you cooperate with the imperial army to travel to all the prefectures in the county and crush any signs of rebellion. Save all of the afflicted humans. This is your responsibility!”

The hundreds of thousands of cultivators below the altar had mixed expressions on their faces. What Seventh Prince said all made sense, and there was no refutation any of them could provide. It was their responsibility to do as he’d ordered. But once they left the county capital, they would be truly scattered. It wasn’t that they would never be able to reunite. But while they were gone, it was entirely possible that everything could be flipped around. Black could become white. The strategy of ‘divide and conquer’ was a blade that could cut in any direction.

The three deputy palace lords looked disappointed. Marquis Yao sighed and was about to speak when, all of a sudden, he turned to look off into the distance. Master Seventh shivered and looked in the same direction. The Captain did the same, and already he was breathing heavily, his eyes shining with blue light and his expression one of delight. Even more delighted was Qingqin, who let loose an excited cry.

“CAW!”

The hundreds of thousands of cultivators all sensed that something was happening.

Seventh Prince frowned imperceptibly as he looked off into the distance.

A beam of light streaked through the air toward the county capital. It was not the speed of pseudo-Nascent Soul, but rather, that of Void Returning. Soon, it became possible to see a gigantic Wood Spirit moving at incredible speed. Standing on his shoulders was a figure in a blood-stained

uniform. As his garment flapped in the wind, his eyes shone with unswerving determination. His good looks were unrivaled in all heaven and earth. He was none other than Xu Qing. Wrapped around his right wrist was a little white snake which looked curiously in the direction of the county capital.

Xu Qing's arrival caused excitement to fill the hearts of the cultivators in the capital. Cheering broke out, creating a massive sound wave that spread out, resonating with heaven and earth.

In the canopy of heaven, the four-clawed golden dragon let loose a roar, and it pulsed with golden light that blessed Xu Qing. It also exhaled dazzling clouds that lit up all creation. As a result, all humans in the capital could clearly see what was happening. It was the first time this dragon had created auspicious clouds for someone other than an imperial prince.

The cheering in the county capital was so forceful the clouds trembled, and surpassed the cheering that had been directed toward Seventh Prince after Palace Lord Kong died and he returned having won a great victory over the Holytides. Back then, Xu Qing had been in the army outside the capital, and had looked up silently as Seventh Prince received the adoration of the crowds.

Today, Seventh Prince was in the capital city looking out at the crowds, and watching as Xu Qing returned to adoring cheering. This time, Seventh Prince was the one looking on silently. Even the statue of Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity trembled.

What was more, immense streams of destiny aura swept toward Xu Qing and gathered above his head. As he neared, something became visible even to the naked eye of the mortals. It was....

A crown!

Chapter 538: The Heart of the People Contains Righteousness and the Dao

Someone who brings ruin to a government comes to bear a heavy weight. In fact, a weight like that is enough to crush the soul and leave one damned by myriad tribulations. Someone who survives such an ordeal experiences something like nirvanic rebirth. Having done so, they can soar beyond the highest heavens and become the focus of all eyes.

As of this moment, Xu Qing, who had *trampled thistles on the way to the throne*, was now returning. He was that person who had experienced nirvanic rebirth. After experiencing the calamity he did, then returning to be the center of attention, he was like the most dazzling light in existence. His light burned so brightly that it stoked the emotions of all living beings, burning away the pressure that resulted from all the recent hardships.

Cheering filled heaven and earth. The sound soared along with the wind.

The events of the past year or more had been difficult for everyone in Sea-Sealing County. The death of the old governor left everyone in a daze. Then war came, seemingly out of the blue. Even as they were still in that daze, the death of Palace Lord Kong struck like tribulation lightning, tearing apart Sea-Sealing County and leaving the survivors deeply scarred. After the war ended, and the reeling Sea-Sealing County finally started to recover, the Lieutenant Governor's Coup brought despair.

The people felt apprehensive, confused, bitter, and helpless. They needed someone who could bring about real change. They needed someone who could lead them through the crisis. In the past, they

had believed Palace Lord Kong to be that person, except he died in battle. Later, they thought that person to be Seventh Prince or the lieutenant governor....

But today, they fully believed it was Xu Qing! His moment of return brought a change to the dome of heaven. Auspicious signs proliferated, and the people cheered endlessly. Men and women. Old and young. Cultivators and mortals. To them, there was only one person worth looking at.

Xu Qing was the focus of all the eyes in the county capital.

The golden dragon roared. Qingqin released a piercing cry. The destiny aura surged into the sky, swirled around, and formed a dazzling crown over Xu Qing's head.

And then, within the cheering, people started shouting something very specific. It didn't take long before others heard and approved, then joined in shouting the same word.

"Governor!"

"Governor!"

As they cheered, the atmosphere in the county capital grew more passionate. The Wood Spirit grand elder, at Xu Qing's direction, stopped about 300 meters outside the city wall. Xu Qing stood on his shoulder, looking out at everything, his heart pounding.

Xu Qing was only twenty years old. Despite having learned a lot from his Master and the Captain, he was currently struggling to control his emotions. His goal had never been to assume the office of governor. In fact, the thought had literally never occurred to him. He had merely been following his heart and doing what he thought needed to be done. Therefore, he just stood there outside of the city thinking for a long moment. He was really at a loss.

But the cheering only grew louder, so he finally took a deep breath, calmed himself, and walked into the city.

He went straight toward the altar. Everywhere he passed, the mortals clasped hands and bowed. The cultivators did the same. On every road he walked down, it was the same. The crown above him became clearer and more eye-catching.

Eventually, he reached the square below the altar. The hundreds of thousands of cultivators from the three palaces looked at him with shining eyes as they clasped hands and bowed! No one asked them to do it. It was just something they instinctively felt they had to do after everything they had witnessed.

It was because of their respective fallen palace lords. It was because of the old governor. It was because of the crisis Sea-Sealing County had gone through. It was because of how Xu Qing had bravely stepped out alone. For a number of reasons, everyone was more than willing to bow to him.

Hundreds of thousands of people all bowed simultaneously, causing the crown over Xu Qing's head to thrum loudly as it glowed with dazzling light.

The three deputy palace lords smiled as they also bowed. Among them, Li Yunshan seemed the most grateful. The three honor guards bowed as well, and they seemed almost dazed.

Master Seventh did not bow. Nor did the Captain. Of all the residents of Sea-Sealing County, only those two, because of their status, qualified to refrain from bowing. After all, they were essentially Xu Qing's family.

Master Seventh did nothing to hide the pride in his eyes. It was bright and impossible to overlook. It was similar with the Captain, who stuck his chest out and grinned, looking very pleased with himself.

