

Timescape 751

Chapter 751: Grand Emperor Swordsage

As the fluctuations of the voice spread through the imperial capital, buildings vibrated, spell formations flared to life, and auspicious rainbows appeared in the dome of heaven. Within the various organizations in the city, countless powerful experts looked on with serious expressions. In fact, many people couldn't prevent shock from appearing on their faces.

Xu Qing had hardly been around for a day, and already, he was shaking people to the core. From their perspective, he had accumulated astonishing levels of influence, resulting in a heavenly king perishing. He had occupied half of an entire region, formed an alliance with the Moonrite Region, and had participated in the extremely rare event of killing a god. Any other person who had done even one of those things would be considered extraordinary in every way, much less Xu Qing, who had done all of them.

The way he had confidently strode through the spell formation went to show how he handled himself. He even shocked everyone with a Dawning Sun. After that, he went to bow to the statue of the Grand Emperor. Despite all the countless years which had passed, this was only the fourth time Grand Emperor Swordsage woke up and spoke.

Because of all those things, Xu Qing was the complete center of attention right now.

At the moment, Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior was sighing deeply. He was starting to get nervous, although he didn't dare to transmit a message to Xu Qing at the moment. In the ancient records he had read in the past, protagonists usually didn't act like this. Generally speaking, they kept a low profile.... In fact, it was most often the villain, who usually was a member of a superpower sect, that would win a big victory and then return triumphantly to the city, where everyone would be shaken to the core. The patriarch had studied many scenes like that, and knew that they were generally designed to highlight how terrifying the villain was. But it also gave the protagonist a target. Step by step, the protagonist would overcome various setbacks, and thus, the readers would experience the joy of seeing a nobody defeat an important person.

This... My lord and master is doing everything backward....

Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior was trembling inwardly. More than ever, he was coming to realize that Xu Qing was definitely not doing things the way they usually happened in ancient records. If he felt that way, there was little need to mention all of the people in the imperial capital who didn't understand Xu Qing.

There were very few people who had shaken the entire capital city during the Dark War calendar. What was more, an instance of Grand Emperor Swordsage awakening was something that would ultimately be recorded in the historical annals of humankind. In the ancient records of history, the statue of Grand Emperor Swordsage had always been asleep, and usually only sent out divine will during assessments of the heart for the swordsages.

In the past, the statue had awoken three times.

The first time was in the era of Emperor Eastglory. After the humans suffered a huge defeat, Palace Lord Chenshu Yan of the Swordsage Division, just before dying, called out to the Grand Emperor and begged him to awaken. That was the first time Grand Emperor Swordsage's statue woke up.

Because of that, the Firemoon Darkheaven people, due to the hindrances of karma, didn't exterminate humankind.[1]

The second time was during the reign of Emperor Mirrorcloud. Division Lord Wang Ken of the Swordsage Division entered the palace when the Crown Prince of Violet and Cyan was beset from all sides in ambush. The division lord... never came back out. On that day, Grand Emperor Swordsage woke up, looked to the south, and sighed.

The third time wasn't very long ago. It was when Emperor Dark War ascended the throne. At that time, the Grand Emperor woke up and looked at him, his gaze hard but full of anticipation. According to the ancient records, the Grand Emperor sent a message to Emperor Dark War at that time. However, no one knew what that message was. People just said that Emperor Dark War was silent for a few breaths of time before clasping hands and bowing to the Grand Emperor.

Today was the fourth time. In an instant, countless gazes, along with innumerable streams of divine will, came from all parts of the city and converged on that spot like a tempest. Verbal discussions and inaudible transmissions swept out like waves on the sea. To the residents of the capital city, it wasn't exactly hard to get intelligence reports about Xu Qing. And of course, that included information about the assessment of the heart. As a result, it didn't take long for people to realize what was going on.

“Probably the most important detail in Xu Qing's information is that he's the first person during the Dark War calendar to be given a 30,000-meter pillar of light during the swordsage assessment of the heart! That must be why the Grand Emperor is waking up!”

In the imperial palace, inside the Phoenix Sun Pavilion, Princess Anhai stood at the window, looking in the direction of Grand Emperor Swordsage's statue and thinking about everything she knew about Xu Qing. Finally, she looked away.

The Grand Emperor is waking up because of him. This... initially makes it seem like the Grand Emperor is taking care of him. But why does it seem to me... that it's more like Xu Qing being bequeathed with an important responsibility?

Meanwhile, in Seventh Prince's mansion, Seventh Prince himself sat with his eyes closed. Behind him were a few dozen cultivators, all silent and unmoving. The entire building was quiet. If you looked closely, you would find that Seventh Prince's hands were clenched very tightly in his sleeves.

In Tenth Prince's mansion, the prince that everyone thought to be arrogant, despotic, and erratic was in the middle of losing his temper in front of his servants. However, deep in his brutal gaze, in a place where no one could see it, was a glimmer of something cleverly devious.

The other imperial princes were all reacting in various ways in different locations. As for whether their physical reaction matched their internal reaction, no one knew.

There were some important officials and heavenly kings, including the prime minister and people like him, who had very calm facial expressions that didn't reflect the turbulence in their hearts. Most of them looked thoughtfully at the statue of Grand Emperor Swordsage, and then at the

imperial palace. The Grand Emperor woke up when Dark War took the throne. Years later, when Xu Qing came, the statue woke up again....

In the imperial palace's Heaven-Gazing Pavilion, the emperor's face remained expressionless as he looked, not outside, but at the game board in front of him. After a moment, he placed a white game piece onto the board.

Sitting opposite of him was the imperial preceptor, who smiled and put down a black piece. "Your Majesty, I already answered your question. You, sir, have not yet explained to me what Grand Emperor Swordsage said to you on the day you ascended the throne."

The emperor looked up calmly at the imperial preceptor. "The Grand Emperor told me that he regrets what happened with the Crown Prince of Violet and Cyan. And he said that, if I could manage it, I should return that skull that Mirrorcloud buried himself with. Didn't you get it already?" [2]

The emperor spoke in a casual tone, but his every word was packed with meaning.

The imperial preceptor said nothing for a long moment. Then he smiled again. "To run into a person like you in this life, Your Majesty, well, it ensures I won't be lonely."

The emperor didn't react, and instead just picked up another white game piece to play. However, before he could put it on the board, a majestic voice echoed out to fill all heaven and earth.

"Come to the Swordsage Division, young friend. I'll be waiting for you there."

The game piece remained between the emperor's fingers as he slowly looked up. The imperial preceptor's eyes glittered as he also turned to look outside.

Within the crowds in the city were powerful experts, all of whom were stunned. It was the voice of Grand Emperor Swordsage who had just spoken. What was more, there was a big difference between the Grand Emperor waking up and him summoning someone. That was especially true in the Swordsage Division, where everyone from the division lord to the ordinary swordsages were visibly taken aback.

At the foot of the statue, Xu Qing looked up, his heart pounding. After a long moment passed, he took a deep breath, bowed again, then turned in the direction of the Swordsage Division. He knew the general direction to walk. Along the way, any patrolling swordsages who spotted him would give him formal swordsage salutes, and would help clear a path for him.

Xu Qing was also a swordsage.

It took about two hours before a very unique building complex appeared up ahead. Numerous palace structures were grouped together into the shape of two huge swords. One of them lay directly on the ground, the other was stabbed into it. They were so massive that they could easily fit millions and millions of people inside. This was the Swordsage Division headquarters.

As Xu Qing neared he found that almost all of the swordsages assigned to the headquarters were outside waiting for him. Also present was the middle-aged Division Lord Zhou Hengzhi, who was one of the heavenly kings.

The summons from the Grand Emperor was an important thing, and there was no way that the swordsmen, who valued strict adherence to the law, would dare to take the situation lightly.

Among the crowd was a person who had met Xu Qing in the past. He was Huang Kun, who, according to Seventh Prince's introduction, had a grandfather who was an honor guard in the Swordsman Division. [3]

Huang Kun's heart was racing. He was one of the few people in the imperial capital who had seen Xu Qing before. And he almost couldn't believe what had happened in the Holytide Region after that banquet. The awakening of the Grand Emperor was being taken seriously by everyone in the Swordsman Division, and only emphasized to Huang Kun how far apart he was from Xu Qing. Years ago, when they both sat at the same banquet together, Huang Kun hadn't thought much of Xu Qing. After all, Xu Qing was just a random swordsman from some backwater location. Even though he was special in Sea-Sealing County, that didn't have much to do with Huang Kun. As for whether or not Xu Qing would ever make a name for himself, that had been an unknown.

But now... as Huang Kun looked around at his fellow swordsmen, he could only sigh. He was now just one of countless swordsmen, and all of them were looking at the same approaching figure.

Xu Qing didn't even notice Huang Kun. He was struggling to stay calm and collected despite the respect shown to him by the Grand Emperor, and the sensation that it was shaking the entire dynasty.

When Xu Qing saw all of the swordsmen gathered outside the Swordsman Division, he stopped in place. Taking off his green jerkin, he produced a swordsman uniform from his bag of holding and put it on. Upon donning the same pure white clothing as everyone else, Xu Qing truly looked like he belonged. The gazes of the swordsmen changed slightly at that point, and that included the division lord and other swordsman leaders. They nodded slightly.

Taking a deep breath, Xu Qing continued walking past all the swordsmen until he was standing in front of the division lord himself. Looking very serious, he offered a formal swordsman salute.

"I am Swordsman Xu Qing, here at the summons of the Grand Emperor."

Division Lord Zhou Hengzhi gave Xu Qing a serious look, then nodded.

"Please, go ahead," he said. He gestured, and a vortex sprang into being at the main entrance of the division. The sword energy that pulsed out of it caused the swordsmen's Emperor's Swords to vibrate.

Looking very solemn, Xu Qing entered the portal. The moment he stepped in, he found himself inside the palace, in what was considered a restricted area.

It was a simple cave that contained only an altar, atop which sat a withered old man. He looked almost like a corpse, and he emanated a strong sense of decay. However, the spot where his heart existed pulsed with life. He had innumerable shocking and ghastly wounds covering him. They were, of course, injuries he had sustained while keeping humankind safe. Every single one pulsed with godly might; they were all wounds that had been inflicted by gods.

This was the actual clone of Grand Emperor Swordsage. He was the last Grand Emperor of humankind, and he... was the only Grand Emperor who had refused to leave Revered Ancient, and had been safeguarding humankind ever since!

When Xu Qing saw the Grand Emperor and all his wounds, he felt a sensation of intense respect well up in him. Dropping to his knees, he kowtowed.

The Grand Emperor's eyes slowly opened.

Chapter 752: The Bequeath of the Grand Emperor

In the dim, dark cave, the opening of the Grand Emperor's eyes caused scintillating, multi-colored light to spread everywhere. It was like an astral redirection, in which all living things transformed. The cave itself was hidden by the light, as a huge starry sky took over everything. Xu Qing felt as if he had been dragged outside of Revered Ancient and into the starry sky beyond. There, dazzling starlight glittered everywhere, like a great, starry river.

The countless bits of starlight merged together to form a huge figure. The figure of starlight wore a resplendent imperial robe and had a shining imperial crown. His facial features were threatening without being angry. He was none other than the Grand Emperor. The Grand Emperor made of stars sat cross-legged, his might filling the universe and covering Revered Ancient.

Seeing this, Xu Qing felt as small as a grain of dust. He inclined his head, clasped his hands, and bowed deeply.

“Tell me, what is the original purpose of the Swordsage Division?” the Grand Emperor asked, his voice echoing through the starry sky and causing the void to tremble.

Xu Qing looked up at the Grand Emperor, and respectfully answered, “The Swordsage Division was intended to lead humankind to the heights of glory, and to bring about a golden age of peace. That was its original intention.”

“What is the mission of a swordsage?” the Grand Emperor asked.

“To swordsages, the sword means life. We protect all living beings, swear to sever the doom of dawn, and cause the light of heaven and earth to blossom.”

[1]

In response, the starlight-formed Grand Emperor glittered brightly as if in approval.

“What do you do if nonhumans try to stop you?” The words contained something profoundly aggressive about them.

Expression somber, Xu Qing calmly said, “Execute them!”

“What do you do if other humans try to stop you?”

Without any hesitation, Xu Qing said, “Execute them! An emperor represents 10,000 citizens. But an emperor is only one person. That illustrates why the Swordsage Division can execute judgment on anyone except the emperor!”

“What do you mean by emperor? What kind of emperor?” There was killing intent in the Grand Emperor’s glittering eyes, and it caused the starry sky to turn cold.

Upon hearing the question, Xu Qing bowed his head. He needed to think. A moment later, he looked up, and his eyes glittered.

“Is it an Ancient Emperor?”

The Grand Emperor didn’t respond. Xu Qing didn’t say anything. A long moment passed. Finally, the Grand Emperor spoke in an ancient voice.

“To the swordsages, that ‘emperor’ could be an Ancient Emperor or it could be the emperor of humankind. To swordsages, that ‘emperor’ is no single person. The purpose of an emperor is to ensure the survival of a species. In other words, an emperor... is whatever makes sure a species survives.

