

## Timescape 541

Chapter 541: Flowers in the Eyes, Stars in the Heart (part 1)

As the cultivators from the county capital looked on with strange expressions, Third Elder Brother hurried out of the crowd, leaped up onto the dreadnaught, and kowtowed in front of Master Seventh.

“Master, it’s been years since you said it would be difficult for me to overcome the challenge of passion. Thus, I bound my hair with a hat that has the character ‘forbidden’ on it. As of today, my heart has been fully assessed. I’ve overcome the challenge of love. Therefore, I earnestly request that you let me back into your tutelage.”

Third Elder Brother’s voice was soft and reserved. After he finished speaking, he flashed a smile in Xu Qing’s direction. That said, his current demeanor, including his rather forced smile, made him seem a lot less impressive than in the past.

Meanwhile, the eight female disciples from the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society held their children as they followed Third Elder Brother. However, when they noticed the glares of the swordsages, they stopped short of boarding the dreadnaught.

“Eight? That’s it?” Master Seventh said coolly. “When you have ninety-nine, then you’ll be ready to return to me.”

Master Seventh flicked his sleeve, sending Third Elder Brother tumbling off of the dreadnaught.

Stopping in midair, Third Elder Brother sighed and, as everyone watched, once again kowtowed in the direction of the dreadnaught.

Then, Master Seventh invited the Swordsage Court grand elder, plus the patriarchs from the Church of Departure and the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society, to join him in the dreadnaught’s superstructure. There, they apprised Master Seventh of the various intelligence reports from their sects. The Swordsage Court grand elder also provided an update on the recovery work going on in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture.

Xu Qing stood by, occasionally looking at Third Elder Brother off in the distance.

Third Elder Brother remained in a kowtow. It was the same with his daoist partners.

The two sect patriarchs who were giving their reports to Master Seventh occasionally glanced at Xu Qing out of the corners of their eyes. Both of them were aware of Xu Qing’s status in Sea-Sealing County.

“Exalted Lieutenant Governor, as of now, the recovery and rebuilding in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture is about seventy percent complete. Everything should be done within half a month. Furthermore, the orders you gave regarding the remaining half of the experimental god body have been carried out.”

The grand elder from the Swordsage Court clasped hands and bowed, then looked at Xu Qing and smiled.

Xu Qing looked back respectfully. He had always felt a lot of admiration for this grand elder.

After another brief interchange with Master Seventh, the Swordsage Court grand elder and patriarch from the Church of Departure respectfully left.

The patriarch from the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society, who was the Junior Brother of Daoist Sima, hesitated briefly. Then he glanced at his Elder Brother. Daoist Sima looked back with no change in facial expression. Finally, the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society patriarch smiled wryly and clasped hands to Master Seventh.

“Exalted Lieutenant Governor, about Third Highness, he—”

“That’s your business,” Master Seventh said coolly. “I know I clashed with your Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society in the past, but you never told me that he committed such a grave error. It’s only natural for you to punish him.

“I might be the lieutenant governor now, but I can’t *practice favoritism and engage in cronyism*. Nor can I use my position to put pressure on others. Since my Third Sib made such a mistake, I’d say punishing him with eight daoist partners isn’t enough. Go for ninety-nine! That should teach him a lesson.”

The patriarch chuckled bitterly in his heart. He knew that his previous actions had aroused the displeasure of Master Seventh. That was why he’d had no choice but to bring Third Highness along. After all, Third Highness’s Master was now the lieutenant governor; if the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society got too stubborn, they would be courting disaster. All he could do was feed as many replenishing tonics as possible to Third Highness. However, that didn’t do much considering Third Highness had been almost completely drained out. Now, all he could do was grit his teeth and keep trying.

“Exalted Lieutenant Governor, our Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society doesn’t have enough holy daughters to—”

“That’s your problem. Remember, Third Sib’s punishment can only be handled by holy daughters with the proper position and bloodline. Now, see yourself out.”

Master Seventh’s face remained completely expressionless.

The patriarch seemed like he had more to say, but Master Seventh’s eyes were extremely cold, so he just sighed inwardly with regret. He almost couldn’t believe this was happening. How could he have ever guessed that, seemingly overnight, the sect leader of some random little sect that he’d never cared about would suddenly become the lieutenant governor. What was more, he had been keeping his cultivation base hidden so deeply no one knew how strong he really was. The patriarch knew he had to figure out a way to resolve the situation, otherwise the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society’s future in Sea-Sealing County would be uncertain.

The patriarch felt more anxious than ever, but he had no choice but to leave. As he passed by, his Elder Brother Daoist Sima said, “Don’t covet what belongs to others. Repay what needs to be repaid.”

The patriarch seemed to grow a lot older as he left the dreadnaught.

In a balcony on the dreadnaught's superstructure, Master Seventh stood, saying nothing as they flew in the direction of the Eight Sect Coalition.

After enough time had passed for an incense stick to burn, Xu Qing hesitantly said, "Master, about Third Elder Brother..."

"Forget about him!" Master Seventh said, snorting coldly. "Third Sib has always been a very deep thinker. However, all he cares about is profit. He's extremely patient, but at the same time, unpredictable.

"Why do you think he went and provoked the holy daughters of the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society? Why do you think he made it seem like he was fleeing from marriage? He obviously knew the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society was aware of his true identity, and that they would track him down and apprehend him.

"He did everything specifically so the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society would apprehend him in the way he wanted."

Although Xu Qing was the one who had spoken up, Master Seventh was obviously speaking to Daoist Sima as well.

Daoist Sima didn't say anything.

Xu Qing stood there thoughtfully. His Master's words had touched on some very important information. And that was... Third Elder Brother's true identity.

Seeing Xu Qing puzzling over that, Master Seventh continued speaking.

"Emperor-Receiving Prefecture was never very special until ten thousand years ago when the Ghost Emperor passed away into meditation here. As the body nourished the lands of this prefecture, the three spiritual souls became the Three Spirits, and the seven physical souls became the Seven Fiends. The Ghost Emperor's blood fed all living beings, and his core teachings and doctrines allowed numerous sects to rise to prominence. That's why Emperor-Receiving Prefecture changed.

"The Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society possesses more of those core teachings and doctrines than anyone else, especially the will domain. They, a once tiny sect, eventually became the number one organization in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture.

"The reason is that the year the Ghost Emperor passed away into meditation, a child was born into the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society. He was born out of a convergence of the Ghost Emperor's blood, and he led the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society in their rise to prominence. Though he eventually perished, he left behind children.

"Members of that bloodline were considered direct descendants of the Ghost Emperor, and each generation served as leaders in the Supreme Arbiter Immortal

Society. However, over time, the bloodline became diluted, and eventually, those people lost their position of prominence. That said, members with strong blood would occasionally appear. Your Third Elder Brother is one such person. He has the strongest blood of the Ghost Emperor in this generation.

“Thirty years ago when Third Elder Brother was born, and they realized how strong his blood was, the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society tried to refine him into a treasure. That was when he was only a teenager. His allies managed to sneak him out, and later, he became my apprentice.

“That said, he always had a desire to get revenge for what happened. And thus, thanks to his careful planning and preparations, he managed to return to the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society.

“He doesn’t fear death. You see, he might seem human, but in reality, he isn’t a human at all. And he has an innate bloodline ability that, after death, allows him to reawaken in any descendant he chooses. That said, it’s hard for him to recover his consciousness when that happens. That’s why he spent so many licentious years out on the Forbidden Sea. At this point, I doubt even he knows how many descendants he has.

“The reason is to give all of his ancestors a chance to reawaken as well, all for the purpose of ultimately destroying the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society. He’ll likely experience an ancestral reawakening at some point, which is why he has the character ‘forbidden’ on his hat. That said, my cultivation base has its limits, so I’m not sure if the hat I created will work forever.

“In any case, the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society knows all of this. Presumably, the reason they’re keeping him under house arrest and constantly delivering daoist partners to him is that they have another way of refining that bloodline. In the final analysis, though, it’s still a betrayal. If he wasn’t my apprentice, I wouldn’t bother interfering. But he is my apprentice, so things are different.

“If the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society wants to smooth things out, they’ll have to figure out how to do so on their own. All I can say is that when an apprentice kowtows to me, they earn my protection. And if anyone dares to harm my apprentice, I’ll wipe out their entire sect or clan.”

Xu Qing was understandably shaken by all of this information. Third Elder Brother had an innate ability that was very similar to the parasitization technique of the Grueglooms. Except, it was even more nefarious.

Daoist Sima didn’t seem surprised at all by what he was hearing. As a former patriarch of the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society, he’d known such details for a long time. After a moment of

thought, he clasped hands. “Lieutenant Governor, my Junior Brother is at fault in all this. I’ll make sure he provides satisfactory compensation.”

Master Seventh didn’t respond. Xu Qing also maintained silence. This was a matter that surpassed him, and there was no need for him to provide input.

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The next day, the dreadnaught passed over the Supreme Arbiter Salvation Mountains, then followed the Everlasting Immortal Profundity River until the Eight Sect Coalition appeared.

The bells tolled twenty-one times, which was the highest level of honor, and indicated the greatest tribute that could be offered by the Eight Sect Coalition. [1]

As the bells rang, the president and patriarchs of the Eight Sect Coalition all came out to receive the guests. Sir Bloodsmelter and Plumdark were among them. Sir Bloodsmelter looked very pleased, while Plumdark’s expression was soft and gentle. The other patriarchs were all behaving similarly. Only the patriarch of the Soaring Cloud Sword Sect looked a bit desolate. The president’s expression was neutral, and he didn’t betray either happiness or anger. When he caught sight of the dreadnaught, his eyes glittered with mixed emotions. However, they faded quickly as he bowed respectfully to the dreadnaught. Everyone else bowed deeply at the waist.

The megacity was decorated with lanterns and colored banners. Countless disciples present all looked very excited, especially those from Seven Blood Eyes, who seemed exceptionally proud.

“We offer respectful greetings, Lieutenant Governor, Secretary-General Xu.”

As the coalition echoed with expressions of greeting, Sir Bloodsmelter laughed heartily.

Master Seventh shoved aside thoughts of his third apprentice. Smiling, he led Xu Qing off the dreadnaught and into the Eight Sect Coalition.

Xu Qing was moved by the sight of so many familiar faces. That was especially true when he looked at Plumdark and thought back to the lamp from Forbidden by the Immortal. Plumdark was looking at him with the same gentle smile she always had.

Chapter 541: Flowers in the Eyes, Stars in the Heart (part 2)

The first thing Master Seventh did was take Xu Qing to offer formal greetings to Sir Bloodsmelter. Sir Bloodsmelter smiled from ear to ear; clearly, this was one of the highlights of his life. After that, Master Seventh exchanged greetings with the others present.

Xu Qing couldn’t just leave. He was no longer a mere dao child. Everyone knew that he was the future governor, so he would stick close to Master Seventh and start getting acquainted with the types of situations he would deal with in the future throughout Sea-Sealing County.

The formalities lasted for about two hours. After that, the president respectfully saw them off, whereupon Master Seventh and Xu Qing went with Sir Bloodsmelter back to the Seven Blood Eyes headquarters. The one thousand swordsages also joined them; they would stay in Seven Blood Eyes for the time being.

Qingqin, meanwhile, remained hidden in the clouds, where he gazed in the direction of South Phoenix, thinking, *I wonder if I should pay a visit to Eldest Brother?*

Plumdark watched them go. She knew that they had many matters to attend to having just returned, and that it wouldn't be appropriate to intrude. But she felt happy. As she turned to head back to the Dark Serenity Sect, she glanced at the president and saw his complex facial expression. Laughing softly, she flew off. Though she hadn't said a word, her soft laughter left no doubt as to her attitude.

The president stood there silently, that laughter ringing in his ears. It created a powerful pressure that made his mixed emotions surge even more powerfully. Eventually, he closed his eyes for a time. When he opened them, his gaze was once again soft and gentle. He would maintain that visage. From the very beginning, he had never shown any outright hostility toward Xu Qing or Seven Blood Eyes. Staying calm and gentle was his baseline behavior. It was also just his personality. Many people had ugliness inside them, but they kept it hidden. The only question was whether the world would give them the chance to reveal it. Some people would keep it inside for years. Some people would keep it inside for a lifetime, even until they died. The only question was how long the president of the Eight Sect Coalition could keep it inside.

In Seven Blood Eyes, Xu Qing was serving tea to Sir Bloodsmelter.

Sir Bloodsmelter still hadn't recovered completely from the injuries he'd sustained in the war. He was obviously in a wonderful mood, though he occasionally coughed. That said, the excitement of this day was something he hadn't experienced for a very long time.

"That's more than enough!" Sir Bloodsmelter said, taking the cup of tea. He drank the entire cup without spilling a drop. Eyes shining with admiration and praise he continued, "Little Seventh, you need to take care of this apprentice of yours. Without him, you'd never be the lieutenant governor. In fact, you're simply borrowing glory from him!"

Master Seventh stood there looking extremely proud.

"And that's why I still think you should expel all of your other apprentices. All you need is Fourth Sib and Second Sib. They're more than enough. Big Sib and Third Sib are both useless and annoying to the core."

Xu Qing didn't respond to Sir Bloodsmelter's words. He'd heard this kind of talk before.

"What you say makes sense, Patriarch," Master Seventh said, nodding. "I'll definitely put some thought into your advice. By the way, sir, have you put any thought into that matter I mentioned earlier?"

"I'm not going. But I fully endorse your idea of moving Seven Blood Eyes to the county capital." Sir Bloodsmelter put down his tea cup and looked at Master Seventh with gratitude in his eyes. "It wasn't an easy thing to bring Seven Blood Eyes this far. But over the years, I've seen both castles built and mountains crumble. We need to *prepare for future storms and be vigilant in peacetime*.

"The continent of South Phoenix is our first foundation. We can rest at ease with your lovely little apprentice there to watch out for things. Emperor-Receiving Prefecture is Seven Blood Eyes' second foundation. We can't just leave it undefended.

“The two of you can establish our third foundation in the county capital. That way, if things ever go wrong, we can fall back to Emperor-Receiving Prefecture, and if necessary, to South Phoenix. That’s the only way to ensure that our work with Seven Blood Eyes will stand the test of time.”

Given Sir Bloodsmelter’s years and experience, he was always concerned with how to provide a solid foundation to deal with problems. Master Seventh agreed with him in some ways, but disagreed in others. Seeing that the two of them were going to discuss the matter at length, Xu Qing bid farewell.

As he walked the familiar paths in the sect, he ran into fellow disciples he knew. All of them were very excited to see him, and would clasp hands and bow, even if they were a great distance away. At a certain point Xu Qing looked over his shoulder and saw the Mute about 300 meters behind him. As usual, the Mute was there keeping an eye on him, standing guard. Xu Qing nodded at him.

Then he went to Master Sixth’s grave. When he stood in front of the gravestone, he could almost hear Master Sixth’s voice. He took out a flagon of alcohol and poured it over the grave.

“Master Sixth, Night Dove is dead,” Xu Qing whispered. “Sadly, his head was ripped to shreds, so I couldn’t bring it back with me. I think that’s fine, though. I’ll make sure to take good care of the crown prince’s head. I’ll bring it to you in one piece.”

He sat in front of Master Sixth’s grave for a long time. Eventually, the little white snake in his sleeve slithered out, crawled up to his neck, and nuzzled his cheek.

When dusk approached, he stood and left. While walking down the stairs, he saw someone familiar. It was a young woman in her twenties. She wore a yellow daoist robe, and was extremely pretty. The aroma of medicinal pills surrounded her, except, she seemed lonely, as though she had too much on her mind. When she caught sight of Xu Qing, she suddenly looked ill at ease.

“Xu... er, Elder Brother Xu Qing.”

Smiling, Xu Qing said, “Junior Sister Gu, long time no see.”

This young woman was Gu Muqing. She seemed a bit stunned, and couldn’t think of what to say to Xu Qing.

Xu Qing was a bit surprised to see her acting so awkwardly. A moment passed, and he left. When he was gone, she bowed her head and berated herself for not saying all the things she’d wanted to say for so long.

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Ling’er stuck her head out of Xu Qing’s sleeve and looked curiously back at Gu Muqing. “Big Bro Xu Qing, that girl seemed really nervous. Like she wanted to tell you something. What’s her deal? Should we go back and ask what she wanted to say?”

Xu Qing shook his head. “I doubt it’s anything serious. I’ll ask Master about it later.”

Ling’er nodded. “Okay. If she’s in trouble, Big Bro Xu Qing, maybe you and I could help her.”

This wasn't Xu Qing's first time coming to realize how willing Ling'er was to help others. Smiling in agreement, he continued on his way and eventually left the sect.

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After Xu Qing was gone, a sigh could be heard near Gu Muqing. It was Gu Muqing's Master, who was almost like a mother to her. Stepping over, she wrapped her arms around Gu Muqing.

"Master," Gu Muqing said, her eyes welling with tears.

There was little Gu Muqing's Master could do but comfort her. "You foolish girl. You still have a chance! Keep trying!"

Gu Muqing nodded, and her eyes shone with determination. [1]

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After Xu Qing was out of the sect, he took out his transmission jade slip and sent a message to Zhang San. [2]

Zhang San had been waiting for the message to come in, and he replied instantly. "*Hahaha! Xu Qing! I'm in our harbor!*"

Smiling, Xu Qing put the jade slip away and raced over to their harbor. It didn't take him long to find Zhang San.

Zhang San already had three life flames. In the two years since Xu Qing had last seen him, he'd put on some weight. Clearly, things had been going well for him. He even had a few girls from the Second Peak with him. It was hard to say how he did it, but all the girls with him seemed to get along. He seemed very excited to see Xu Qing. Rushing forward, he embraced him and laughed heartily.

Zhang San was very pleased. In fact, he was so pleased that it wasn't possible to describe with words. Nowadays, he found himself smiling even when he was in the middle of meditation. As it turned out, his investment from years ago had paid off many times over. Who could ever have guessed that a puny constable from the Violent Crimes Division in South Phoenix would eventually end up as the future governor of all of Sea-Sealing County? Going forward, Zhang San would have quick access to the highest authorities in the county.

Xu Qing could sense Zhang San's excitement, and it made him smile. It felt wonderful to be back in Seven Blood Eyes seeing all his old friends. All the weariness and exhaustion that had been building up in the county capital was melting away.

Taking out his dharmaship, he handed it to Zhang San. "Elder Brother Zhang, is there any chance you could upgrade my dharmaship?"

After experiencing his first heavenfate tribulation, Xu Qing's cultivation base had reached the Nascent Soul level, and the dharmaship hadn't been a good fit anymore. He needed something faster and stronger. He needed what was called a spirit cruiser.

Boat. Skiff. Ship. Cruiser.



Those were the four main categories of dharmaboats in Seven Blood Eyes. After the cruisers were the dreadnaughts the likes of Master Seventh's. Of course, Master Seventh's dreadnaught was on a much higher level than the ordinary variety. [3]

Thumping his chest, Zhang San said, "No problem at all! My cultivation base is a bit low, but we've got plenty of money on hand. I'll just ask some Sixth Peak elders to come over. I'll tell them what to do, and they'll handle the particulars. I'll definitely make you a spirit cruiser like no other! In fact, this dharmaship of yours is basically useless. Instead of upgrading it, I'll just make you something brand new."

Seeing that Zhang San wasn't taking the dharmaship, Xu Qing put it away and clasped hands in thanks.

"By the way, Xu Qing, all of your share of our harbor profits are with Ding Xue. She's keeping them safe for you. That girl just doesn't trust me! Every time she comes to collect your share, she counts everything, one spirit coin at a time. And if even one spirit coin is missing, she gives me the hardest time!"

Zhang San and Xu Qing chatted for a while until it got late. Finally, Xu Qing bid farewell.

Zhang San was determined to make the perfect spirit cruiser, so instead of going to sleep, he started working.

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Xu Qing strolled through the Port District. It was night, and the moon's reflection danced in the rippling water. The sound of the waves took him back to his old life in Seven Blood Eyes. Eventually, he reached his old berth, where he set down his dharmaship and boarded it. The rocking sensation of the boat made him feel incredibly at peace.

Sticking her head out of Xu Qing's sleeve, Ling'er said, "Big Bro Xu Qing, I get the feeling you're preparing to go somewhere. Are you planning to go to the Imperial University in the imperial capital?"

Xu Qing shook his head. Based on what his Master had told him, going to the Imperial University wouldn't help much considering the level of his cultivation base.

"I'm wondering how Eldest Brother's research into the Moonrite Region is going," Xu Qing whispered.

"Moonrite Region? Well, Big Bro Xu Qing, wherever you end up going, I'll come along. Once I can take human form, I'm going to be really impressive!"

Xu Qing smiled. He was used to being alone most of the time, but having Ling'er along was nice. He was about to say something in response to her when his divine sense detected someone approaching. He looked up.

After about ten breaths of time, he heard Ding Xue's lovely voice. "What are you up to, Big Bro Xu Qing?" [4]

Chapter 542: Three Women, One Snake, One Man (part 1)

Ding Xue's voice was soft and charming, like a fine rain that entered the dharmaship to be heard by both Xu Qing and Ling'er.

Ling'er's eyes widened, and she looked suspiciously outside.

Xu Qing's expression didn't change as he waved his hand, opening the dharmaship's defenses.

Ding Xue approached through the moonlight. She had long hair and violet garments. Her hair was bound with a golden ribbon, which glittered resplendently. Strapped to her back was an ancient bronze sword that made her seem very valiant. That said, she also seemed somewhat flirtatious, with bewitching eyes and a cute smile. She was still young, but in the two years that had passed, she had transformed from a girl into a seductive young woman. As the moonlight shone down on her, she seemed incredibly attractive, but at the same time, charmingly shy.

Surprised, Xu Qing instinctively looked in the direction of the shore.

"What are you looking at little old me like that for, Big Bro Xu Qing?" Ding Xue asked, looking a bit bashful as she stepped onto the deck.

"I'm not looking at you," Xu Qing replied truthfully. "I'm looking for Zhao Zhongheng."

Ding Xue's ample chest rose and fell. Although Xu Qing's unromantic words were potentially lethal, they didn't do much to her. Difficulties existed to be overcome, right??

Eyes glittering beautifully, she approached Xu Qing. Upon seeing his captivating face, her heart skipped a beat, and she swallowed. As she struggled to maintain control, she sighed inwardly with regret at the thought of failing to win him over back during the Merfolk Isles days.[1]

It's all the fault of that Zhao Zhongheng! Hmph! But that's fine. With effort, one can achieve anything!

As Ding Xue tried to pump herself up mentally, she took out a stack of spirit notes and offered it to Xu Qing. She made sure to reveal some of her snow-white forearm as she did.

"Big Bro Xu Qing, this is your share of the profits from Harbor 176. Thanks to Zhang San's skill and my attentive care, there isn't a single spirit coin missing."

Xu Qing nodded. He had already learned from Zhang San that Ding Xue had been taking care of his share of the profits for the past two years. He was very grateful for her warm-heartedness. That was especially true when he thought about how, thanks to her love of knowledge, she had given him a lot of spirit stones back when he was very poor. Because of that, he'd always had a good impression of Ding Xue. Smiling, he took the spirit notes. Pulling out a few, he handed them back to Ding Xue.