Meanwhile, Seventh Prince looked at Xu Qing approaching, then at the crowd. He could tell that, going forward, no one in Sea-Sealing County would be able to do a thing to Xu Qing.

Marquis Yao looked at Xu Qing and smiled, his eyes filled with a very profound look, as well as determination. The marquis was about to do something completely monumental. Something unheard-of among humans. And he was the only one in the crowd who qualified to try. After all, there was very little chance of anyone succeeding at such a task. Ancient traditions were difficult to break. Because of that, and many other reasons, what he was about to do probably shouldn't be possible.

But even if the result was failure, he still had to try. Sea-Sealing County as a whole had made its wishes clear, and that was something even the emperor would take seriously. Even if the result was failure, it didn't matter to Marquis Yao. He still had to make the attempt. And if it didn't work, he could always try again in the future.

As Marquis Yao looked at Xu Qing, he thought, *the heroic souls of the governor and Brother Liangxiu in heaven would definitely agree with what I'm about to attempt. Whether in public or private, I need to make sure this kid is absolutely invincible in Sea-Sealing County!*

With such thoughts on his mind, Marquis Yao clasped hands and bowed very deeply to Xu Qing. Then, he spoke in a somber voice that echoed far and wide.

“Ask heaven!”

The moment the words left his mouth, the crowd exploded with cheering so loud it shook the surroundings.

Seventh Prince sighed inwardly. Earlier, the random mortals cheering ‘governor’ didn't really mean much. Such shouting could be chalked up to emotions running high, and they carried no weight.

But for Marquis Yao to say what he had just said was completely different. Asking heaven, asking earth, and asking the people... was the ceremonial way to crown a new governor!

Throughout all human history, there had never been a pseudo-Nascent Soul governor. This would definitely be something the emperor paid very close attention to. That was especially true considering that it was pushed forward by Yao Tianyan. He was one of the few people who distinguished himself in opposing the lieutenant governor. He was the only member of the old guard who survived the war. What was more, he had been grievously wronged in the whole affair. And of course, he had been one of the five most powerful people in Sea-Sealing County. As such, he had the authority to do this.

Seventh Prince's thoughts raced as he considered all the elements at play. *I doubt my father will approve of this. But he does have to consider the will of Sea-Sealing County as a whole. And regardless, Yao Tianyan is clearly throwing caution to the wind. He's betting everything by publicly announcing to the world, to the human species, and to the emperor himself that Sea-Sealing County... approves of Xu Qing!*

Xu Qing has ignited the hearts of the people, and that's going to make him difficult to deal with. He's going to be like an ever-burning flame.

Seventh Prince maintained silence. He could tell that public sentiment had already been established.

The sky glittered as the image of the past governors, created by the flow of destiny aura, stood tall and bore witness to the events below.

No words were spoken in response to "ask heaven." However, there was a deafening crash of thunder, which was the canopy of heaven in Sea-Sealing County providing the answer.

"Ask earth!" Marquis Yao said, his eyes shining. Intense rumbling sounds echoed from the earth, providing the answer.

"Ask the people!" Marquis Yao said, looking out at the county capital.

The hundreds of thousands of cultivators below the altar, as well as the countless mortals in the city, all shouted their resounding response.

"You may!"

"You may!"

The sound of the voices became like heavenly might filling the world. It represented the voice of the people and the will of Sea-Sealing County. Sea-Sealing County had made its choice!

As everyone looked at Xu Qing, and as the destiny aura converged on him, his heart pounded with many emotions. Looking around at everyone, he took all of those emotions and made them part of a deep bow. He bowed to Marquis Yao. He bowed to the cultivators of the three palaces. And he bowed to the county capital. Deeply.

At this point, it didn't matter if the emperor approved or not. Even if there was no official governor in Sea-Sealing County, Xu Qing's words would carry more weight than those of anyone else. There was no one in Sea-Sealing County with a higher standing than him.

As the bright moon shone down, no one was paying any attention to Seventh Prince. After a long moment of silence, Seventh Prince laughed softly. He could tell what was happening. At that moment, he made his decision to leave. He would take his army out of Sea-Sealing County and toward the former Holytide battlefields. Only there could he be in the limelight.

Before leaving, he turned to look at Xu Qing. Xu Qing's return, and the ceremony that resulted, had fixed the image of Xu Qing deeply in Seventh Prince's mind.

In addition to Yao Tianyan, there's now a second person I'm going to remember from Sea-Sealing County. My father will definitely reprimand me for letting a lone hero like this take center stage. But I can accept that.

With that, Seventh Prince made his departure.

The Lieutenant Governor's Coup was over.

The forces of Sea-Sealing County were mobilized. Hundreds of thousands of cultivators spread out to help purge the mutagen, save the mortals, and restore order. As orders streamed out from the county capital, the various prefectures of the county were rescued from calamity. Because of all the

various karma involved, there was no attempt made to hide the truth about the Lieutenant Governor's Coup. Official announcements were made so that everyone knew what happened.

The curtain closed on the coronation ceremony for the new governor.

In the end of the tenth month of the year 2932 of the Dark War calendar, the tumult in Sea-Sealing County was revealed to be the work of the lieutenant governor, who was exposed as a member of Torchlight. His real name was Bai Xiaozhuo, and he had served as the governor of Sea-Sealing County in the days of the Sovereign Kingdom of Violet and Cyan. By using a god magic, he was reincarnated, and then sowed chaos in Sea-Sealing County.

The swordsage Xu Qing, who had received a 30,000-meter pillar of light in the Grand Emperor's assessment of the heart, stepped out from the crowd during the coronation ceremony. Ignoring the threat to his own life, as well as his own desires, he strongly opposed the coronation. Then he revealed the truth about the conspiracy, resolved the danger to Sea-Sealing County, and saved everyone from a massive catastrophe.

The emperor was deeply moved.

In that same month, the emperor issued five edicts. The first edict was a strong rebuke of Seventh Prince for his failure to manage the situation properly.

The second edict put all members of Torchlight on the Most Wanted list. In all counties and prefectures, the Five Greater Celestial Divisions, and all associated government departments, were to scour the lands and kill anyone connected to Torchlight.

The third edict named Yao Tianyan, direct descendant of Heavenly Marquis Yao, as the acting governor of Sea-Sealing County. It also named the righteous folk hero Zheng Kaiyi as the new lieutenant governor, and gave him the authority to recommend a new governor for the county, as long as that person was in the Void Returning level. If so, then Sea-Sealing County could appoint a new governor with no further formalities. [1]

The fourth edict removed the commanders-in-chief as the palace lords of the three palaces, and instead promoted the existing deputy palace lords to those positions.