“The true meaning of ‘can execute judgment on anyone,’ as far as the Sword Division is concerned, means that anything which can negatively affect the survival of our species... can be executed by the swordsages! Even if that’s the emperor himself!”

A tremor passed through Xu Qing, and he struggled to control his breathing. This was actually different from his understanding of the swordsages.

Based on the Grand Emperor’s choice of words, Xu Qing now understood that there was a difference between the Swordsage Division and the Sword Division. The very earliest swordsages actually came from this Grand Emperor’s Sword Division.

“However, there have to be limits to power. And thus, after my Sword Division turned into the Swordsage Division, I issued a dharmic decree stating that, after my death, all generations had to have a Sword Division successor. His responsibility is... to supervise. And only the Sword Division successor has the power I just mentioned to you.

“The Summer Immortal Palace has another responsibility other than maintaining historical records, and that is to oversee the Sword Division successor. It’s a cyclical relationship.

“That said, my dharmic decree has not yet taken effect. The reason is that this clone of mine still has a scrap of life force left. After all... things have changed a lot since my day, and I’m not ready to let go yet....”

Xu Qing felt shaken to the core. He now understood that the Sword Division successor was really the last bit of insurance to ensure the survival of humankind. The Grand Emperor looked at Xu

Qing but didn't say anything further. Then he closed his eyes. Apparently, the only reason he woke up was to tell Xu Qing this information.

The starry sky blurred. The stars went dark. The cave returned. The Grand Emperor once again became a withered corpse with only a tiny scrap of life force in it.

Xu Qing lowered his head, bowed respectfully, then turned to leave.

That was when the Grand Emperor suddenly said, "Do you remember what I told you during the assessment of the heart?"

Xu Qing stopped in place and nodded.

"No matter what happens... never change!" The Grand Emperor said nothing further after that.

Xu Qing vanished from the dark cave.

The Grand Emperor went back to sleep. The red color was fading from the sky.

After Xu Qing returned to the Swordsage Division, it was as if everything from before was a dream. His return caused another convergence of gazes and divine will.

All organizations in the imperial capital were paying attention. They had no idea what the Grand Emperor said to Xu Qing. They only know that he returned to the Swordsage Division after the time it takes an incense stick to burn.

The surrounding swordsages looked at him as well, and that included the division lord. The palace lord didn't ask him any questions. He just looked at him long and hard, then walked back into the Swordsage Division. The other swordsages backed up and also returned to the Swordsage Division. However, as of this day, Xu Qing had left a deep impression in all of their hearts.

Eventually, he stood alone outside. He had his eyes closed as he replayed what just happened with the Grand Emperor. Gradually, he felt sorrow.

Is the Grand Emperor going to perish...?

Xu Qing could sense that he had been bequeathed by the Grand Emperor with an important responsibility. And that responsibility was humankind. Xu Qing opened his eyes, bowed to the Swordsage Division, and left with mixed emotions.

The dome of heaven was dark. The moon was bright and the stars were faint. A breeze blew as Xu Qing walked the streets, his garments swaying along with his long hair.

The wind here was different from the wind in Sea-Sealing County. Instead of being humid, it was very dry. It was a strange sensation.

As Xu Qing walked along silently, he contemplated everything that took place after he arrived at the imperial capital. It had been one thing after another, and he still needed time to process it all.

Time passed. Eventually, Xu Qing caught sight of Ningyan's mansion and the lake. Beneath the light of the moon, the lake looked like a mirror, reflecting the canopy of heaven. If you stared long

enough, you might get the mistaken impression that the moon in the lake was real, while the moon in the sky wasn't real.

Back inside the mansion, Xu Qing meditated for the rest of the night. The next morning at dawn, he looked in the direction of the Swordsage Division and sighed.

A response came from Tenth Prince's mansion.

Tenth Prince refused. He said that the request was complete nonsense.

It didn't make sense. Given Xu Qing's actions upon arriving, most people with a brain would choose not to stick their heads out. They would only end up as test fodder for others to determine where Xu Qing's bottom line was. That was especially true considering what just happened with the Grand Emperor waking up. The most logical thing for Tenth Prince to do would be to return the items. That would be the norm for human nature, and is what anyone but a fool would have done.

Xu Qing shook his head. He didn't believe Tenth Prince to be an idiot, so clearly there had to be some reason that this action would benefit him.

The imperial capital really is a complicated place full of convoluted relationships. Everyone wears a mask, and a different one at that.

Eyes glittering coldly, he stood, called Ningyan, Kong Xianglong and the others, and left the mansion. The Captain and Plumdark had long since gone out on their own, and were nowhere to be seen.

On the way to Tenth Prince's mansion, Ningyan looked at Xu Qing with reverence and respect. He was obviously aware of what happened with the Grand Emperor.

After thinking about Tenth Prince's actions, he leaned closer to Xu Qing and quietly said, "Biggest Bro, just so you know, Tenth Prince is somewhat simple-minded. He has ordinary talent and an average cultivation base. When he was small, his mother's clan didn't seem to like him very much, nor did my father. It was my mother who took pity on him and cared for him for several years. Unfortunately, after my mother passed away, he forgot favors and violated justice."

"I'd like to see him for myself," Xu Qing said calmly.

Ningyan didn't offer any more explanations.

Eventually, the group reached the east part of the city, where a spectacular mansion rose up in front of them. The mansion glittered with gold and jade, almost as if it were worried people might not believe it to be worthy of respect. The guardian animal statues outside the mansion were made from spirit stone. There was a buzz of conversation coming from inside the mansion; clearly a banquet was underway. Laughing and chatting could be heard, along with the sound of music.

Two guards were stationed out front, and when they saw Xu Qing coming, they got visibly nervous. Their cultivation bases flared as if they were facing a big enemy.

Xu Qing didn't attempt to burst inside. He stopped at the main entrance and waited for the guards to announce his presence. But after a long moment passed in which the guards didn't do anything, he thought about it for a moment, then continued forward.

The two guards moved to block his path, but before they could, their vision swam, and Xu Qing was past them. Having reached the bright red main door, he put his hand on it. When he pushed, the door rumbled, and a host of cracks spread out across its surface. Then it exploded.

Xu Qing's eyes narrowed as the splinters of the door swept into the mansion, causing a cloud of dust to rise up. Almost immediately, a group of about a hundred cultivators rushed toward Xu Qing.

"Halt! Who goes there!?"

"This is Tenth Prince's mansion! How dare you be disrespectful here!"

Though these cultivators were clearly enraged, they were actually moving quite slowly. And before they could even get close, Xu Qing and the others had crossed the courtyard and had arrived at the banquet.

It was a gathering of dozens of silkpants from the imperial capital. There were a host of handmaidens everywhere, all of them acting very licentiously. In the middle of it all was a young man in the robe of an imperial prince. Looking very domineering, he glared at Xu Qing and Ningyan as he produced a unique bag of holding and put it on the table in front of him.

"Get the hell out of here."

Everyone looked on to see what would happen.

Xu Qing's expression was the same as ever as he waved his right hand and sent his ancient sun out into the open. The face of every banquet attendee froze. Tenth Prince's expression turned cold, and he stood. However, before he could speak, Xu Qing blurred into motion, appearing right in front of him.

Xu Qing reached out and pushed him, tapping into his god troves. A terrifying aura swept forth, causing Tenth Prince's pupils to constrict. Then blood sprayed out of his mouth as he stumbled backward and passed out.

Ningyan hurried forward to the table, grabbed the bag of holding, and scanned it. Then he looked at Xu Qing and nodded excitedly.

Xu Qing looked at the unconscious Tenth Prince, then turned and walked back to the entrance. There, he looked back briefly, his eyes glittering with profound light.

After enough time passed for an incense stick to burn, Tenth Prince's eyes flickered open. When others told him what had happened, he flew into a rage.

Seeing that, the guests were quick to say their farewells. Meanwhile, Tenth Prince cursed his guards, screamed at everyone, then stormed into his sleeping chamber. After the door was closed, and when he was sure no one could see, he let the fury fade away. In its place was an expression of sorrow.

Aunt Qing, there was only so much I could do. I kept your belongings safe for Ol' Twelfth... and now they're back where they belong. [2]

When Tenth Prince thought about that particular member of the Senior generation, he felt sorrow and bitterness. In the imperial palace, where familial love was looked down on, he would never be able to forget the only person who had ever shown him motherly love.

Sadly, this is my only option. I can't let people realize how sentimental I am. And I promise, Aunt Qing, I'm going to figure out how you really died!

Chapter 753: Red Dust Emotional Suppression Pavilion

After thinking about everything that happened from the moment he broke down the door, to the seemingly contrived banquet, to the way Tenth Prince arrogantly took out the bag of holding, Xu Qing was left thinking one thing.

It seems entirely possible this Tenth Prince isn't the silkpants everyone thinks he is....

Although it seemed like a case of Xu Qing making a big splash and Tenth Prince acting domineering, the reality was more nuanced. There were deeper things going on.

That said, in many instances, one isolated incident isn't enough to make a broad judgment. The only way to determine if Tenth Prince really had set the entire thing up would only become apparent later as he took other actions. Given that, Tenth Prince's actions actually made a lot of sense. He didn't care if people other than Xu Qing and Ningyan realized what was really going on, as the power of words could overcome many obstacles.

As Xu Qing thought about those things, Ningyan was at his side, his eyes also flickering thoughtfully. As an imperial prince, Ningyan was naturally not an idiot, and he had picked up on some of the same clues. He looked over at Xu Qing, and Xu Qing looked back and nodded. Together, they returned to Ningyan's mansion.

Back inside, Ningyan took Xu Qing to the mansion's shrine hall. There, he opened the bag of holding to reveal a scroll painting. There was nothing else inside. Apparently, it wasn't something that would normally be stored in a bag of holding, as it took effort to extract it without destroying the bag itself and losing the scroll to spatial rifts. The scroll painting was wrapped up in a special package that was designed to facilitate its storage in the bag of holding.

All of that made it abundantly clear the Tenth Prince had been meticulous in making preparations that required a lot of time and effort to handle properly.

That was another reason why Ningyan had been in such a hurry to leave, and hadn't bothered checking thoroughly what was inside the bag of holding.

After taking out the scroll painting, Ningyan felt a bit shaky. He rubbed the painting with trembling hands, his eyes glimmering with reminiscence. Finally, he unfurled it and hung it on the wall of the shrine hall.

It depicted a young woman. She wore a simple yet elegant blue gown. Her hair was not bound and her smile seemed shrewd and even crafty. She wasn't stunningly beautiful, and in fact, there were many people in the world more attractive than her. But there was no doubt that she had a strong personality. The light in her eyes shone through even in the painting, making it clear how vivacious she was.

Looking more melancholy than ever, Ningyan approached the painting, lit some incense, and bowed to his mother.

Xu Qing solemnly stepped forward, lit some incense, and bowed. Then, as he looked at the painting, and specifically Ningyan's mother's eyes, his expression flickered.

He had no idea who had painted this image, but they executed it in a very lifelike way. For example, he had gone to the trouble of painting the pupils in the eyes. But it wasn't just the pupils that were painted in detail; there were also reflections in the pupils. Although they were somewhat blurry, the general shape was visible, and at first, it seemed like an altar.... But if you looked more closely, you would realize it was actually a building. The specific details of the building weren't clear.

Xu Qing decided to revisit the matter later. Looking to the side, he saw that Ningyan was lost in thought as he looked at the painting. Xu Qing, having experienced moments like this himself, knew that Ningyan probably wanted to be alone. He left the shrine hall, being careful not to disturb Ningyan. As he made his way through the mansion, he encountered occasional patrolling swordsages. Other than them, the mansion was relatively empty. A faint breeze blew, causing the bells hanging from the eaves to chime. That only added to the emptiness.

Plumdark hadn't returned, nor the Captain. Both of them were handling their own matters in the imperial capital. Kong Xianglong went out to pay a visit to Li Yunshan.

That meant that the only people left in the mansion with Ningyan were Xu Qing and Wu Jianwu. Some distance away, Wu Jianwu sat at the edge of the lake reciting some poetry in the breeze.

"The water ripples, mortality is tangible; a koi fish roasts here in the capital!"

"Great poem. Really great poem!"

The poem was recited by Wu Jianwu, and the praise came from the parrot.

Xu Qing scanned the lake with divine will and saw Wu Jianwu sitting there, looking thoughtfully at the surface of the water. As he continued to recite more poetry, the parrot didn't just spout praise. It had taken on an additional task. It was keeping a record. It was recording all of Wu Jianwu's poetry in a jade slip, for when Wu Jianwu occasionally needed to reference them.

Seeing how much fun they were having, Xu Qing chose to just sit down on the stone slabs of the courtyard. The sensation of the breeze, and the sound of the chiming bells, caused him to gradually relax. As he reviewed all of the information of late, he came to the realization that he was probably going to be in the capital for a while. After all, he was here, yet the emperor hadn't summoned him yet.

Xu Qing wasn't in a hurry. After getting his thoughts in order, he closed his eyes and started working on his cultivation. The spirit energy in the capital was stronger than in Sea-Sealing County. And though there was still mutagen, it existed in much lower levels. For mortals, it meant that their longevity was very close to normal. For cultivators, it meant that cultivation progress came a lot quicker, and the chances of mutation were infinitely smaller.