"Here, take these."

Ding Xue blinked a few times and refrained from taking the spirit notes. Then, she stood there for a moment fiddling with the hem of her sleeve, looking like she wanted to say something. After a few breaths of time passed, she was mentally ready. Taking out a white bottle from her bag of holding, she placed it in front of her.

“Big Bro Xu Qing, this is some osmanthus-flavored lotus seed soup that I personally prepared. I’m planning to give it to my aunt and uncle, but I’m hoping you can try it and give me some feedback.”

Xu Qing hesitated briefly. However, there didn’t seem to be any reason to refuse, so he took the bottle and sampled it. He frowned.

“It’s a bit sweet.”

An embarrassed flush crept up Ding Xue’s neck to her face. “Big Bro Xu Qing, you.... Anyway, okay. I get it.”

Xu Qing wasn’t sure what she meant by that, and was about to inquire. Before he could, Ding Xue stood.

“I need to go, Big Bro Xu Qing. I know you just got back and need to rest. I’ll come back tomorrow. By the way, thanks for the pocket money.”

Still blushing, Ding Xue took the spirit notes and hurried away. Once outside the dharmaship and on the shore, a pleased smile appeared on her face.

It turns out the methods my aunt taught me really do work. I just need to set myself up as his household administrator. If I want to win Big Bro Xu Qing, I can’t rush things. I have to make sure things go smoothly. That way, he doesn’t get his guard up. Then, slowly but surely, I’ll melt his heart. I also need to be sure to not be too assertive. I need to make myself seem like helpless prey. Aunt explained that that’s how she won over Uncle years ago.

With such thoughts on her mind, Ding Xue started planning out her next steps in finer detail....

Back on the dharmaship, Xu Qing frowned as he tried to figure out what exactly Ding Xue meant by the things she said. There were obviously multiple interpretations.

“Big Bro Xu Qing,” Ling’er said from his sleeve. “You need to be careful about her. I picked up some hidden aggression in her eyes when she was looking at you. She must have some specific thing she’s trying to accomplish. My papa once told me that there are some people who are always trying to get things out of other people. I think she’s that type of person. She’s bad news, Big Bro Xu Qing.”

Xu Qing felt his guard go up. But then he realized it wasn’t likely that Ding Xue meant him any harm. That said, it probably wouldn’t hurt to keep his guard up, at least a little bit.

Ling’er felt very happy to see Xu Qing taking her advice seriously. “Aren’t I pretty amazing, Big Bro Xu Qing? Especially when it comes to getting a read on people. With me around, you’ll have a much easier time figuring out who the bad people are.”

Xu Qing smiled and was about to start meditating when he once again looked toward the shore.

Before long, he heard the rather high-pitched voice of an excited young woman.

“You’re finally back, Big Bro Xu Qing....”

A young woman appeared outside. She was dressed in all black, and she was carrying a very large earthenware jug on her shoulder. The jug was so much larger than her petite frame that it created a very discordant image. However, that just made her seem more unique. She had fair skin and eyebrows like willow leaves, as well as eyes that, though not unusually large, seemed capable of revealing her heart to the world. Her facial expression seemed to be one of infatuation, passion, and also morbid obsession. There were a lot of scars visible on the skin of her forearm, all of which had been put there by her own fingernails. Her lips and nose were very distinctive, as was her pretty ponytail. All of these things together created a very unique image.

Yanyan.

She leaped into the air and right toward the dharmaship's defenses. Of course, Xu Qing's dharmaship had Gold Core power, and since Yanyan was only in Foundation Establishment, she could be seriously injured if she slammed right into the defenses. She didn't seem to care.

Knowing Yanyan well, Xu Qing lowered the defenses so she could easily land on the deck.

She looked a bit disappointed, as if she'd been ready to be seriously injured, and had been looking forward to it. But then she thought about what was to come, and she brightened up. She put the earthenware jug down with a thump, then dumped a pile of torture instruments off to the side.

There were needles, blades, pincers, saws, and more.... Many of them were black with blood thanks to their heavy usage over the past two years. A good number of them were also stained with the baleful aura of resentful souls, which spread out into the dharmaship.

"Big Bro Xu Qing. Let's... get started, okay?"

Her nose flared and she started breathing heavily as she slapped the jug. The jug shattered, and streams of smoke billowed out. Unexpectedly, they were Smokewights.

Although the Smokewights had been heavily sanctioned after the Lieutenant Governor's Coup, some of the more clever ones had fled before any action was taken. And of course, there were others that had been away before everything went down. Some were top experts, others were more ordinary individuals.

The ones that tumbled out of the jug were the latter. There were quite a few of them, but most emitted Foundation Establishment fluctuations. The handful that were in Gold Core were extremely weak.

"Big Bro Xu Qing, my grandma helped me capture these Smokewights. Sadly, we couldn't find the big one. Just these shrimps. But we can still have some fun with them. After you left, I was all alone, and it was just so boring!"

Eyes glittering with excitement, she grabbed one of the Smokewights. As it struggled in her hand, numerous blades flew up and circled around her like a tempest. They slashed through the smoke, but no screams could be heard. That was because no matter how you slashed up a Smokewight, they could form back together almost instantly, and it didn't inflict any pain.

Despite that, Yanyan seemed entranced with the concept of slicing up the Smokewight. Trembling almost uncontrollably, she looked over at Xu Qing.

She was about to say something when she noticed that his facial expression was somewhat aloof. Stunned, she hesitated for a moment and then said, “You don’t like this, Big Bro Xu Qing?”

She looked deeply apprehensive, even despairing, and she even started to wilt physically. She obviously cared a lot about Xu Qing’s opinion, and whatever he said next could affect her entire world.

Xu Qing looked at her and realized that there was something unusual about Yanyan. She had been a morbid person two years ago, but she hadn’t been as crazed as this. What was more, he could tell that many of the scars on her arm were fresh. The look in her eyes was the same as you would expect to see in a drowning person who was pleading for help. Her illness had gotten worse. It wasn’t that she treated others sadistically. She treated herself sadistically. And it was only in that state of twisted pain that she felt she could breathe and be happy.

As Xu Qing’s eyes glittered with profound light, he heard an aged voice speaking from outside. It was none other than Guru Eastnether, Yanyan’s grandmother.

“I only have this one grandchild, Xu Qing,” she said bitterly, “Can you help her...? Ever since she was little, she’s had no mutagen in her, and as a result, she has a problem with inner devils. Her personality has become more and more cruel over the years. I’ve tried many times to purify her, but her problem combined with her personality makes it impossible to cleanse her of wicked thoughts.

“Things got really bad when she tried to reach Gold Core but failed. She very nearly collapsed mentally. I can keep her safe physically, but she has too much mental pressure to deal with. She either has to torture others or torture herself. And that just makes her more antisocial and eccentric. I have no other options here. But I do trust you.”

Xu Qing looked at Yanyan. He could see the despair in her eyes, and the way she seemed to be wilting. It was as if her sea of consciousness was riddled with damage thanks to all of her pent-up frustrations.

“So immature,” Xu Qing suddenly said.

Yanyan looked up at him.

Chapter 542: Three Women, One Snake, One Man (part 2)

Face expressionless, Xu Qing made a grasping gesture with his right hand, causing one of the Smokewights to fly over to him. As soon as it was in his hand, he sent a stream of frigid energy out, which surrounded the Smokewight and solidified into an ice cube around it.

Xu Qing waved his hand, and one of Yanyan’s needles flew over to him. Bolstering the needle with his cultivation base, he stabbed it through the ice into the struggling Smokewight. An agonized shriek rang out from the ice cube. Next, a flying dagger sliced into the Smokewight through the ice. Because of being frozen, the Smokewight couldn’t form anew. Before long, it had been sliced into a dozen pieces which Xu Qing lay out on the ground in front of him so that none were touching.

It was clear that the sensation of being chopped apart but unable to form anew brought extreme mental anguish. The screams grew more intense.

Meanwhile, Yanyan's eyes shone brightly, and she was breathing heavily. She was shivering, and seemed to be getting excited once again.

Throwing the pieces of ice to Yanyan, he made another grasping gesture, causing a second Smokewight to fly over to him. This time, he didn't use ice. He used poison. When the poisons spread into the Smokewight, it started corroding, not just its body of smoke, but its soul. Howls of grief filled the dharmaship.

Yanyan was getting even more excited; apparently the howls of agony were like soothing sounds of nature.

However, Xu Qing wasn't done yet.

"Rip off some cloth from your garment," he said coldly.

Looking very obedient, Yanyan immediately ripped off a section of her garment, which revealed more scarred flesh beneath.

She didn't even notice that. Crawling over to Xu Qing almost like a puppy, she handed him the cloth.

Xu Qing took it, then waved his hand, which soaked the fabric and added a sealing power to it. Next, Xu Qing put the third Smokewight onto the cloth. The cloth turned dark as the Smokewight was sucked into the fabric.

Xu Qing tossed the fabric to Yanyan.

"That way it has no freedom, either of body or soul," Xu Qing said calmly. "Pursuing physical cruelty, whether towards others or towards oneself, is a means to an end. Not the end itself. And when you use it, the results are childish. Mental torment is something much different."

Yanyan shivered. The more Xu Qing berated her, the happier she felt. Eyes burning with infatuation, she put her finger into her mouth, bit it, and then offered it to Xu Qing.

His eyes turned cold.

Bowing her head, she pulled her hand back and sucked it in her mouth. The strange energy in her sea of consciousness was dissipating, and her cultivation base fluctuations were growing stronger. Apparently, her first heavenly palace was almost materialized. It wasn't quite there yet, though.

Seeing that, Xu Qing sighed and lifted his index finger.

The moment he did, Yanyan crawled over, bit his finger, and sucked deeply. Her eyes narrowed as if in ecstasy, and she looked more content than she had ever looked before. She had been waiting for this day for a long time. In that moment, her heavenly palace materialized! Her mind then started spinning so dramatically she passed out.

After that, Guru Eastnether sighed from outside the dharmaship. "Many thanks."

Yanyan vanished, having been taken away by Guru Eastnether.

The ship was silent.

Shortly after, Ling'er poked her head out and looked at Xu Qing, then the spot where Yanyan had disappeared. Xu Qing looked a bit embarrassed, and was about to offer an explanation when Ling'er suddenly inhaled sharply.

“She’s a monster, Big Bro Xu Qing! She’s even worse than the one before. I can’t believe she actually bit your finger! You really have to be careful around her!”

Before Xu Qing could respond, gentle laughter echoed in the dharmaship.

“What a cute young lady.”

When Xu Qing heard that voice, he went stiff.

When Ding Xue showed up, he could brush her off. When Yanyan showed up, he could put her in her place. But there was one woman in the Eight Sect Coalition who Xu Qing had always felt flustered around. Whether it was their first meeting when she lifted his chin, or her changeable personality when they traveled up the river, or the times their gazes met in the county capital, or that time he took his robe off in front of her... [1]

She understands more than you. And there are things she understands that you’re clueless about. She’s seen everything you’ve seen, and many other things you’ve never seen. She knows what you’re thinking, and even knows some things you don’t understand how to think about. She’s impeccable.

As her voice reached Xu Qing, and he felt himself unable to move, a consummate beauty stepped out of thin air.

She wore a white dress embroidered with lavender-colored roses. Her belt matched the flowers, and was decorated with moons. Her black hair was rolled into a bun and bound with a pearl hairpin with tassels that hung down the front. [2]

Her beautiful face had eyebrows like something from a painting, and her eyes glittered like stars. The faint smile on her face was the type that could tug at the hearts of anyone who saw it, but at the same time, she seemed elegant and refined, like a hibiscus flower floating on the water, free from all impurities. There was also something enigmatic about the way she smiled at Xu Qing, as if her smile contained hidden bitterness as well as a bit of sorrow.

She was, of course, the unmatched and peerless Arch-Immortal Plumdark.

Ling'er’s eyes went wide, and she instinctively shrank back into hiding.

Inhaling deeply, Xu Qing got to his feet and bowed. “Greetings, Arch-Immortal.”

Plumdark smiled as she walked up to him. Reaching out, she brushed some dust off his shoulder, as if to ensure that there was nothing present to contaminate him. She smoothed out some of the wrinkles in his garment. Then she looked deeply into his eyes.

“As long as you’re safe, that’s all that matters,” she said simply. Her words contained concern, caring, worry, thoughtfulness, and all of those things came across in the words she spoke.

Warmth filled Xu Qing, and he shivered as it spread through him, softening his heart. He no longer felt rigid, but instead, relaxed. He let Arch-Immortal Plumdark take his hand as she sat next to him. He could smell her familiar perfume, and noted how the tassel of her hairpin swayed as she sat. The mere sight seemed enough to sway one's thoughts.

Xu Qing felt a bit dazed, and thus, a bit cautious.

As Plumdark gazed at him, she said, "I know what you want to do, and where you want to go. I won't stop you. But I want to tell you something. If I had known what was going on, I would have stood with you. As you know, I don't tell lies. I'm a decisive person, and when I make a decision about something, I don't change my mind. It doesn't matter who tries to change my mind, I won't do it, not even if heaven falls and the earth is crushed."

Plumdark's voice caused ripples of emotion to spread through Xu Qing's heart.

He understood. He didn't remember everything he'd seen in that temple in Forbidden by the Immortal. But he remembered the lamp. And he remembered that person who looked exactly like Plumdark. Now, as Plumdark spoke, he suddenly felt an image rising up in his mind. Though he couldn't make out the details of it, it brought with it a familiar feeling. She was right. She was the type of person who wouldn't change her mind no matter what anyone said.

A long moment passed, and then Xu Qing quietly said, "I know."

Her smile grew more radiant. "Your Master invited me to bring the Dark Serenity Sect to the county capital along with a portion of Seven Blood Eyes. He suggested that we combine the sects and form a new sect. I agreed. He said I should pick the new name for the sect. That's why I'm here. What would you think if we called it the Green Dark Sect?" [3]

Xu Qing hesitated for a moment, then nodded.

Her tender gaze dropped from his face to his sleeve. She laughed softly. Then she went on to talk a bit about what the future would hold for the Green Dark Sect. She kept the conversation on official business, but her voice was so lovely that it was easy to lose track of time just listening to her speak.

Xu Qing gradually grew even more relaxed.

It was late in the night when Plumdark said, "There's another reason I came. I want to paint a defensive totem on you. Remove your robe."

Xu Qing suddenly went from being relaxed to being as stiff as a board again. Plumdark laughed. Eyes glittering playfully, she stood and left. As she walked out, she said, "See you back in the county capital, Ah Qing."

The ship went quiet again.

After a long moment, Xu Qing exhaled, and instinctively looked down at his sleeve. Ling'er poked her head out and looked at him anxiously.

"Big Bro Xu Qing! She was the most dangerous of all! She's a devil queen!! That was so scary! Big Bro Xu Qing, all the others before are just on a totally different level than the devil queen!"



Xu Qing cleared his throat and went on to placate Ling'er. She wasn't completely convinced.

A few days passed.

Yanyan was in seclusion. Plumdark didn't show up again. But Ding Xue came back. That said, she wasn't able to follow through with her plan.

And that was because Zhao Zhongheng showed up as well. Although he was very nervous around Xu Qing, he gritted his teeth and followed Ding Xue around with a determined look in his eyes. When Xu Qing saw how determined Zhao Zhongheng was to win over Ding Xue, he sighed inwardly.

Because Xu Qing had been gone for two years, there was a lot of business to take care of. That was especially true considering how much his status had changed. What was more, sects from throughout Emperor-Receiving Prefecture were sending people to offer formal greetings to Master Seventh. And Master Seventh would often ask Xu Qing to be present.

Ten days later, much to Ding Xue's frustration, Xu Qing decided to leave the sect.

He planned to go to South Phoenix and pay respects at Sergeant Thunder's grave.

Before he left, Master Seventh gave him a jade box. "This is the fish bone from that god. I've crafted it into a divine weapon. You can try it out while you're traveling. It's pretty incredible, and you can consider it a major line of defense for you. What's more, it's from the same source as your body, so it's particularly suitable for you specifically."

Inside the jade box was a black spike, about as thick as a finger. It was covered with natural striations, and emanated a terrifying aura, as well as powerful fluctuations of godliness. Although it wasn't alive, when Xu Qing looked at it, he got the sensation it was breathing in unison with him. It felt like it was actually part of him. As Xu Qing sensed how terrifying the spike was, and the feeling of lingering fear that came with it, Master Seventh spoke again.

"In the eyes of gods, things from the mortal world are incomparably weak. But this weapon... could harm a god. It has the godly authority of misfortune in it. Therefore, I picked a specific name for it. It's the Spike of Misfortune."

Chapter 543: Old Haunts, Old Friends, Old Stories (part 1)

Beyond Emperor-Receiving Prefecture, atop the pitch-black Forbidden Sea, there were endless rolling waves and a mist full of cold mutagen. Even in the middle of the day, the burning heat of the sun couldn't disperse that mutagen, much less illuminate the depths of the sea. That was why, over the countless years that had passed, there were many legends on the Forbidden Sea about godly entities lurking in its depths. Only the species native to the sea, or other high-level cultivators, could possibly know how strong those godly entities actually were, and whether or not it was possible to defeat them in combat.

The broken face wasn't the only god in existence. In other words... the most terrifying entities in the Forbidden Sea weren't godly entities, they were actual gods. Gods could sleep in suns and moons. Gods lurked in palaces in places like Forbidden by the Immortal. Gods existed in Cruelmurk. As such, it was only natural to expect gods to be resting in the Forbidden Sea that surrounded the Revered Ancient mainland.

For one thing... the Forbidden Sea was just too immense. The sea region between Emperor-Receiving Prefecture and South Phoenix was massive, and that wasn't even to mention the fact that the sea extended far beyond South Phoenix.

Truth be told, the areas that surrounded South Phoenix, when compared to the Forbidden Sea as a whole, were essentially coastal waters.

In the past, the Forbidden Sea had been called by a different name. It was the Sea of Endlessness. That name perfectly described the scope and range of the waters. It was almost like an entire world of its own, standing tall alongside the mainland and the dome of heaven. [1]

At the moment, waves roiled on the water outside of Emperor-Receiving Prefecture as a pitch-black dreadnaught screamed through the air overhead. It was Master Seventh's dreadnaught, which he had lent to Xu Qing for use in Sea-Sealing County. The dreadnaught had a spirit, and thus didn't need to be piloted. As long as it had a power source, it could be controlled by anyone.

Coming along with Xu Qing were the thousand swordsages from the county capital, as well as Daoist Sima.

Also flying through the air was Qingqin, whose caws echoed out far and wide. No other birds dared to fly too high into the sky, thanks to Qingqin's presence. They would stay low, where they would occasionally dive into the water and come back up with prey in their beaks. That caused snakeneck dragons to gather. They would occasionally burst out of the water and snatch birds out of the sky, then splash back down.

Xu Qing stood on the dreadnaught's superstructure, looking down at the sea. He saw the snakeneck dragons and the waves they created, and it made him think back to all the time he had spent out at sea in his early days.

After a time, he focused on the Spike of Misfortune. In the sunlight, the black fish bone spike seemed like a black hole that sucked in all the light around it, all while emanating terrifying fluctuations.

Quite a few of the swordsages noticed, and looked over with serious expressions. Only Xu Qing, thanks to his unique fleshly body that had the same origin as the spike, could hold the thing without feeling uncomfortable because of the pressure.

Looking at the Spike of Misfortune, he said, "Master Freespirit."

Instantly, the black iron skewer flew out of his bag of holding and hovered in front of him, trembling obsequiously. Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior appeared, clasped hands, and bowed.

"Milord!"

The patriarch was wracked with anxiety, and felt like he was facing imminent catastrophe. In fact, it caused his voice to tremble, and left his heart wallowing in despair. For a long time now, he had been operating under the expectation that if he didn't work hard enough, Xu Qing would put him to death. Because of his personality, that thought had taken root deep within him, and therefore, whenever Xu Qing experienced a big jump in cultivation base, the patriarch felt jumpy and nervous.

And now, with this fish bone spike out in the open, he was certain his time had come. He had gone all out, yet nothing he had done had enabled him to keep pace with Xu Qing. It wasn't that he *hadn't* been working hard. It was just that Xu Qing made progress too quickly.

“Milord, I’m ready. In all the books I’ve read in my life, the main character always progresses by leaps and bounds, while their followers are ordinary people who can’t keep up. This just goes to show, milord, that you are definitely like the main character in a novel. That’s fine. I understand. I don’t want to drag you down. So I won’t beg or plead. I just hope that, based on all the cautious and conscientious work done by your humble servant over the years, you can make it quick and painless.

“If I do get another life after this one, your humble servant will definitely find an opportunity to be your follower again. After being there to serve your every need, sir, I will gaze up as you reach the pinnacle of the highest heavens.”

The patriarch's face was a mask of sorrow, yet even in that state, he looked at Xu Qing with loyal sincerity. As far as he was concerned, that was his only chance to save himself... He knew that he was privy to too many secrets. If he was in Xu Qing’s place, the patriarch would be bursting with killing intent. Therefore, he could just do his best to touch Xu Qing’s heart, and hope that Xu Qing would think about all his hard work and not kill him. The best outcome would be for Xu Qing to kindheartedly take the initiative to spare the patriarch.

Xu Qing looked deeply at Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior. He didn’t sense any sincerity from the patriarch. But he had been paying attention to everything the patriarch did over the years, and how much help he had provided. By now, the grudge Xu Qing had developed years ago toward the patriarch had long since faded into nothing.

After all, the iron skewer couldn’t match up to his own cultivation base now. Even though he had ensorcelled it, compared to the Spike of Misfortune, it was severely lacking.

Therefore, Xu Qing had planned to unseal the patriarch and let him go on his way. After all, he understood how karma worked. As for the secrets the patriarch was aware of, Xu Qing had his ways to deal with that.

But after what the patriarch just said, Xu Qing thought for a time, then changed his mind. Eyes hardening, he decided that he should give the patriarch an opportunity.

Though Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior was still feeling nervous, he was actually sighing with relief on the inside. He was convinced that his words just now had been very effective. Obviously, the Fiendish Xu was moved; his silence right now was evidence of that. Because of all the patriarch's hard work over the years, he was considering whether or not to commute his death penalty.

Why is my life so hard? I just want to be free! To keep on living! How come things have to be this difficult?

As the patriarch’s inner fury built, Xu Qing’s eyes glittered with determination. Xu Qing performed a right-handed incantation gesture, causing fire to spring up and envelop the iron skewer. He seemed to be planning to melt the skewer with the heat.

Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior was stunned. “Milord, I—”

“I’m giving you an opportunity. Just hang in here.” Xu Qing’s hands flashed in a double-handed incantation gesture, and his twelve nascent souls all opened their eyes and spat out life flames. He also added in the fire of his five life lamps.

As the patriarch howled, the iron skewer, which he had fused with after two instances of tribulation lightning, started melting into molten iron. That molten iron was Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior's true form. The patriarch's screams grew shriller. Terrified, the shadow twitched back and forth, and looked ingratiatingly toward Ling'er.