The fifth edict bestowed swordsage Xu Qing with a golden identity medallion, a yellow robe, the right to attend the Imperial University, and grade-one battle credit.[2]

Those five imperial edicts were announced publicly everywhere.

In a very short time, all human regions and counties were deeply shaken, and Xu Qing's name spread far and wide.

There were two things in those edicts that were particularly important. The first was Zheng Kaiyi's mission. The second was Sea-Sealing County's right to appoint a new governor with no further formalities.

Clearly, the emperor knew how important the situation was, but at the same time, couldn't change the law. That said, he wasn't going to ignore Sea-Sealing County's wishes. That was why he gave such an important mission to Master Seventh. After all, everyone in Sea-Sealing County now knew

about the relationship between Master Seventh and Xu Qing. As for the new governor being able to take office without further formalities, that essentially guaranteed that as long as Xu Qing reached Void Returning... then he would be the governor of Sea-Sealing County.

Sea-Sealing County's moment of catastrophe had passed. Everything... went back to normal.

But to Xu Qing, it was just a new starting point. It was time to set sail again....

Chapter 539: Do You Have a Daoist Partner, Xu Qing?

It was the twelfth month of year 2932 of the Dark War calendar, and as the winter wind blew through the fields and the dry forests, it brought with it snowflakes that danced like fine powder. It was as if the wind wished to cover over all of the scars left behind by that ancient foe who had so recently visited the lands. When the wind reached the county capital, it swirled about, falling onto the streets, the rooftops, and the bustling people. It became a white mist that filled the world.

The county capital had changed a lot during the last half a month.

Just as the snowy wind sought to cover the scars in the lands, the cultivators from the three palaces joined forces with the Swordsage Courts of the various prefectures, along with all of the countless sects there, to rebuild Sea-Sealing County. Swordsage veterans traveled to the prefectures to join the rescue operations and help suppress any chaos being unleashed by nonhumans.

Gradually, the effects of the Lieutenant Governor's Coup began to fade. The recovery was truly underway.

Marquis Yao and Master Seventh were both tied together because of Xu Qing. Though they didn't know each other at first, after starting to work together, they both earned each other's respect and admiration. Apparently, they had similar personalities in some ways, and thus, they got along well.

The wind brought with it a new era to Sea-Sealing County.

The deputy palace lords of the three palaces were now the official palace lords. In the case of the Swordsage Palace, that was Li Yunshan. Honor Guard Sun was the highest-ranking of the honor guards, so he became the new deputy palace lord.

Honor Guard Sima had another mission to handle.

Xu Qing's life was vastly different than before. The rewards mentioned in the imperial edict hadn't yet been officially distributed, but thanks to his Master and Marquis Yao, he knew full well how significant they would be.

The golden identity medallion brought with it the right of reprieve from the death penalty. As long as the bearer didn't commit treason, they could nullify the death penalty one time. The yellow robe was a gift directly from the imperial clan, and provided a huge boost in status. The right to attend the Imperial University was also very significant. Ever since ancient times, the legacies of humankind were kept in the Imperial University, which meant that the place could be a lot of help when breaking out of Spirit Trove and into Void Returning. Beyond that, whichever student ranked highest in the university's standardized testing would have a chance to be recruited by one of the holy lands. If they passed the recruitment assessment, then they would be able to travel to the holy lands. The holy lands existed outside of the Revered Ancient mainland, and were on a much higher level of existence.

In the nearly 3,000 years of the Dark War calendar, not one single student had ever passed the recruitment assessment.

As for the grade-one battle credit, that was a massive honor, and there were less than a hundred living people who had it.

That said, all of those rewards were things Xu Qing could live without. His daily life hadn't changed very much, except for the fact that he no longer lived in his sword pavilion. He now resided in the old Secretariat Division in the Swordsage Palace.

At the urging of Marquis Yao and Master Seventh, Xu Qing had once again reestablished the Secretariat Division. It was now a special department in Sea-Sealing County, and it oversaw, not just one specific palace, but the entire county. In other words, it surpassed the palaces.

As for Xu Qing, he continued to serve as the secretary-general.

He worked for the Governor Marquis Yao, as well as Master Seventh, to consolidate all reports from throughout the county. And thus, he assisted them in county administration.

There were a lot more members of the Secretariat Division than before. Now, the Secretariat Division didn't have offices just in the Swordsage Palace, but also in the other two palaces. At Kong Xianglong's suggestion, Secretariat Division offices were set up in all the prefectures as well, and they would cooperate with the Swordsage Courts there to keep the prefectures safe.

Kong Xianglong took responsibility for all that. He was now a member of the Secretariat Division as well, as was Sir Mountain-River, who had recovered from his injuries.

The Captain was a bit jealous of all the authority Kong Xianglong had, so he pestered Xu Qing into starting a Black Ops Division. When it came to recommendations for who to lead the Black Ops Division, the Captain naturally put himself forward. Once he took over, he became obsessed with his duties. And before long, he organized a mission outside of the county capital.

Before leaving, he clasped Xu Qing's shoulder and flashed a haughty grin. "Little Junior Brother, the old man is the lieutenant governor now. In order to keep the family fortune safe, your Eldest Brother can't just sit around idly. I'm going to make sure the Black Ops Division does its part!"

Xu Qing noted how the Captain was trying not to look excited, and then thought back to a transfer order submitted by Li Shitao from the Administration Palace. He looked around.

"What are you looking at?" the Captain asked, stunned. Before, he had been looking very lofty and heroic, but seeing Xu Qing looking around caused him to feel a bit guilty.

"I'm looking for Li Shitao," Xu Qing answered sincerely.

"Your sister-in-law? She demanded to come with me, and though I'm not exactly thrilled by that, I couldn't refuse her." Clearing his throat, the Captain abandoned that conversation topic and threw his arm around Xu Qing's neck. "Let me tell you, little Ah Qing, I'm not taking this trip for the purposes of romance. I have two main goals. One relates to the Black Ops Division. But the other... is that I'm starting to plan a *really* big job!

“After that job, you and I are going to be even more awesome than we are now. To prep for this job, I need to go out and start collecting intelligence reports about the Moonrite Region. Don’t worry, I’ll be back soon.” [1]

“Moonrite Region?” Xu Qing said, his eyes narrowing. Nowadays, he was very sensitive to the word ‘moon.’

The Captain blinked a few times, waved his hand in a ‘hushing’ gesture, then lowered his voice.