Therefore, Xu Qing didn't want to waste this opportunity, and immersed himself in cultivation. As of now, he had three god troves. Unfortunately, he wasn't even sure of how to progress with his fourth. It was something he needed to put some thought into going forward. Other than that, he had his god states.

The god state associated with his first god trove was easy to sustain. But his second-level god state needed Crimson Mother's flesh, and that was a big waste, especially considering the god state didn't last for long. There was little need to mention his third-level god state.

I need to figure out a way to change that.

Before coming to the imperial capital, he had asked Master Seventh about the situation. His Master had told him that he would be able to find the answer in the imperial capital.

Where do I find this answer?

Xu Qing looked up into the canopy of heaven for a time, then closed his eyes and went back to breathing exercises.

Days passed. Half a month later, there was less attention being focused on Xu Qing than before, mostly because he hadn't left the mansion the entire time.

The story about the incident between Xu Qing and Tenth Prince had long since made the rounds in the capital. What was more, after the event, when the banquet continued, Tenth Prince had made a point of repeatedly mentioning how Xu Qing was his enemy now.

There was something else that had distracted the prying eyes. A major development occurred in the war with the Nightshades. A few days previously, a grand prince of the Firemoon Darkheavens was invited to the Nightshade's imperial capital. It was a very sensitive situation, and it resulted in a temporary ceasefire in which tensions mounted.

Xu Qing hardly saw Plumdark or the Captain during the half month that passed. He spent most of his time in the courtyard seated in meditation.

One evening when Ningyan was away, two people that Xu Qing had met before sent a message saying that they wanted to visit. Shortly after, they were escorted into the courtyard by two swordsages.

“Long time no see, Xu Qing! Hahaha!” One of them smiled broadly as he casually entered and sat on a stone bench near Xu Qing. The other one seemed more cautious as he approached the bowed respectfully.

Xu Qing opened his eyes and looked at them. It took a moment for him to realize who they were.

“Brother Meng. Brother Huang.”

The cautious fellow was the swordsage Huang Kun, while the casual one was Meng Yunbai. [1]

He had been introduced to both of them when he went to Seventh Prince's banquet. And Meng Yunbai, who was the grandson of the minister of war, had actually been sitting right next to Xu Qing, and had given him additional information about some of the other guests. In fact, Xu Qing had talked with Meng Yunbai more than anyone else that day.

Laughing heartily, Meng Yunbai continued, “I knew from the moment we met that you had limitless potential, and that we would definitely meet again one day. Of course, I had no idea it would be here in the imperial capital.

“I wanted to come see you earlier, but my clan said I couldn’t. They said too many people are watching. But thanks to the developments in the Nightshade war, attention has shifted, and I was finally permitted to make contact.”

Meng Yunbai’s personality hadn’t changed since that banquet. He seemed carefree, as if he would say anything that came to mind. And when he talked, he got to the point.

Off to the side, Huang Kun nodded. “It’s the same over at the Swordsage Division. Actually, there are a lot of swordsages who want to pay a visit to you, Xu Qing....”

Meng Yunbai blinked a few times, then lowered his voice and adopted a mysterious tone of voice. “You see, someone invited Huang Kun and I over to the Red Dust Pavilion today. Then we thought of you, and decided to ask you to come along. What do you think, Xu Qing? Want to join us for a drink?”

“By the way, the Red Dust Pavilion is a great place. You’ve heard of the Red Dust Emotional Suppression Pavilion, one of the ten superpower sects, right? When I say Red Dust Pavilion, that’s what I mean.

“It’s different from most sects. The disciples are primarily women, and their cultivation revolves around withdrawing from society and suppressing emotions. Of course, if you want to withdraw from society, you have to be a part of society first. And if you want to suppress emotions, you have to release them first.

“That’s why their sect opens Red Dust Pavilions in many places. It’s a very expensive place, and they have strict requirements based on status, position, and cultivation base. If you don’t meet the qualifications, then regardless of anything, you won’t be allowed inside. For all intents and purposes, going there will leave you broke for a month. While we go there for fun, the Red Dust Pavilion disciples practiced cultivation there.

“However, they offer entertainment and companionship, nothing more. Nobody would dare try to use force on them. No, they’re treated very well. After all, the god they worship is supposedly High God Starfire of the Firemoon Darkheaven people.

“When it comes to the female cultivators from there, each one is more good-looking than the next, and each one has a hotter body than the next. And if we guests are charming and dashing enough, then you can get intimate and practice dual cultivation. Now that is true bliss!”

Meng Yunbai licked his lips, and his heart burned with passion. However, seeing that Xu Qing wasn’t very interested, and was about to reject his invitation, he quickly continued, “Incidentally, the gathering today is being hosted by the junior emperor from the Star Emperor Preeminence Sect. He’s also a descendant of Grand Emperor Starry Sky. You know, now that you’re here in the imperial capital, you probably feel like your head is spinning. I know you might want to stick to yourself, but the reality is that there are some good people around here. Besides, you can take advantage of this situation to learn first-hand how things work here.”

Xu Qing thought about it. What Meng Yunbai said did make sense. He needed to personally observe more about the imperial capital so that he could make his own judgment about things.

Finally, Xu Qing nodded, got to his feet, and left the mansion along with Meng Yunbai and Huang Kun. Meng Yunbai talked just about nonstop, telling Xu Qing all about the customs in the capital. Combining that with what he already knew gave Xu Qing an even deeper understanding of the capital.

Soon, it was evening, and yet the streets were no less crowded than before. In fact, they were busier. As in most human cities, nighttime was often more vibrant. In the east of the city was a courtyard structure. It featured extravagant architecture, precious building materials, ornamental rocks, and decorative streams. A light buzz of conversation could be heard inside. Above the main entrance was calligraphy as flamboyant as dancing dragons and swirling phoenixes.

Red Dust Pavilion.

There were red lanterns everywhere, and a lot of foot traffic in the area. The open-air courtyard was filled with small buildings separated by ornamental rocks and connected with meandering paths. The little buildings all had spell formations that could be used to create privacy.

Meng Yunbai was obviously a regular here, as he was immediately noticed by the granny in charge, who walked over with a smile on her face. She was called ‘granny,’ but was actually an attractive middle-aged woman. She had a flirtatious look in her eyes, but if you looked closely, you could see a cold glint there. Being hot on the outside but cold on the inside was one way to make yourself a lot more attractive.

Meng Yunbai casually slipped his arm around the ‘granny’s’ waist and then pointed at Xu Qing. “Recognize him?”

The ‘granny’ looked Xu Qing over, and the pupils in her beautiful eyes constricted. She smiled. “Young Sir Xu! Who hasn’t heard about you?”

Xu Qing’s expression was the same as ever as he looked around. He wasn’t very comfortable in places like this. As for Huang Kun, though he had started out being reserved, being in this familiar environment, he started to loosen up a bit. As Meng Yunbai continued to laugh and chat, the ‘granny’ led them onward.

The smell of perfume filled the air, lending a sense of romance to the place. It was a really nice brothel, that was clear. Some of the buildings had guards, and when they spotted Meng Yunbai, they clasped hands and bowed.

There were beautiful, alluring women everywhere. When they noticed Xu Qing, almost all of them stopped and stared. In sharp contrast, Xu Qing ignored them.

Before long, the ‘granny’ had led the three of them to one particular building which was completely empty except for a young woman playing a zither.

However, as Xu Qing got closer, it was like walking through a sheet of water and into an otherworldly paradise. Within that otherworldly paradise was a huge immortal hotspring. The spirit energy a dense mist that filled the area and cleared the mind. Not too far away were a dozen or so young men, toasting each other and chatting. Each young man had a beautiful woman at his side, each of whom was attractive in a different way.

Seated in the very middle was a young man in a black robe embroidered with a starry sky. He was extraordinary, being very handsome, with sword-like eyebrows and eyes that sparkled like stars. He was currently chatting with the woman next to him. He was obviously the host of this event, the junior emperor of the Star Emperor Preeminence Sect. Music drifted about, and there were dancers performing. The atmosphere was very warm.

When Xu Qing, Meng Yunbai, and Huang Kun entered, everyone in the immortal hotspring looked over. Meng Yunbai stepped forward, clasped hands to the young man in the starry sky robe, then laughed heartily.

“Brother Peng, sorry that Huang Kun and I have come late, but we brought a new friend with us. I don’t think I need to introduce Xu Qing to any of you. You’ve all heard of him.”

All gazes shifted to Xu Qing. Some people even rose, smiled at him, and clasped hands.

Junior Emperor Peng looked at Xu Qing and nodded. His expression wasn’t cold, but neither was it warm. It was neutral.

Xu Qing nodded to everyone, then found a place to sit down. Meng Yunbai chatted for a bit, then went over to Xu Qing to explain who everyone was. They were either nobility or disciples from major sects. They were sizing Xu Qing up while he did the same to them. Regardless of what they were thinking on the inside, they were all smiles on the outside.

Eventually, some beautiful girls arrived, and one of them, who was fairer than any of the others, gracefully sat down next to Xu Qing.

“Young Sir,” she said with a smile, “you look a bit out of sorts.”

Xu Qing wasn’t necessarily out of sorts. It was just his first time being in a situation like this.

In the Red Dust Pavilion’s shrine hall, the clay fox stirred, and her eyes suddenly glittered.

Should I go have a look at the naughty little boy...?

Chapter 754: Romance and Drunken Immortal in the Red Dust

Within that otherworldly paradise in the Red Dust Pavilion, chatting, laughter, and music drifted about as the young men and women interacted, and emotions began to build.

Xu Qing’s keen senses told him that, as emotions grew stronger, there were spell formations at work. Those formations were similar to the spirit convergence formations from his early days. They were designed to gather the seven emotions and six sensory pleasures.[1]

Xu Qing looked thoughtfully at the alcohol in the cup in front of him. It was a deep amber color, and had a very unique fragrance. From the sip he had taken earlier, he could tell this alcohol was extraordinary.

“That’s a specialty of our Red Dust Pavilion,” the young woman seated next to him said. “Mortals can’t drink it. Even one drink will kill them. Its name is Drunken Immortal, and though it has some amazing ingredients, people under Void Returning will have trouble digesting them. In fact, to them, it could well be considered a poison.

“That said, it won’t hurt you. It’s actually considered very precious. As you know, the process of cultivation transforms our fleshly bodies into something incredible, and sometimes, that makes it hard to get drunk. Drunken Immortal is the only alcohol that can really get you feeling drunk. And that makes it easier to release your emotions.

“The spell formations here in the Red Dust Pavilion are designed with cultivation purposes in mind.” [2]

Xu Qing looked around and tried to wrap his mind around what she was saying. To him, poison was something for killing people. It seemed strange that people would use it to get drunk. It was something that didn’t occur either in South Phoenix or Sea-Sealing County.

Maybe that’s just how things work in the imperial capital.

Xu Qing didn’t really approve, but wasn’t inclined to voice his opinion. He had already sensed that the spell formations here were collecting emotions, and he could also sense that the women of the Red Dust Pavilion were absorbing the power of those emotions.

It really wasn’t a suitable environment for Xu Qing. Looking around, he saw Meng Yunbai drinking and having fun. Huang Kun was off to the side, his eyebrows dancing up and down as he whispered something to the girl next to him.

Xu Qing didn’t feel like he fit in here. Not wanting to waste his time, he prepared to leave when, all of a sudden, dazzling light appeared. A bright red teleportation portal appeared over the surface of the immortal hot spring, out of which emerged two figures. Both were women. The one in the lead position was someone Xu Qing recognized. It was the ‘granny’ who had led the way here.

The second person caused the entire otherworldly paradise to go dim and colorless because of her mere presence. All eyes locked onto her. The junior emperor from the Star Emperor Preeminence Sect looked at her with eyes that burned with passion. She was why he had come. The cotton veil on her face revealed only her eyes, which glistened like a pond in spring. She wore a gauzy pink garment with a silk sleeveless coat of red and green, embroidered with a phoenix. The garment perfectly accentuated her slender waist and graceful wrists.

Her figure was hinted at by the fabric of the garment, making her incredibly alluring. She carried an ancient pipa with her, and her hair was bound atop her head and secured in place with a peony. [3]

She was a spectacular beauty, the type that could make all flowers look colorless, and could liven all living beings. She walked gracefully onto the shore next to the immortal hot spring, and

approached the gathering. After giving a curtsy bow, she sat on a small jade pillar and started playing music with her delicate fingers.

The song started out graceful and tinged with regret, as if it were telling a story that would never end.... As it continued, the rhythm picked up, like a butterfly dancing gracefully in the wind, or the gurgle of spring waters running down a mountain. It was as if the young woman were thinking about beautiful times spent with her paramour. Everyone was moved by the beauty of it.

But then the song changed, and became about departures and the sorrow of parting. Apparently, the paramour was going off to war. He had no choice but to leave, and left behind nothing but memories. The tone of the music changed to that of sorrow, as if the song was telling the paramour... *“Wherever you go, your aura remains. When you’re here, the music plays. When you leave, the music becomes you.”*

Everyone was even more deeply moved.