In that manner, time passed. The patriarch's screams grew weaker and weaker until they weren't audible. And the iron skewer melted into a red-hot pool of molten iron.

Next, Xu Qing performed another double-handed incantation gesture, causing the molten iron to fly up in numerous thin streams. They headed right toward the Spike of Misfortune, not to fuse into it, but to fill in the natural striations on its surface. At the same time, Xu Qing mobilized his god vitality, sending out fluctuations that provided an additional blessing. Eventually, the molten iron had filled every striation on the fish bone.

The Spike of Misfortune looked very different now. It had a pitch-black base with red striations. And it pulsed with an aura of death and killing.

Since Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior was already a spirit automaton, he was now half integrated into the Spike of Misfortune. His level of existence was so much lower than the Spike of Misfortune, that normally speaking, he couldn't possibly serve as its spirit automaton. Only by placing him on the outside, almost like a glove, could he link to the spike and control it.

Although that level of control wouldn't be perfect, with Xu Qing's help, the spike could slaughter enemies much more effectively than if it didn't have a spirit automaton at all.

What was more, the influence of the fish bone of a god would affect long-term transformations on the patriarch. In fact, it was possible that one day in the future, the patriarch could transform into the true spirit automaton of a godly weapon. That process would be very painful, as it would involve a complete metamorphosis that was an even greater torment than what just happened.

What was more, the patriarch would have to survive long-term and refrain from being devoured....

The patriarch was understandably shocked by what had just happened. When he finally recovered from his daze, he was actually very pleased. The process had been painful, and he had no idea how he would survive long-term. But he did know that he had passed a major milestone.

Thankfully I'm very calm and resourceful, otherwise I might not have succeeded!

Rejoicing at heart, the patriarch was about to say something when Xu Qing looked at him encouragingly.

"Master Freespirit," Xu Qing said, "I'd been planning to give you your freedom. But since you want to be my follower for all eternity, I'll help you out this one time."

"Huh?" The patriarch's eyes went wide, and his heart started pounding. He even shivered. However, he recovered quickly. *He's testing me. It's a trick! Yes, that's right. He wants to check how loyal I really am. Very, very cunning!*

Convinced that he was right, he loudly said, "Milord! I, Master Freespirit, will loyally follow you, sir. I've long since come to the realization that comfort is far more important than freedom!"

“These past few years have been the most wonderful in my entire life. The level of comfort I’ve experienced is something I could never part with. Without being able to be your follower, sir, I would feel unending pain and torment. In fact, even just thinking about something like that fills me with grief and despair. I have no desire for freedom, milord. I only want to be by your side. In the end, I far prefer comfort to so-called freedom.”

Ling’er was moved by the patriarch’s speech. Looking at him, she whispered to Xu Qing, “This old guy is really a good person, Big Bro Xu Qing.”

Xu Qing didn’t bother explaining the situation to her. After offering a few encouraging words, he put the Spike of Misfortune away. Then he looked down at the shadow.

The shadow shivered and sent out a host of emotional fluctuations.

“Breakthrough... very soon... wonderful lord and master... amazing lady and mistress... I’m formidable... and useful!!”

The shadow was truly frightened. It had seen the violet crystal in action, and had seen how the god’s finger failed to escape from it. That had filled the shadow with despair, and the longing to simply figure out a way to stay alive. In its anxiety, it could do nothing but spout out everything it knew how to say.

Meanwhile, Xu Qing was thinking of a way to get the shadow to break through to the next level. Before, it hadn’t been possible, but now he was confident he could do it.

Ignoring his shadow, Xu Qing sat down cross-legged and started to meditate. At the moment, he had thirteen heavenly palaces. Twelve of them already had nascent souls, and he had experienced one heavenfate tribulation.

It was only his most recent heavenly palace, the one formed from the hellspirit bloodwing lamp, that didn’t have a nascent soul. However, with the help of his other nascent souls, the nascent soul in that fifth lamp was rapidly forming.

It won’t be long now.

Closing his eyes, Xu Qing focused on cultivation.

Chapter 543: Old Haunts, Old Friends, Old Stories (part 2)

Seven days later, the dreadnaught arrived at South Phoenix. From a distance, Xu Qing spotted the old Seven Blood Eyes, where he had started out years ago. A lot had changed since then. It was still just as bustling and noisy, and there were Seventh Peak ships going in and out of the port. The original seven peaks had been taken to Emperor-Receiving Prefecture, but the peaks that had replaced them looked exactly the same, except without the huge eyes.

The arrival of the dreadnaught caused a stir. Countless people looked up as it flew overhead. Unfortunately, Xu Qing’s messages to Second Elder Sister had not been answered. When Master Seventh saw him off, he’d mentioned that she was in seclusion trying to reach a breakthrough. Because of that, Xu Qing didn’t stay in Seven Blood Eyes for long. Soon, the dreadnaught shot out of the city and headed toward the eastern part of South Phoenix.

To the Xu Qing of the past, South Phoenix had been massive. In fact, it was so big that getting around it required using teleportation portals. But after everything he had experienced, he now realized why Master Seventh had described ‘the continent of South Phoenix’ as an island. Compared to the massive Revered Ancient mainland, it really was just a little island.

Given the speed the dreadnaught was capable of, it only took half a day before Xu Qing reached the old scavenger basecamp.

It was just as dirty and chaotic as before. Xu Qing didn’t see many familiar faces. Scavengers, who walked a fine line between life and death, rarely had very long lifespans, unless they got really lucky.

Xu Qing looked down to take everything in. Then he went down to walk the streets of the now-unfamiliar camp. He passed scavenger after scavenger. He walked past the buildings made from logs and mud. Any mortals who saw him wouldn’t even remember seeing him. That was a function of his D-132 nascent soul. It wasn’t as easy to create amnesia effects in cultivators. But such effects worked easily in a scavenger basecamp.

Xu Qing walked along silently, heading in a specific direction. He wasn’t aiming to visit his old residence. Instead, he went to that one particular street that he had left soaked in blood all those years ago.

There had been a general store on that street back then. The store was still there, although there was a different proprietor.

Across the street from that shop, a person in a black robe sat cross-legged under the eaves of a building. She seemed skinny, and though her facial features weren’t visible, she had an evil ghost scythe slung over her shoulders. She was none other than Qing Qiu. There were a few scavenger corpses nearby. Clearly, they were foolish idiots who had provoked her. Not everyone in the world could think clearly.

Perhaps because of Qing Qiu’s presence, the street was very quiet. The proprietors of all the shops sat inside trembling and not saying a word. She had obviously been here for some time. Maybe it was because she had come looking for certain information, or because she’d been unable to believe everything she saw back in the county capital.

Thus, she had come here to wait. In reality, it was possible that not even she knew what she was waiting for. And she kept waiting until this very day, when she heard footsteps approaching on the little street.

Xu Qing walked up until he was standing next to her.

She kept looking straight ahead. She didn’t turn her head. Her hand tightened on her evil ghost scythe, and then it relaxed. She didn’t say anything.

Xu Qing followed her gaze and realized she was looking at the general store. He could almost see the scrawny, dirty little girl with the scar, busy at work there.

Seven years had passed. Seven years ago, the two of them had met by chance. Both had experienced the opening of the eyes of the broken face of the god. Both had survived. Seven years later, they were here again.

Xu Qing didn’t say anything.

Qing Qiu sat there quietly until her shoulders started trembling.

Finally, he whispered, "It was here that you gave me a piece of candy. You said that when I felt down, I just had to eat it, and I'd feel better. I think I have an idea what you're feeling right now. However, I want to let you know that I ate that piece of candy you gave me, and it eased the grief in my heart." He took out something wrapped in a piece of oil paper and put it on the ground in front of her. "That's a piece of candy I bought for you in Seven Blood Eyes."

With that, he turned to leave. However, after only walking about ten paces, he stopped and looked back. Voice somber, he said, "Also, remember to submit your report to the Secretariat Division when you get back."

"Yes, sir!" Qing Qiu replied instinctively. Only after the words left her mouth did she bow her head. Her hands tightened on her scythe.

The faintest of smiles appeared on Xu Qing's mouth. Without another word, he left.

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After he was gone, the wind picked up, sending dead leaves swirling through the street. It rustled the oil paper, and stirred Qing Qiu's heart and mind. Back when she saw Xu Qing's nascent souls on that altar, she had felt shaken to the core. The shocking scene was something she almost couldn't believe was real.

For years, she had struggled and fought in the hopes of being able to go back to South Phoenix and look for one specific person. It was hard to believe that the very person she had been hoping to find had actually been by her side for two years.

Not only that, but he was so amazing and powerful. She, who could never admit her own weaknesses, now had to acknowledge that she had fallen behind. It left her feeling dazed. Confused. All of her hard work, all of her bitter struggles, had been in the hopes of going back and keeping safe that one person who was the most important person in her life.

Years ago, he had stood in front of her and exchanged bamboo slips to keep her safe. She had struggled to return that favor. It was her goal. Her dream. But now she realized that the person she wanted to keep safe didn't need her at all.

Then she thought about everything that happened in the county capital. She thought about the Ten Entrails Tree. And she realized that, all along, *he* had been keeping *her* safe. And thus, she had come back to this scavenger basecamp, filled with too many mixed emotions. As she sorted out those emotions, she started to hope that she would once again run into her Big Bro Kid. And she had.

"Damnation!"

Qing Qiu gritted her teeth as she thought back to how she had instinctively responded to Xu Qing's final command. Fuming, she reached out to grab the candy in the oil paper. However, as soon as her fingers closed around it, they became incomparably gentle, as if she were holding a precious treasure.

She carefully opened the paper to reveal a gleaming piece of rock candy. She didn't eat it. She just looked at it. And underneath her mask, she smiled.

When the evil ghost scythe noticed that, it started talking excitedly.

*“Ah Qiu, you have to seize this opportunity. It’s a gift from a heavenly dao! Going forward, make sure to always do exactly as the exalted Xu Qing says. If he asks you to do something, you do it! Don’t even think about refusing.”*

*“And that way... we’ll eventually have the chance to end things in mutual destruction with a Void Returning expert! Or even... a god!! That could actually happen!”*

*“Heavens! If we could actually end things in mutual destruction with a god, then it would be the greatest glory imaginable!!”*

The evil ghost scythe was so excited it was shivering, and its eyes glowed bright red.

For once, Qing Qiu didn’t tell the scythe to shut up. In fact, a thoughtful look appeared in her eyes.

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Xu Qing had left the scavenger basecamp and was walking through the forbidden region toward Sergeant Thunder’s grave.

Ling’er hadn’t said anything the entire time. There were some things she wanted to say, but she could sense that Xu Qing’s mood had dipped once inside the forbidden region. She gently rubbed her head against his cheek.

Inside, she was thinking, *That girl must have been one of Big Bro Xu Qing’s friends from back in the day. She seemed to be in a really bad mood, but once she saw that candy, she felt better. What’s the deal with that candy, anyway? Maybe I should buy some. Then if Big Bro Xu Qing doesn’t feel good, I can take it out and give it to him.*

As Ling’er was thinking that she had just learned something very useful, Xu Qing arrived at Sergeant Thunder’s grave.

The weeds had grown in, but the gravestone was the same as before. He sat down in front of it. He looked at the big tree, then the gravestone. It was already dusk, and mist was starting to build up in the area. He didn’t care about that. He took out two jugs of alcohol, one of which he placed down in front of the grave. The other, he raised in a toast.

“Sergeant Thunder, a few days ago I did something really momentous....”

Smiling, Xu Qing drank and told the story. He talked about the county capital, the swordsmen, the war, and Palace Lord Kong.

“Eldest Brother said I’ve grown up. I guess he’s right. It’s been seven years.... Sergeant Thunder, you once told me that when enough time passes, you forget things. You said that you’d waited for long enough, and that you didn’t want to wait any longer. But how come, when I close my eyes sometimes, I just find myself wishing I could eat one of the dishes you’re so good at cooking...?”

After Peerless City vanished from existence, he had drifted about, homeless, encountering all sorts of bitterness. Eventually, he met the one person who had given him a home, and some warmth. He would never forget that.



He took a drink. Then another. Evening turned into night. The mist turned into a fog.

“I miss you, Sergeant Thunder...”

Finally, Xu Qing sighed, kowtowed to the grave, and then got to his feet. Step by step, he walked deeper into the forbidden region.

This was where he'd acquired the shadow. His plan was to bring the shadow back, have it absorb the mutagen of this forbidden region, and see if that could help it to achieve a breakthrough.

After Xu Qing entered the forbidden region, the shadow started getting excited. As Xu Qing got deeper inside, that excitement grew. The shadow began to emit fluctuations of hope, and it spread out from Xu Qing's feet.

Wherever it went, the trees would rock back and forth before turning into coffins with countless eyes on them. As a result of the shadow, the fog grew thicker. And pulses of greed began to float through it, as though there were malicious eyes in its depths, looking at Xu Qing and his shadow with avarice. Rustling sounds could be heard, as if entities in the depths were whispering quietly.

Xu Qing eyed the surrounding fog, his eyes shining coldly. He kept walking. Eventually, he reached the temple complex from years before. As he passed it and entered the true depths of the forbidden region, the fog got even thicker. Eventually, he heard the Singing.

This was his second time hearing the Singing in this forbidden region. Legend had it that if you heard it and survived, the forbidden region would give you a gift. The second time you heard it, you would see the person you most wanted to see. As the Singing echoed out, everything turned colder. A frigid coldness filled the area.

Xu Qing stopped walking and looked out into the fog. He heard... footsteps.

Chapter 544: Favor for the Phoenix's Family (part 1)

The forbidden region's silence turned into something very gruish with the arrival of the Singing. The lyrical voice brought sinister coldness that froze the grass, turning each blade into an icy thorn, and each tree into a statue. It seemed like it was part of the night, so instead of breaking the deep stillness, it actually made everything more still.

Xu Qing stood in place listening, his heart racing as he thought back to what happened seven years ago. This was his second time hearing the Singing. [1]

To the scavengers, the Singing in the forbidden region was something terrifying; generally speaking, anyone who heard it ended up dead.

But something different happened back when Xu Qing heard it. He'd had no means to protect himself back then. All he could do was wait for death as the Singing froze everything around him.

As for right now, though he wasn't actually standing on the soil of Sea-Sealing County, he could still feel the county's destiny aura. With the blessing of that destiny aura, he didn't need to fear anything but the most horrifying grues. And that wasn't even to mention the fact that he had backup in the form of a dreadnaught and Qingqin.

Therefore, Xu Qing felt no fear when he heard the Singing. Instead, his eyes shone with anticipation as the footsteps approached. He was waiting. Waiting for that figure to appear.

His shadow had spread out 300 meters in all directions, creating something like a special forbidden region around him. Within that area, all the grass had eyes on it, and the trees had become coffins. All of the countless eyes were open, and they joined Xu Qing in looking around. The shadow's gruish aura spread out, and it was filled with brutality, hunger, and also fear.

If one could look down at the forbidden region from a very high vantage point, it would be covered with fog, with the exception of the 300 meters surrounding Xu Qing, which was absolutely clear.

The Singing grew clearer. The footsteps drew closer.

Upon reaching the 300-meter border, the Singing persisted, but the footsteps stopped. Just beyond that border, where the fog started, it was possible to see a pair of straw sandals, crimson as if stained with blood.

Xu Qing did not remember seeing these sandals before. Above the sandals in the swirling mist was a figure that was similarly unfamiliar. It looked like a young woman, clad in a voluminous black robe that stretched behind her into the forbidden region. Her arrival caused the grass in the area to bend in her direction, and the trees bowed in worship.

Mutagen roiled off of her, infusing the fog and causing it to ripple. Her eyes were especially unique. One was red. The other was white. The red eye contained innumerable deceased souls, while the white one had endless skeletons. The eyes took in both Xu Qing and his shadow.

"Food!" she said in a raspy voice that emanated, not just from her mouth, but from the fog, the plants, and the entire forbidden region.

Within the 300-meter area, the shadow's eyes glowed with mysterious light as they locked onto the woman. At the same time, they flickered with even greater fear.

*"The lady of... forbidden region..."* the shadow said, projecting fluctuations directly into Xu Qing's mind.

Xu Qing simply stood there, his eyes cold. Meanwhile, the black-robed woman was just about to step into the 300-meter area when she stopped and looked up into the sky.

A moment later, she spoke again. "Leave!"

This time, the voice thrummed with a power of expulsion and rejection, and it rose up from the entire forbidden region as well.

Xu Qing's expression was the same as ever. Clapping hands to the lady of the forbidden region, he said, "Sorry to disturb you."

The fog gathered around the woman, and the power of expulsion grew more intense. Within it was a faint sense of malice, as if it were looking for an opportunity. However, the pressure weighing down from above, struck fear into her heart, and thus, the malicious intentions did not turn into malicious actions.

As the lady of the forbidden region faded from view, Xu Qing politely said, "Did you forget something, ma'am?"

The figure in the fog was apparently pretending not to hear him.

Looking like the perfect image of courtesy, Xu Qing continued, “When you hear the Singing a second time, this forbidden region gives you a gift. You’re supposed to be able to see the person you most want to see. This is my second time hearing the Singing.”

The figure in the mist looked coldly at Xu Qing, but didn’t respond. It turned and began to move in the opposite direction, disappearing into the fog. The frigid yin aura in the area grew more intense, and the sound of the song drifted about, giving further weight to the force of expulsion.

Xu Qing’s expression turned grim, and his eyes even colder. Abandoning his previous polite attitude, he said, “Dreadnaught!”

The moment the words left his mouth, the 3,000-meter dreadnaught descended, emanating a terrifying pressure. At the same time, Daoist Sima and the thousand swordsages all unleashed their auras, lending further weight to the pressure on the forbidden region.

The forbidden region trembled, and the fog seethed. The woman that had been in the middle of leaving stopped in place, turned, and then thrummed with very dangerous fluctuations as she looked at Xu Qing with a vicious expression.

“There’s nothing unreasonable about my request,” Xu Qing said. “Senior Qingqin.”

A caw erupted in the dome of heaven that could shred metal, as if Qingqin had been waiting for a long time for Xu Qing to call him into action. He seemed excited, and it brought a stiff breeze that was like a huge hand shoving down onto the forbidden region.

Then Qingqin himself appeared. The ground quaked, and the fog rippled violently.

The lady of the forbidden region looked around with her eyes flashing. Her malice soared, and at the same time, shrill zither music echoed out from the depths of the forbidden region. The song of the zither filled the entire forbidden region, causing everything to vibrate. Zombies emerged from the trees, and vicious souls burrowed out from the plants and vegetation.

All of them pulsed with killing intent aimed at Xu Qing. It was as if everything was transforming dramatically thanks to the zither music. It was as if the forbidden region had been previously covered by a veil, but now that veil was being pulled back to reveal the true features of the place. Many of the plants here were actually made from evil souls. And many of the trees were actually piles of corpses. There were also ordinary plants and trees. But they only took up about forty percent of the place. Sixty percent of the forbidden region abounded with zombies, which were all of the countless living beings that had died in this place over the years.

Up above, Daoist Sima stepped out onto the deck of the dreadnaught and looked down at the lady of the forbidden region. “This forbidden region isn’t very formidable. It’s only about half mutated. Once it’s fully mutated, it will become a peak forbidden region, at which point not even I could suppress it. I would need more power. But right now, we could attempt to seal it.”

Daoist Sima’s words caused the zither music to grow even more piercing. At the same time, the surrounding zombies howled ferociously.

The shadow, meanwhile, looked at Xu Qing, pulsing with fluctuations of longing.

Xu Qing ignored those things. After clasping hands to Daoist Sima, he turned to the lady.

“Please allow me to see the person I wish to see. That is the rule which governs this forbidden region.”

As the zither music resounded, the lady of the forbidden region coldly said, “The honor of this forbidden region is inviolable!”

She lifted her hands, and the entire forbidden region woke. The forces of rejection and expulsion erupted. It looked like a war was about to break out

Face completely expressionless, Xu Qing lifted his hand and pointed toward the sky.

“Taboo treasure!”

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Far away in the county capital, the taboo treasure thrummed, and golden light shot through the sky in the direction of South Phoenix.

Marquis Yao, who was currently in the Governor’s Mansion working on official business, noticed what was happening. Looking up, he smiled, then went back to work.

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Golden light appeared in the sky above the continent of South Phoenix, specifically, over the forbidden region by the scavengers. It turned into a golden net that weighed down with terrifying pressure.

The zither music stopped. Yet again, the lady of the forbidden region looked up, and this time, her expression flickered slightly. As she glared at the golden net, ripples spread out in the surrounding fog. The zombies and evil souls stopped moving. A moment later, the lady of the forbidden region looked away. She waved her hand. And then, a stream of red mist emerged from her and converged off to the side.

That mist was formed from her essence; once it left her, she became a bit more difficult to see.

The mist converged slowly, almost begrudgingly. Eventually, it became a pair of shoes.

They were the same shoes Sergeant Thunder had been wearing when he died.

Xu Qing’s heart pounded as the mist pulsated, gradually turning into the image of Sergeant Thunder, who stood there looking at Xu Qing. His gaze was one of mixed relief and sorrow.

Xu Qing’s eyes were already slightly bloodshot.

“Sergeant Thunder...”

Sergeant Thunder smiled and nodded in Xu Qing’s direction. Then, after looking around, he sighed, turned, and turned back into a mist that gradually dissipated into nothing.

The shoes walked away and disappeared.

Xu Qing didn’t say anything. He was thinking about something Sergeant Thunder had said once.

*“Don’t wait around this place. I saw the one I wanted to see, but now I feel empty...”*

“Do I feel empty?” Xu Qing murmured as he looked at the fog. He was still waiting to see if any other figures would appear.

Now that he had heard the Singing twice, he was hoping to see other people. For instance, Grandmaster Bai, Master Sixth, and especially his father and mother. However... as time passed, and Xu Qing waited, no more shoes appeared. Looking very lonely, and feeling very bleak, he looked at the lady of the forbidden region.

“Senior, is there any chance I could see some other people?”

The lady glared back at him. Qingqin let loose a cry. The dreadnaught pulsed. The taboo treasure net glittered. The lady said nothing.

Eventually, Master Sixth appeared in the fog. He seemed confused, then looked thoughtful. Finally, he noticed Xu Qing. He smiled. Heart full of grief, Xu Qing clasped hands and bowed very deeply. Master Sixth smiled and returned the bow. Then he faded away into the fog.

The fog began to retreat.

“Senior, is there any possibility I could see Grandmaster Bai and my parents? I’d be happy to pay for it.” Xu Qing spoke with complete politeness.

However, the lady of the forbidden region ignored his courtesy. The zither music grew harsher, and the expression on the lady’s face turned even icier.

Voice cold, she said, “Flame Phoenix has ordered that the forbidden regions in South Phoenix may not expand outward. However, any who encroach on the forbidden regions here will be crushed by Forbidden by the Phoenix!”

The surrounded zombies all howled in unison. The taboo treasure net, Qingqin, and Daoist Sima all erupted with even greater pressure. However, in response, the brutal will of the forbidden region did the same. Forbidden regions could be suppressed or sealed. But their honor could not be infringed upon.