“Just wait until I’m back. I’ll explain everything then. Suffice it to say, little Junior Brother, you need to be ready to travel. This time around, your Eldest Brother is going to take you to accomplish something consummately amazing!”

The Captain licked his lips, his eyes flashing with that crazy light that Xu Qing was very familiar with. Humming a little tune, he led his people out of the county capital.

Xu Qing was currently standing on a limestone platform next to the entrance of the Swordsage Palace, watching the Captain leave.

“Come on out,” he said coolly.

Ning Yan poked his head out of the doorway of a nearby building, then chuckled self-deprecatingly as he hurried over to Xu Qing. Ning Yan feared the Captain, and had also been very worried about the Captain dragging him along. Knowing that hiding wouldn’t do any good, he had repeatedly begged Xu Qing for help in that regard.

“Exalted Secretary-General, as it turns out, I really *can* serve as your secretary!”

“Did you track down Qing Qiu?” Xu Qing said, looking at him.

“Yes! That shrew—”

Xu Qing’s gaze turned cold.

Ning Yan gulped and quickly reworded things. “The exalted Qing Qiu, who was previously affiliated with the Church of Departure in the Emperor-Receiving Prefecture, has left for the continent of South Phoenix....”

Xu Qing nodded and didn’t say anything further.

Ning Yan then hurried off. After he was some distance away, he breathed a sigh of relief. He had to admit that Xu Qing had really become a lot more impressive in the past half month. As Ning Yan knew, that was the pressure he exuded as the destiny aura of Sea-Sealing County gathered on him. Even though Xu Qing technically had experienced only a single tribulation, the destiny aura of the county made it so that no one could casually defy him.

Meanwhile, Xu Qing ignored Ning Yan and made his way toward the Swordsage Palace’s Records Repository.

During the past half month, they had been going there a lot. At his request, the Administration Palace and Justice Palace, as well as the Governor’s Mansion, had been sending their ancient records there for him to study. There were a lot of records to go through.

On the way to the Records Repository, a little white snake peeked out from his sleeve. Looking at him with big, innocent eyes, she curiously asked, “Big Bro Xu Qing, who’s Qing Qiu?”

Xu Qing looked down and stroked the little snake’s head. “A childhood friend of mine,” he said gently, “that I encountered again later in life. I’ll introduce you later.”

The little white snake seemed very pleased with the way he was petting her. Closing her eyes, she laughed, and it sounded like tiny bells tinkling.

“Coo. Coooo.”

Xu Qing also laughed softly. Back in the Spirit Abyss, Ling’er had been the one to save him right before he lost consciousness.

She had not yet fully absorbed the Ancient Spirit destiny aura. It was a long and slow process. Therefore, she was currently in the form of a little white snake that stayed wrapped around his right wrist.

When Xu Qing arrived at the Records Repository, he continued browsing through the records and information there. Hours passed. Days.

Three days later, Xu Qing sighed. He had found some useful information, but not very much. He was looking for information about life lamps, especially the way to thoroughly integrate them into oneself. He remembered the Captain once mentioning that many people had tried unsuccessfully to do that through the years.

After poring through so many ancient records recently, Xu Qing had come to find that what the Captain said was entirely true. There were historical examples of people succeeding. However, all of them were before the broken face of the god arrived.

Long before Emperor Ancient Spirit conquered Revered Ancient, there was an Imperial Sovereign of antiquity who walked a path of defiance. Normally speaking, once a cultivator reached the Imperial Sovereign level, they could transform their blood and thus generate a life lamp. Later on, that Imperial Sovereign’s descendants could be blessed by the good fortune of using that life lamp in Foundation Establishment. But the Imperial Sovereign in question defied that custom.

Similar to Xu Qing, while he was in the Foundation Establishment level, he slaughtered descendants of the Ancient Emperors and Imperial Sovereigns, took their life lamps, and made them his own. He nearly died in the process. But in the end, he managed to fully integrate those life lamps into his own blood, making them part of himself. Then, after many more near-death experiences, he rose to the highest heights and became an Imperial Sovereign.

In the lieutenant governor’s ancient records, that Imperial Sovereign was mentioned, but only in passing. After all, those events were in the ancient past. What was more, the only reason there was any mention of him at all was that he walked such a heaven-defying path. As for how true the story was, it was hard to tell.

“Light from beyond the heavens?” Xu Qing murmured. The story of that Imperial Sovereign mentioned those words. Apparently, the reason he could integrate the life lamps into his own body was because of some mysterious thing referred to as ‘light from beyond the heavens.’

That light from beyond the heavens was only mentioned in this one story about this specific Imperial Sovereign. Xu Qing hadn't been able to find any other clues about it in any of the other ancient records.

A few days ago he'd asked his Master about it. Not even Master Seventh had heard of such a light. Xu Qing also consulted Marquis Yao, who didn't know anything, but offered to ask a friend of his in the imperial capital about it. Feeling a bit disappointed, Xu Qing went back to the Secretariat Division. There, he worked on processing various documents being sent in from the prefectures. The next day, he got a voice message from Marquis Yao.

"Xu Qing, I got a response to my inquiry. I also have something I want to give you. Do you mind stopping by Yao Mansion?"

Eyes glittering, Xu Qing left the Swordsage Palace and hurried toward Yao Mansion.

Along the way, he noted how busy everyone on the street seemed to be, and how all of them seemed a lot happier than before. None of them were suffering any poisonous effects from the pallid boluses they had consumed. That matter had been confirmed after Marquis Yao and Master Seventh summoned alchemy grandmasters from all over Sea-Sealing County. After careful inspection, they had declared the pallid boluses to be harmless.

However, many commoners still harbored doubts. Therefore, Marquis Yao suggested to distribute a harmless elixir and label it as an antidote to the pallid bolus. Before long, that antidote was being distributed free of charge to everyone in the county capital. They called it a 'pallid-diffusing pill.'

The reality was that the pill mostly just strengthened the physical body. But the result was much rejoicing on the part of the people. What was more, Xu Qing learned a valuable lesson from that about human nature. Whether in terms of the process or the result, everything worked out in the end.

Clearing his mind, Xu Qing hurried to Yao Mansion.

Once he arrived, he was received with all due solemnity. The Yao Clan cultivators who had been released from the Corrections Division had all learned that a few words from Xu Qing had spared them from a deadly catastrophe. Therefore, a large crowd of people from the Yao Clan were waiting respectfully for him at the front gate. Their eyes shone with gratitude as they clasped hands and bowed deeply to him.

"We offer respectful greetings, Secretary-General Xu."