Gradually, the pipa music changed again. This time, it became lively and heroic. Even aggressive. It also caused drifting snowflakes to appear. The roof in the otherworldly paradise became pitch-black, and then glittering stars appeared, which swirled together to become a gravestone.

Emotions stirred in the audience as they realized that the woman had learned her paramour died in battle. The music was angry, and it contained a helpless hatred of the world.

It was just like the poem:

For ten thousand miles, no one is around to collect the bones. All houses in the city call the souls to be buried.

The husband died in battle while the son is unborn; the wife still lives, but is like a candle in the day.[4]

The immortal hotspring and the otherworldly paradise were completely silent. Some people were thinking about the Nightshades. Some thought of humankind. Others thought of their clans’ patriarchs.

In the end, the music stopped, and the last note lingered until it transformed into the same note which had begun the song. It was as if the song had traveled through time, returning to the past to once again sigh as life began again....

“Amazing!” the junior emperor said, standing, his eyes glittering. Everyone else joined him, rising to their feet and offering words of praise.

Even Xu Qing was moved. He had listened to music before, but never anything like this. It was like listening to a complete story that completely drew him in.

The young woman bowed her head, then picked up the glass of alcohol in front of her, lifted it to the crowd, and then took a drink.

That action caused her veil to shift to the side, revealing her face. Her skin was as fair as jade and as beautiful as a flower, and the fair skin of her wrist as she lifted the drinking vessel was equally as enticing. Her lips were as red as cinnabar, and as she put the drinking vessel back down, she smiled alluringly.

Everyone watching her struggled to remain calm.

Seeing all the emotions at play, the 'granny' smiled. "Young sirs, this beautiful immortal is Miss Ling Yao. Normally speaking, Miss Ling Yao doesn't make public appearances, but upon finding there was a special guest today, I issued her an invitation which she accepted. Young sirs, I'm sure all of you know the rules by which Miss Ling Yao operates."

Hearing that, Junior Emperor Peng nodded. "Of course we know. Miss Ling Yao will sit next to whoever she fancies. No one can force her to sit where she doesn't wish."

As the words left his mouth, he cast a meaningful look in Ling Yao's direction. He had come here this day for her, and it wasn't his first time showing interest. What was more, based on the information he had access to, she was also interested in him.

Most importantly, the female cultivators in the Red Dust Pavilion all cultivated the dao of suppressed emotions. Of course, before you could suppress emotions, you had to release them. And a release of emotions couldn't just happen randomly. As it related to their first time practicing dual cultivation, men could be very useful to these women. And the higher the level of cultivation base involved, the more incredibly shocking that usefulness became.

By borrowing power from Ling Yao, I can have a much better chance of stepping from the great circle of Spirit Trove and into Void Returning. In fact, my chances will improve exponentially.

As Junior Emperor Peng thought such things, Ling Yao picked up the pipa. Her dark eyes glittered, and her charm overflowed, capturing the soul. She scanned the crowd, and then focused on Xu Qing. Smiling, she walked over and, as everyone looked on, sat down next to him.

Xu Qing went stiff from head to toe. At the same, he put his guard up. He didn't recognize this woman, and given that they had never met before, there was clearly meaning behind her action of sitting next to him. Frowning, he turned to look at her.

Ling Yao's eyes gleamed as she looked back at him and quietly said, "What are you looking at me like that for, young sir?"

Her gentle voice caused Meng Yunbai's heart to pound. As for Junior Emperor Peng, he looked away expressionlessly, took a drink, then put the cup down and closed his eyes. Everyone else present had different expressions on their faces as they looked at Xu Qing, then the junior emperor. They exchanged meaningful glances.

Shortly after, the young man sitting next to the junior emperor looked at Xu Qing and laughed heartily. "Brother Xu, you're really a dragon amongst men. It's your first time here, yet Miss Ling Yao has taken a liking to you already. I have to offer my congratulations, Brother Xu. In fact, let me offer you a toast. Going forward, we should keep in touch regularly!"

He lifted his drinking vessel politely and took a drink.

Both his wording and his demeanor were very courteous, so Xu Qing didn't have any good reason to refuse the toast. Raising his drinking vessel, he also took a drink. The moment he did, another of the guests raised his cup.

“Brother Xu, you’re a man of striking appearance and talent. You’re also the acting governor from one of the border regions. I’ve heard a lot about you over the years, and now that I can see you in person, I’m even more impressed. Allow me to toast you three times in a row.”

The young man drank to Xu Qing three times in a row. Xu Qing realized what was going on. Before long, everyone else was toasting him, all of them speaking very courteously and keeping their expressions warm and welcoming. It was obvious what their goal was, and there wasn’t much that could be done to stop them. At a certain point, Meng Yunbai seemed about ready to stand up and intervene, but Xu Qing prevented him. [5]

This ‘poisoned’ alcohol might get other people drunk, but not Xu Qing. As long as something had ‘poison’ in it, he didn’t need to worry about it at all. Therefore, he didn’t refuse any of the toasts, and instead drank glass after glass. After all of the drinks were done, a lot of the other guests were swaying back and forth, while Xu Qing looked the same as ever. Everyone was now looking at him curiously.

Meanwhile, Xu Qing had taken care to memorize the names and faces of everyone present. Then he smiled.

“I’m very happy to have met all of you amazing heroes today,” he said. “You’re the pillars of humankind, and are geniuses all of you. People like us are responsible for continuing the glory of all humanity. Given that, why don’t we start drinking one *jug* at a time?”

He looked at the ‘granny.’

The ‘granny’ was clearly surprised, but she immediately called a handmaiden over and told her to bring in enough jugs of alcohol for everyone.

The other guests hesitated. None of them would dare to drink too much of this alcohol. Sometimes, alcohol itself could be considered a weapon.

Remaining calm inside, Xu Qing smiled in the way his Eldest Brother had taught him to.

“Please, drink!”

A lot of the other guests were hesitating. Finally, the junior emperor opened his eyes, looked at Xu Qing, and then got to his feet.

“I’m tired. Let’s get together again another time.”

Everyone else stood as well. Seeing that, Meng Yunbai cast an apologetic glance in Xu Qing’s direction, then frowned and opened his mouth to speak.[6]

Before he could, light glittered above the immortal hot spring as a white-haired old woman stepped out. Her expression was grave, and her eyes serious. Everyone was stunned to see her there. All of the female cultivators stood and bowed to her.

“Big Boss.”

Even the junior emperor and his friends all looked very serious as they bowed to her. That went to show how important she was. She was actually a grand eldress in the Red Dust Emotional Suppression Pavilion, and was in charge of all sect affairs in the city. She nodded at the junior emperor and the others. As far as she was concerned, they were basically children that weren't worth paying attention to. Her gaze quickly reached Xu Qing, whereupon her expression turned warm.

“You must be Young Sir Xu?”

Chapter 755: The Wind Fills with Deadly Blades; Water Rises to Take Lives

“Young Sir Xu,” the big boss said respectfully, “we're honored by your presence. If you're displeased with any aspect of our service, please don't hesitate to notify me. If you have the time, do you mind coming with me, young sir? A Senior member of our sect asked me to bring you in for an audience.”

With that, she looked expectantly at Xu Qing.

Surprise was visible in the eyes of everyone present. They all knew about Xu Qing's background, which was why they had 'toasted' him, but not done anything too outrageous. Nor had they done anything openly humiliating. After all, there was no need to do anything like that just because of Ling Yao.

However, their intelligence reports didn't mention anything about Xu Qing having connections to the Red Dust Emotional Suppression Pavilion. That was especially noteworthy considering that though it was one of the human superpower sects, it was actually backed by one of the gods of the Firemoon Darkheaven people. As for how deep the sect was connected to that god, it was hard to say. Regardless, even the emperor himself had no choice but to tacitly approve of the sect.

Therefore, the fact that this sect was treating Xu Qing so respectfully was nothing short of a shock. And it immediately led to speculation about which Senior member of the sect the old woman was referring to.

Junior Emperor Peng's eyes narrowed, and his pupils constricted. He had originally thought of Xu Qing the way people from all the other organizations did. He didn't want to offend him, but also wasn't interested in getting close to him. As a result, though it had been quite a shock to see Ling Yao go sit next to Xu Qing, he hadn't done anything dramatic. His own status, plus the circumstances in the Red Dust Pavilion in general, prevented him from doing that.

However, he had lost some face, which was why he had allowed his friends to 'toast' Xu Qing. At a certain point, he didn't want things to get pushed too far, which was why he had been preparing to leave. But then the big boss showed up, and that changed what he thought about Xu Qing on many levels.

Meng Yunbai and Huang Kun looked at Xu Qing in surprise.

Xu Qing sighed inwardly. He was already fairly certain he knew what was going on. Back when Meng Yunbai introduced the Red Dust Pavilion and mentioned the associated god, Xu Qing had understood the situation. That said, they were in the imperial capital of humankind. There was a difference between worshiping a god, and a god actually coming. Based on his experience dealing with Crimson Mother, he knew that all too well.

After the events in Moonrite, Xu Qing was confident that High God Starfire wasn't an enemy, at least for the time being. And that meant dealing with this situation shouldn't be too difficult. In fact, all of that had played into his decision to come along. But his presence had been noticed, so after thinking the matter over, he clasped hands to the big boss and agreed to go with her.

And thus, as everyone watched, she escorted him away. Ling Yao also disappeared.

After he was gone, the guests left, all of them thinking different things. News of what happened was going to spread quickly in their respective organizations, and it was easy to imagine how quickly everyone else in the capital would learn of it, and how that would affect their perspective on Xu Qing.

Junior Emperor Peng looked thoughtfully at the teleportation portal Xu Qing had just disappeared into.

Meng Yunbai blinked a few times. He'd previously believed that he knew Xu Qing well thanks to the intelligence reports he'd read. But now he realized that everything he knew was just surface-level. Xu Qing's true strength lay underneath.

“Very interesting....” Meng Yunbai murmured as he left with everyone else.

Meanwhile, after Xu Qing followed the big boss into the teleportation portal, he was whisked away from the immortal hot spring and the otherworldly paradise. When he materialized, he was in front of a shrine hall.

The big boss respectfully bowed, then backed up a few steps all while indicating that Xu Qing should enter.

He looked at the door and took a deep breath. Then he pushed the door, and it slowly swung open, allowing pink light to spread out from inside. As it surrounded Xu Qing, he saw a shrine inside, within which was a clay fox.

Looking at the clay fox, he clasped hands and bowed. “Well met, High God.”

Coquettish laughter echoed in the shrine hall. “You were so aloof back in Moonrite, you naughty little boy. Back then, I never could have imagined I would see you here. I know full well what kind of place this is, you know. Thankfully, I woke up in time, otherwise you might have been swallowed whole by those slutty wenches.”

Xu Qing didn't say anything.

“Are you happy to see me, naughty boy? Are you surprised?”

Xu Qing shook his head. “Not surprised. High God, you were right next to me just now, weren't you?”

Glittering with bright light, the clay fox's eyes opened and locked onto Xu Qing. “You've got sharp eyes, naughty boy. You actually sensed my slip of divine sense on Ling Yao. What did you think of Ling Yao, by the way? She's my god daughter that I personally selected. I have another god daughter in the lands of the Firemoon Darkheaven people, later on I'll have her find you to spend some time together. If you'd like, I could permit you to split a drop of your primal yang between them.”

Xu Qing was used to the clay fox's teasing, so he didn't react. Instead, he politely said, "High God, I'm sure there's an important reason you summoned me."

The clay fox's eye twitched slightly as a slightly displeased expression appeared. "Your facial expression.... If it weren't for you humans' Grand Emperor Swordsage keeping this city locked down, I wouldn't have been so badly injured by his sword when I came here in my true form. And then I wouldn't need your primal yang, you naughty little boy. Ah, whatever. Time is of the essence. If I stay awake too long, your Grand Emperor Swordsage will sense me sooner or later. You see, I called you here because I wanted to warn you about something.

"Your human emperor... is doing something that no human emperor has ever done from ancient times until now!"

Xu Qing's eyes narrowed.

The clay fox smiled, and instead of going into more detail, looked off into the distance. "Also, you need to be careful of the imperial preceptor here.... He's dangerous. Very, very dangerous." The clay fox's voice was very serious. "You know, you're very similar to him...."

Xu Qing looked up and was about to speak when a terrifying wave of divine will swept out from the statue of Grand Emperor Swordsage.

The clay fox snorted coldly and a bit defiantly. But then the fox's eyes closed and it reverted into an ordinary statue. At the same time, a surge of gentle force pushed Xu Qing out of the shrine hall. After that, the divine will dispersed.

The big boss gave Xu Qing a meaningful look. As the servant of a High God, she knew that there were statues of the same god in all of the Red Dust Pavilions. But they were just statues. Very rarely did any of them wake up like this. And it was even rarer for one of them to wake up for a single person. On the other hand, she also knew that there were many things in which *not* understanding was a lot better than understanding clearly. Bowing her head slightly, she led Xu Qing out of the Red Dust Pavilion.