Then Qingqin glowed with magenta light, and his center head flashed a look of arrogance and disdain. A red feather appeared in its mouth.

Chapter 544: Favor for the Phoenix’s Family (part 2)

The moment the feather appeared, the entire forbidden region trembled. The lady in the black robe looked up, stunned, before quickly bowing her head. The distant zither music became a low vibration.

That was one of Flame Phoenix’s feathers.

In the continent of South Phoenix, Flame Phoenix wasn’t just the emperor of Forbidden by the Phoenix. He was the emperor of the entire continent, and by extension, the emperor of all the forbidden regions.

The fog returned, swirling and wriggling into a new shape. Strangely, no matter how the lady of the forbidden region tried, it wasn’t possible to form all three figures in full. Xu Qing’s father and mother became mere outlines before they collapsed. Grandmaster Bai was also an outline, but didn’t become clear. He also dissipated.

Xu Qing looked at the lady of the forbidden region. A moment passed. Qingqin cawed. Finally, the lady of the forbidden region spoke in a raspy voice.

“There are two human souls that were sacrificed to the Father God. They cannot be summoned back. The other soul is not in Revered Ancient.”

The lady of the forbidden region suddenly backed away, merging into the fog. Then the fog retreated into the depths of the forbidden region, where it formed a sealing power that isolated itself from the outside. Apparently, she wasn't very pleased with how things had gone, and was now choosing to seal herself in seclusion. Along with her went the force of expulsion.

Xu Qing stood there quietly. He was not surprised that he had been unable to see the image of his father and mother. Back in Peerless City, they had been sacrificed to the broken face of the god. But he was confused by the situation with Grandmaster Bai's soul.

Not in Revered Ancient?

Xu Qing frowned. Thinking back to Grandmaster Bai's death, he turned to look in the direction of the Violet Lands. His last stop on this visit to South Phoenix was to pay respects to Grandmaster Bai, and also see his childhood companions who lived in the Violet Lands.

*Maybe I should ask Chen Feiyuan and Tingyu about all the details of Grandmaster Bai's death.* [1]

After a moment of thought, he turned to Daoist Sima and Qingqin. He clasped hands and bowed. “Seniors, I hope you don't mind waiting for me for a few days. I plan to have one of my spirit pets evolve here.”

Daoist Sima looked at the shadow beneath Xu Qing's feet. Nodding, he took the swordsages back to the dreadnaught. Qingqin gave a caw, flapped his wings, and flew in the direction of the fog in the middle of the forbidden region. He was actually very interested in the lady there. The zither music twanged, and the fog roiled. Qingqin disappeared into the fog.

Xu Qing wasn't quite sure what happened after that. However, given that Qingqin had one of Flame Phoenix's feathers, it seemed unlikely he would be in any trouble.

Turning, he walked back in the general direction of his old laboratory. As the light of dawn appeared, he reached the spot where Squad Thunderbolt had battled the black-scaled wolves.

Sitting down cross-legged, he quietly said, “This is the spot where I sealed you. Let this mark the boundary for you today. Don't go into the depths of the forbidden region. Don't go into the temple complex. But you can go everywhere else. Show me how much you can grow up.” [2]

His shadow immediately spread out 300 meters. Countless eyes opened and looked at Xu Qing.

“Thanks... milord...”

The shadow faded as it spread out even farther. It left Xu Qing and began moving around and finding plants that had been mutated by the lady of the forbidden region. Seemingly inexhaustible amounts of mutagen flowed into the shadow. Chewing sounds echoed out. Plants and trees alike were nothing more than food for the shadow. It was the same with the mutant beasts. Howls echoed out, and the scavengers who heard them trembled and fled. After some thought, the shadow decided not to bother the scavengers. It wasn't sure how Xu Qing would react to that. So it stuck to devouring mutant beasts and mutagen.

Gradually, its aura grew stronger. Slowly but surely, the plants and trees, instead of disappearing, transformed. The plants grew eyes, and the trees became coffins. It was the same with the mutant beasts. After the shadow devoured them, they would grow eyes and come back to life. It was almost as if the shadow was somehow taking over the forbidden region.

Time passed. Three days went by.

By now, about ten percent of the forbidden region pulsed with the aura of the shadow. And its appearance had changed. The shadow was stuffed and couldn't continue. Sweeping back toward where Xu Qing was seated cross-legged, it emanated cheerful fluctuations that indicated it was close to a breakthrough.

Xu Qing opened his eyes, and they glittered coldly.

“Devouring ten percent and then trying to force a breakthrough? That won't do any good.”

The pleased shadow shivered. “Keep going... slowly but surely... get stronger...”

“Hurry up and break through,” Xu Qing said coldly.

The shadow shivered and shrank in on itself. Then a 300-meter-tall tree appeared in front of Xu Qing. It had a thick trunk and an umbrella-like canopy. It pulsed with immense power, and emanated an extraordinary aura. There were no leaves on the tree, just countless red eyes. However, the eyes didn't contain a hint of brutality. Only obedience. That only made the tree seem more gruish, though.

Ling'er stuck her head out of Xu Qing's sleeve. “You've got this!”

Her words of encouragement caused the shadow to become even more excited. The tree branches swayed, releasing heaven-rending, earth-crushing rumbling sounds.

Next, the huge tree began to transform. It became an enormous coffin, also covered with eyes. Its aura became even more intense, and it also had a feeling of death in it. After that, the coffin transformed into a black vortex that emitted howling sounds. The shadow was now heading toward its third state.

Xu Qing stared at the vortex with keen anticipation. The shadow had its uses occasionally, after all. Therefore, after Xu Qing came to understand how terrifyingly powerful the violet crystal really was, he wanted the shadow to get stronger.

I wonder what its third form will be like.

Rumbling echoed from within the vortex as it grew larger. It went from 300 meters to 3,000, and it floated high into the sky.

It wasn't a vertical vortex. It was horizontal, like an enormous storm cloud that filled the sky. Black rain fell from it, except, it wasn't made of raindrops, but rather, of numerous shadows. Gradually, everything within that 3,000-meter area became pitch black, as if the entire area was completely isolated from the rest of the world.

Seeing that, Xu Qing started to get a bit excited.

Up above, Daoist Sima and the other swordsages looked on with raised eyebrows.

Eventually a huge face appeared within the vortex. The facial features were unfamiliar, but it was clearly howling in a way that made it seem like the voice was full of thunder. The face didn't remain in place for long. After a few breaths of time, it vanished back into the vortex, while at the same time, Nascent Soul fluctuations rolled out.

The shadow's shape changed again. Instead of a vortex, it was like a 3,000-meter black canopy up in the sky. It was almost like a blotchy stain on the dome of heaven. Excited fluctuations rolled out.

"I'm... so... strong!"

Xu Qing let out a cold harrumph.

The fluctuations transformed into those of terror.

"I'm... so... weak!"

The shadow didn't wait for any instructions from Xu Qing, and immediately revealed some of its new powers. The 3,000-meter canopy of heaven was suddenly dotted with stars. It was almost as if that 3,000-meter section wasn't just a blotchy stain in the sky, but rather, its own starry sky! Astonishingly, those stars were all eyes. And when the eyes blinked, those stars glittered.

"Milord... I conceal... flee... transport..."

The shadow was excitedly trying to explain what it could do.

Xu Qing frowned. From what he could tell, the shadow had transformed to look a bit more gruish, but other than that, didn't seem to have developed any new abilities.

Sensing Xu Qing's displeasure, the 3,000-meter canopy of heaven sent out more fluctuations.

"Eyes... possess... seal..."

"That's it?" Xu Qing said, his eyes glittering coldly.

Shivering, the shadow loudly said, "I... can possess... gods!"

Xu Qing's eyes narrowed. Standing, he looked at the 3,000-meter canopy of heaven.

"Eventually..." The eyes in the canopy of heaven blinked a few times.

Xu Qing replied in a cool tone, his face completely expressionless. "Get the hell back here."

The shadow dropped down and returned trembling to Xu Qing.

Meanwhile, Ling'er chuckled. "Little Shadow is really trying hard, Big Bro Xu Qing!"

She looked at Xu Qing and blinked a few times.

The shadow shivered and emanated fluctuations of thankfulness. It had never experienced anything like this before. After all, the only thing it got from Xu Qing was coldness. Considering all that coldness, getting just a teeny bit of warmth left it feeling very grateful toward Ling'er. Not sure how to respond, it twisted and turned in a variety of clever ways. Ling'er laughed.

The laughter made the shadow even happier. But then it saw Xu Qing's expressionless face, and it shivered and didn't dare to look happy any more.



Xu Qing ignored the shadow as he flew up to the dreadnaught. As soon as he landed on the deck, Daoist Sima gave him a look. His other war comrades smiled.

Xu Qing also smiled. Thanking them, he then looked back into the depths of the forbidden region. Apparently noticing his gaze, Qingqin flew up out of the fog and let loose a contented caw. Even now, no one knew what he had been doing in the fog.

Curious, Xu Qing scanned the forbidden region, but the fog obscured everything. Qingqin seemed fine, though, so Xu Qing didn't put any more thought into it. Before long, the dreadnaught was speeding toward the Violet Lands.

That was going to be Xu Qing's next stop. After what happened in the forbidden region, he wanted to look more deeply into what happened leading up to Grandmaster Bai's death. Last time he'd been there, he had only been concerned about exacting vengeance, and hadn't looked much into the overall circumstances. Based on what the lady of the forbidden region had said, Xu Qing got the feeling that there were more mysteries to be unraveled.

#### Chapter 545: Assassination Before a Grave (part 1)

The Violet Lands were special to humans in the continent of South Phoenix. To the scavengers and mortals, they represented imperial authority. They were a symbol of nobility. Anyone who came from the Violet Lands was automatically important. Their style of clothing conveyed eternal luxury, and they gave people something to look forward to. Most people would dream their whole lives of being able to reside there. Sadly, it would be *easier to find a phoenix feather or a qilin horn* than to find someone capable of making that move.

The reason for all of that was that the Violet Lands were the last true kingdom of humans in South Phoenix. The Sovereign Kingdom of Violet and Cyan, which bore the same name as an even greater kingdom from the Revered Ancient mainland, had long since been toppled. However, eight major clans from that kingdom still lived on.

They represented the true local power of humans. Their court politics affected the entire continent, and because of their long relationship with Flame Phoenix, they benefited from his protection. For generations, they had refused to leave South Phoenix, and they were people no one dared to provoke. In their view, all the other forces in South Phoenix, from Seven Blood Eyes to the Church of Departure, and even the mysterious Words of Truth, were, in the final analysis, outsiders.

Isolationist. Old-fashioned. Haughty. Those were the words most commonly used to describe the Violet Lands.

But on this bright morning, the mortals in the Violet Lands saw something completely unimaginable.

All eight clans had mobilized. The direct bloodline clan members dressed in their finest, and had gathered in ranks at the east gate of the Violet Lands' capital city. All of them had very respectful expressions on their faces. The eight clan chiefs stood up front with similarly respectful bearings. Flanking them were the elders of the various clans. All of them were looking east toward the horizon.

There were some elderly folks atop the city wall, who had once borne the magical treasure legacies of their people, but who had since passed those legacies on to their successors. Now, their

cultivation bases were in decline, and they couldn't even walk without assistance. But they were there, looking toward the horizon as well.

No one spoke.

Considering how important social hierarchy was in the Violet Lands, this was something rarely seen.

There was nothing in South Phoenix that could cause the isolationist clans to present themselves so solemnly. Clearly, they were waiting to receive someone. Because of that, the mortals in the Violet Lands were all speculating about what was going on.

Among the forces of the eight clans gathered outside the east gate were two people who stood near the clan chiefs. Given their low seniority in the clan, they normally wouldn't be allowed to stand in that position. But on this day, they had been required to stand there. Many people were glancing their way, including some of the clan chiefs. One was a man, the other was a woman. He was handsome, but his expression was dour. She was beautiful, her expression a mixture of nervousness, anticipation, and also disbelief. They were none other than Chen Feiyuan and Tingyu.

The events in Sea-Sealing County the previous month had been shocking to everyone. And of course, news had spread to the continent of South Phoenix. It was no surprise that the eight clans of the Violet Lands had looked into the matter. Everyone knew that someone named Xu Qing had been appointed as the secretary-general, which was a very high position. And after the attempted coup in the county capital, he had become even more important. It didn't take long before they found out that Xu Qing, like them, was from South Phoenix. Thus, when they were notified that Xu Qing was coming to the Violet Lands, the eight clans took it very seriously. That was why they had gathered to receive him. They were old-fashioned and isolationist, but they knew who they were dealing with. If this visitor was someone from South Phoenix, they could afford to treat him haughtily. But they wouldn't dare to treat Sea-Sealing County that way.

As Tingyu wrestled with her nervousness, she quietly asked, "Feiyuan, do you think Xu Qing... is the same as he was before?"

Grandmaster Bai's death had been a very harsh blow to Tingyu. As she had grown, her personality changed. She became weaker. If it weren't for Chen Feiyuan protecting her, she would have been nothing more than a tool to be married off by her clan.

"Tingyu," Chen Feiyuan said, "forget about all that stuff when we were kids." When he spoke, he sounded grim and forbidding. However, that wasn't on purpose. He lived in a clan where power struggles affected everything, and everyone was trying to outwit everyone else. He had long since adapted to that environment. "If Xu Qing is the same as before, that would be great. But it wouldn't be surprising at all to find that he's changed. Also, the fact that he announced his visit indicates... that there's an important reason he chose to come here."

Tingyu nodded and said nothing further.

An hour later, a mighty caw echoed from the horizon, spreading in all directions and causing the clouds to seethe. Qingqin's massive frame filled the sky, casting a shadow over the Violet Lands. Along with him came the dreadnaught, screaming through the air. They brought a stiff wind that

caused the clothing of the Violet Lands cultivators to flap wildly. Expressions somber, they looked up into the sky.

Xu Qing and Daoist Sima emerged from the dreadnaught and landed in front of the east gate. The cultivators from the eight clans all clasped hands and bowed.

“Well met, Secretary-General Xu, Honor Guard Sima.”

Bells tolled in the Violet Lands. They rang twenty-one times, echoing out somberly in all directions.

Xu Qing was as polite as he always was. He returned the greeting according to etiquette, then exchanged some more formalities. After that, he looked at Chen Feiyuan and Tingyu. Smiling, he said, “Elder Brother Feiyuan. Elder Sister Tingyu.”

Tingyu became visibly excited. Chen Feiyuan, on the other hand, remained expressionless, though his eyes flitted back and forth vigilantly. Xu Qing noticed that and wondered what it meant.

Meanwhile, the eight clans enthusiastically invited him into the city. They had planned a lavish banquet to welcome him, but he politely declined, and instead indicated he wanted to pay respects to Grandmaster Bai. The clan chiefs all knew about Xu Qing’s relationship with Grandmaster Bai, and could also tell that he was interested in catching up with his old friends. Naturally, they accommodated his wishes.

The chief of the Bai Clan carefully avoided mentioning that Grandmaster Bai was buried in a public cemetery.

Meanwhile, the chief of the Chen Clan smiled and said, “In that case, we won’t bother you, Secretary-General Xu. My dear son Feiyuan can keep you company and also be responsible for your safety.”

Xu Qing looked at the clan chief and nodded. Then he clasped hands to the representatives of the eight clans. After all of them left, he was alone with Chen Feiyuan and Tingyu.

Once they were alone, Tingyu couldn’t hold back any longer, and she hurried up to Xu Qing. In her memories, Xu Qing was a dirty little kid who had eavesdropped on alchemy lessons outside the tent in the scavenger basecamp. In the blink of an eye, seven years had passed. She hadn’t seen him since the day they parted in that basecamp. Back when Grandmaster Bai passed away, Xu Qing had come to the Violet Lands, but she’d only glimpsed him in passing, and he had also been in disguise. Only later on did Chen Feiyuan tell her about Xu Qing avenging their Teacher’s death. [1]

“Little Junior Brother...” she said, her eyes red with tears.

“Elder Sister Tingyu.” Xu Qing was also feeling emotional. Although he wasn’t as close to Chen Feiyuan and Tingyu as he was to the Captain, the innocence of their childhood relationship was something he would never forget. Though they hadn’t spent much time together, those memories were something he cherished.

As he sighed with emotion, he looked at Chen Feiyuan and noted that his cultivation base was only in Foundation Establishment. However, his aura was very gruish, and it seemed like he had a massive tempest within him. It made Xu Qing think back to when he had used the Seven Blood Eyes taboo treasure, and had seen something inside of Chen Feiyuan. [2]

People with the blood of Violet and Cyan could live symbiotically with magical treasures. It was a power the eight clans had seized, and then eventually turned into an innate ability.

Looking at Chen Feiyuan, Xu Qing said, "Elder Brother Feiyuan, inside of you is that—"

"Well met, Secretary-General Xu," Chen Feiyuan interrupted, clasping his hands formally.

Xu Qing stopped speaking. Given Chen Feiyuan's facial expression, and his behavior at the east gate, Xu Qing could guess that something was going on. He turned to Daoist Sima.

Daoist Sima maintained silence for a few breaths of time. Then he quietly said, "Marquis Yao arranged all of this personally. We shouldn't run into any complications."

Xu Qing stood there in silence. The trip to the Violet Lands had been announced ahead of time. But when Xu Qing arrived and saw all eight clans present, he had started to suspect something was going on. Combine that with the way Chen Feiyuan looked around vigilantly earlier, it caused everything to click into place. Marquis Yao had probably arranged all of this as a fishing expedition.

It was like how, years ago, Master Seventh had sent him out, then followed along secretly, hoping that people who coveted Xu Qing's life lamp would reveal themselves. Right now, while Sea-Sealing County was stable again, there were surely still villains in hiding. [3]

There were definitely species with hidden agendas that didn't want Sea-Sealing County to be stable. Perhaps there were Torchlight agents out there, or other rebels who hadn't been rooted out during the attempted coup. Even Seventh Prince would have to be on the watch for such people.

Given how important Xu Qing was right now, if he perished, it would be a huge blow to the stability of Sea-Sealing County. Despite that, it didn't make sense to pour endless resources into mounting defenses against such people. Therefore, Marquis Yao wanted to purge as many of them as possible at the same time. And Xu Qing's trip had thus become a focal point.

Xu Qing looked expressionlessly in the direction of the county capital. He said nothing further.

Off to the side, Chen Feiyuan's expression eased after hearing Daoist Sima's words. He had previously assumed this trip was all Xu Qing's doing, and that he had been using their Teacher's grave as a tool in some sort of game. That was why he had reacted with antipathy.

Chapter 545: Assassination Before a Grave (part 2)

Tingyu didn't have the heart of a schemer like Chen Feiyuan or Xu Qing. Therefore, she didn't realize there had been a misunderstanding, nor did she even consider that only a few words could resolve that misunderstanding. However, she could sense that Chen Feiyuan seemed somewhat irritated. Grabbing Chen Feiyuan, and then grabbing Xu Qing, she pulled them closer together.

Smiling, she said, "Chen Feiyuan, don't think that just because you've grown up you can ignore your Elder Sister's words. And Xu Qing, don't be put off by Chen Feiyuan's icy exterior. He actually paid very close attention to everything you did in the county capital. You see, the more he grows up, the less he likes revealing what he really thinks."

Chen Feiyuan cleared his throat. Xu Qing grinned. The three of them looked at each other, and for a moment it was like they were all back in that tent in the scavenger basecamp, sitting together and

listening to Grandmaster Bai's lectures. A moment passed, and they continued on their way to the public cemetery.

Daoist Sima followed behind, keeping his distance. As he looked at the three youngsters, he sighed inwardly and thought of his own Junior Brother. *I should go remind him again not to covet the bloodlines of others. It will only lead to disaster.*

It was currently noon. Though it was in the middle of winter, the sky was clear, with only a few wispy clouds floating along. The wind wasn't very cold, and the sun shone down on Xu Qing, Chen Feiyuan, and Tingyu, keeping them warm as they walked to the cemetery.

Martial law had been imposed thanks to Xu Qing's visit. What was more, there were guards from the eight clans nearby, ready to follow orders from Chen Feiyuan if necessary.

There were plenty of flowers and incense at Grandmaster Bai's grave. Whether it was Chen Feiyuan and Tingyu, or other people who had been helped by Grandmaster Bai through the years, there were always people coming to pay respects.

Xu Qing looked at the grave and thought back to Grandmaster Bai. Tingyu handed him some incense, and he lit it, knelt in front of the grave, and kowtowed. Parents impart the soul to a child. A teacher prepares them for life. Because of that, teachers and parents surpass the importance of heaven. Whether it was Master Seventh or Grandmaster Bai, it was the same.

Xu Qing had understood that truth from a young age. Although he lived in a chaotic world, anyone who imparted knowledge to him was someone he would cherish forever.

However, as Xu Qing kowtowed, those wispy clouds floating in the sky suddenly stirred into motion. There was no explosion of killing intent. There was no icy will. The clouds just formed into a hand that shot down toward Xu Qing in front of the grave. It moved so quickly, and happened so unexpectedly, that it seemed clear this was an ambush designed to be difficult to defend against. What was more, Void Returning power erupted in the hand, causing it to pulse with a sensation of extermination.

Nine figures suddenly appeared.

The first eight were the clan chiefs who had previously departed. All of them pulsed with Spirit Trove fluctuations. The ninth person was an old man with white hair who had a Void Returning aura. Together, they shot toward the descending hand. That old man was publicly accepted as the patriarch of all eight clans, and he was the only Void Returning cultivator in the Violet Lands.

When the two forces collided, the hand was sent flying backward. Eyes shining, the Violet Lands patriarch raced in pursuit.

The eight clan chiefs then flew out to make sure Xu Qing wasn't harmed by any residual shockwaves from the hand. Just like that, the situation was resolved.

The entire time, Xu Qing didn't react at all. He just kept kowtowing.

Tingyu was visibly shaken. As for Chen Feiyuan, his face remained expressionless. Because he was in charge of Xu Qing's safety, he had immediately requested help from the Violet Lands leadership when he sensed something was going wrong.

However, just as Xu Qing's forehead touched the ground, streams of smoke suddenly rose up all around him. Numerous Smokewights took form and rushed toward Xu Qing. There were hundreds of them, all with extraordinary cultivation bases. Being skilled at assassination, they closed in quickly. However, before they could get close, the surrounding air rippled, and a huge sealing mark appeared, pulsing with terrifying power. It was the combined power of the eight clans' magical treasures. Though it wasn't quite at the level of a taboo treasure, it was about as powerful as a magical treasure could be.

All it took was for Chen Feiyuan to crush a jade slip he held in his hand, and the magical treasure appeared. Everything trembled.

Xu Qing wasn't hurt at all, but the Smokewights screamed as they were ripped apart.

Things weren't over yet, though. Almost as soon as the magical treasure sealing mark appeared, the third wave of assassins arrived. They didn't attack from the sky or land, but rather, from within the wind. As the wind blew from all directions, over a thousand figures appeared. They seemed to be Smokewights, except their auras were different from Smokewights. Clearly, they were just in disguise, and were from some other unknown species.