The crowd was made up mostly of elderly ones, women and children. Yao Yunhui and Yao Feihe were both there. [2]

Yao Yunhui had a complicated facial expression. Before, she had been alluring and curvaceous. Now she seemed haggard and had clearly lost a lot of weight. That said, she was still very attractive. In fact, to some people, she might seem weaker than before, and thus more deserving of tenderness.

Yao Feihe, meanwhile, wore the same formal court attire she usually wore. However, the disaster which had befallen her clan, and especially being imprisoned, had left her much thinner, even a bit sallow. When Xu Qing first met her, she had seemed very graceful and poised. Now she seemed a lot more down-to-earth.

When she met Xu Qing's eyes, she gave a curtsying bow, as did Yao Yunhui.

Xu Qing hurried forward and physically lifted them up from their bowing. He glanced at Yao Yunhui and those around her, then focused on Yao Feihe.

"Marquis Yao is my Senior," he said. "Please, ladies, there's no need for this formality."

"Young Sir Xu," Yao Feihe said softly, "your kindness is something our Yao Clan will never forget." As the surrounding members of the crowd gave way, she and Yao Yunhui led Xu Qing into Yao Mansion. Yao Feihe walked next to Xu Qing. Yao Yunhui trailed behind them. The fragrant aroma of perfume filled the air, which was something Xu Qing wasn't used to. The little white snake on his wrist peeked curiously out of his sleeve.

Eventually, they reached the Yao Clan's primary reception hall.

Marquis Yao was there waiting, a smile on his face.

"Greetings, Governor," Xu Qing said, bowing respectfully.

Marquis Yao smiled and indicated for Xu Qing to take a seat. Instead of taking the seat of honor, Marquis Yao sat to the side. Seeing that, Xu Qing felt even more respect than before, and also chose a seat to the side. [3]

Yao Feihe and Yao Yunhui poured tea for them.

The one serving Xu Qing's tea was Yao Yunhui. As she poured the steaming tea from the pot, she looked at Xu Qing out of the corner of her eye, and she suddenly looked a bit distracted. The events of the past flashed through her mind. She almost couldn't believe that the new swordsage from less than two years ago had somehow risen to such incredible heights. In her distraction, she overfilled the cup, and as the tea spilled onto the table, Xu Qing turned to look at her. Only then did Yao Yunhui react. She quickly took a few steps back.

Yao Feihe seemed similarly distracted. However her reasons for distraction were different from those of Yao Yunhui, but were no less profound. She was thinking about the first time she'd met Xu Qing, back when her close friend Plumdark introduced him. Back then, she didn't pay much attention to him, as he was nothing more than a puny little swordsage. Maybe he did have a 30,000-meter pillar of light from the Grand Emperor, but he was far from being grown up.

Meanwhile she was the younger sister of Marquis Yao, who even had a small role to play in the imperial capital. Back then, the civil way she conversed with Xu Qing was for the sake of Plumdark. The reality was that Yao Feihe didn't want Plumdark to place limitations on her own future. Yao Feihe felt like a mighty tree standing next to Plumdark, there to make sure no one did anything to besmirch her honor.

But after that, things changed rapidly, and everything was turned upside down. The next thing she knew, Xu Qing was acknowledged by the people of Sea-Sealing County as their next official governor. Because of him, her brother's name was cleared, and she and her entire clan were spared a deadly calamity. Thinking back now to that time when she first met Xu Qing, she realized that he was actually the mighty tree. She just hadn't realized it at the time.

As a result, she couldn't help but be a bit distracted. Because of her distraction and mixed emotions, she suddenly found herself feeling a bit envious of Plumdark.

Marquis Yao noted the odd expressions on the faces of his sister and daughter. He was a bit surprised. He looked at Xu Qing, then his daughter, and then his sister. Finally, he cleared his throat.

Yao Yunhui and Yao Feihe quickly bowed their heads and left the reception hall.

Soon, Marquis Yao and Xu Qing were alone.

Marquis Yao looked at Xu Qing. Xu Qing looked back at him, his expression the same as always.

The marquis spoke first. "Xu Qing, do you have a daoist partner yet?"

Xu Qing's jaw nearly dropped. Before he could say anything, the white snake poked her head out of his sleeve and glared at Marquis Yao.

"Coo. Coooo!"

Marquis Yao glanced at the snake, smiled, and then dropped the subject. Waving his hand, he took out a blood-colored lamp shaped like a wing. He put it down in front of Xu Qing.

"This lamp is for you."

Chapter 540: Last Night's Wind Brings a Starry Night Sky (part 1)

Xu Qing's pupils constricted.

He recognized this lamp. It was a hellspirit bloodwing lamp! Back when he was in Holytide territory in disguise as a Nightshade, he had acquired one of these lamps, and currently had it inside of him as one of his dao souls. However, the lamp he currently had was the left wing, which provided a boost to speed. In front of him now was the right wing.

Many thoughts were running through his mind as he looked up at Marquis Yao.

Marquis Yao looked back at him with a meaningful expression. Smiling, he lifted his cup and took a sip of tea. He didn't speak.

Xu Qing likewise didn't say anything. He knew that in Sea-Sealing County, both the governor and the palace lords were all complicated people. Considering that Marquis Yao was one of that group of five people who were considered the most powerful in Sea-Sealing County, he was just the same.

All in all, not just anyone could befriend so many nonhumans, and earn their trust. Nor could many people keep the truth about themselves hidden for so long, only to reveal it right at the perfect time. Even more telling was that, in the end, he had identified all members of his clan who truly preferred nonhumans over humans, and he had purged them with blood.

Whether it was in terms of his thinking ability or his methods, Marquis Yao was among the best of the best. It was no coincidence that he was giving Xu Qing this specific lamp.

Back during the battle at the altar, I revealed my life lamp umbrellas. I guess that was a bit of a slip-up.... Of course, it wasn't as if he'd had much choice in the heat of the moment.

Xu Qing was right: Marquis Yao had noted his life lamp umbrellas, then used a secret identity of his among the Holytides, plus other connections, to secure the matching lamp.

Upon seeing Xu Qing's thoughtful expression, Marquis Yao smiled. He could only hope that this lesson would help Xu Qing to be a bit more thoughtful in the future, and thus grow up a bit faster, at least in terms of thinking ability. The lesson had been emphasized enough, so Marquis Yao put down his cup of tea.

"Although it might not be obvious to someone paying attention to the war, the Holytides actually suffered losses as significant as our own. For example, most of the small nations around the Ten Entrails Tree were destroyed. And many of their Black Guard cultivators died."

Having reached this point, Marquis Yao stopped talking for a moment and looked Xu Qing in the eyes.