Once outside, Xu Qing looked back briefly before heading out into the night. It was getting close to midnight, and the capital city was wreathed in darkness. There were no stars in the sky, as there was a thick cloud cover, within which could be heard the muffled sound of thunder.

The city was lit by lantern light, although that wasn't the case on every single street. There weren't a lot of pedestrians out this late, and most were on their way home. Some walked alone, some in groups of up to five people.

Perhaps because of the thunder, and the sense of moisture building up, most people hurried on their way. The whimpering wind had picked up. It was cold as it scraped across the ground and the eaves. When it touched Xu Qing's face, the chill made him realize that the seasons were changing.

Autumn is here.

Walking alone down the street, he contemplated the two things the clay fox had told him.

What big thing is the emperor up to?

After he had been walking for some time, he heard the pitter-patter of raindrops striking the ground. Then lightning crashed, and it started raining harder.

A shimmering light could be seen surrounding Xu Qing, which kept the rain away, so he didn't stop walking. Nor were his thoughts interrupted. At the moment, he was completely absorbed in the clay fox's final words.

“Be careful of the imperial preceptor.... You're very similar to him....”

Xu Qing had never seen the imperial preceptor. But it didn't comfort him to know that he was similar to him.

I doubt High God Starfire meant that we're similar to each other in being dangerous. There's no way shē thinks of me as being dangerous. So maybe the similarities shē's talking about... are aura and physical appearance.

As the rain fell and the wind blew, he stopped walking, and a grim expression appeared on his face. Eyes shining coldly, he looked down the street. It was a long street with buildings lining it both tall and short. None were lit up. As the rain pinged onto the rooftops, it dripped off the eaves, forming little rivulets that flowed into the street. The occasional bolt of lightning illuminated the area.

The wind wasn't normally visible. But this heavy rainstorm was able to give shape to the wind. Within the coldness and the moisture, there was something very sharp, which soon turned into a host of knives slashing toward him.

In the blink of an eye, something that looked like a fiendish club flew out of Xu Qing's bag of holding. Of the three heads on it, the one that resembled Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior had its eyes opened, and he howled with rage as he shot into the wind. He moved faster than the wind or rain could, and a moment later, a sound like weapons clashing echoed out. Then, a host of blades formed from water were sent spinning off to the side.

As the iron skewer circled back around to Xu Qing, the rain started falling harder, and the little rivulets merged to create something like a lake.

The natural laws in this area had been transformed by someone. The heavy rain blurred the surroundings, and the only light came from occasional bolts of lightning. The 'lake' beneath Xu Qing's feet was rising dramatically. It seemed like it might cover everything soon.

Even more astonishing, within that rippling water appeared something like a hand that shot out and toward Xu Qing. Some distance away, it was possible to see shadowy figures lurking in the water. Their features weren't clear, but they looked like life forms made from water itself. And they were rushing toward Xu Qing, each and every one of them pulsing with killing intent.

Then the dark buildings on either side of the street transformed, becoming like cross-legged statues, pitch-black and bald, with eyes open as they spoke in gruish voices.

“Hear the edict of the ghostly spirits; thine lonely soul mourns; monsters of the eight divisions; four lives filled with rancor; those with heads die; those without heads live; the wind fills with deadly blades; water rises to take lives; treat injustice as kindness; treat unjust death as goodness; the young man who lives; kneel before mine altar; eight trigrams lose light!”

Chapter 756: The Strategy of Yin-Yang Water Fiends and Ghostly Apparitions

The sound of the dao curse became streams of black mist that emerged from the mouths of the bald statues, then intertwined in midair to form a black talisman. The talisman was long and thin, and as the rain hit it, black ink dripped off it, pulsing with a sinister, corrosive energy. Then it accelerated toward Xu Qing to seal him.

In that moment of crisis, Xu Qing's eyes turned pitch-black as taboo poison converged there. Whatever he looked at would be cursed, and right now, he was looking at that black talisman.

After one breath of time had passed, the magical talisman vibrated, then began to fade. As poison filled it, mysterious light erupted from the talisman as it tried to fight back. After two breaths of time had passed, the poison built in intensity, releasing a poison gas that became a host of blurry ghost faces, howling in anguish. After three breaths of time had passed, the talisman began to crumble and decay. It hadn't even reached a position nine meters away from Xu Qing.

Next, poison erupted from within Xu Qing. It didn't just come from his eyes. It swept out in all directions like a tempest, enveloping the talisman.

Intense rumbling sounds echoed out. The talisman almost seemed to possess its own life force; instead of being suppressed, the talisman melted of its own accord, turning into a host of countless smaller talismans that scattered in the street. From a distance, it almost looked like money for the dead, creating a road between life and death, and locking down a myriad of ancient souls.

Heaven turned gloomy, and the earth went dark. As everything was locked down, the entire street seemed to be separated from the imperial capital, until it was its own unique dimension. Within that dimension, natural laws were transformed, and magical laws were deeply influenced. Everything was different from the outside world.

The water on the street had long since become an entire lake, and the water level was still rising. It had already reached Xu Qing's legs, and was now rising to his waist, as if to drown him.

The curse originally contained fifty-two characters, which was exactly the same as the number of statues. As the statues continued to curse the area, they rose from their cross-legged positions, then splashed through the water as they charged toward Xu Qing. [1]

The watery life forms that had appeared earlier weren't cultivators, but rather, manifestations of a divine ability. They also surged with killing intent as they closed in on Xu Qing. What was more, a hand formed from water emerged, pulsing with destruction, slaughter, and the will of ghostly spirits.

Taking in the scene as a whole, it looked like death was hemming Xu Qing in from heaven, from earth, from the left, and from the right. Rain poured down, soaking his garments and hair. Strong killing intent seeped into his body and soul.

The water in the street chaotically covered everything. This was an attack using the strategy of 'water fiends and ghostly apparitions.'

At the minimum, someone would need a cultivation base in the great circle of Spirit Trove to unleash an attack like this, and they would need help to set up a spell formation. More likely than not, whoever was behind this was in Void Returning. That was the only way a deadly scenario such as this could be unleashed so quickly.

Furthermore... that person most likely was not present, but was using some remote method to unleash the magic. They obviously wanted to end this incident very quickly. What was more, they had to know Xu Qing well, as they had obviously set things up on this specific street.

As all of those thoughts raced through Xu Qing's mind, his face turned grim and his eyes cold. It had been a long time since he felt any true sense of danger. In fact, he hadn't felt anything like this since Moonrite. It would be simple to resolve this situation if he just detonated his ancient sun. But he couldn't quite make himself do that. Most importantly... detonating that sun would affect the entire imperial capital. That... might be what his enemy was trying to provoke him into doing.

Xu Qing's eyes narrowed as his cultivation base surged. Three god troves appeared behind him, the furnaces within them roaring to life with flames of godly might.

Intense heat filled the area, causing the water on the ground to rapidly evaporate into steam. Then Xu Qing tapped into the power of his god troves to shoot up from the water. Beneath him, water seethed, and the hand stretched toward him.

Face expressionless, Xu Qing pushed his right hand downward. In response, Xu Qing's shadow spread out from him in all directions, causing mutagen to flourish. As it spread and covered everything, it released the forbidden region it had consumed. It spread out, obscuring the sky, and turning the area above Xu Qing into a spinning black vortex. The ground was covered with water. The sky was covered with a shadow. And Xu Qing was in the middle. Because this area was now cut off from the outside, releasing the shadow's forbidden region was perfectly suitable.

Using godly powers to suppress the magical techniques of cultivators was definitely a valid battle strategy.

As the shadow spread out, the dimension trembled. At the same time, the shadow rippled as it turned into a hand just like the water below.

This was a pitch-black hand with a tree in the middle of the palm, from which hung a coffin that swayed back and forth like a bell. Cackling laughter rang out like a sinister chant. As the shadow affected the dao curse, Xu Qing's killing intent surged, and he shoved his right hand down. The hand made of shadow descended, passed through Xu Qing, and then slammed into the hand made of water.

A deafening sound wave rolled out in all directions, smashing into the water and affecting the life forms. The fifty-two statues lurched to a halt.

At the same time, Xu Qing bent at the waist before shooting forward like an arrow from a bow, heading right toward the statues. The iron skewer flew toward the destabilized life forms of water.

The clash happened in the blink of an eye.

Thanks to Master Seventh's unique crafting technique, the iron skewer was now shockingly mighty. The three faces on it all had their eyes open now, including the face of Crimson Mother and the god from Forbidden by the Immortal. With their bolstering, the fiendish club shot through one of the life forms after another. Each one exploded, losing its life force and turning into ordinary water.

Xu Qing was even more impressive. He shot forward with such incredible speed that the rain was blasted aside. His first god trove emitted thunderous rumblings as it broke into countless fragments

that merged into Xu Qing. That was godsource. As it fused with Xu Qing, his body collapsed, flesh grew out, and he became taller and larger.

He now looked like the Ghost Emperor, complete with an imperial crown. Blinding golden light shone off him, transforming into a seven-colored glow. The heart of the heavenly dao furnace thumped, with each beat like heavenly thunder. At the same time, intense flames swept out over him. A black spear appeared, covered with innumerable bolts of lightning. As Xu Qing hefted it, he appeared in front of the first statue. One swipe of the spear caused the statue to explode and turn into countless fragments that showered down.

Xu Qing was in his first-level god state, which dramatically boosted his battle prowess, and made his taboo spear even more terrifyingly strong. Moving with blinding speed, Xu Qing pierced through a few dozen statues in one shot. Every single one exploded.

And yet, Xu Qing was already frowning.

When he destroyed the last statue, an intense sensation of deadly crisis filled him. Without any hesitation, he gripped the spear tightly and then threw it toward the end of the street.

Next, he took out a piece of Crimson Mother's flesh.

Meanwhile, the black spear screamed through the air, shooting to the end of the street and stabbing into the air there. At that point, it stopped moving.

That was the border of a sealing magic. At the point where the spear pierced it, there was a bit of black cloth visible. Clearly, someone had been concealed in invisibility there....

A sinister voice suddenly filled the street.

“We underestimated you. But you underestimated the dao curse.

“The Dao Paragon asks: why are the four lives filled with rancor, and why do those with heads die? We do reply: the fallen statues lock down the heavenly body!”

As those words echoed out, the shattered remnants of the fifty-two statues emerged from the water, transforming into fifty-two chains that snaked toward Xu Qing. No matter how deftly he dodged back and forth, he couldn't avoid them, and was quickly wrapped up. Each of the fifty-two chains had one end wrapped around Xu Qing and the other end in the water. From a distance, it looked like some fiendish devil had been physically tied up.

“The Dao Paragon closes his eyes and asks: how and where does the wind fill with deadly blades, and the water rise to take lives? We do answer: of course, water can seal any and all minds!”

Things weren't over yet. The water in the lake became like threads, each of them with a chain inside. They shot toward Xu Qing, wrapping around him, locking down his divine sense, and in fact, sealing off all of his sensory organs, including his eyes.

“The elated Dao Paragon again asks: treat injustice as kindness, treat unjust death as goodness, invert the cosmos and the universe, question chaos in the

world, but how can it all be reconciled? We do explain: a dao curse can impale the soul!”

Fifty-two pitch-black nails flew out of the water. Looking closely, it was possible to see that atop each nail sat a tiny version of one of the black, bald statues. They moved with shocking speed toward Xu Qing and stabbed into him. Every place they stabbed corresponded to a meridian connected to his soul. This was an attempt to impale his soul and lock it out of reincarnation.

“The Dao Paragon closes his eyes and sighs: a hundred ghosts calmly stand, ready to serve the dukes of hell, souls condense, five serenities filled with filth, a hundred dark wines injected, seven liquids cannot replenish, impermanence without limit, assimilated by order of law.”

Chaos rose up everywhere. Countless shadow figures, the souls of a myriad species, all manifested, becoming streams of black mist that once again formed the same black magical talisman as before, which then shot toward Xu Qing’s forehead.

Most shocking of all was that the street that had been separated out into its own dimension also began to change.... It was no longer a street. Astonishingly, it was a massive paper talisman as big as the entire street itself!

There were two talismans, one bright and one dark, one for yin and one for yang!

The end of the street was the end of the talisman, and it curled up... moving in Xu Qing’s direction as if to connect to the black talisman. It... was really going to seal him.

A sensation of deadly crisis filled Xu Qing. And yet, he still didn’t choose to detonate his ancient sun. Instead, he crushed the piece of Crimson Mother’s flesh. His second god trove appeared, collapsed into black mist, and fused with him. In an instant... a terrifying aura swept out in all directions.

A bitter howl escaped Xu Qing’s lips, like the cry of a fiendish devil, shattering everything around it. The talismans trembled, and the water filled with ripples.

Chapter 757: Who’s Playing Go?

As the terrifying aura spread out, the isolated dimension filled with infinite fluctuations. The lake water rose up, the air distorted, and the rain vibrated. Clouds appeared in the sky of the dimension, rapidly swirling into a rumbling vortex. It connected with the mist coming off the lake, thereby linking heaven and earth like a tornado. A ghastly pressure weighed down on everything as rain poured down in torrents.