When they appeared, the dreadnaught shot onto the scene. A thousand swordsages emerged, and arrayed themselves around the cemetery with deadly force.

Meanwhile, a black lightning bolt shot through the sky, opening up a rift out of which three figures emerged.

All three were Void Returning experts. One was in the second stage, the other was in the third stage. All were in disguise as Smokewights. The moment they appeared, the clouds seethed as a caw from Qingqin turned into an attack that targeted all three of them.

As explosions filled the air, a fourth figure emerged from the rift. It became a bright beam of light that shot right toward Xu Qing. As the fourth figure neared, Daoist Sima's eyes glittered with cold light. Stepping forward, he flicked his sleeve, flew up into the air, and started fighting.

As fighting played out in the sky and on the land, a nearby clan member shivered, and then exhaled sharply. The breath transformed into two imps made of mist that rushed toward Xu Qing.

They were so close to Xu Qing that they made an immediate threat. In the blink of an eye, they were closing in. That was when a hand reached out of thin air and grabbed both of them. The hand clenched, and the imps screamed as they shattered into bits of mist. Then the hand continued outward as a person emerged.

Xu Qing recognized this person. It was the old deputy palace lord of the Justice Palace, who was now the official palace lord. He nodded at Xu Qing, then pursued the fleeing bits of mist.

At the same time, a massive magical symbol of teleportation appeared next to the rift in the sky. It flickered to life, and eight people stepped out. Shockingly, they were led by Palace Lord Li Yunshan. Next to him was the palace lord of the Administration Palace, plus the other three honor guards.

They immediately shot into the rift, after which rumbling booms rang out.

Tingyu was completely stunned by what was happening. She opened her mouth to speak, but Chen Feiyuan reached out, grabbed her, and pulled her to safety.

Xu Qing stopped kowtowing and looked up into the sky. There, golden light flickered as the county capital's taboo treasure net formed. It spread out to fill the canopy of heaven. In the middle of that net, a face appeared. It was none other than Marquis Yao.

Countless minor worlds swirled around him, like glittering stars. With the blessing of the taboo treasure net, and the destiny aura of the county capital, those minor worlds coalesced into a single major world! It then swept toward the rift formed from the black lightning.

“Fourth-stage Void Returning!”

Even as Xu Qing's eyes narrowed, the smoke coming off of the incense in front of the grave turned into a finger that shot toward Xu Qing. An aura of fatal killing spread out, locking onto Xu Qing's soul. If that finger attack landed, Xu Qing's soul would collapse.

However, the moment the finger appeared, the air next to it rippled, and another person emerged to stand protectively in front of Xu Qing.

“Begone!”

The fluctuations in the voice were terrifying, but they didn't harm the grave itself. They were all focused on that finger of smoke. The smoke collapsed.

It only took a moment for Xu Qing to realize who this newcomer was. He was the grand elder from the Swordsage Court in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture.

He was Grandmaster Bai's Master! After a moment, he turned to look at Xu Qing. Then he looked at Tingyu and Chen Feiyuan. He nodded.

“Xu Qing, continue paying your respects.”

After clasping hands to the grand elder, Xu Qing looked back at Grandmaster Bai's gravestone. Once again, he began kowtowing earnestly.

“Sorry to disturb your sleep, Teacher...” Xu Qing murmured. He could guess at what Marquis Yao was trying to accomplish here, though Xu Qing himself had not been aware of the plan. And he also knew why Marquis Yao didn't mention anything ahead of time. The marquis had obviously been aware that Xu Qing wouldn't agree to lay a trap like this right in front of his Teacher's grave. Or perhaps this wasn't their chosen location for the fight to play out.

Xu Qing continue to kowtow.

One kowtow. Two kowtows. Three kowtows....

Marquis Yao had obviously prepared thoroughly for this situation. He also had the cooperation of the Violet Lands. As a result, the well over 1,000 would-be assassins were either being killed or captured. The fight didn't last long. Once the attackers realized a trap had been laid, they tried to flee.

After Marquis Yao's major world entered the rift, the place rained blood. The assassination attempt was already almost over. Although some fighting was still playing out, it had already moved out of the Violet Lands.

Everything grew quiet.

The assassination attempt by the secret resistance forces in Sea-Sealing County had been thwarted. Perhaps they didn't attack with full force, or perhaps they didn't prepare well enough. Either way, their haste, coupled with their selection of the wrong battlefield, and perhaps other factors they couldn't have predicted, led to this conclusion. Because of everything, Xu Qing felt like he had just been part of a show.

Or maybe Marquis Yao wasn't on a fishing expedition. Maybe he got some information about what was going to happen, and decided to tighten the noose....

Xu Qing thought about it for a moment.

The grand elder from the Swordsage Court noticed Xu Qing's facial expression.

"Don't be irritated at Marquis Yao," he said. "He paid a heavy price for this. Tapping into the county's taboo treasure and destiny aura, plus the forced convergence of his major world, is going to cost him longevity.

"Now that he's the governor, his connections with the various nonhumans are going to be the foundation of his success in Sea-Sealing County. He has a totally different style than the old governor. Some species required to give blood tribute did it in the form of intelligence reports.

"Marquis Yao wants to stabilize the county and intimidate those around us. He can't afford to show any cowardice, and thus, chose to make an impression. The reality is that Sea-Sealing County doesn't actually have a fourth-stage expert, which led to this current situation."

The grand elder looked deeply at Xu Qing.

"Furthermore, he took a weakness of yours and managed to erase it in the eyes of the enemy. If they think you're willing to lay a trap like this right in front of your Teacher's grave, then they'll believe that mundane emotional connections are meaningless to you. Going forward, no one will try to use such things against you. Of course, this is all just my opinion."

Xu Qing didn't reply. He knew the situation in Sea-Sealing County, and he could guess Marquis Yao's intentions.

As Xu Qing looked in the direction of where the fighting was still playing out, Chen Feiyuan approached.

"Our Violet Lands forces have captured many enemies. Some we need to keep for interrogation. What do we do with the others?"

Calming his heart and mind, Xu Qing said, "Kill them."

Chapter 546: Daofate Heavenfiend; Thirteenth Nascent Soul! (part 1)

Xu Qing had always been indifferent toward enemies.



Chen Feiyuan nodded. Looking at Xu Qing, he sighed inwardly. After his Teacher passed away, Chen Feiyuan had lost any measure of protection he had. To survive the clan infighting that was typical in the Violet Lands, he had mastered the ability to be ruthless and unfeeling.

But Xu Qing had already mastered that when he was a kid. It's an instinct by now.

Chen Feiyuan had only come to understand that part of Xu Qing when he himself became embroiled in clan power struggles. Chen Feiyuan's understanding of Xu Qing was informed by many things, such as his actions as the Kid in the scavenger basecamp, the bloodbath with the camp owner, or how Xu Qing slaughtered his way through Seven Blood Eyes. Chen Feiyuan had observed how Xu Qing handled himself, and had been determined to learn from him.

There wasn't any need for further discussion. Chen Feiyuan took out a transmission jade slip and gave the orders to slaughter the prisoners.

Xu Qing didn't pay attention to the details. He didn't stay for long in the Violet Lands. He spent three days catching up with Chen Feiyuan and Tingyu. Then the eight clans gathered again to see him off.

When it came time to part, Tingyu wept. Her frailty had become much more apparent after their Teacher's death, and that was especially true when it came time to part with people she cared about. The pain she felt was obvious.

Xu Qing could tell that she was no longer the curious and exuberant girl she'd been when they were kids. But as she grew, the camaraderie they'd experienced as fellow disciples was a source of warmth inside of her, which insulated her against the coldness of the Violet Lands, and the dog-eat-dog world she was forced to live in. That's just how life is sometimes. White hair eventually covers the past. The colder the world is, the more likely that emotions other than love will build up in the heart. And sometimes, those emotions don't need long periods of time to develop.

With some struggle, Tingyu managed to control herself. She didn't cry in front of Xu Qing. It was only after he was gone that she fell onto Chen Feiyuan's shoulder and wept.

Chen Feiyuan looked at the Elder Sister he had grown up with. He could feel her heartache. "Elder Sister," he said softly, "do you remember what Teacher told us? The world is a tavern for living beings. And the timescape is an old guest...."

Tingyu looked up and softly continued, "As long as we don't die, we'll meet again."

The exact same words could be heard on the dreadnaught as Xu Qing murmured them. The wind stirred his clothes and lifted his hair as the dreadnaught started moving. He was thinking about what Grandmaster Bai looked like when he uttered those words. [1]

On his final day in the Violet Lands, he had asked Chen Feiyuan and Tingyu for all the details of what happened before Grandmaster Bai died. For example, he'd asked if Grandmaster Bai had any other friends similar to Master Seventh. He'd inquired about any unusual circumstances leading up to the murder, and whether or not Grandmaster Bai said anything noteworthy.

Chen Feiyuan had little to add. But Tingyu had a good memory, and was able to describe that time period in detail. However, she didn't mention anything that Xu Qing found relevant. Except... she mentioned that their Teacher had the habit of looking into the sky. It wasn't something he had always done. He only developed the habit in the year before his murder.

Xu Qing looked up quietly into the sky.

“Beyond Revered Ancient...”

He thought about it for a moment. In the end, he couldn't come up with an answer to what happened to Grandmaster Bai. He could only bury the matter in his heart.

After leaving the Violet Lands, Xu Qing took a trip to Forbidden by the Phoenix. He wanted to determine once and for all who Huang Yan really was. Upon arriving at the fog-filled Forbidden by the Phoenix, Qingqin let loose a loud caw. However, Flame Phoenix didn't react.

Xu Qing studied the place for a time, then chose to leave. However, just before passing the border of Forbidden by the Phoenix, he got a voice message from Second Elder Sister.

*“Little Junior Brother! I'm in Forbidden by the Phoenix. Guess what? I'm pregnant! However, because of that, I'm having trouble with my next cultivation breakthrough. It's so annoying. And it's all the fault of that big fat fatty, Huang Yan. So, so annoying!*

*“Anyway, Huang Yan is helping me figure everything out, which means we can't go out and see you. By the way... Huang Yan wants me to tell you that his offer from before is still valid. If you're feeling down, just come back to South Phoenix.”*

After listening to the message, Xu Qing turned to Qingqin.

Qingqin cawed. His expression was one of excitement and curiosity; he could clearly sense that something unusual was going on in Forbidden by the Phoenix.

*Is Huang Yan really Flame Phoenix?* thought Xu Qing. All the clues indicate that the answer was yes. But when Xu Qing thought back to everything he'd done with Huang Yan, it seemed completely preposterous.

In the end, all he could do was sigh and return to the dreadnaught. With that, he left South Phoenix and crossed the Forbidden Sea. Soon, he could see Emperor-Receiving Prefecture in the distance.

He didn't spend much time in the Eight Sect Coalition. After a few days, Master Seventh took a contingent of disciples from Seven Blood Eyes and the Dark Serenity Sect, then teleported back to the county capital along with Xu Qing. Plumdark wasn't with them; she'd gone ahead to select a suitable site for the new sect, and begin the construction work.

The president of the coalition saw them away with a smile. However, there was also something wistful in his expression.

The Eight Sect Coalition still had eight sects. There was no change in that regard. The new Green Dark Sect would be an independent organization. As it expanded and grew in the future, it would surely outpace the Eight Sect Coalition. Master Seventh was the lieutenant governor, and one of the characters from Xu Qing's name was in the name of the sect. Given that, everyone in the county knew that, though the sect was currently small and weak, given enough time, it would become a superpower.

Thus ended Xu Qing's travels.

He had visited many places and accomplished many things. He also felt like he was thinking much more clearly now. On the fourth day back in the county capital, he finished his thirteenth nascent

soul using the hellspirit bloodwing lamp. The left wing boosted speed, and the right wing augmented attack power. The moment the right wing formed, a sensation of killing and death erupted from the nascent soul. It was far stronger than any of his other life lamps.

After sensing how formidable it was, Xu Qing thought for a moment, then took out a jade slip. Master Seventh had given it to him on their way back. It contained a nascent soul technique that Master Seventh had created just for Xu Qing.

The Daofate Heavenfiend Art.

Similar to the Gruegloom Daoseizing Art, Master Seventh had designed it according to Xu Qing's personality, temperament, and current capabilities. In other words, it was a one-of-a-kind technique. When Xu Qing thought about how proud Master Seventh was of the technique he had crafted, he felt warmth in his heart. It was only recently that he had come to realize that creating an entire technique was extremely difficult. It required a lot of practice, and also plenty of special materials. And Master Seventh had done that all for him.

Xu Qing studied the jade slip and committed the technique to heart.

Cultivators from all species in the Revered Ancient mainland would experience a big shift in cultivation style when they reached Nascent Soul. It required heavenfate.

Heavenfate was something that only came into play starting with Nascent Soul cultivators. It was different from destiny aura. Specifically, heavenfate was built on a foundation of power from the natural and magical laws of heaven and earth. It could be likened to the musical notes that make up a piece of music, the strokes used to write characters, or the bricks used to construct a building. One of its uses was to nourish and grow the nascent souls. But also it could be stockpiled inside the nascent souls, and then, during one of the five tribulations, could be used to form a secret trove.

The amount of heavenfate you possessed determined your success rate in forming a secret trove. It also formed the foundation of the secret trove. What was more, if you had enough heavenfate, then after you formed a secret trove, any remainder could be added into the secret trove to create natural and magical laws, thus preparing it for the birth of a heavenly dao. Clearly, heavenfate was an absolutely essential aspect to cultivation in the Nascent Soul level. The way to get more heavenfate was to experience heavenly tribulations.

Normally speaking, the first heavenly tribulation wasn't unusually powerful. But every tribulation after that became increasingly terrifying. It was said that the fourth tribulation was one of complete extermination, and it wasn't uncommon for people to fail that tribulation. People who had life lamps had a bit of an advantage. If they failed that tribulation, they wouldn't lose the nascent souls in the lamps. But they would lose the life lamps.

Ordinary nascent souls would be severely damaged, and the cultivator would have to pay a huge price to fix them. In some cases, the nascent soul would even be destroyed permanently. Because of all that, there were many people who didn't dare to face the tribulations of the Nascent Soul level. They were willing to just stop at that point.

Though it seemed like Spirit Trove cultivators weren't very rare, one reason for that was the vast size of the Revered Ancient mainland, and its immense population. Every single one of those Spirit Trove cultivators had experienced the life-or-death test of heavenly tribulations.

Of course, it went without saying that immense amounts of research had been done regarding the Nascent Soul 'heavenfate tribulation.' And there were obviously sundry methods used to pass them. Some were very effective, but also extremely expensive. Others were less ideal, had harsh requirements, and were essentially theories.

The best chance to pass tribulations was to use one of the secret methods kept by the major sects, or to cultivate an imperial-class technique. Not only would that enable a person to have a much higher chance of success, but also, it would allow them to get more heavenfate.

Of course, many species had even more precious techniques for tribulations. Such techniques would enable the user to pass the tribulation unharmed. However, they had very strict cultivation requirements, and couldn't be cultivated without the use of various precious materials of heaven and earth. Techniques like that were not widespread.

What was more, since most species had hierarchical societies, those techniques were usually reserved for the nobility.

Regardless, cultivators needed to actually form their nascent souls before thinking about the tribulations. Whether they formed nascent souls from the spirit power of heaven and earth, by devouring the nascent souls of other people, or by consuming precious materials and medicinal pills, the ultimate goal was to have nascent souls that could pass the tribulations and absorb a lot of heavenfate. In addition to that, special techniques were required.

The Daofate Heavenfiend Art that Master Seventh had designed for Xu Qing was a domineering technique that conformed to the traditions and style of the Seventh Peak.

It was essentially a continuation of the Gruegloom Daosiezing Art, as it focused on devouring. Of course, it didn't devour gold cores from heavenly palaces, but rather, heavenfate from nascent souls! With it, Xu Qing could take the heavenfate that other people had accumulated after passing their tribulations, and make it his own.

Heavenfate was the best nourishment a nascent soul could get, and thus, this technique didn't require precious materials. It just required slaughter! It was because the technique focused on heavenfate that it had Daofate in the name.

An odd expression could be seen on Xu Qing's face when he saw the name. As best he could tell, Master Seventh had added 'dao' to the name just to make it sound good. It probably would have been better to call it the Plunderfate technique. [2]

The Heavenfiend part of the name was also important. There was a second aspect to the technique; the person who cultivated it could break down the nascent souls they devoured. Some of the heavenfate that resulted would be turned into nourishment. But some of it could be used to create an illusory clone called a heavenfiend clone.

Heavenfiend clones looked like ordinary doppelgangers, but weren't. For one, they could be produced en masse. They would adhere to the original form like souls, and could be sent into battle to protect their true form.

However, the best use of the heavenfiend clones was to pass tribulations! Because heavenly tribulations just got more and more terrifying, and the price to pay for failing was the loss of nascent souls. Meanwhile, the main goal was to gather heavenfate. Therefore... passing such tribulations was essentially a formality. Having a heavenfiend clone pass the tribulation instead was

the same thing. If a heavenfiend clone was destroyed, there would be a second to take its place. Then a third.... As long as one of them succeeded, then the heavenfate power could be gathered using the Daofate aspect of the technique.

That was how the Seventh Peak operated, and that was how Master Seventh operated.

Eyes shining, Xu Qing took out three medicinal pill bottles.

Chapter 546: Daofate Heavenfiend; Thirteenth Nascent Soul! (part 2)

In the beginning, cultivating the Daofate Heavenfiend Art was similar to cultivating the Gruegloom Daoseizing Art. The latter had required the actual heart of a Gruegloom to function as the foundation. With the former, the requirement was a nascent soul from another cultivator, one that had passed a heavenly tribulation and already had some heavenfate.

That was the foundation of the Daofate Heavenfiend Art.

And thus came the three pill bottles.

The first bottle contained the headless corpse of a Gruegloom Nascent Soul cultivator. Master Seventh had spent a lot of time tracking that down for Xu Qing. After all, the Grueglooms were a rare species. It would function to augment Xu Qing's Gruegloom abilities, and would enable him to extract the nascent souls from his enemies.

The second bottle contained a blood-red vortex that pulsed with clear holiness. That was the marrow Master Seventh had extracted from the fish bone of the god. Because the god in Forbidden by the Immortal was now dead, it was masterless, and easy to work with. There was a unique way to use it. It had to be fused with Xu Qing's heavenly dao nascent soul. And then, with the power of the heavenly dao, Xu Qing could wrest the heavenfate out of his enemy's nascent souls.

The third bottle contained 100,000 evil souls from Cruelmurk.

Bai Xiaozhuo had used the three fish bones to lock onto the position of Cruelmurk and open a pathway to it. That had allowed masses of evil souls to enter the world. It didn't last for long before Xu Qing whisked him away to the Ancient Spirit world. But some of those souls had remained behind.

The souls were incredibly ferocious. What was more, their minds were in chaos. Memories from before life and after death had driven them into states of madness.

Later, Master Seventh tracked them down and started purifying them in the bottle. After cleansing their chaotic minds, he turned them into seeds that would later become heavenfiend clones. Although killing large numbers of Cruelmurk souls would result in being marked by Cruelmurk, thanks to Xu Qing's special body, as long as he didn't go overboard, he would be fine.

Xu Qing looked at the bottles and sighed. This technique truly was tailor-made for him. The Daofate Heavenfiend Art essentially took his capabilities, evolved them, adjusted them, and then turned them into something uniquely perfect for him.

*Everything's ready. Now I just need to finalize my nascent soul tribulation.* Through his thirteenth nascent soul, Xu Qing could sense that the tribulation would come in the next few days.

Also, I need to consider the purification of the memories of the Cruelmurk souls.

Taking a look at the bottle with the Cruelmurk souls, he came to the conclusion that the purification speed was subpar.

*It's going to take months....* Eyes shining, he considered another option.

However, even as he pondered that, his transmission jade slip vibrated. Taking it out, he saw that he had received a message request from Marquis Yao.

He used divine sense to respectfully say, *"Greetings, Governor."*

Marquis Yao's voice echoed in his mind in response. *"Xu Qing. I got in touch with Mu Ye."*

Xu Qing's eyes narrowed.

*"At the moment, everything is going fine. Per my request, Mu Ye is pushing for the Heavengale dynasty to hand over one of its counties to us. There are some issues. That county isn't on the border, and in fact, is a long way from Sea-Sealing. However, we can deal with that."*

After saying a few more things about Mu Ye, the marquis went on to discuss some matters relating to Sea-Sealing County as a whole, including the situation with some of the allied nonhumans, as well as how things were going with Seventh Prince in the three prefectures that had yet to be returned to the county.

The marquis was using his own methods to help Xu Qing get a handle on the big picture. They didn't talk about the Violet Lands. Xu Qing didn't ask about it, and kept his tone very respectful.

His attitude pleased Marquis Yao very much. It wasn't lost on the marquis that, even after Xu Qing's status changed so dramatically, his behavior and attitude remained the same.

It's rare for people to stay so true to themselves.

Eventually, the discussion ended, and Xu Qing put down the jade slip. He looked in the direction of Yao Mansion.

Although Xu Qing wasn't completely convinced regarding all of Marquis Yao's methods, having such a perceptive and discerning individual in charge of Sea-Sealing County would leave the people feeling very safe. As long as you trusted him.

Xu Qing looked away from Yao Mansion. With Master Seventh around, he didn't feel the need to worry about such things. Although Xu Qing had a high position in the eyes of the people, the reality was that he was nothing but a mere pseudo-Nascent Soul cultivator. When you simply accept public opinion as fact, you would lose the quality of having an inquiring mind.

Xu Qing hated people like that, and had no desire to become what he hated. Therefore, he would act the way he had always acted. He would be respectful, but vigilant. And he wouldn't think of himself as being some amazing, important person. At the same time, he would keep his eyes and ears open. He would learn as much as possible, including about the big picture, to make himself a more complete person.

Putting the jade slip away, he settled down and focused on cultivation.

In that manner, time passed.

Three days later, a vortex of tribulation clouds appeared in the dome of heaven above the Swordsage Palace. Rumbling sounds built in intensity until a bolt of heavenly lightning shot toward Xu Qing in the Secretariat Division.

Xu Qing's thirteenth nascent soul floated up into the air to meet the heavenly lightning.

Rumbling echoed out as the lightning surrounded the nascent soul. Sparks flew everywhere. Then a second bolt of heavenly lightning fell, even more violent than the first. A killing will raged out of the nascent soul, whose eyes shone with ferocity as it looked up and faced the tribulation.

The intensity of the sounds attracted the attention of people throughout the county capital. That was especially true in the Swordsage Palace. Everyone knew that Xu Qing was going through nascent soul 'heavenfate tribulation.' For this tribulation, there would be three bolts of lightning.

Although it seemed unlikely anything would go wrong, both Master Seventh and Plumdark were both in different areas looking at the Swordsage Palace, ready to intervene if necessary.