"Some died before. Some died in the last half a month. During the transfer of the Heavengale Imperial Palace, many records were lost. Emperor Heavengale is very apologetic about it."

Xu Qing's eyes narrowed slightly.

"Xu Qing, given your current status, you have the right to know a few things. For years, the governor, myself, and Brother Liangxiu were working on a complicated plan to earn the trust of the Holytides. My job was to deal primarily with Emperor Heavengale, to convince him to desert the Holytides and rejoin humankind!"

Marquis Yao's words caused Xu Qing's heart to start pounding. Considering that the Holytides on the northern front had been the forces of Emperor Heavengale and Emperor Moonmist, it explained how Marquis Yao had managed to somehow avoid getting killed.

"I got about eighty percent of the way to achieving my goal. If I'd had ten more years, I could have succeeded... Unfortunately, things changed. In the fighting on the northern front, Emperor Moonmist was such a menacing force that we even suspected he had human traitors working for him..." Marquis Yao's eyes turned cold. "The deaths of Brother Hengxin and Brother Rongyu are not as simple as they seem. When Emperor Heavengale held his hand and allowed me to escape, Seventh Prince arrived and took control. Given that he showed up out of nowhere to save me, I had my suspicions about what was going on. But I had no choice other than to start working for him."

Xu Qing picked up his cup and looked at the tea swirling inside.

Marquis Yao kept talking. "Xu Qing, I'm telling you all of this so that you can hopefully see the bigger picture. Right now, you're more than just a swordsage.

"You have status. But you're also like a game piece on the board. What assets you have, you need to use. Based on what I've heard, Emperor Heavengale is currently representing their ancestral emperor in the negotiations with Seventh Prince. One of the things they're haggling over are territory rights.

“We’re going to be taking over several counties. Plus, we need to expand Sea-Sealing County....

“On the surface, the Holytides have cut their ties to the Nightshades. But given how long I’ve dealt with them, and everything I’ve come to learn about how Holytides think and operate, I don’t think there’s any way they’ll really isolate themselves in that way. They’re definitely going to keep some secret connections to the Nightshades.

“For example, in the negotiation party from the Kingdom of Heavengale are members of their nobility, in other words, people in the top two levels of their caste hierarchy. From what I’ve heard, one of them received a caste promotion from a Nightshade godchild.”

Marquis Yao’s eyes glittered as he looked at Xu Qing. It was very rare for him to speak so openly with other people.

Xu Qing’s facial expression remained the same as ever. Inside he was thinking that, after everything that had happened, he could trust Marquis Yao. What was more, there didn’t seem any reason to hide things from him. After some more thought, Xu Qing put down his tea cup, took out a jade slip, released some of his violet moon aura, then handed the jade slip to Marquis Yao.

“Mu Ye.” [1]

Marquis Yao took the jade slip and studied it for a short time.

“Xu Qing, although I have a general idea of what you accomplished as the ‘Nightshade godchild,’ there are obviously a lot of details I don’t understand. Do you think you can trust this Mu Ye?”

“I can kill him with a thought,” Xu Qing replied softly.

Marquis Yao smiled and nodded. Next, he went on to explain to Xu Qing what he had learned about the ‘light from beyond the heavens.’

“As the name implies, this type of light comes from beyond the Revered Ancient mainland. More specifically, they’re a mysterious type of light beam that exists in the void. No one knows where they come from, and they’re extremely rare. It’s highly uncommon for them to reach Revered Ancient, and it’s very hard to capture and preserve them.

“At least, that was the situation before the broken face of the god arrived. After the face arrived, they virtually disappeared. They can indeed be used to integrate life lamps, but the cost is immense. You have to spend some of your own life force.”

Xu Qing sighed inwardly. It sounded like getting light from beyond the heavens would be *as hard as fishing a needle from the sea*. In fact, it seemed almost impossible. After chatting for a bit longer, Xu Qing bid farewell to Marquis Yao. By the time he left Yao Mansion, it was evening.

Once out in the open, he heard Ling’er’s voice.

“Big Bro Xu Qing, you need to be careful around those two female cultivators! There was something very strange about the way they were looking at you. Especially the one who spilled the tea. There’s something very fishy about her. You absolutely, positively have to be careful, Big Bro Xu Qing. I fear they might be trying to hurt you!”

Ling’er seemed very sincere.

In response, Xu Qing thought back to the situation as a whole. Considering what happened with Zhang Siyun, it seemed entirely likely that Yao Yunhui might be plotting against him. He nodded. In contrast, he wasn’t sure what to make of Yao Feihe. However, he decided to keep an eye on the situation.

Ling’er was very pleased that Xu Qing seemed to agree with her. She felt very useful at being able to help him keep an eye out for dangers. Thus, she flew out from Xu Qing’s sleeve and coiled up on his shoulder next to his ear.

“Big Bro Xu Qing,” she whispered, “I can actually be very useful. Once I can take human form again, which will be soon, I can even do housework! Oh, right. I can sing too! You see, I’m a very quick learner, and some of my Wood Spirit friends taught me. I’m pretty good! Can I sing a song for you?”

Ling’er seemed so happy that Xu Qing couldn’t help but smile and nod.

Ling’er started to sing in a voice like a misty rain, which reached all the way to Xu Qing’s heart.

“The moonlight, diffuse.

"Sunlight on the trellised rail, abstruse;

"Rain falls, light and loose;

"Heartbreak ebbs and flows, but never is reduced.

"Say not you’ll join me in your next life, just say we’re fated to meet again like before....

"I have no regrets in this life, I just hope the flowers will bloom for you evermore.

"In the next life, I’ll look back, smile, and wait millions of years for the fated encore....”

Ling’er’s young, tender voice seemed to flow right to Xu Qing’s heart.

As the sun slowly sank toward the horizon, he walked the streets of the capital, keeping his aura concealed, and hiding any trace of his passage. He passed the people, and he passed the clamor, and he felt calm. As the wind blew past him, he listened to the song, and his hair drifted along with the lyrics.

When the red light of sunset arrived, the little white snake almost looked like a young woman, her face flushed as she softly sang.

Some distance away in the Lieutenant Governor’s Mansion, Master Seventh stood in a building looking down at the street. His gaze fell on Xu Qing, and he smiled. Marquis Yao stepped out of thin air to join him. They stood together.

Master Seventh sighed. "How wonderful to be young."

Marquis Yao laughed softly. "Couldn't have said it better myself. How nice to be young."

"Exactly." Master Seventh looked at the marquis. "Now, considering that my apprentice saved your clan and cleared your name, you have to keep a close watch over him and keep him safe. If you don't... if your heart turns cold... then no one will step out to say they object to what happens."