Thanks to the spinning tornado and the terrifying aura, the black talisman shivered. Cracks spread out across it, and they leaked pitch-black blood.

Similarly, cracks appeared on the long street, which was now a talisman. The mist seethed, releasing a terrifying power that surpassed either of the two talismans. Then something unimaginable happened.

A blurry face appeared on the talisman, glaring at Xu Qing in the mist. Though its facial features weren’t clear, its grim expression was intense. At the same time, the fifty-two chains stretching out

of the lake water began to sway. As howling sounds emerged from the mist, seven of them started collapsing!

Rumbling sounds emerged from the lake water as the chains shattered and turned into ash. The threads of water coming out of the lake were also ripped to pieces.

Seeing that, the face in the black talisman scowled defiantly and then spoke in a gruish voice.

“The Dao Paragon asks: water fiends cross over, eradicating ghosts and driving out monsters, but how can it be done? We do answer: they who ignore our orders lose their heads!”

A sound like the wailing of ghosts and howling of wolves echoed out in all directions. The water rippled violently as a saber emerged from it, which aimed at Xu Qing and then slashed down. It moved with incredible speed, slicing through raindrops, cutting apart the air, and shattering space with destructive power. At the same time, the black talisman burst into green flames that bolstered it as it tried to seal Xu Qing.

The street-talisman also erupted with power as it closed in on Xu Qing.

Xu Qing, who was the focus of everything, was in the middle of the violently churning mists. Trembling, he threw his head back and unleashed a roar that hardly sounded human. Indescribable pain wracked him in both body and soul. It felt like his god body was being ripped apart, causing poisonous gas to spill out everywhere. In the blink of an eye, all of the chains emitted cracking noises, and seven more of them collapsed.

Forty of the nails that had stabbed into him were forced out, where they spun off to the side amidst loud popping sounds. Then they sped out of the mist toward the water saber. Loud pinging sounds could be heard as forty holes were punched into the saber. Then the nails continued toward the black talisman and the street-talisman. They pierced through them.

The black talisman was now riddled with damage, and the street-talisman lost an entire section. As a result, the sealing power within them diminished, and the mist seethed more violently. Intense rumbling sounds echoed out continuously as the remaining chains, threads, and nails collapsed one after another.

The dilapidated water saber continued forward, but couldn't reach the mist before shattering. In the end, the final chain, the final thread, and the final nail collapsed, and the mist expanded explosively. Then, as more rumbling sounds could be heard, the mist contracted, shrinking in on itself to reveal a shocking figure.

Ancient. Dark. Deadly. Those were the sensations this figure emanated. There was no skin visible, only black armor. That included the head. Especially terrifying was that, in the location of the eyes were two glowing balls of netherworld fire. The figure seemed icy cold and completely fear-inspiring. Black streams of mist rose from the armor, gathering behind it to form a massive black cloak. As the vortex in the canopy of heaven covered everything, boundless poison and decay filtered down. This figure looked like a fiend or devil!

This was Xu Qing in his second-level god state. In this state, all living beings would wither and die in his presence. That also applied to the yin-yang water fiend strategy.

Xu Qing looked up and started walking forward. Everything trembled. Appearing in front of the black talisman, he reached out with an armored hand. The talisman burst into flames, emitting black streams of smoke like black dragons. They roared and snapped at Xu Qing, but before they could even get close, they emitted agonized shrieks.

In Xu Qing's current state, his poison was so incisive that it could infect all things. The black dragons screamed as they collapsed into nothing. Xu Qing, with this pitch-black helmet and armor, with only the eyes visible as glowing netherworld fire, ignored the screaming dragons as his hand clamped down onto the talisman. A cracking sound rang out as the talisman collapsed, and the dragons turned into black ink that fell into the water below.

Xu Qing knew that he couldn't stay in this state for very long, so after destroying the talisman, he turned his cold gaze onto the street.

At the far end of the dilapidated street was a shadowy figure. It was very gruish, as it wasn't made from flesh and blood, but rather, from black paper. It stood at the end of the street-talisman, its painted eyes glimmering with cold light as it stared at Xu Qing.

"I present the ghostly spirit netherworld magic; rivers, lakes, suns, m—"

Xu Qing didn't wait for the confusing words to be fully spoken. Without hesitation, he launched himself toward the paper person with terrifying speed.

The paper person's facial expression didn't change as he bent backward and merged into the talisman. There, he continued speaking.

"—moons, mountains, rivers, stars, and heavenly bodies are all within my command. I let bright be bright, and dark be dark. Let the curse be enforced like law forthwith!"

By the time Xu Qing arrived, the voice was already dispersing. At the same time, the street-talisman rippled, with both ends curling up and racing toward Xu Qing.

They were like two waves backed by terrifying force.

Seeing that, Xu Qing extended his right hand and then shoved it downward. When it hit the surface of the water, the entire dimension trembled, and everything began to decay.

The water turned black as even the natural laws were infected. Everything became a part of the poison, and thus, under Xu Qing's control. The vortex descended, connecting to the poison mist, and then crushing down onto the paper person.

A boom rang out like the clanging of a bell, accompanied by a sound like shattering glass. The sealing of the yin-yang water fiends collapsed.

The world returned to normal. The street was a street. The rain water fell down.

At the same time, strips of black paper fell down, mixing with the rain. Xu Qing reached out and grabbed a handful of them. His body returned to normal, and now that he was leaving his god state, blood oozed out of his mouth.

Whistling sounds reached his ear. This fight had taken place in the middle of the imperial capital, and though magical techniques had been used to conceal it, it was a given that it would be noticed eventually.

Xu Qing didn't move. Keeping his guard up, he looked around, all while taking out a jade slip and sending some voice messages.

Moments later, several swordsages arrived. They were assigned to patrol this area, so they were the first to show up. When they saw the bits of black paper falling down around Xu Qing, their expression flickered and they exchanged glances. Clearly, something big had just occurred!

After all, this was the imperial capital. Attempted assassinations were a big deal, especially considering the target was Xu Qing. That made this entire thing even uglier.

The swordsages immediately began looking for clues.

Before long, two prismatic beams of light appeared, shooting through the air toward the street where Xu Qing stood. One was Plumdark, the other was Li Yunshan.

When Xu Qing saw the two of them, he breathed a sigh of relief.

Li Yunshan's expression was grim as he scanned the area. Plumdark looked furious, though after confirming Xu Qing wasn't hurt, her expression softened. Li Yunshan opened his mouth to speak, but Xu Qing shook his head.

"I'll explain in private."

Li Yunshan nodded. Escorted by the two of them, Xu Qing went back to Ningyan's mansion. The trip went without incident.

Once inside, they activated all of the defenses. The Captain, who had been gone for a few days but was now back, had a very serious expression on his face. He, along with Plumdark and Li Yunshan, looked at Xu Qing.

"It was a well-laid trap," Xu Qing said calmly. "Meng Yunbai invited me to go with him to the Red Dust Pavilion. He knew the general way I would return, so he's definitely a suspect. In the Red Dust Pavilion, I met the junior emperor from the Star Emperor Preeminence Sect. He and I had a bit of a conflict, so he's also on the list. Everyone else that was there, including Huang Kun, should be looked into. That said, they're too obvious as suspects.

"There are probably other forces lurking in the shadows as well, possibly with different reasons for attempting an assassination. Seventh Prince obviously has a motive.

"The assassin was a paper person without any life force. He looked more like an avatar of some sort, with a cultivation base beyond Spirit Trove. It was actually Void Returning.... What's more, the magical technique he used was, by his own words, a dao curse. It involved ghostly spirits. That said, it was all too obvious, and seems like a possible misdirection.

“Additionally, there are some things about the assassination attempt that seem suspicious.

“First, why try to kill me here in the imperial capital? If I died, it would be a bad thing for many parties here. That said, those parties seemed slow to notice what was going on.

“Second, although the assassin seemed strong, whoever orchestrated this had to know about my Dawning Sun, as well as all of my various accomplishments. Why would they only deploy a single assassin?

“Third, during the fighting, I got the impression that the assassin was expecting to die. He wanted me to use my Dawning Sun. That said, I’m not sure if the assassin wanted me to think that, or if it was just a random thought.”

Xu Qing went into a detailed explanation of every aspect of the assassination attempt. When he was done, he held out his hand, within which was a piece of black paper.

“In the end, I feel like this assassination attempt wasn’t actually an attempt to kill me. I think it was an attempt to turn me into a game piece, and guide me into a course of action to benefit the mastermind.”

Chapter 758: Using a Compass to Confirm

When Xu Qing finished speaking, everyone stood there silently. They had not personally witnessed the assassination attempt, but based on Xu Qing’s detailed description, they understood the fundamentals of what happened. The suspicious aspects that Xu Qing had mentioned were indeed odd, no matter how you analyzed them.

“What organization has the resources to attempt an assassination like this in the imperial capital?” the Captain said. “They prevented all the other organizations from realizing what was going on, not to mention the imperial capital’s grand spell formation. I guess the real question is what organization could cause everyone else in the capital to be so slow and unresponsive?”

Xu Qing had no answer, but Plumdark and Li Yunshan both looked in the direction of the imperial palace.

It really seemed like the only person in the capital who could do all of that would be the emperor himself. The only other possibilities would be Grand Emperor Swordsage or some other terrifying organization that even the emperor feared.

Unfortunately, they lacked sufficient information to even guess what kind of organization the emperor would fear.

What was more, Grand Emperor Swordsage was asleep. Though he woke up when Xu Qing arrived, he couldn’t stay awake constantly. Besides, he had no logical reason to carry out an assassination attempt.

Then Plumdark asked, “What if... Ah Qing had actually detonated his Dawning Sun? What would have happened?”

“The capital would have descended into chaos,” Li Yunshan replied, frowning. “There would have been countless casualties. Every organization would have been shaken to the core. Not only would the capital and everyone in it have lost a lot of face, they would have become a laughingstock to countless species. And regardless of who was really responsible... we would have had a hard time avoiding responsibility. We would have lost any advantage and initiative. It’s hard to predict what would have happened in the end. It would all come down to the emperor’s attitude.”

“Very interesting,” the Captain said, smiling grimly. “The mastermind clearly has a way of keeping close tabs on little Ah Qing’s whereabouts, as well as the resources necessary to actually attempt the assassination. What’s more, this whole thing needed to benefit them even if little Ah Qing didn’t die.

“All the clues and conflicts point in one direction, except... why does it seem like this whole thing is a lot more complicated than it seems?”

“Is it possible that this event is supposed to be a wedge? To drive conflict between multiple parties? Or perhaps the mastermind just wants to foster doubts in our minds, so that no matter what we do next, we feel like we’re just game pieces in a larger game?”

“I think we should analyze this from a different angle. Forget who the mastermind is. Let’s think about things from our perspective. Given everything that’s happened, what do we do now?”

The Captain looked at Xu Qing, then Plumdark, and finally Li Yunshan.

“The first thing we do,” Li Yunshan said, “is assign more Sea-Sealing County swordsages in the city to protect Xu Qing, as well as to investigate. At the same time, we need to report the matter to the Holytide Region.”

The Captain shook his head. “That’s not a bad idea. However, the more people we involve, the more likely we’ll be accused of overstepping authority. That would just make everything more chaotic. On the other hand, we can’t just do nothing.... This assassination attempt on little Ah Qing was a message....”

Li Yunshan didn’t respond, and the Captain clearly didn’t have anything more to say.

The courtyard was very quiet. The wind blew, and the rain fell, and the dark clouds in the sky blocked out any sunlight.

Xu Qing hadn't offered any input so far. But after hearing everyone analyze the situation, and based on what he had experienced, his thoughts eventually led him to what the clay fox had said about the imperial preceptor.... And he also thought about the conclusions of his own analysis from earlier.

Eventually, Plumdark looked away from the imperial palace. "The emperor was approved by the Grand Emperor, and generally acts how you expect the human emperor to act. It's hard to make a determination right now. In the end, Xu Qing, you have to decide what to do. Your decision is the most important thing here."

Xu Qing looked in the direction of the imperial palace, then nodded. "In that case, submit a petition to the emperor in the name of the Holytide Region. Whatever conclusions we've reached, the emperor and the other parties in the capital will surely have considered it as well.

"We have no way to speculate what the mastermind actually wants to do. So we can only wait to see how the emperor handles the aftermath."

Plumdark agreed. Li Yunshan, after some thought, said nothing in contradiction.

The Captain blinked a few times, then lowered his voice and said, "Little Ah Qing, do you remember back when we first arrived in Sea-Sealing County? You made a good decision back then. However, I still think we should have cried a bit more. Made more of a scene. That would have been a lot better." [1]

Xu Qing thought about it, then made sure his face looked paler, so that he seemed like he'd been seriously hurt....

"That's not quite good enough, little Ah Qing. Here, I'll help."

As the Captain eagerly approached Xu Qing, the stunned Li Yunshan looked away.

Meanwhile, Plumdark cast a cold glance at the Captain, who shrunk back a bit, then forced a smile onto his face. Inside, he was sighing regretfully.