When the third bolt of heavenly lightning fell, it surrounded the nascent soul. The nascent soul let loose a piercing shriek. Then the tribulation was complete. The clouds parted, and as the sun shone down, a heavenfate aura rushed into the thirteenth nascent soul. The heavenfate aura was nothing compared to the aura that had appeared on the day of the Lieutenant Governor's Coup. After all, this was a tribulation of a single nascent soul, whereas the previous one had been for twelve at the same time.

That wasn't relevant, though. With his Daofate Heavenfiend Art, Xu Qing would have plenty of chances to build up more heavenfate. What was most important was that he no longer counted as a pseudo-Nascent Soul cultivator.

As his thirteenth nascent soul returned to him, Xu Qing's eyes opened, and they glowed with violet light.

"Nascent Soul!"

His thirteenth heavenly palace was complete, and had turned into a nascent soul. He had completely experienced the first tribulation.

Now there's only one more step before I can start cultivating the Daofate Heavenfiend Art!

Xu Qing took out one of the bottles from Master Seventh. It was essentially a holding item, as within it were the Cruelmurk souls, in the middle of being purified. After examining the souls thoughtfully for a time, Xu Qing's eyes shone with determination. After much analysis over the past few days, he had come to the conclusion that his idea for accelerating the process was valid.

Standing, he left the Secretariat Division and went in the direction of the Supreme Void Demonization Sect. Although the Supreme Void Demonization Sect had suffered during the war, it was a superpower sect, and thus, recovering afterward hadn't been too challenging.

When Xu Qing arrived, there were lots of disciples about.

His goal wasn't to make a big scene. Rather, he intended to visit the Supreme Void World. From inside the sect, he teleported out of Sea-Sealing County and into the same void as before. Inside the body of that huge fish, he traveled to the familiar Supreme Void World. Before long, he saw the huge statue with the hole in its chest, whereupon the fish spat him out in a bubble.

A moment later, Xu Qing was in the Supreme Void World.

The brain trees, which had been floating around casually, caught sight of him. Sensing his aura, they shivered and fled in the opposite direction. They also sent out warnings to the other brain trees, letting them know that the great robber had come again!

As a result, the area around Xu Qing became empty almost immediately.

Ling'er stuck her head out and looked around curiously. "What is this place, Big Bro Xu Qing? And why are those things running away? It looks like they're scared of you."

"This is the Supreme Void World," he explained. "It's a special place. They're not running away. It's their special way of offering greetings."

Xu Qing took a step forward, and a pair of blood-red wings appeared behind him. The wings flapped, and he shot forward at incredible speed toward the nearest brain tree.

The brain tree screamed. "Don't eat me, don't eat me, don't eat me!"

Xu Qing ignored the cries of the brain tree. Grabbing it, he took out the bottle with the Cruelmurk souls, and then used the bottle's function as a holding device to suck the brain inside.

This was Xu Qing's idea. The brains in the Supreme Void World liked to eat memories. In their malicious avarice, they would swindle people they encountered, and then make them forget the terms of the deal they made. That, in turn, let them make even more deals, which could lead to their victims losing all of their memories.

Xu Qing got the feeling that these brain trees would be perfect for purifying the Cruelmurk souls. After all, what they suffered from was chaotic memories.

At first, the brain tree had been screaming. But once it was inside the bottle, and noticed all of the Cruelmurk souls, it started trembling in excitement. It flew to the nearest soul, and then the surface of the brain seemed to flicker with electricity, as if it had absorbed something. After that, the soul didn't seem cruel anymore, but rather, dazed.

*It works!* Thrilled, Xu Qing flew onward to get more brain trees. That said, he knew he had to keep himself in check. After capturing about thirty of the brain trees he stopped.

Although he only had thirty, they were going to significantly speed up the process of purifying the souls. In fact, it would probably be only five days until the souls could be used in his cultivation. Pleased, Xu Qing left. Back in the Swordsage Palace, he went into seclusion to start working on his Daofate Heavenfiend Art.

Half a month flew by.

During that time, he worked constantly on cultivation. One day, he got a message from Master Seventh.

*"Fourth Sib, an emissary from Seventh Prince arrived with a letter of invitation. You're invited to the spot where the Ten Entrails Tree used to be in Holytide territory, to participate in the Holytide's ceremony of return. Seventh Prince and the Holytides have finalized the initial agreement. After the emperor certifies it, he'll issue an imperial edict, and the Holytides will return to humankind."*



*“You’re not just invited to the ceremony. You’re also invited to a private dinner with him to talk about returning the three provinces to Sea-Sealing County. Based on my information, the people invited to this event are the children of various nobles and aristocrats, the apprentices of almighty cultivators, and other famous heroes from the imperial capital.*

*“So, will you go?”*

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Even as Xu Qing was listening to his Master’s message, the banquet was starting in Holytide territory near where the Ten Entrails Tree had once stood. With the huge tree gone, that area had changed a lot. There was now a huge crater in the earth there.

Later, Seventh Prince arrived and set up a garrison headquarters. The area surrounding the crater was an endless army camp.

The surviving tiny city-states had all been swallowed up by the huge army camp. One of the smaller city-states, the name of which was Modelrule, had a dark blue palace that Seventh Prince took a liking to. Therefore, he took it over and used it as his operations palace.

In a banquet hall in that palace, laughter could be heard from a group of well-dressed young men and women. All of them had the air of nobility, and all were from the imperial capital.

Seventh Prince sat at the head of the table, smiling. Unbeknownst to everyone present, though, his eyes contained deep contempt for the other people at the table. That contempt only vanished when he looked at the young woman sitting next to him.

“Sister, I have to admit I’m surprised that you honored me with your presence.”

The girl looked to be in her twenties. She had fair skin and clear, cold eyes that seemed capable of seeing through anything and everything. The fingers that held her drinking vessel were like white snow dusted with pink frost. She wore an outfit of blue, embroidered with peach flowers, cut in a very elegant style. Her hair was bound high with a beautiful hairpin, and she wore all sorts of jade jewelry. Everything about her seemed icily arrogant.

In response to Seventh Prince, she said, “What does that mean, Seventh Brother? Are you prying for information about why I came?”

Seventh Prince smiled and looked down into the alcohol in his own drinking vessel. “I wouldn’t dare.”

Chapter 547: Fanning the Flames; Lending a Knife (part 1)

In the early parts of the war, the Holytides had seized three prefectures. After the war finished, Seventh Prince had accepted their return as part of the surrender. However, to date, they had not been transferred back to Sea-Sealing County.

It was nothing unusual. Seventh Prince had recaptured the provinces, and Sea-Sealing County was prepared to pay for their return. However, Seventh Prince had not been inclined to negotiate the matter before. What was more, he had army forces garrisoned throughout those prefectures. Because it was a human matter, the Holytides didn’t interfere. Another factor was that those three prefectures had mines that produced a lot of spirit stones, as well as other valuable forging

materials. Those things would be instrumental in Sea-Sealing County's future recovery from the war. As a result, the prefectures couldn't simply be abandoned.

And now, at long last, Seventh Prince had invited Xu Qing to negotiate their return.

*"Marquis Yao hopes you can go, but he didn't give his approval yet. You need to make the final decision, Fourth Sib. In terms of your personal safety, I wouldn't worry about it too much. If anything untoward occurs, Seventh Prince will be held responsible. Given his personality, I doubt he would be so foolish as to allow something like that to happen."*

Master Seventh had pointed out all the pros and cons for Xu Qing to consider.

Xu Qing mulled it over. He thought about the arrangements Marquis Yao had already mentioned, including that other county Sea-Sealing was secretly taking over. Because that county wasn't on the border, it actually didn't matter very much to Sea-Sealing County. But it had a different significance to Seventh Prince.

I bet Marquis Yao predicted this was going to happen. He really is quite brilliant.

Another thing to consider was that, since the Captain wasn't back, Xu Qing had some time to spare.

Marquis Yao wanted him to go. Master Seventh was waiting for an answer. And on his travels, he had personally seen how much everyone was working to keep Sea-Sealing County safe.

Considering that he was blessed by the greater part of the county's destiny aura, it was only natural that he shoulder similar responsibilities.

What was more, once the Captain did get back, they would need to leave. After doing some research, Xu Qing had come to find that the Moonrite Region was far, far away from Sea-Sealing County. It was on the other side of the Holytide Region, separated by Yin Sacrifice River. In the days of Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity, it had been human territory. But it had subsequently been lost, and was now controlled by the Nightshades. Of course, the Nightshades had a different name for it.

Spirit Garden.

The word 'garden' can have different meanings. It could just mean a place with animals and plants. But metaphorically speaking, it could refer to something like a farm where essence is harvested. That said, the information Xu Qing had access to didn't go into any detail. Presumably, that was why the Captain had felt the need to go out and gather his own information. In any case, Xu Qing felt like it would be good to accomplish some things before leaving Sea-Sealing County, so he agreed to accept the invitation.

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A few days later, a fleet left Sea-Sealing County under the command of Palace Lord Li Yunshan. The new deputy palace lords from the Administration Palace and the Justice Palace came along, as did six honor guards from the various palaces. Because the Swordsage Palace took the lead in military matters, 20,000 veteran swordsages were picked to join the force.

Kong Xianglong was among them. After the Lieutenant Governor's Coup, Kong Xianglong stopped drinking as much. He focused his energy on cultivation, and spent a lot of time working in the

Secretariat Division, where he had consolidated a lot of authority. Li Yunshan had taken a liking to him, and was grooming him to eventually take over the Swordsage Palace.

The fleet consisted of over a thousand huge warships that cast shadows on the mountains and rivers below as they flew along.

In the lead was an enormous bronze sword, atop which were Li Yunshan and the other Void Returning experts.

Right behind the bronze sword was Master Seventh's dreadnaught, which was pitch black and pulsed with a somber and desolate aura that gave birth to screaming winds. Xu Qing currently stood on the dreadnaught's superstructure, looking out at heaven and earth.

After several teleportations, the fleet reached what had once been the western front. At that point, the flying ships stopped for a short time. Everyone looked down at the shattered lands that had not yet been restored to their previous condition. They saw the huge gully that had been carved out by Palace Lord Kong, and they also saw... the spot where he'd fallen in battle.

Everyone bowed their heads and observed a moment of silence.

Xu Qing clasped hand and bowed deeply. Kong Xianglong stood next to him, his face expressionless and his eyes closed.

Eventually, the ships started moving again. They left the battlefield and continued into Holytide territory.

Kong Xianglong opened his eyes. He didn't look over his shoulder, but instead, kept his eyes in the direction of the Holytides.

"Xu Qing," he said calmly, "I'm genuinely interested in seeing what these damned imperial hotshots are all like."

"I bet they're all complicated people," Xu Qing replied quietly.

Ever since Kong Xianglong took oversight of prefectural intelligence reports in the Secretariat Division, he had started dressing differently. He wore a black suit of armor that radiated a somber and desolate aura. His eyes were cold, and his expression was always threatening without being angry.

He looked a lot like Palace Lord Kong.

His cultivation base had improved. Two years ago, he had possessed ten heavenly palaces. Back then, he was the number one chosen in Sea-Sealing County. And he had continued that tradition by adding more heavenly palaces and also converting some of those palaces into nascent souls. Just like Xu Qing, Kong Xianglong had decided to form all of his nascent souls before experiencing 'heavenfate tribulation' and acquiring heavenfate. From his aura and fluctuations, it was obvious that he would only need a few more months before he would face his tribulations.

A few days passed.

After entering Holytide territory, things went smoothly. They didn't encounter any dangerous situations. By making use of teleportation portals, they arrived on the eve of Seventh Prince's private dinner.

The area where the Ten Entrails Tree had once stood looked a lot different than Xu Qing remembered. Seventh Prince's imperial army camp stretched out seemingly without end. Xu Qing couldn't help but look up into the dome of heaven and think back to what had happened there not so long ago. He looked away. Seventh Prince's subordinates received them and set them up in a garrison in the army camp. Then Xu Qing and Kong Xianglong were invited to attend the banquet in the imperial palace.

Li Yunshan and the others were not included. There were few people in Sea-Sealing County that Seventh Prince cared about. As for Kong Xianglong, he was being invited because of his grandfather.

And thus, not long after they arrived in the army camp, Xu Qing and Kong Xianglong were led by Seventh Prince's servants into the city-state of Modelrule. Most of the houses in the place were abandoned. The entire city-state had been taken over by the army, and the city now pulsed with an austere aura. There were bloodstains on the ground.

In comparison, the blue palace was quite different. The sound of music, dancing, laughter, and chatting drifted out from inside.

When Xu Qing and Kong Xianglong heard that, they exchanged a glance. Keeping their facial expressions placid, they entered. The banquet was already underway.

The moment they stepped into the banquet hall, the music continued, but there was a lull in the laughter and chatting. Everyone turned to look at them.

At the same time, Xu Qing and Kong Xianglong examined the banquet hall.

Seventh Prince was in the position of honor, smiling at them. Next to him was a pretty young woman with an icy facial expression, who sat alongside Seventh Prince in the position of honor. Clearly, they ranked the same in the social hierarchy.

Seated slightly lower than them on either side of the room were about a dozen other young men and women who all had extraordinary cultivation bases. At the very least, they were in the Nascent Soul level, and there were even a few who pulsed with Spirit Trove fluctuations. All were exceptionally attractive, and most of them wore very fine garments. A few were dressed in more utilitarian outfits, yet their eyes sparkled like starlight, making them seem very unique.

It was hard to tell from their facial expressions what they thought about Xu Qing and Kong Xianglong. Though they might not be considered the most profoundly shrewd people in existence, they had all been raised in the imperial capital, and were definitely above average in that regard.

Seventh Prince waved his hand slightly, and the chatting and laughter resumed.

"Xu Qing. Kong Xianglong."

Expression somber, Xu Qing clasped hands and bowed. "Well met, Your Majesty Seventh Prince."

Only the most hot-headed people would reveal their feelings in a situation like this. Obviously, this place was not full of such people. And if people like that were here, there would be a reason for them to act like that.

For example, Kong Xianglong's face remained expressionless as he bowed, yet refrained from saying a single word.

Seventh Prince didn't seem to care about Kong Xianglong's behavior. Looking at Xu Qing with admiration in his eyes, he raised his voice and said, "Ladies and gentlemen, this is Xu Qing of Sea-Sealing County, who you have all heard so much about. He was rewarded personally by my father the emperor. He was given a golden medallion, a yellow robe, admittance to the Imperial University, and grade-one battle credit."

With that, Seventh Prince started introducing everyone else to Xu Qing.

"Xu Qing, this is Zhou Tianzhi, an elite chosen from the Yearmaster College in the imperial capital. He brims over with talent.

"This is Luo Jinsong, a descendant of Heavenly Marquis Luo Yun.

"Over here is Immortal Fairy Gemspirit from the Creation Mansion, a place that specializes in the research of gods. Our Dawning Sun is largely their handiwork.

"Next is the grandson of Minister Meng, the Minister of War."

Smiling the entire time, Seventh Prince went on to introduce everyone. Most everyone present was nobility of some sort. They were either from families that had once produced heavenly marquises, or currently had family members in high positions of government. Those who were not like that were famous people from the imperial capital.

"Right here is Huang Kun. Xu Qing, you and Brother Huang have a bit of a connection already. You're both swordsages. You see, his grandfather is a grand honor guard in the Swordsage Division, one of our dynasty's Five Greater Celestial Divisions."

Every person who was introduced nodded and smiled at Xu Qing. He saluted them all courteously.

There was one person who caught Xu Qing's attention in particular.

"Xu Qing, you've definitely never seen this fellow before, but he's actually from Sea-Sealing County. He's Zhang Qifan, a chosen from the Supreme Void Demonization Sect. Thirty years ago he traveled to the imperial capital to study, and has come back as part of the princess' retinue."

The middle-aged Zhang Qifan stood and clasped hands in Xu Qing's direction, his expression a mix of wistfulness and admiration.

Finally, Seventh Prince's expression turned very serious as he stood, clasped hands, and bowed to the cold young woman seated next to him.

"Xu Qing, this is my dear older sister, Princess Anhai."

Without batting an eyelid, Xu Qing clasped hands and bowed. "Well met, Princess."

Kong Xianglong also bowed formally in greeting.

Princess Anhai's expression remained cold. She nodded, but didn't say anything.

Seeing that, Seventh Prince's eyes narrowed very slightly, and only for a moment. Smiling, he invited Xu Qing to sit.

Xu Qing nodded. Together with Kong Xianglong, he sat on the right side of the banquet, at a table at the far end near the door.

The singing and dancing resumed, as did the laughter and chatting. Seated across from Xu Qing was Zhang Qifan from the Supreme Void Demonization Sect. Raising his drinking vessel, he offered a toast. His smile seemed sincere and slightly tinged with sorrow. [1]

Xu Qing noticed his gesture. Raising his drinking vessel to join in the toast, he took a drink.

“Xu Qing,” a voice said from next to him, “considering it’s our first meeting, I really shouldn’t be this bold, but I can’t help but be curious about... the Grand Emperor’s assessment of the heart. What answer did you give to get that amazing 30,000-meter pillar of light?”

Chapter 547: Fanning the Flames; Lending a Knife (part 2)

The person who had just spoken to Xu Qing was not Zhang Qifan. Instead, he was a young man seated to the left of Xu Qing and Kong Xianglong, at the same table. He wore a pale yellow robe, and though he was handsome, he had affected a gentle expression that made him seem mild and kind-hearted. He was currently looking at Xu Qing with a smile on his face.

Xu Qing thought back to the introductions from moments before and remembered that this person was the grandson of the Minister of War. His name was Meng Yunbai. [1]

Upon hearing Meng Yunbai’s question, the young woman seated next to him looked over. She wore a plain green garment and was very attractive. Her hair was tied into a ponytail, but the pupils of her eyes glittered so bewitchingly that anyone who looked at her would feel shaken to the core. According to Seventh Prince’s introduction, she was Immortal Fairy Gemspirit from the Creation Mansion.

“You smell like a god,” Immortal Fairy Gemspirit said. She was young and pretty, but she spoke with the voice of an old woman, which made her seem somewhat gruish.

Xu Qing looked at Meng Yunbai, then Immortal Fairy Gemspirit. He was about to tactfully decline to answer the question when Meng Yunbai laughed.

“How about we make a deal? You tell me the answer, and I’ll, er, I’ll tell you which of these people already have it out for you and why! How about that?”

Kong Xianglong’s brow furrowed slightly. He was already coming to realize that these people from the imperial capital were no simpletons. Meng Yunbai probably didn’t care about the answer to his question. He was using it as a pretext to show his own attitude. As for whether he had good intentions or not, that was impossible to say. But one thing was for certain: he wanted to influence Xu Qing’s opinions. The main question was whether he would provide legitimate information or lies. However, Kong Xianglong knew that games like that wouldn’t work on Xu Qing.

Xu Qing looked at Meng Yunbai for a moment, then took a jade slip out of his bag of holding and handed it over.

“What’s this?” Meng Yunbai said, his eyebrows shooting up. He scanned the jade slip with divine sense, and then his eyes went wide. He looked back at Xu Qing. “This is how you answered? It’s so comprehensive!”

“Yeah,” Xu Qing said calmly. “Those are basically all the answers that have been given in the assessment of the heart over the past several years in seven prefectures.”

The jade slip was the very same one that the Captain had paid for years ago. He had later given a copy to Xu Qing.

Stunned, Meng Yunbai stared suspiciously at Xu Qing. He instinctively didn’t believe the story, but the jade slip really did have a lot of answers recorded in it. They were very detailed. They even went on to list how high the pillar of light was that came with each answer. At a glance, it was obvious it had taken a lot of money and work to get a list like this. As he hesitated about what to do next, other people at the banquet had somehow begun talking about the Nightshade godchild. The matter had been discussed a lot among the Holytides, and many other people had heard about the situation. Although most people who had been directly involved were dead, it wasn’t possible to stop rumors from spreading.

“You’re talking about that Nightshade godchild? I don’t know all the details, but I heard that big crater outside was made by him. From that alone you can understand the kind of astonishing things he does.”

“Unfortunately, nobody knows where he came from, nor why the Ten Entrails Tree suddenly disappeared.”

“The Nightshades are pure evil, and this godchild is probably more evil than the average Nightshade. Considering their culture revolves so much around sacrifices, I’d say there’s a high likelihood he sacrificed the Ten Entrails Tree to their god Crimson Mother.”

“Your Majesty Seventh Prince, during your victory against the Holytides, did you happen to hear anything about that Nightshade godchild?”

Seventh Prince shook his head. “I heard about the situation, and I did ask some Holytides about it. Based on how they described it, this Nightshade godchild had a shocking cultivation base and an extremely high status. With the wave of his hand, he could unleash the power of Crimson Mother. Even the Nightshade divine likenesses kowtowed to him and called him master.

“Sadly, after he vanished, no trace was ever found of him. Of course, my venerable sister knows much more about the Nightshades than me. Sister, the Creation Mansion oversees such matters, correct?” He looked at Princess Anhai.

Princess Anhai’s face remained expressionless as she spoke in a cold voice that matched her demeanor. “In all likelihood, the Nightshade godchild came from the Moonrite Region. It’s only there that the true family of Crimson Mother exists, and is kept like livestock.”

Xu Qing’s gaze sharpened. He hadn’t heard information like that before, but it made sense.

Off to the side, Kong Xianglong took a sip of alcohol to prevent himself from glancing at Xu Qing. He had not forgotten that Xu Qing and the Captain had disguised themselves as Nightshades and infiltrated this very area. And it was after they went on their mission that the whole Nightshade godchild incident occurred....

Everyone else present nodded knowingly in response to Princess Anhai's assessment. However, Seventh Prince suddenly turned to Xu Qing and smiled.

"Xu Qing, Sea-Sealing County isn't too far away from here. Did you hear about that Nightshade godchild?"

Xu Qing looked Seventh Prince in the eyes and said, "I heard about it after the fact."

Seventh Prince smiled and said nothing further.

Xu Qing betrayed no reaction whatsoever. Eventually, the topic of conversation changed to topics relating to other species on the Revered Ancient mainland. For instance, they started talking about the Firemoon Darkheaven people, and their upcoming Great Hunt of Species. Everyone present seemed incensed.

At one point, everyone started praising Seventh Prince for his great service in bringing back the Holytides. He simply smiled in response. Discussion shifted to Dawning Sun, and the situation with humankind in other counties. People mentioned other random anecdotes and rumors. Xu Qing and Kong Xianglong didn't participate in any of the chatter. They weren't informed enough.

Then, out of nowhere, someone suddenly obliquely criticized Xu Qing.

"Your Majesty Seventh Prince, I've always been the kind of person to speak directly, and tend to offend people. You yourself have pointed that out to me. But I really just have to get this off my chest.... I just can't hold it in! There's someone who *forgets favors and violates justice* here! It's disgraceful!"

The person who said this was the descendant of Heavenly Marquis Luo. Based on Seventh Prince's introduction, his name was Luo Jinsong. [2]

As he was speaking, he was looking straight at Xu Qing.

Xu Qing didn't react. From a young age, he had witnessed the ugliness of humanity. And he had long since learned that when a person started a conversation by jabbering about their own personality, it usually meant that whatever came after that was hostile. As he sat there, he heard Meng Yunbai whispering into his ear as quietly as a mosquito.