"You still don't trust me, do you?" Marquis Yao asked quietly.

A very meaningful look appeared in Master Seventh's eyes. "Something occurred to me recently. When everything happened the other day... if I hadn't said something, would you have stepped in?"

Marquis Yao looked at Xu Qing off in the distance, and took a moment to think seriously about the question. He even visualized the situation that played out half a month ago.

"I probably would have."

Master Seventh didn't respond for a while. After looking at the sunset for a time, he said, "How did the discussion go with him?"

"He gave me a name. I'll have my people connect with this person, and we can use him to keep Seventh Prince in check. The three prefectures we lost haven't been returned yet. Sea-Sealing County isn't strong enough to be a threat to anyone right now." Marquis Yao turned to look at Master Seventh. "Any progress with the puppet corpses of Brother Hengxin and Brother Rongyu?"

Master Seventh shook his head. "They're the next generation of the experimental god body. I haven't even been able to restart them yet. But I have some ideas. I'll be heading back to Seven Blood Eyes soon to retrieve my other research material. In fact, I plan to move Seven Blood Eyes here to the county capital."

Marquis Yao nodded. He didn't have any issues with Seven Blood Eyes being moved to the capital. Having no further questions, he turned and left.

After Marquis Yao was gone, Master Seventh looked down at his hands. Visible on his palm was a magical symbol formed from god vitality. It was a unique little thing he had been researching, and it had one purpose. It detected lies. Normally speaking, gods were supposed to be omniscient and omnipotent. Although that was only true relatively speaking, what it did mean was that gods were much more easily able to tell the difference between what was true and what wasn't.

As Master Seventh looked at the symbol, it flickered. He nodded.

He was being completely sincere, but at the same time, not totally honest. Well, people's hearts can change. Since Sea-Sealing County is supposed to belong to Fourth Sib... it will be his.

Master Seventh's eyes shone as he thought for a moment, then took out a jade slip to send a voice message to Xu Qing.

"Fourth Sib, in three days I'm leaving the county capital. I'm taking a trip back to Seven Blood Eyes. It's been a while since you've been back. Want to come along?"

Chapter 540: Last Night's Wind Brings a Starry Night Sky (part 2)

"Pockets lined with gold, I return home; I walk the night clad in brocade silk..."

Xu Qing had just arrived back at the Swordsage Palace, and was immersed in Ling'er's singing. Eventually, he noticed his jade slip vibrating, and he listened to his Master's message.

Looking at the little white snake, he asked, "Ling'er, do you want to go back to Seven Blood Eyes?"

"Sure!" she replied happily. "I'm still part of the Seven Blood Eyes Intelligence Division, after all!"

After seeing how happy that made Ling'er, Xu Qing thought back to all the people he knew in Seven Blood Eyes and realized he really did want to take a trip back. He needed to tend to Master Sixth's gravestone. It had also been a long time since he paid a visit to Sergeant Thunder's grave, or Grandmaster Bai's. Beyond that, there was another thing Xu Qing needed to do.

Taking out his jade slip, he replied to his Master. *"Master, do you think we could swing by the Smokewights on the way back? I have a little debt to settle with them."*

From the time he was young, Xu Qing had always been the type of person to hold a grudge.

Three days later, a Seven Blood Eyes dreadnaught rose into the sky over the county capital. It was pitch black, had ornamental rocks and buildings on its back, and could carry a hundred thousand cultivators.

Master Seventh stood atop the highest building on the dreadnaught's superstructure, and next to him was Xu Qing. Behind them were a thousand cultivators, all of them swordsages and veterans of the war. They were being led by Honor Guard Sima, as ordered by Palace Lord Li Yunshan and Marquis Yao. This group was Xu Qing's guard division while he traveled through Sea-Sealing County.

Daoist Sima wasn't just an honor guard now. He had another identity. He was Xu Qing's dao protector. It was his responsibility to keep Xu Qing safe in all circumstances.

In addition to the Dreadnaught, there was another huge entity up in the sky, hardly visible in the clouds.

Qingqin.

He hadn't planned to come along, but after Xu Qing indicated he would have a good meal along the way, he'd excitedly agreed. Qingqin seemed a bit impatient, and kept letting loose exasperated caws. The clouds vibrated in response, and the cries echoed out so clearly that all mortals and cultivators could hear them.

As everyone in the county capital looked on, Xu Qing, Daoist Sima, and the rest of the thousand cultivators clasped hands and bowed. Then the dreadnaught rumbled to life and shot over the horizon. As it sped over the lands of Sea-Sealing County, it left behind a streak of light and expanding ripples in the air. Qingqin gave it added speed, making it streak along like a lightning bolt. In less than a day, it passed over the border of the county capital, and soon reached a boundless desert.

As soon as they entered the desert, the majestic power of the dreadnaught combined with Qingqin's hunger became a somber and desolate aura that blurred the sky. The intense heat of the desert instantly lessened as a result.

Killing intent rippled out from Qingqin and the dreadnaught.

That was even more the case considering that Daoist Sima and the other veteran swordsages had learned along the way that their first stop was a branch division of the Smokewights.

These swordsages had experienced the baptism of war. They had climbed mountains of corpses and swam through seas of blood, and thus viewed slaughter and death differently than before. Though they weren't completely indifferent to such things, it took more than their mere mention to move them. That level of increased calm just made their somber and desolate aura even more striking.

As the dreadnaught sped along, the denizens of the desert trembled in fear. Not even the lightscraggs dared to come out into the open.

The Smokewights in this location weren't the only representatives of their species. Because Smokewights were made of smoke, they could be found in any location where there was smoke. However, because of the environment, there were a lot of Smokewights in this particular branch location.

After the defeat of the lieutenant governor, Xu Qing had explained to Marquis Yao how the Smokewights were connected to Torchlight. Thus, this branch had already been locked down during the half-month cleanup operation in the county.

The Smokewights had done their best to get back into the good graces of the humans. But after the suffering brought by the Lieutenant Governor's Coup, humans needed an outlet for their pent-up emotions. That, coupled with the fact that Torchlight accomplices were now on the most wanted list, ensured that the Smokewights weren't allowed to simply escape.

All of the Smokewight branch locations had been locked down, and few individuals managed to escape.

However, there was one specific branch location that Xu Qing had isolated to handle himself. This was the place he had visited on his trip back from Ten Entrails Tree. During that extremely critical time, he had requested use of their teleportation portal, only to have them intentionally delay him. He had not forgotten how he very respectfully waited to use the portal, only to be treated with malice. Back then, the Smokewights had just looked at him with coldness in their eyes.