By the next morning, news about the assassination attempt on Xu Qing had spread like wildfire through the city. Many people questioned whether the news was real, but regardless, the numerous organizations in the capital were all shaken.

Along with news of the event, rumors also spread about Xu Qing himself. He had gritted his teeth against the injuries, but after he returned to his residence, they flared up, and he passed out. Thankfully, he had a scrap of life force left, and the forces of Sea-Sealing County were standing guard over him and treating him.

As the news rocked the city, Meng Yunbai and Huang Kun were the first to come visit. They didn't lay eyes on Xu Qing, but rather, were received by the Captain. That said, they were clearly nervous, and obviously wanted to make sure they weren't suspected of being involved.

The junior emperor of the Star Emperor Preeminence Sect sent some medicinal pills to demonstrate goodwill. Everyone else who had been present at the banquet at the Red Dust Pavilion did the same. The Red Dust Pavilion even sent people to visit.

In addition, after Master Seventh and everyone else in the Holytide Region received the news from Li Yunshan, they deployed forces to look into the matter on their end. In the half of the Nightspirit Region they controlled, a host of priests mobilized, causing rumbling sounds to fill heaven and earth.

Even more astounding was that in the direction of Moonrite, the Heir Apparent's Smoldering God aura erupted. Smoldering God fluctuations also rolled out from Princess Brightblossom and Fifth Sister in the Moonrebel Congregation. Ninth Sib's sword energy exploded out. The combined energy from the Moonrite Region made it abundantly obvious how furious they were.

Back in the imperial capital, the petition submitted via jade slip by Xu Qing and the others from Sea-Sealing County made its way up the chain of command until it was presented to the emperor.

The jade slip contained a personal description of the event from the perspective of the victim, and it was delivered along with a piece of black paper.

The swordsages weren't recalled to the mansion. They remained on the outside. As for Xu Qing and everyone else, they couldn't do anything but report the matter in full to the emperor.

It didn't matter who the mastermind was or what they wanted. Sea-Sealing County's decision was to remain steadfast but also be flexible. The emperor was actually the biggest suspect, therefore... reporting the matter to the emperor meant that everyone in the imperial capital, both Xu Qing and the other organizations, were all waiting to see how he reacted.

About two hours after the jade slip was delivered to the emperor, a stern voice echoed through the imperial capital.

“The Greater Celestial Swordsage Division, Justice Division, and Special Operations Division have one month to conduct an investigation and get to the bottom of the situation!”

That was the imperial decree.

Light erupted from the Swordsage, Justice, and Special Operations Divisions, which rose into the sky and took the shape of terrifying illusory figures that bowed in the direction of the imperial palace.

“Your orders shall be followed!”

Next, a holy pill was sent from the imperial palace to Ningyan's mansion. The pill was crystalline and strangely fragrant. Even the pill bottle that contained the pill was extraordinary, crafted as it was from pure bone.

“That's a heaven-immortal pill!” Ningyan exclaimed upon seeing it. “Those pills are rare even in the imperial palace. Supposedly, their main ingredient is something that, after the catastrophe in Revered Ancient, can only be found in the holy lands.... The restorative properties of this pill are astonishing. They'll even work well on heavenly kings. This pill is completely priceless!”

The Captain's eyes went wide, and he instinctively licked his lips. Xu Qing took the pill and examined it closely, whereupon his heart started pounding.

Based on his skill in the dao of medicine, he could tell this pill was completely extraordinary. He wasn't familiar with the concocting method, and what was more... just taking the pill out of the bottle resulted in all the surrounding mutagen being suppressed. The godsource in Xu Qing even stirred in response.

There are some very mysterious elements to this pill.

As the Captain stared longingly, Xu Qing put the pill away.

The Captain blinked a few times, and was already trying to come up with a plan to scam the pill from Xu Qing.... In the end, though, he had to sigh. *Little Ah Qing has really gotten clever. He's not easy to fool.*

After that, the Swordsage, Justice, and Special Operations Divisions worked very hard in their investigation. They even went to the Ghostwurm Nethersect.

The mood in the imperial capital got tense very quickly. Younger people everywhere were trembling in fear, even though they had nothing to do with the event.

Clues began to turn up. However, Xu Qing didn't pay attention to any of that. During the half month that passed, he focused on recovering from his 'injuries.' The first time he made a public appearance, he did so with Plumdark. After the assassination attempt, Plumdark abandoned the search for her lamp, and spent her time making sure Xu Qing recovered well. But after they started going out together, they would scour the imperial capital, and Plumdark would stop frequently to try to sense the lamp.

"There are nine locations where I can sense traces of the lamp. Three are near the imperial palace. Two are underground. Four are on Planet Ancient Emperor. In order to determine its exact current location, I need to use something to narrow down the search. Xu Qing, I can craft that item myself, but I'll need to concoct a special blood pill made from my own blood to unleash its full potential."

She looked at him. He nodded.

"I can concoct it."

And thus, the two of them bought all the required ingredients, then went back to Ningyan's mansion, one of them to craft an item, the other to concoct a pill.

The blood pill was unique, and thus, it couldn't be concocted in one session. The pill needed to remain in the pill furnace for a specific period of time, all while adding in cultivation base power and special medicinal plants.

Xu Qing paid very close attention to everything. Another half a month passed. When the blood pill was almost complete, another imperial decree came to Ningyan's mansion. The imperial decree shook everyone, because... the emperor had called for an audience!

"I hereby summon Xu Qing of the Holytide Region for an audience!"

"I hereby summon my twelfth son Guyue Ningyan for an audience!"

Chapter 759: No Need for Alarm with Plumdark Around

It was only a few hours away from dawn.

For any human, a meeting with the emperor was a very solemn occasion. Humans, of course, had all sorts of ceremonies that went along with important situations, and audiences with the emperor were no different.

Therefore, the imperial edict was sent along with a set of formal court attire for Xu Qing. The court garb was complicated. It had a lot of decorative embroidery, including a five-clawed sable dragon and lots of magical symbols. From head to toe, it included over a hundred items, which meant that it was virtually impossible to put on unless you knew what you were doing. [1]

When Li Yunshan, Kong Xianglong, and everyone else laid eyes on the outfit, they were stunned. None of them knew how to dress in such an outfit, but they could tell that every piece was extraordinary.

Even the Captain, who had lived many lives, looked with wide eyes at the clothing, and was initially at a loss for words. One thing was for sure: this clothing was far more precious than any of Nethersprite's clothing from back in the day. It was imbued with immortal energy, flickered with faint light, and looked like a free-flowing magical treasure.

It's worth so much! The Captain licked his lips enviously as he pondered how to get an outfit like this for himself. After all, he was the Eldest Brother, and it would be a big loss of face for him to not have something like it.

Of course, not even Ningyan could enter the presence of the emperor wearing ordinary clothing. However, his garment was unique to him, and he had no idea how the important government officials would don their attire. He could only shake his head and wave his hand.

"I don't know how to put it on. But I could send a message to Third Sister. She could come help."

"That won't be necessary," Plumdark said coolly. "Etiquette is required in human culture in order to propagate rationality. Spring represents the dynasty, autumn represents the court. The former is scarlet, the latter is sable.

"A golden dragon represents the emperor, with five claws for respect. The sable dragon represents the region, also with five claws for respect. This is an ancient restriction placed on the heavenly marquises to control them. Given the nature of the imperial edict, and the gift of this outfit, it's clear the emperor is being courteous. We need to respond in kind.

"In terms of how to don this outfit, it corresponds to ancient divination methods. It conforms to the arts of the five elements and the nine palaces. Combining that with the movement of the stars in heaven, it has a total of forty-nine different combinations that can be formed, each one appropriate for a different setting and ceremony.

“When visiting the emperor today, Xu Qing, you will be representing the Holytide Region. Therefore, you should dress in the manner of an ancient feudal lord when having an audience with the emperor. According to the ancient customs, someone being rewarded for military service to the emperor doesn’t need to kowtow to him. The emperor will first nod three times, then offer a seat. The heavenly marquis will then claps hands nine times in thanks.”

Ningyan, the Captain, Li Yunshan, and everyone else eyed Plumdark with respect. Even though they didn’t quite understand what she meant, they were impressed.

Although Plumdark’s understanding could certainly have come by reading a lot of books, there was something about her explanation that seemed slightly more complicated than that....

As everyone speculated what that might mean, Plumdark looked at the black court attire. She waved her hand gently, and all one hundred pieces of the outfit rose into the air and floated to surround Xu Qing.

Xu Qing looked at the clothing. From a young age he had been aware that there were ceremonies and etiquette that had been around since ancient times. However, he wasn’t familiar with such things. That said, he wasn’t worried. And that was because... in the imperial capital, there were few people who could understand ancient times as well as Plumdark. In fact, Xu Qing got the feeling that Plumdark had very likely worked with court attire like this, long ago.

“All of you leave and wait outside,” Plumdark said in a voice that was both cool and dignified.

Li Yunshan and everyone else immediately bowed their heads and left. The Captain and Ningyan fundamentally feared Plumdark, so they were quick to depart.

Before long, Xu Qing was alone with Plumdark.

“Court attire isn’t easy to put on, Ah Qing,” she said. “Close your eyes. I’ll help.”

Xu Qing took a deep breath and obediently closed his eyes.

Next, Plumdark waved her hand, causing Xu Qing’s clothing to fly off his body. Even as he shivered, other clothing started landing on him, linking together in a specific way.

As Plumdark dressed Xu Qing, she spoke into his ear. “The court attire of a heavenly marquis is primarily black in color, which is why the outfit is called a ‘square-cut sable garment.’ Coupled with the square-cut sable garment is a curved headpiece. In ancient times, the hat was constructed from the bones of skyswallowers.

“Nowadays, skyswallowers have gone extinct, so instead, black immortal jade is used. Because this specific outfit is a combination of the square-cut garment and the curved headpiece, it eventually came to be called a ‘curved and square-cut outfit.’ That’s the official court name for it.” [2]

The more Plumdark spoke, the more certain Xu Qing was of his previous speculation. He could feel the clothing attaching itself to him, and though it seemed bulky, it was actually very comfortable. It

even caused his cultivation base to circulate more smoothly, making him feel free and relaxed. It was almost as if magical and natural laws were being influenced to bless him.

“You can open your eyes now,” Plumdark said.

Xu Qing opened his eyes, and the first thing he noticed was the look of praise on Plumdark’s face. He lifted his arm, and mist formed in front of him to make a mirror.

He wore a black garment with a square cut and lots of embroidery. The five-colored sable dragon looked very lifelike, flowing along with the movement of the garment as if it were alive. It was even possible to hear the faint roar of a dragon. He wore boots with slightly curved toes with three circles on the tips. He had a hat of sable jade, a belt of jade with a cloud motif, and a jade pendant. All of them looked like part of a set. In combination with Xu Qing’s unusual good looks, it was a spectacular sight.

Looking very pleased, Plumdark smiled and said, “Excellent. If you attend an audience with the emperor in accordance with etiquette like this, and he doesn’t understand the deeper meaning, then he’s an ignorant fool.”

Xu Qing blinked a few times but didn’t say anything.

After looking him up and down, Plumdark approached to make some minor adjustments. Then she clasped his hand and led him out.

When everyone saw him dressed in that way, they were stunned.

Li Yunshan wasn’t sure what to say. The first thing he felt was pressure, and it wasn’t from the cultivation base, but rather, the court attire. The Captain struggled to control his breathing, and his heart filled with the intense desire to have his own court attire. Kong Xianglong took a deep breath and then bowed his head. Ningyan was completely taken aback. As far as he could tell, if Biggest Bro went out dressed like this, he would drive countless girls in the capital crazy. In fact, if Biggest Bro took a liking to any individual girl, then even Sixth Prince would have to acknowledge defeat.

People say that looks aren’t important to cultivators. But... but... with such freakishly good looks, is Biggest Bro even human?

Xu Qing didn’t pay attention to the reactions. At the moment, he could sense his cultivation base stirring wildly in response to the court attire. He had never worn clothing as symbolically significant as this, and it felt a bit strange. That said, the outfit was also very comfortable.

And thus, about two hours later, they left the mansion for the imperial palace, with Ningyan in the lead wearing his imperial prince’s attire.

It wasn’t bright outside yet, and because of the nearing of autumn, the weather was bone-chillingly cold. Few people were out and about. About an hour later, the sun rose, bringing some warmth with it. More people were on the street as Xu Qing and the others reached a teleportation portal that took them to the rainbow bridge behind the statue of Grand Emperor Swordsage.

Only when court was in session could the government officials use the bridge. On other occasions, only people summoned directly by the emperor could cross it. Plumdark and everyone else from Sea-Sealing County were prohibited from coming along.

This particular audience was held during a session of the imperial court. Therefore, as Xu Qing and Ningyan crossed the rainbow bridge, they weren't alone. There were other figures dressed in court attire, including both men and women. All had serious expressions on their faces, and they pulsed with extraordinary cultivation base fluctuations.

Most of them wore blue garments, with some of them having red clothing. In terms of black attire... Xu Qing only spotted seven other people dressed like that. All seven of them had cultivation bases in the fourth stage of Void Returning. Some walked alone, others were escorted by groups. All stood out.