"Brother Xu Qing, that's Luo Jinsong. He's not at all as direct as he just claimed to be. Let me tell you, he's not the only person in the imperial capital who's supposedly a descendant of a heavenly marquis. There are others. And all they have to rely on is past glory. They have no true authority or power. What's more, few of them are talented in any way. Their bloodlines have become far too diluted.



“And that’s exactly what Luo Jinsong is like. He’s clever, and fancies himself a follower of Seventh Prince. But Seventh Prince doesn’t care about him one bit. That’s why he’s calling you out in front of everyone. It’s all to curry favor with Seventh Prince.

“Of course, he’s no fool, and has surely considered that Seventh Prince might not be too pleased by him doing this. But as long as rumors start to spread that he’s close with Seventh Prince, then he doesn’t care. I guess what he doesn’t realize is that people who are merely clever will always be that: just clever.”

Meanwhile, Luo Jinsong was glaring at Xu Qing with malice in his eyes. “It was a tough choice to try to save Sea-Sealing County, Your Majesty Seventh Prince. But you *stood your ground against the opinion of the masses*. In the heat of the fighting with the Nightshades, you led your army to Sea-Sealing County and saved them from imminent peril. You saved countless lives!

“Then you personally led the troops into battle, braving death to dauntlessly advance across the field of battle. The Holytides fell back again and again! If it wasn’t for their ancestral emperor achieving a breakthrough, I bet all of the Holytide Region would already be human territory again!

“Despite that, you still accomplished amazing things. You brought the Holytides back to humankind, thus earning glory in all of Revered Ancient. All the while, *someone* was behind your back slandering you in the most contemptible fashion! As a result, His Majesty the emperor reprimanded you for failing to manage the situation properly!”

Luo Jinsong was clearly turning right into wrong and obscuring the truth. The banquet hall went completely quiet.

Seventh Prince coolly said, “Shut up.”

Luo Jinsong stood, clasped hands, and bowed to Seventh Prince. Then he looked up and angrily continued, “Your Majesty, you are *benevolent and generous by nature*. In your righteous nobility, you decline to haggle with the hoi polloi. But I personally just can’t stand for this! Some dog got his life saved, only to *forget favors and violate justice*.”

With that, he sat back down, lifted his alcohol flagon, and took a long drink. Everyone else in the crowd looked at Xu Qing with a variety of different facial expressions. That included Meng Yunbai.

Xu Qing still betrayed no reaction whatsoever. He naturally didn’t put much stock in what Meng Yunbai had just told him. Luo Jinsong seemed like he was saying these things to Seventh Prince because he was outraged by injustice. But Xu Qing’s way of dealing with things in life had changed. He didn’t just pay attention to what was right in front of him. He had learned to widen his view and look at the situation from a more broad perspective. Doing so in this situation led to some different insights. It seemed unlikely that Luo Jinsong was simply doing this to curry favor with Seventh Prince. He was trying to open up some old scars and stir up some sort of controversy. Xu Qing noted that Princess Anhai’s facial expression had remained the same the whole time, and that she was just sitting there quietly instead of getting involved.

Kong Xianglong, in contrast, still kept his sight on what was right in front of him. He was already getting mad, and it looked like he was about to say something. Before he could, Xu Qing reached out and put his hand on his shoulder. Standing, he turned to Seventh Prince and Princess Anhai.

“Your Majesty. Princess. I only arrived today, and I’m tired from traveling. If there’s no official business to attend to, I’ll take my leave for now.”

Seventh Prince’s eyes glittered with profound light, and he smiled. It looked like he was about to speak, but before he could, Zhang Qifan from the Supreme Void Demonization Sect, who was sitting directly across from Xu Qing, slapped the table in front of him. As the bang echoed out, he shot to his feet and looked furiously at Luo Jinsong.

“That’s complete nonsense! Having just returned today, I got in touch with good friends of mine in my sect, and got all the details about the war. I know exactly what Secretary-General Xu did! You talk of Sea-Sealing County being saved from destruction? Well I’m from Sea-Sealing County, and I’d like to ask you, when the Holytides invaded, where were the relief troops? When countless Sea-Sealing cultivators were sacrificing their lives on the northern and western fronts, where were the reinforcements?

“My county marshaled all of its troops to defend against the forces of an entire region! They bitterly endured for months. The palace lord of our Swordsage Palace died! Countless people lost their lives. And who was it that stood atop all those corpses and gloriously accepted the credit for the win?

“If the backup troops had arrived earlier by one incense stick’s worth of time, then our palace lord wouldn’t be dead! Based on what I’ve heard, the relief troops actually left the imperial capital in plenty of time to arrive much earlier! What were the relief troops doing? Waiting for everyone else to die before they swooped in? I suppose they were worried if there were too many survivors, they would have to split the rewards too many times?

“Since you brought up managing the situation improperly... if a member of Torchlight was actually appointed as governor, then would Sea-Sealing County even be controlled by humans anymore? If that’s not failing to manage the situation properly, then what is?”

Xu Qing’s eyes narrowed. Kong Xianglong looked at him, and he suddenly realized what was going on. Zhang Qifan’s words came seemingly out of nowhere. Someone here wanted to use Xu Qing and Kong Xianglong to fan the flames of conflict!

Things had just settled down in Sea-Sealing County, and now was definitely not the time to be stirring up the pot. The county had just experienced a war and an attempted coup, and was still in the process of recovering. If things suddenly got out of control again, it could cause big problems. Most importantly, after the repeated catastrophes, the people of the county wouldn’t easily trust another leader.

And yet now, someone was muddying the waters for as-yet unknown reasons.

#### Chapter 548: Any Who Touch Sea-Sealing's Soft Spot... Die! (part 1)

The moon hung bright over the spot where the Ten Entrails Tree had once stood. The dark sky surrounding it formed a very clear contrast. But there were also clouds, and as they crept in front of the moon, that clear contrast was obscured. As a result, the banquet in the palace was slowly being covered by a stream of darkness.

In turn, that dark stream was muddying the waters that lay between Sea-Sealing County and the Holytide Region.

It would have been within the rights of Xu Qing and Kong Xianglong to say the very things Zhang Qifan had just blurted. After all, they had fought in the war, and had been present for all the chaos. They were eyewitnesses. But now was definitely not the time for Zhang Qifan to be saying such things. Although he was from Sea-Sealing County, he hadn't experienced any of those things personally. He was like an outsider who aired someone else's grievances, then joined forces with them in opposition to the same adversary.

This entire situation had obviously been planned ahead of time. However, it seemed certain that this was not the original plan.

Xu Qing had obviously turned things around by keeping Kong Xianglong from losing his temper. That had forced the hand of the enemy, who had scrambled to adjust by having an outsider jump in and take over the script lines that they had expected to be spoken by Kong Xianglong. The hope was to get the scene back in line with what had been originally expected. The person behind all of this obviously didn't care how it affected Sea-Sealing County.

It was a clear attack aimed at... Seventh Prince.

Xu Qing knew that, and so did everyone else at the banquet. Granted, there had been many words of praise showered on Seventh Prince earlier. But language is one of the most unpredictable things in heaven and earth. When you believe what someone says, you give them all the power.

Kong Xianglong looked at Xu Qing. No change in expression could be seen on Xu Qing's face. It was almost as if he hadn't heard anything Zhang Qifan just said. He just turned and started walking off.

Kong Xianglong did the same. Though Kong Xianglong seemed like the kind of person who focused more on brawn than brains, the reality was that he was capable of deep thinking. He just didn't have a lot of practice at it. That was why he had been slow to react earlier. Now it was obvious to him that Sea-Sealing County was being used to fan the flames with Seventh Prince. And he wanted no part of it.

What Sea-Sealing County needed right now was stability. That was the most relevant thing to consider. Secondary to that was that playing games with the imperial clan could turn lethal very quickly. Although it could also result in *turning weapons of war into gifts of jade and silk*, those who ended up stuck in the middle rarely had good fates in the end. You could be an important asset in one moment, and then be discarded a moment later.

Everyone in the banquet was surprised to see the two of them ignoring what was happening, and even going so far as to leave. Meng Yunbai's eyes glittered, and he smiled. Princess Anhai showed

no reaction at all. Seventh Prince took a sip from his drinking vessel, his facial expression the same as before.

Meanwhile, an almost undetectable flicker passed through Zhang Qifan's eyes. Face a mask of fury, he flicked his sleeve and turned to walk off.

But then, the blunt and straightforward Luo Jinsong narrowed his eyes. A flush was creeping up his neck, and blue veins bulged, making him look very unsophisticated. Shooting to his feet, he unleashed explosive Nascent Soul fluctuations, which became like a tempest around him. A shadowy figure appeared behind him, clad in battle armor and pulsing with a baleful aura. There were twelve totemic designs on the armor, and shockingly, each one resembled Luo Jinsong's face. Even more astonishing, the fluctuations coming from each face contained heavenfate; clearly, all of them had passed a heavenfate tribulation. He took a step forward, which propelled him with lightning speed toward Zhang Qifan.

"How impudent!" he raged, reaching out with both hands.

Meanwhile, Zhang Qifan turned around. Pulsing with killing intent, he pulled a long, blood-colored sword out of thin air using his right hand, while simultaneously using his left hand to perform an incantation gesture and touch his forehead. Demon energy pulsed out of him. Two leathery wings appeared on his back, and his entire body seemed to wither until it looked like a corpse. Scowling viciously, he lifted his blood sword and prepared to clash with Luo Jinsong.

Simultaneously, three other banquet attendees became blurs of afterimages as they shot toward Zhang Qifan.

It was a case of four against one. There was no need to speculate what would happen. In the blink of an eye, blood sprayed out of Zhang Qifan's mouth. His blood sword exploded, and he staggered backward toward Xu Qing and Kong Xianglong.

Kong Xianglong frowned. Xu Qing looked completely calm. Ignoring what was happening, they kept walking. Xu Qing could tell that this entire thing was an act, and it wasn't a very good one.

But then, Luo Jinsong laughed coldly and said, "Kong Liangxiu might have seemed like he performed some important services, but given the way things ended, he obviously got greedy and made his move too soon. If he'd just stayed calm and lasted for the time it takes an incense stick to burn, he would have still been alive when His Majesty Seventh Prince arrived with the relief troops. You can't blame others for his death!"

Xu Qing stopped walking, and a cold gleam appeared in his eyes.

Next to him, Kong Xianglong was already seething. Turning, he glared at Luo Jinsong.

"Shut the fuck up!" he growled. He couldn't hold it in any longer. The humiliation had gone too far. Taking out his command sword, he took a step forward.

But then Xu Qing's hand clamped down onto Kong Xianglong's shoulder.

Kong Xianglong was in the pseudo-Nascent Soul level, and was only a few months away from a breakthrough. Given that, he wasn't in the position to fight Luo Jinsong, who was an actual Nascent Soul cultivator.

Xu Qing stepped past Kong Xianglong, moving with incredible speed to appear right in front of Luo Jinsong. His eyes were as cold as ice. Palace Lord Kong's name and honor were inviolable. That was Xu Qing's bottom line. Palace Lord Kong was also a soft spot for Sea-Sealing County in general. Anyone who touched that soft spot would have to pay the price. It didn't matter if that person was the descendant of a heavenly marquis.

Xu Qing's heart was filled with killing intent. He wasn't going to wait until later to kill this person in secret. In some cases, killing someone in secret was the best thing to do. But in other situations, killing them out in the open was the best way to send a message.

Of course, Xu Qing knew that killing Luo Jinsong here wouldn't be easy. There would be people inclined to interfere. Therefore, he needed to end things quickly and efficiently.

Clenching his right hand into a fist, he launched a blow at Luo Jinsong's chest.

Luo Jinsong's gaze sharpened. Xu Qing's speed and aura were both fear-inspiring. But Luo Jinsong didn't show even a shred of cowardice. Grinning fiercely, he unleashed all of the power of his energy and blood, causing a blood mist to erupt from him and form an illusory projection. His baleful aura grew more intense, his muscles bulged, and his entire body became covered with vicious-looking blue veins. He had an innate ability that gave him a huge boost to his fleshly body. As his energy and blood raged, he grew in size, rapidly reaching a height of six meters. His arms were thicker than Xu Qing's torso as he reached out to grab Xu Qing's incoming fist. Meanwhile, his other hand swept out as if to grab Xu Qing bodily.

But then Xu Qing's entire body turned semitransparent. He did nothing to stop Luo Jinsong's hands from getting close to him.

Then those hands clamped down... onto nothing!

When using his Gruegloom abilities, Xu Qing could turn his entire body semitransparent, which allowed things to pass right through it. In that state, his speed wasn't reduced at all.

Luo Jinsong's face fell as he realized he'd made a mistake, and it was too late to fall back. However, he still managed to react. Eyes flaring with anger, he roared at Xu Qing's incoming form.

Meanwhile, red light erupted from his blood clone as it took a step toward Xu Qing. That light became like a sea of blood that weighed down on Xu Qing with immense pressure. But a fraction of a moment later, golden light glittered as Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior appeared, controlling the Spike of Misfortune and sending it stabbing right toward the blood clone. The Spike of Misfortune cut like a hot knife through butter, piercing through the sea of blood and slashing open the clone.

Because of that opening, Xu Qing in his Gruegloom form was able to accelerate rapidly and then pass through Luo Jinsong. When he came out the other side, he had a nascent soul in his hand!

It was one of Luo Jinsong's nascent souls!

Xu Qing tightened his hand, and the nascent soul screamed before collapsing. The heavenfate within it swept into Xu Qing's hand and entered his body, becoming nourishment. What remained of the nascent soul in his hand was pitch black. It continued to crumble in on itself until it turned into a shadowy form that pulsed with a cold, vile aura as it floated behind Xu Qing.

It was his first heavenfiend clone.

Luo Jinsong shivered violently from head to toe. Eyes shining with astonishment, he suddenly coughed up a huge mouthful of blood and staggered forward. At the same time, his flesh started turning black, with many spots starting to visibly decay.

“This....”

He seemed to have something to say, but before he could, Xu Qing stepped forward in his illusory form, and then appeared in front of Luo Jinsong.

Somehow, he had a dagger in his hand, and he swept it right through Luo Jinsong’s neck.

The head tumbled through the air!

It landed on the ground with a thump, then rolled to a stop in front of Seventh Prince and Princess Anhai. The eyes were wide open and full of disbelief, as if, even in the moment right before death, he couldn’t believe what was happening. Clearly, there wasn’t a huge difference between Luo Jinsong’s cultivation base and Xu Qing’s. What was more, Luo Jinsong had a fleshly body blessing. So how could he have literally lost his head so quickly?

And then the poison ravaged his head, turning it into a black sludge. His body was also melting.

Xu Qing didn’t skip a beat, though. Without pausing for a moment, he sent the dagger stabbing toward Luo Jinsong’s poisoned and decapitated body.

The moment the dagger made contact with the headless body, the corpse’s chest split open, and red fire erupted from within. The fire pulsed with a stupefying aura that made it clear it wasn’t something from the mortal world, and it caused rippling heat waves to spread out as it shot toward Xu Qing.

At the same time, an ordinary-sized person stepped out from Luo Jinsong’s chest, holding a cosmic teapot that was pitch black and covered in golden striations. The fire was coming from inside that teapot. [1]

Chapter 548: Any Who Touch Sea-Sealing’s Soft Spot... Die! (part 2)

The person who stepped out looked exactly like Luo Jinsong. The moment he was out in the open, he took out a huge handful of antidote pills and swallowed them. Eyes cold, he glared at Xu Qing within the fire. Then he opened his mouth to speak, only for his face to fall again.

The sea of flames surrounding Xu Qing immediately began to die down. Over the course of two breaths of time, Xu Qing inhaled all of the fire and swallowed it down. Xu Qing became clearly visible as the fire went away. He had an odd expression on his face as he looked at Luo Jinsong holding the cosmic teapot, and an imperceptible flicker passed through his eyes.

Meng Yunbai’s voice suddenly reached Xu Qing’s ears. “The Luo Clan is in decline, but they still practice the legacy technique passed down by their heavenly marquis patriarch. It’s called the Darkheaven Rhythm Art. Whenever they use the molting rhythm, they can get a better fleshly body blessing.”

Xu Qing ignored him. Meanwhile, quite a few people at the banquet had risen to their feet and were calling out.

“Neither of you make a move!”

“This is not the proper venue for fighting!”

“I’m sure the two of you can work things out without resorting to deadly combat.”

A few people even started walking forward. What was more, the clamor of the fight had even attracted the attention of some of the guards outside the banquet hall, who were now rushing inside.

When Luo Jinsong saw that, he breathed a sigh of relief in his heart. Glaring coldly at Xu Qing, he made to back up.

Xu Qing didn’t stop him. Glancing at the cosmic teapot, and then back at Luo Jinsong, he calmly said, “There’s no cure for my poison.”

Luo Jinsong’s expression flickered, and he was about to take out some more antidote pills when he shivered from head to toe. Then, greenish-black coloration started spreading out over his skin again. Feeling extremely alarmed, he sent his cultivation base into full rotation, hoping to suppress the poison. Then he looked pleadingly at Seventh Prince and Princess Anhai.

Yet before he could say a word, black blood oozed out of his eyes, ears, nose, and mouth. His tongue and ears fell off, turning into black sludge as they dropped to the ground. A horrendous gurgling emerged from his throat, and then, right in front of everyone, he melted into a fetid sludge.

In only about four or five breaths of time, Luo Jinsong completely liquefied. The last thing he did was look at Princess Anhai as if begging for mercy. She didn’t react.

All of the onlookers were visibly stunned. None of them had been very impressed with Xu Qing’s ability to snatch nascent souls. He wasn’t the only person in existence that had such abilities. It was the same with his poison. When he produced that strange soul shadow, some of them had been surprised, though they didn’t show it on their faces. Even when Xu Qing beheaded Luo Jinsong, no one had reacted, as they all knew that Luo Jinsong couldn’t be killed in that way.

But now things were different. The situation with Luo Jinsong was already resolved. However, that poison was still around, and it was explosively deadly. All eyes fell on Xu Qing.

As for Meng Yunbai, he was looking at Xu Qing with a mixture of confusion and dread.

Immortal Fairy Gemspirit from the Creation Mansion had an unprecedentedly serious look on her face. Eyeing the black sludge, she suddenly said, “That poison has the curse of a god in it!”

Everyone was shaken by her words.

An unusual gleam could be seen in Seventh Prince’s eyes, and for the first time, Princess Anhai looked at Xu Qing.

Xu Qing, his expression placid, stepped over to the black sludge that had been Luo Jinsong. Seemingly unconcerned about dirtying his hand, he took the cosmic teapot out of the sludge. After putting it away, he turned and bowed to Seventh Prince and Princess Anhai.

“I killed this person because he insulted the soul of a hero. Palace Lord Kong lived for humankind, and for Sea-Sealing County. Even the emperor lamented his passing, and agreed for the palace lord to be enshrined and blessed by the joss flame of humanity.

“This person was the descendant of a heavenly marquis, yet he insulted a brave hero and threatened to drive Sea-Sealing County into chaos. Clearly, he had a twisted heart, and was most likely a secret member of Torchlight. Not even death can wipe out his crimes!”

Xu Qing’s voice didn’t thrum with emotion. His expression was neutral, and after speaking, he rose from his bow, turned, and walked back toward Kong Xianglong.

Zhang Qifan was standing next to Kong Xianglong, but Xu Qing ignored him.

Xu Qing didn’t address what was really going on. Instead, he used his actions to let everyone know they couldn’t manipulate him and Kong Xianglong. *Whatever issues you people have with each other, you handle them. Leave us out of it.*

It was also a clear message that touching Sea-Sealing County’s soft spot would come with a price.

A smile appeared on Seventh Prince’s face. Princess Anhai’s gaze hardened slightly. Everyone else had serious expressions on their faces. Now all of them knew a bit about Xu Qing’s personality. And they were all thinking the same thing.

Best not provoke this guy.

As for Luo Jinsong, the truth was that none of them really cared about him or the fact that he was dead. That was his issue.

Everyone watched as Xu Qing walked to the door. He stopped there, turned to look at Seventh Prince, and after a moment of thought, said, “Your Majesty Seventh Prince, is there any chance Sea-Sealing County can have those three prefectures back?”

Seventh Prince didn’t respond immediately. Next to him, Princess Anhai’s eyes flickered with an imperceptible smile. Picking up her drinking vessel, she took a sip.

A moment passed, and then Seventh Prince smiled amiably. “There are still some problems with bandits in those three prefectures. Once they’re cleared out, Sea-Sealing County can have them back.”

This was not how he had planned for things to end up. But given how events played out, there was no way he could outright refuse Xu Qing. Xu Qing had taken Luo Jinsong’s behavior as an outright instigation, and that actually fell in line with what the prince wanted. Therefore, he had decided to back down a bit in regards to the three prefectures. Although he hadn’t given an explicit timetable of when he would return them, he had made his stance clear.

Xu Qing clasped hands respectfully, then turned and left with Kong Xianglong. During the entire time, neither of them had looked once at Zhang Qifan.

It was hard to tell what Zhang Qifan was thinking, as he didn’t reveal anything via his facial expression. He just returned to his seat and took a drink of alcohol.

The banquet resumed. The chatting and laughing returned. It was as if nothing had happened. However, people would occasionally glance at the black sludge on the ground, and they would feel deeply shaken.

Later that evening, Princess Anhai departed to rest, and that marked the end of the banquet.



Soon, the only person left in the large banquet hall was Seventh Prince. As he sat there calmly sipping alcohol, he smiled.

I set the stage for you perfectly, my sister. And as it turned out, you planned a whole little play for me to watch. Except, given how smart you are, how could you botch it up so badly?

Seventh Prince's eyes narrowed as he fiddled with his drinking vessel. Then, his expression hardened, and his eyes shone with cold light.

"Checks and balances!" he murmured.

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Seven days passed.

The official ceremony marking the return of the Holytides would begin soon. During that time, Xu Qing and Kong Xianglong never left the Sea-Sealing County garrison. Xu Qing spent some of that time studying the cosmic teapot he'd taken from Luo Jinsong.

Specifically, he was interested in the fire. It was obviously a very special fire. As soon as Xu Qing sensed how terrifying it was, he carefully avoided it. But he hadn't been able to completely avoid it, and the burning of that fire had provoked a change in the violet crystal. The violet crystal had actually reached out to absorb the fire. And afterward, a flash of light emerged from the crystal.

That light seemed to illuminate Xu Qing's sea of consciousness. Though it only flashed once, when it happened, one of the spokes on the black umbrella life lamp had vanished, as if it melted!

That was the reason Xu Qing had taken special note of the teapot. There had been no time to look closely at the teapot in the heat of the moment, so he had waited until he was back in the garrison to go into seclusion and study it.

Meng Yunbai came to pay a visit, and Immortal Fairy Gemspirit submitted a request to do the same. Xu Qing politely refused to see them. For one thing, he didn't have much spare time. What was more, he didn't want to get dragged into the intrigue of the imperial capital.

He and Kong Xianglong gave a full report to Li Yunshan. He reached the same conclusions as them, but also had some deeper insights that he shared.