Because they delayed him, Xu Qing ended up running into Chu Tianqun and being forced into a battle to the death in a minor world fragment that they controlled. Had it not been for Ling'er, Xu Qing would have died in that fight. What was more, after he came out victorious, he remembered a Smokewight out in the desert, watching him. His grudge with the Smokewights had existed ever since then. [1]

As the dreadnaught screamed through the desert, Xu Qing's eyes were as cold as ice. Sensing Xu Qing's emotional state, Qingqin let loose ear-piercing cries.

Half a day later, they reached the Smokewight city that Xu Qing remembered so well. From a distance, it looked illusory, as if it were smoke with no physical structures in it. Of course, Smokewights existed in a state of smoke to begin with. When it came to open combat, they usually

used puppets, which they normally stored in their minor worlds. However, part of the sanctions imposed by the humans involved the destruction of their minor worlds and the sealing of all their cities. Considering how powerful humans were in the county, the Smokewights hadn't been able to fight back at all.

That was when Xu Qing had requested that this particular city be left alone. And thus, they had simmered in anxiety until this point. Now, Xu Qing's arrival signaled their imminent destruction.

Qingqin led the charge with an excited caw. Magenta light flared, smashing through all barriers. Then three heads shot forth and began absorbing everything. Anguished howls rang out as smoke streamed into Qingqin's mouths. He let loose an exuberant cry.

Next, Daoist Sima gave orders to the swordsages, and a thousand beams of light shot into the Smokewight forces.

Xu Qing stood on the dreadnaught, watching coldly. He did not have a heart that overflowed with pity. As soon as the Smokewights began colluding with Torchlight, their fate had been sealed. It didn't matter if it was because they had been paid off, or because they were hoping to gain from the relationship in the future. The Smokewights had chosen to help Torchlight fight against humankind. From that point, they should have been prepared to pay for any failure with their own blood. It was a brutal world in which people lived by the maxim 'an eye for an eye.'

The extermination didn't take long. After all, this was only one branch of the larger species. Considering the extreme level of force at play, there was no way they could fight back. Four hours later, the smoke cleared, and there was nothing left of the Smokewight city.

Qingqin didn't seem sated, and gave Xu Qing a caw that seemed to be a request for more food.... Xu Qing considered it, then nodded. Enlivened, Qingqin flew off over the horizon. The dreadnaught followed.

On the way to the teleportation portal, Xu Qing took a bamboo slip out of his bag of holding and scratched the Smokewights off the list.

Off to the side, Master Seventh looked at the bamboo slip and noticed 'Crown Prince of Violet and Cyan' carved at the top of the list. He also noted how many names had been crossed off, and then his eyes stopped at one particular name that hadn't been crossed off.

'The Captain.' Behind it were a host of question marks, many of which were crossed out.

Master Seventh *wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry*. Pointing at the Captain's name, he asked, "What's that all about?"

Xu Qing looked at the Captain's name, reached up to cross it off, then paused. "Crossing a name off means that person is dead, so... it would be unlucky to cross this one off." He put the bamboo slip away. Then he took a look at his iron skewer. The skewer vibrated in a show of respect.

"Master, what happened to that fish bone?" Xu Qing felt like Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior and the shadow had fallen so far behind him in battle prowess that it seemed like a good idea to replace them.

The patriarch could sense what Xu Qing was thinking. The skewer vibrated more strongly. At the same time, the shadow rippled and emanated emotional fluctuations of fear and pleading. Xu Qing ignored them.

Ling'er could sense what was going on, and looked curiously at the shadow. The shadow shivered. Changing strategies, it sent fawning fluctuations toward Ling'er.

Meanwhile, Master Seventh smiled. He had long since become aware of all the various assets possessed by his apprentice. And ever since finding out Xu Qing had the finger of a god, he generally wouldn't be surprised by anything.

"I broke the fish bone into three parts, and I'm still ensorcelling them. I'd say it'll take another half month before it's done. What a pity we lost the three fish bones Bai Xiaozhuo had."

Of course, Master Seventh had long since inquired about the details of what happened after Xu Qing and Bai Xiaozhuo teleported off the altar, and Xu Qing had explained everything in detail.

And thus, the shadow continued to cozy up to Ling'er, even going so far as to take a variety of shapes to amuse her. As Ling'er laughed contentedly, the dreadnaught flew over the desert and eventually reached the teleportation portal leading toward Emperor-Receiving Prefecture.

Two days later, Xu Qing caught sight of Emperor-Receiving Prefecture's northern tundra.

The wind here was colder than in the county capital. There were many more snowflakes, drifting down from the sky, covering the lands and heavily reducing visibility.

However, there were several thousand people standing in the snowy wind. As the dreadnaught got closer, those people became clearly visible. In front of them was the grand elder of the Swordsage Court. Expression somber, he clasped hands and bowed.

"We offer respectful greetings, Lieutenant Governor."

The thousands of people behind him also bowed. Etiquette had to be followed.

Master Seventh was no longer the sect leader of Seven Blood Eyes, he was the lieutenant governor.

There weren't just swordsages in the crowd, there were also many sect cultivators. They had been organized into two groups. One group wore black daoist robes embroidered with blood-red threads. They were from the Church of Departure. The other group wore golden daoist robes that seemed extremely luxurious, and pulsed with immortal energy. They were from the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society. It didn't matter if the cultivators' daoist robes pulsed with death and blood, or refinement that surpassed mortality, they all had extremely respectful expressions on their faces.

Master Seventh's facial expression remained the same as ever, and he didn't seem moved at all by the deference shown to him. He seemed like a person who, after many years of life, wasn't concerned about putting on an ostentatious display upon returning home from afar.

Xu Qing noted his Master's reaction, and felt even more admiration than before. He also felt that he could be more like his Master in that regard.

"Master, Little Junior Brother..." someone called from the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society forces. Then a person emerged wearing a Seven Blood Eyes daoist robe. He

had a tall hat with the character 'forbidden' on it, was unusually thin, and had dark circles under his eyes.

Xu Qing recognized him immediately. It was Third Elder Brother. However, his physical appearance caused Xu Qing to inhale sharply. He was skinnier than before, to the point of being gaunt. It seemed like all the energy had been sucked out of him, leaving him as little more than a husk. What was more, Third Elder Brother was flanked by... eight young women, all of whom were cradling infants. [2]

Master Seventh, his face expressionless, calmly said, "This is just too much!"

From the coldness in Master Seventh's voice, Xu Qing could tell that he was really angry.