As Xu Qing studied them, they studied Xu Qing. And of course, his black court attire was very eye-catching. That said, since he wasn't familiar with anyone else, nor they with him, they merely made eye contact according to etiquette, and didn't converse.

Xu Qing saw that at the very end of the rainbow bridge, there was a palace floating in the air.

Behind it was Planet Ancient Emperor, and the combination of their auras was boundless and majestic.

Xu Qing flew across the bridge with Ningyan close behind him. As they got closer to the imperial palace, Ningyan started to get increasingly nervous. However, Xu Qing's calm rubbed off on him a bit.

The palace became increasingly clear to their eyes. There were richly ornamented buildings, ornamented with jade and jewels. On either side of the main entrance were two giants in golden armor, each of them holding a greatsword, their eyes glittering as they scanned everyone crossing the bridge.

When Xu Qing and Ningyan arrived outside the entrance, the giants looked at them but didn't block their path. They allowed them to pass inside to the Immortal Reception Plaza. From there, they looked up the staircase of 10,000 steps to the magnificent palace at the top.

There were already several hundred people standing in the Immortal Reception Plaza now when Xu Qing and Ningyan arrived. Many of them looked over at the two of them. Shortly after that, as the sun was rising in the distance, a somber voice echoed out from the palace at the top of the stairs.

"All of you may enter the court!"

Golden dragons flew out of the clouds, swirling above and issuing draconic roars. All of the statues in the imperial capital unleashed auspicious light, causing heaven and earth to fill with a multicolored glow.

All of the cultivators in the Immortal Reception Plaza flew up into the air and toward the main palace, moving in ranks according to the color of their garments.

Heavenly kings didn't need to attend court, so people in black garments floated up first, followed by those in red, then blue, and finally green....

When Xu Qing saw a few dozen people in black court garments flying up, he took a deep breath. Then, his expression somber, he also flew up to the top of the stairs. Looking through the opened doors of the palace, he saw the emperor sitting there on the Dragon Throne!

Chapter 760: Attitudes in the Imperial Court

It was the exact moment of dawn. Suns didn't rise from the east in every part of the Revered Ancient mainland. But in the Imperial Region, the sun did rise from the east, like a huge furnace, baking heaven and earth with a red glow as it climbed into the air. The night fractured and fell apart as light illuminated the statue of Grand Emperor Swordsage, whose cast shadow covered the rainbow bridge and the imperial palace.

From a distance, it was possible to see thick violet smoke swirling up from the Immortal Reception Plaza in front of the imperial palace, all within the shadow of the grand emperor.

There was also a large bell that rose up into midair exactly as night and day transposed. It was the Immortal Questioning Bell. From the days of Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity until the present, it had existed in between yin and yang. When the sun came out, it was revealed. When the sun set, it disappeared. Its function was to certify the heart. From the very beginning, whenever a government official was called into question, they could ring the Immortal Questioning Bell to certify the state of their heart. It had been that way since ancient times. That said, during the reign of Emperor Dark War, the bell was rarely used.

At the moment, all of the officials in the sable garments, including Xu Qing, were entering the building. What met Xu Qing's eyes was a majestic palace hall. It was large enough to fit several thousand people. The open areas were lined with pillars carved with auspicious animals. [1]

The hall was lined on either side with guards in golden armor, who stood stock still, their heads slightly bowed in a show of respect for the officials.

At the far end was a staircase with nine steps, each of which were some 300 meters from end to end and a good 30 meters wide. At the top, just beyond the ninth step, was a fantastic Dragon Throne.[2]

Seated atop it was a person. He was something of a blur, making it impossible to make out his features clearly. However, he was definitely wearing a golden imperial garment, and was boundlessly glorious. He wore an imperial crown with twelve tassels on the front and back. The tassels were made from multi-colored immortal thread and sun-moon pearls, and they symbolized how the sovereign emperor was both visible and invisible. He sat there, the core of the entire palace hall, the core of the Imperial Region itself, and the core of humankind in the Revered Ancient mainland.

Even more astonishing was the destiny aura. It was the destiny aura of all humanity, focused solely on the emperor, bolstering and blessing him. All it took was a single glance for Xu Qing to be filled with a boundless sense of mountain-toppling, sea-draining pressure.

His eyes were outstandingly piercing. Xu Qing hadn't felt anything like it, not even from the Heir Apparent and his siblings back in the Moonrite Region. It didn't have anything to do with cultivation base, but rather, destiny aura. With that destiny aura, the emperor could destroy the heavens and crush the earth with a mere thought.

Xu Qing bowed his head and thought back to what Plumdark had told him about the etiquette that needed to be observed.

“When Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity conquered all, that included lands of the living as well as the netherworld of the dead. He ignored the north and focused south, sitting in the west to face the east. That symbolized how the fate of all species rested in the palm of humankind.

“From then on, whether in a major session of court or a minor one, the emperor would always face east.

“The emperor, the heavenly kings, and the palace lords of the Greater Celestial divisions need not attend minor court sessions. But during major sessions, they’re all required to attend. The Grand Emperors sit on the sixth step, the heavenly kings on the third. The heavenly marquises take the first step, while the three dukes stand directly beneath the first step, also facing east.

“The deputy envoy of the Five Greater Celestial Divisions sticks to the north while facing west, while the deputy envoy of the Five Lesser Celestial Divisions sticks to the south while also facing west. Members of the imperial clan are stationed on the right side of the entrance gate, while the grand servant and all the grand servant’s subsidiary officers are stationed on the left side of the entrance gate.”[3]

As Xu Qing considered all of that, the more than ten cultivators wearing black court attire who had entered at the same time as him ascended to the first step, where they stood and looked back at the entrance.

Xu Qing took a deep breath and did the same. The others looked at him, though in most cases it was a brief glance. And thus, Xu Qing came to stand at the very end of the first step.

At the same time as Xu Qing reached the first step, all of the other officials filtered in and began to take their spots according to court etiquette.

The entire hall was silent.

In terms of the three dukes’ position beneath the first step, Xu Qing noticed that there was only one present. He was an old man dressed in red court attire, with long white hair that draped down past his shoulders. He stood tall and straight, his expression threatening without being angry. Xu Qing wasn’t sure exactly who he was, and could only guess that he was a chief minister. As prescribed by Dark Serenity, sessions of court were presided over by a chief minister.

After the crowd had assembled in all solemnity, the old man in red looked everyone over, then turned to face the direction of everyone on the first step, including Xu Qing. His gaze paused for a fraction. He wasn’t just looking at Xu Qing to see what he looked like. Instead, he seemed shocked that Xu Qing’s clothing was all correct down to the finest detail. He could tell that every aspect of Xu Qing’s attire corresponded to the most ancient, traditional style. Although most ordinary people wouldn’t pick up on that, this old man most certainly did. His gaze rested on Xu Qing for only the briefest of moments before he turned to the emperor on the ninth step. Clasp hands, he bowed.

“Your Majesty, court etiquette has been maintained.”

Everyone in the crowd bowed their heads. In ordinary minor sessions of the court, the emperor would stand and return the respectful salute, thus ending the opening ceremony.

But this time, something different happened....

The emperor slowly rose from his throne, pulsing with dramatic pressure that spread through heaven and earth thanks to the destiny aura.

The clouds outside seethed as golden dragons roared from within them. At that point, the emperor, instead of saluting the gathered officials, turned his head and looked through the pearl tassels at Xu Qing. He nodded three times.

Speaking on behalf of the emperor, the chief minister said, “For services rendered, let the acting governor be given a seat!”

The stairs rumbled as a seat carved with a sable dragon slowly rose up.

Looking very respectful, Xu Qing clasped hands and bowed nine times in thanks. He did not fumble any of the etiquette, with even his posture conforming to the ancient traditions.

When everyone in the crowd saw that, they didn’t react visibly, but inside they were surprised. And now, they viewed Xu Qing with slightly more importance than before, as they knew that he was backed by someone who was deeply familiar with all aspects of human etiquette.

At that point, the emperor saluted the gathered officials, then sat back down on his throne. Xu Qing sat as well. The other cultivators in black court attire similarly sat down, though they sat cross-legged on the ground.

A bell tolled, and the session of court formally started.

Someone stepped forward, and official business began. It started with the affairs of the common citizens. Next were various things related to humankind as a whole, including criminal proceedings as well as matters related to finance, foreign affairs, and the like.

The emperor rarely spoke. Most things were handled by the chief minister. When certain very important things came up, the chief minister would ask for input from the emperor, who would usually just give a few words. After all, the words of the emperor surpassed everything else.

Considering that this was Xu Qing’s first time attending court and seeing all the complex rules, it was no surprise that he was a bit shaken, and had a hard time remaining as calm as usual. He sat with his back to the emperor, looking out at the hall.

Everyone else in attendance kept their faces blank, making it impossible to tell what they were thinking. As different people had their say, Xu Qing came to a true understanding of the idiom *each word spoken is a gem*; everyone spoke concisely, but at the same time, in a way that made their words open to interpretation.

Only dragons and phoenixes among men could be in a place like this....

As Xu Qing contemplated such thoughts, the reports being made to the emperor touched on foreign affairs, and specifically, the war with the Nightshades. As various officials spoke their mind, Xu Qing's gaze came to rest on the right side of the hall, where the imperial clan was gathered.

There weren't many people in that group, and most were elderly. None of the imperial princes were present other than Ningyan, who stood there cautiously and clearly afraid of his father.

Xu Qing looked away. That was when he heard the chief minister speaking again.

“Now, Governor Xu Qing of Sea-Sealing County will give further details about the Nightshade activity in the Nightspirit Region.”

All eyes shifted to Xu Qing. He stood, bowed formally to the emperor, then said, “The Nightspirit Region is divided into north and south. The north half is still controlled by the remnants of the Nightshades' imperial clan. The south is mostly controlled by the Nightshade priests.

“When Crimson Mother perished, the priests fell from grace and lost the blessing of their god. My Sea-Sealing County forces have now taken them as subordinates, and have given them something new to worship.”

In response to his words, a middle-aged man wearing blue court attire suddenly stepped forward.

“Governor Xu, what is this object of worship that you have provided to the Nightshade priesthood?”

The crowd reacted visibly, albeit subtly. It was open knowledge that the Nightshade priests now gave faith to Violet Lord. And it was also common knowledge that Violet Lord was somehow connected to Xu Qing. However, it was also a sensitive subject that shouldn't have been mentioned publicly. Therefore, the fact that this man had asked the question in this way was deeply meaningful on multiple levels.

Xu Qing looked over at the middle-aged man. **“You've committed a breach of decorum.”**

When the middle-aged man saw the look in Xu Qing's eyes, he stepped back into line.

The way Xu Qing quickly resolved the situation was thought-provoking to the crowd, and many people were starting to speculate about who was giving him advice behind the scenes.

The chief minister nodded slightly. **“The acting governor has performed great services, wears the court attire of a heavenly marquis, and is seated on the first step. Zhao Tianyi, you interrupted Governor Xu, which is inappropriate in terms of the ancient etiquette. You have indeed committed a breach of decorum.”**

“Yes,” Zhao Tianyi said, his head bowed to hide whatever emotion was on his face.

Xu Qing ignored him. Facing the emperor, he bowed, then sat back down.

The hall went quiet. Then, another person stepped forward, similarly dressed in blue court attire. After bowing to the emperor, he turned to face Xu Qing.

“Since Governor Xu is seated, I have a question, and it won’t count as a breach of decorum. Governor Xu, the Dawning Suns are the greatest secret of humankind. Therefore, Governor Xu, how did you learn of them, how did you get them, how many do you have, and why did you bring them into the imperial capital and the imperial palace??”

This was another sensitive question, and it was spoken in a voice laced with killing intent. It immediately caused the mood in the hall to turn tense. The guards in golden armor all seemed to become more vigilant than before.

Xu Qing didn’t stand. He let a few breaths of time pass, then calmly said, “The Heir Apparent of the Moonrite Region has nine of them. Because I helped him kill Crimson Mother, he gave me six as a gift. I brought them with me to the imperial capital because I fear death.”

The official who had asked the question said nothing further. He stepped back in line.

The chief minister looked at that official. Although it seemed like the official had been giving Xu Qing a hard time, there was another possible side to the coin: he had given Xu Qing a chance to explain himself. His actions could be considered benevolent, or they could be considered malevolent. It depended on perspective and opinion. That said, it had nothing to do with the chief minister himself, so he simply looked at the emperor.

The emperor sat on his throne, his face expressionless, but a stifflingly dangerous energy pulsing off him, filled the entire hall with pressure and coldness.

About ten breaths of time passed. Finally, the emperor said, “Chief Minister, please explain the results of the investigation into the assassination attempt here in the imperial capital.”

The chief minister bowed his head. He understood full well that the emperor was choosing not to pursue the matter of the Dawning Suns. That was also a signal that everyone else in the crowd understood.

The chief minister looked up and turned to face the outside of the hall, his eyes cold and full of killing intent.

“Bring in everyone connected to the assassination attempt!”