"Seventh Prince obviously didn't just invite us to observe the Holytide return ceremony. I bet he was trying to figure out why Princess Anhai suddenly showed up to visit.

"As for the way you killed Luo Jinsong, Xu Qing, I'd say you handled it beautifully. He insulted Palace Lord Kong, and not even death could wipe out that crime. I'll report all of this to Marquis Yao. Given what he's capable of, and the fact that we're ultimately in the right here, I doubt there will be any ramifications."

On the seventh day, the ceremony began. There was a lot of pomp and formality. Representatives from the imperial capital came to read an imperial decree, and the four Holytide emperors came in person. The Holytide ancestral emperor attended as a projection.

Their arrival caused wild colors to flash in the sky, and kicked up a huge wind. Immense pressure weighed down on what had once been Ten Entrails of the True Immortal.

It was the pressure of a Smoldering God. Time and space both seemed affected, and that was only because of a mere projection of a Smoldering God.

Xu Qing felt like he was facing an actual god, although the feeling was different and hard to describe.

As the ceremony played out, Li Yunshan whispered, “Smoldering Gods... continuous and unending, impossible to be named; they return to non-existence. They are called the forms of that which are without form; the image of non-existence. Meet them and you do not see their beginning; follow them and you do not see their end.” [1]

Xu Qing looked up into the dome of heaven. He saw the four Holytide emperors, as well as the figure behind them, which seemed capable of propping up all heaven and earth. Its head was not visible, nor were its feet, as if it was too big to actually exist.

The Holytide’s ancestral emperor didn’t stay for long. After hearing the imperial edict being read, he vanished.

The imperial edict heaped approval and praise on the Holytide ancestral emperor. What was more, he was bestowed with the very same title as his ancestor. He was appointed as the new Grand Duke Holytide. The Holytide Region would not be renamed. However, it would be half of its original size. The other half would be a new area called the Deep Blue Region. With the exception of Sea-Sealing County, the new region was to be administered by Seventh Prince’s army. Princess Anhai would also assist in carrying out government affairs.

When the ceremony ended, Xu Qing and everyone else returned to Sea-Sealing County.

However, before they left, one other thing happened. Seventh Prince took the initiative to return the three prefectures to Sea-Sealing County. What was more, he added an additional four prefectures. Because of that, Sea-Sealing County henceforth had seventeen prefectures.

The matter was initiated by Seventh Prince and approved by Princess Anhai.

Meanwhile, Moongazing Prefecture, which was the prefecture Sea-Sealing County had secretly taken over, was handed over to be part of the Deep Blue Region. Xu Qing wasn’t really sure of all the details of what happened. Although Marquis Yao had previously explained that Moongazing Prefecture would eventually be handed over, he wasn’t sure of exactly why. It was all the work of Marquis Yao and Master Seventh. However, the imperial edict did make it clear how things would develop going forward into the future.

With Princess Anhai part of the Deep Blue Region, the big picture was changing.

Chapter 549: Little Ah Qing, Are You Ready For a REALLY Big Job?

Located between the Holytide Region and the Deep Blue Region was the spot where the Ten Entrails Tree had stood.

Currently, the Sea-Sealing County fleet was flying away from the Ten Entrails Tree area back home through the Deep Blue Region. Numerous massive flying ships roared through the sky.

The imperial edict did not contain any stipulations directly benefiting Sea-Sealing County. However, the ‘checks and balances’ placed on Seventh Prince, and the arrival of Princess Anhai, changed Sea-Sealing County from a relatively insignificant place to something quite the opposite.

The prince and princess seemed to be playing some game with the goal of recruiting Sea-Sealing County onto their side to help in their struggles against each other. Although that might seem dramatic to mortals, when it came to people of their standing in the imperial clan, such recruiting efforts only held so much weight.

As far as why Seventh Prince handed over four additional prefectures, there was clearly more going on than what was on the surface. There was no way either the prince or princess would allow Sea-Sealing County to become too important. But as long as the county didn’t do something foolish, then they would have plenty of time to settle down and recover.

And that was just what Sea-Sealing County needed.

Xu Qing breathed a sigh of relief. He was currently seated cross-legged in a private cabin in the dreadnaught. He had just finished a session of cultivation, and as he exhaled, the energy swirled around in front of him. It was like smoke containing incredibly high heat, which raised the temperature of the private cabin until it was like an oven. Xu Qing looked at the smoke, felt the heat, and his eyes glittered.

I never could have guessed that I would get something like this back at the Ten Entrails Tree!

His heart was racing. The source of his excitement was the fire from the cosmic teapot. After several days of study, he had confirmed that the fire was harmless to him. But more relevant was that it could melt life lamps! When he sucked the fire into himself, the violet crystal would automatically absorb it. And then, the most fantastic thing would happen. The violet light that then shone onto Xu Qing’s sea of consciousness would cause the life lamps there to start dissolving!

That process didn’t involve destroying the lamp. Instead, it changed its form. In all of his practice of cultivation up to this point, he had never seen anything like this happen. His understanding had always been that life lamps were completely indestructible. That was what all the information he had ever read about life lamps also indicated.

“Light from beyond the heavens?” he murmured. He couldn’t be absolutely certain about that assessment.

The information about that Imperial Sovereign of antiquity who had acquired light from beyond the heavens, all it said was that he used that light to melt life lamps and then make them completely his own.

In any case, Xu Qing had never encountered any situation like this. The focus of his research so far had been checking to see if the life lamps would actually be destroyed when dissolved.

They wouldn’t!

He extended his hand, and on the tip of his finger was a red crystal.

He had already confirmed that when a life lamp was melted, it would turn into an unfathomable substance in his sea of consciousness. When it then entered his bloodstream, it would change his

blood into something different. At the same time, impurities would be released. It was as if the red crystal contained the dissolved blood that couldn't be absorbed by his own bloodstream.

Xu Qing wasn't sure what the red crystal could be used for. But he could sense that it contained the aura of a life lamp. It glittered with bright light and intense heat. Xu Qing put the red crystal away, and his eyes shone with anticipation.

With enough of this kind of fire, I can bring out more light from my violet crystal, melt all of my life lamps, and absorb them into my bloodstream. And when that happens... I might be able to, with my own will, create a personal life lamp!

It seemed possible on a theoretical level. That said, it was different from what that Imperial Sovereign of antiquity had done, which was putting blood into the life lamps to make them his own. Xu Qing was doing the opposite. He was melting the life lamps, and putting them into his blood to make them his own.

Although it seems possible in theory, I have to do more experimentation. And I also need a lot more of that fire!

He looked down at the cosmic teapot. There wasn't an infinite amount of fire in it. After his experimentation, less than half was left. He had also done some asking around, and had eventually got some information from Palace Lord Li Yunshan himself.

"It's heavenfire that can be found on the border between the Moonrite Region and the Mountsouth Region!

"The Mountsouth Region is an administrative enclave of the Firemoon Darkheaven people. It's in the southern part of their territory, and holds much strategic value. There's a continental sea there along the border between the two regions, made, not from water, but from fire. That fire is astonishingly powerful, and the deeper you go into the sea, the more terrifyingly destructive it gets.

"However, that sea of flames isn't natural. It came from heaven. In the middle of Heavenfire Sea is a rift in the sky, out of which pours an endless flow of flames. It's like a waterfall that feeds into the sea below.

"Heavenfire is unique in that, if it leaves that area, it gradually turns into normal fire, unless you have some special item that can preserve it. Obviously, this cosmic teapot is just such an item. But it can't preserve the fire for too long."

Xu Qing was more familiar with the southern parts of Revered Ancient. But he had looked at maps in the past. To the northwest of Sea-Sealing County was the Deep Blue Region. Due north of that was the Holytide Region. To the west of the Holytide Region was the Yin Sacrifice River. Beyond that river was the mysterious Moonrite Region. In the northeastern part of that region was the regional border connecting to the Firemoon Darkheavens.

"The Moonrite Region..." Xu Qing murmured, his eyes shining. He opened the door of his private cabin, and the cold wind dispersed the heat from inside.

It wouldn't be long before they reached Sea-Sealing County, and then, the county capital. After stepping out onto the dreadnaught's superstructure, he found Kong Xianglong sitting there looking out at heaven and earth. He glanced at Xu Qing.

"Did it work out?"

Xu Qing grinned and nodded. He sat next to Kong Xianglong and looked in the direction of the Moonrite Region. Eyes shining, he took out his transmission jade slip and sent a message to the Captain.

*"Eldest Brother, how's your search for information going? I have some news on my end."*

It didn't take long before the jade slip vibrated. When the Captain spoke, he sounded very relaxed and incredibly pleased.

*"I got back a few days ago. I've been waiting for you to get back from visiting our son."*

*"Good. I'll be back in the county capital in about four hours."*

They didn't get into any particulars via voice message. But Xu Qing's chest felt tight with anticipation. Kong Xianglong looked at him quizzically.

"Xu Qing, are you and that extremely dubious Eldest Brother of yours going out on another big job?"

Xu Qing patted Kong Xianglong's shoulder. "Want to join us?"

Kong Xianglong inhaled sharply, looked around suspiciously, and then shook his head. "I'm afraid your Eldest Brother would sell me out. Haven't you noticed how Ning Yan looks at your Eldest Brother nowadays? He seems scared to death."

It made complete sense to Xu Qing. However, he had the feeling Ning Yan wasn't going to be able to get out of this mission. He was just too useful as a tool.

The fleet made a few more teleportations, and about four hours later, arrived at the county capital.

As soon as he stepped off the dreadnaught, he got messages from the Captain urging him to meet up. Therefore, Xu Qing sent a message to Master Seventh to let him know he'd returned, then hurried, not to the Swordsage Palace, but to a particular restaurant where the Captain had said to meet.

Upon entering the establishment, he saw Li Shitao walking out of the Captain's private room. She smiled at him and, without a word, left.

Xu Qing blinked a few times and then walked into the room. The table was filled with food and alcohol. The Captain sat on the far side nibbling on a peach. Looking up at Xu Qing, he proudly said, "Ai, little Ah Qing. I finally understand how frustrating your life must be. People, am I right? When you're too outstanding, the girls are just too forward. It's really annoying." He reached up and rubbed his cheek with his sleeve. His cheek looked clean, but he seemed to be trying to tell Xu Qing that there had previously been a hickey there. "I mean, it's just lunch, right? Why do I have to come to provide company?"

The Captain sighed.

An odd expression could be seen on Xu Qing's face as he looked at the food on the table. Every dish had spirit ingredients, and everything was obviously very expensive. There were two sets of dishware, one of which was untouched, while the other was piled with food. Obviously, one person had been plying the other with food. As for who had done the plying, well, that didn't matter to Xu Qing. As long as the Captain was happy, that was all that mattered. He quickly plastered an envious look onto his face.

The Captain seemed extremely pleased with that expression. After taking a few more bites of his peach, he dragged Xu Qing over to the corner of the room, where he waved his hand to set up a warding spell.

Looking very somber, he said, "Little Ah Qing, are you ready for a *really* big job?"

Hearing that, Xu Qing knew that with the Captain's prelude out of the way, the truly astonishing information was about to be revealed.

As such, Xu Qing put a similarly somber expression onto his face and nodded gravely.

The Captain was delighted at how well Xu Qing was cooperating. Clearing his throat, he lowered his voice and said, "The reality, little Junior Brother, is that you should be the governor already! But your cultivation base is too low, and thus, you can't accept the position. How could we possibly just let Marquis Yao take charge of our stuff? And that's when I started thinking of how we could get both of our cultivation bases to advance by leaps and bounds! And guess what? I thought of a way!"

Raising his eyebrows, Xu Qing said, "What way?"

With a very proud expression, the Captain looked up into the sky and said, "We're going to... devour the red moon!"

Xu Qing thought for a moment, then stood up to leave. He wasn't interested in pointlessly seeking to die. The Captain was crazy, and that was a condition Xu Qing couldn't cure him from. Master Seventh would have to take over.

Seeing that Xu Qing was about to leave, the Captain anxiously jumped up and blocked his path. "Hey, hey. Just wait and hear me out!"

Xu Qing looked expressionlessly at the Captain. Going to Moonrite Region sounded interesting, but he didn't want to become food for Crimson Mother. After all, Crimson Mother was a High God whose mere doppelgänger had devoured the god sleeping in Forbidden by the Immortal. Xu Qing figured he would have to be crazy to present himself on a platter to Crimson Mother.

"Just think about it, little Junior Brother. The red moon is sleeping! The timing here is like a gift provided by heaven. If we devour her successfully, or even just devour a little bit, we could instantly reach Spirit Trove! In fact, I bet that only a few bites might take us all the way to Void Returning!" The Captain's eyes were completely bloodshot as he looked at Xu Qing with that familiar craziness. "Little Junior Brother, did I ever take you on a big job that didn't work out?"

Xu Qing hesitated. "Eldest Brother, did you ever do anything like this in one of your previous lives?" [1]

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The Captain blinked a few times.

“That’s not important. We can get into it later. First, let’s talk about the red moon. You really need to think about it from the opposite angle, little Junior Brother. If we *don’t* devour hēr, then when shē wakes up, shē’ll have no trouble tracking us down. Shē’ll find us with a single thought, and before we know it, shē’ll be right in front of us! You have hēr godsource. I have hēr aura. To hēr, we’re nothing but thieves, which means once shē finds us, we’re dead for sure. And that’s why we need to strike a fatal blow before shē wakes up! There’s no reason for us to be scared of a shrew!” Pulling out a peach, the Captain took a big bite.

Xu Qing, meanwhile, struggled to control his breathing. His mind was spinning, and his eyes were bloodshot. He was well aware that the Captain liked to do really big things, and he had assumed that the latest plan was going to be something monumental. But he hadn’t guessed it would be *this* monumental.

Xu Qing gritted his teeth. “Tell me everything in detail, Eldest Brother.”

Looking very excited, the Captain said, “Okay, little Ah Qing. Moonrite Region is very unique among regions. To the Nightshades, it’s considered like a holy land. In fact, it basically *is* a holy land. And that’s because... the Moonrite Region is the only way to reach the red moon! The red moon is the red moon, while Crimson Mother is Crimson Mother!”

Xu Qing nodded as he listened attentively.

“There’s one thing you need to understand from the beginning. And that is... the red moon is the dwelling place where Crimson Mother sleeps. As for the red moon itself, it’s a star! A moon! A unique heavenly body! In other words, if you want to devour Crimson Mother, then you have to first go to hēr dwelling place. You have to get to the red moon!

“Unfortunately, the red moon is above the canopy of heaven. Although it follows its own orbital track, actually reaching it is going to be extremely difficult. Even though we can see the red moon, we can’t get close to it. However, that’s not the case in the Moonrite Region. Right in the middle of it, in the Penitence Steppes, there’s a shocking statue!”

When the Captain mentioned the statue, his expression became strange, like a mix of regret and sorrow. Xu Qing noted that, and his eyes glittered thoughtfully.

“The statue is massive. Though it’s kneeling in penitence, it’s also in a position to prop up heaven and earth. It’s so tall that words really can’t describe it. It’s very nearly touching the apex of the dome of heaven.

“When the red moon follows its orbital track, it will speed past the statue’s head so closely you can reach out and touch it. That’s also the lowest point in the red moon’s path of travel. The intelligence reports I’ve acquired make that certain. In other

words, if we're right there when the red moon passes, and we fly up with all our might, we'll be able to get on to the red moon."

With that, the Captain took out another peach. Taking a bite, he looked at Xu Qing.

"Of course, I've already planned out everything we need to do once we're on the red moon. And I... am going to devour Crimson Mother, guaranteed!"

The Captain's eyes were bloodshot with craziness.

After taking in the explanation, Xu Qing said one thing. "Who does the statue depict, Eldest Brother?"

The Captain took a few breaths, during which time he took out a peach and handed it to Xu Qing.

"That statue," he said in a hoarse voice, "was created during the time of Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity. It depicts a human Imperial Sovereign who refused to leave Revered Ancient with the Ancient Emperor. Long ago, the Moonrite Region used to belong to him!

"He and Crimson Mother fought a war the likes of which surpassed anything before it. In the end, that Imperial Sovereign died in battle. Because of how much Crimson Mother hated him, shē punished him by forcing his fleshly body to kneel to hēr for all eternity. And hēr curse turned his lands into a pasture.

"Every so often, when the population in Moonrite Region gets big enough, the red moon will have a feast. And everything there is on the menu. Mortals, cultivators, it doesn't matter. They become food. With the cultivators, it starts with those with the highest cultivation base. Every time it happens, the Void Returning experts get eaten first.

"People born in the Moonrite Region are incapable of leaving it, thanks to that curse. If they take even a single step out of the region, they explode and die. Because of that, cultivators from the Moonrite Region live in a state of constant bitterness and loss. Their path of cultivation always ends in death. What's worse, they live in a horrid environment where it's very difficult to survive *without* practicing cultivation."

The Captain took a vicious bite out of his peach. "There is no true sun in Moonrite Region, only artificial light sources and something they call the Heavenfire Skycrossing. Unfortunately, the light of the latter is harmful to the point of being deadly.

"There are also relatives of Crimson Mother who live there, who are also kept like livestock. Because of this, many high-level species call Moonrite Region by a different name. They call it the Red Moon Spirit Garden."

Based on everything Xu Qing was hearing, it seemed to him like the Moonrite Region was a horrid place. And given the circumstances, it seemed likely that the species there would be extremely evil.



“A hell on earth,” he murmured, and then took a bite of peach.

The Captain suddenly looked curiously at Xu Qing. “Where’d you get a peach?”

“You gave it to me,” Xu Qing replied quizzically.

The Captain snatched it back, then took out an apple and handed it to Xu Qing.

Xu Qing looked at the Captain, then accepted the apple and took a bite. Considering he had heard of the Heavenfire Sea before, he asked the Captain about it.

“Heavenfire Sea? I didn’t focus much on that, although I did get a few pieces of information.” The Captain briefly collected his thoughts and then continued, “Supposedly, it’s a sea of fire, in the middle of which is a rift. In the ancient past, the rift wasn’t very big. But as time has gone by, it’s become larger and larger.

“Few people know what’s inside the rift. Through the years, many species have investigated it, but not much has come of all that. One thing that seems certain is that there’s a never-ending world of fire inside. And if you enter, you die. Why, little Junior Brother. Are you planning to visit Heavenfire Sea?”

Xu Qing nodded.

“Well perfect! Since I’ve already deduced when exactly the red moon will arrive, I can tell you we have plenty of time to work with. What’s more, I have a few loose ends that need tying up in the Moonrite Region. So now, all we need to do is sneak away. You can do your thing, I’ll take our ‘tool’ to finish all the preparations.”

The Captain then took out a map of the Moonrite Region, and pointed to one specific spot and said, “Afterward, we’ll meet up here on Mount Heavenly Ox in the Unfinished Mountains.” [1]

“Well, what do you think, little Ah Qing? Are you in?”

After a moment or two passed, Xu Qing nodded and said, “How about we go there first? Then, after we see things with our own eyes, we can make the final decision. Also, you still haven’t told me if you tried something like this in the past.”

Xu Qing looked at the Captain.

The Captain cleared his throat and then tapped one spot on the map. “Think about the name of this place here.”

“Mount Heavenly Ox?” Xu Qing said, an odd expression on his face. “The Unfinished Mountains?”

Unfinished was fairly self-explanatory. But Heavenly Ox.... [2]

The Captain looked very pleased with himself. “The mountain was originally named after me. Who could have guessed that later generations would keep the name? You see, little Ah Qing, one of your Eldest Brother’s past-life bodies is buried there. I really got unlucky back then. I tried to devour a god, but failed. It was all the fault of my unreliable teammates. I actually escaped at first, but didn’t

survive long after. That's the main reason I want to meet up there. I want to take you with me to raid a tomb."

Xu Qing *wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry*. "You're going to raid your own tomb?"

The Captain's eyebrows danced up and down. "I'm getting excited just thinking about it. Also, that's one of the things we need to do to prepare to deal with Crimson Mother."

After that, Xu Qing and the Captain went over some of the details of the plan. They decided to leave in three days. They also made plans for how to get away.

Xu Qing was an important person in Sea-Sealing County, so traveling around could be dangerous. The safest option was to make sure no one knew he was gone. The only people Xu Qing told were Master Seventh and Plumdark. Both disagreed with him leaving at first. But after some persuasion, they gave in, and even provided him with some defensive items. Then Xu Qing made a public announcement that he was going into seclusion to work on his cultivation.

Before 'going into seclusion,' he went to see Zhang San, who had come with Seven Blood Eyes to the county capital. Zhang San had recently finished working on Xu Qing's spirit cruiser. After collecting it, Xu Qing disappeared from the public.

In a flash, a month passed.

There were no major developments in the county capital. The construction work on the Green Dark Sect was finished, and Plumdark took charge. Everything was developing in an orderly fashion. Life had gone back to normal in Sea-Sealing County. Things were calm and peaceful. With Master Seventh and Marquis Yao running things, and especially with Marquis Yao wielding fourth-stage Void Returning power, the nonhumans in the county had stowed any treacherous thoughts.

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In the western part of the Holytide Region, there was a mortal caravan making its way along one of the public highways. The group consisted of some traveling merchants, being escorted by a Holytide bodyguard team. They were planning to visit some small nations near the Yin Sacrifice River.

Somewhere within the long caravan was a young man of about seventeen or eighteen years old with freckles on his face. He sat atop the carriage with the reins in his hand, which he would occasionally flick feebly while calling out to the horses.

He was Ning Yan.

Standing next to him was a young man with his hands clasped behind his back, looking proudly off into the distance. As the sun shone down onto him, it created something like a halo, which made him seem somehow holy.

*"The Lord of dust and ferries arrives; heaven and earth welcome him with drums and gongs!"*

Ning Yan couldn't have been more annoyed.

*What drums and gongs?* he thought. He was truly frustrated at having to be around this person who, the entire journey so far, had been constantly spouting nonsensical poetry.

Looking at the young man out of the corner of his eye, he muttered, "What's wrong with you?"

Hearing that, Wu Jianwu glared derisively at Ning Yan. *"A gentle breeze carries the squawk of chickens and geese; turning, I find myself facing a kiddie!"*

Ning Yan glared at him. Wu Jianwu looked back at him proudly.

At that point, the Captain spoke via divine will from the interior of the carriage.

*"Great poem! It really has that Ancient Emperor cadence. Just what I would expect of our special guest, the top chosen from Seven Blood Eyes' First Peak! No wonder he's known as the greatest successor of Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity. Another! Recite another!"*

Wu Jianwu looked very excited and pleased. Ning Yan said nothing, but he flicked the reins angrily.

Xu Qing sat in the carriage looking out at the scenery. He had expected the Captain to bring Ning Yan along, but was surprised that he'd invited Wu Jianwu.

Ling'er had emerged from Xu Qing's sleeve and was wrapped around his neck. She was currently looking at the Captain.

The Captain looked back at her and blinked a few times. Then he quietly said to Xu Qing, "Let's egg on the moron for now. He's going to be very useful for the plan!" Raising his voice, he loudly said, "Going forward, we're the Heavenly Moon Bandits! Come on, brothers. Come on!"