

## Timescape 851

### Chapter 851: A Coquettish Voice from God Mountain

The sky became redder.

Inside Heavenfire City, countless gazes and innumerable streams of divine will were focused on Xu Qing. Among the observers, it was possible to see expressions of surprise, shock, astonishment, and other complex emotions.

Silence reigned supreme.

Xu Qing's actions had shaken everyone and proved how valiant he was. He definitely deserved to be the champion of round one! As of this moment, not one person flew out of the city to challenge him.

Xu Qing's actions had truly shaken everyone deeply. If he had used the methods of cultivators, it would have been less dramatic. But he had used the power of gods. That left everyone feeling extremely disturbed. Cultivators had been dealing with gods for a long time, and there were even some who could use god magics. That was especially true of people known as godheralds.

But Xu Qing had just taken the future image of the death of a fourth-stage Void Returning cultivator and turned it into a reality. That was something rarely seen. In fact, for many cultivators present, it was their first time witnessing anything like it.

And the miserable fate of the Whitemarsh cultivator who had switched at the last moment before dying was still appalling. He couldn't stop the blood from spraying out of his mouth as his five viscera and six bowels decayed. And the withering to his soul was irreversible. Destroying his major world didn't just cause his cultivation base to decline, it also drained his life force. His body looked much older. And when he finally backed up by about 3,000 meters, other Whitemarsh cultivators clustered around him to help hold him up. At that point, he looked like an elderly second-stage Void Returning cultivator.

Death energy abounded all over him, and his eyes shone with lingering fear and shock. Although he managed to escape with his life, when he thought back to the fight just now, he realized he had essentially already died once. If this was a battlefield, and the natural law protections of the city weren't in place, he would definitely be dying right now.

That knowledge caused his lingering fear to intensify until he was shaking.

What was more, as Xu Qing looked at him from outside the city, the Whitemarsh averted his gaze. He didn't dare to look at him directly.

Xu Qing looked away. However, he had already committed the details of the enemy's aura to memory. Later on, he would find an opportunity to *cut the weeds and eliminate the roots*. With such thoughts on his mind, he turned to look at the Saia cultivator trapped in D-132.

He started walking forward. Every step he took caused ripples to flow out as if on the surface of water. Inside D-132, the power of misfortune was building up, and no amount of curse magic unleashed by the Saia cultivator did any good against it. All curse magic was dispelled by the misfortune. After all, the god authority of misfortune was a type of curse, and excelled at negating other similar divine abilities.

The Saia was trapped and unable to break free. He could only devolve into desolation and amnesia as the effects of misfortune built up.

Xu Qing's approach accelerated the process. He was already on top of D-132, causing violet moonlight to spill down from his fourth-level god state. It both covered D-132 and bolstered it.

But then, the moonlight suddenly changed directions. Instead of falling down, it converged in front of Xu Qing in the form of a violet screen.

Then a finger appeared out of nowhere, to be blocked by the screen of light. It was a faint touch. But ripples spread across the violet light, turning it white. In short order, it transformed... into a jade stone!

From a distance, it was possible to see the light of the jade stone spreading. Wherever it went, it changed the violet moonlight. In hardly a breath of time, an arc-shaped jade stone appeared in midair. Having lost any of the power of the violet moon, it dropped down toward the ground.

A thump rang out as it hit D-132 and shattered. Then, D-132 itself began to transform into the same jade.

In response to the sudden and unexpected development, Xu Qing didn't hesitate to back up and wave his finger out in front of him. Even as D-132 transformed into jade, it vanished into thin air. Some distance away, Xu Qing looked up, his eyes gleaming as he studied the area where the finger appeared.

In that spot, glowing light revealed an extremely attractive young man in the clothing of a scholar. He almost looked human.

After materializing, he smiled at Xu Qing.

"My little companions have taken a liking to you, and they want you to become like them."

The young man's soft voice didn't contain even a hint of anger. It was as if he was just stating an incontrovertible fact about the future. His gaze even seemed soft and welcoming.

Xu Qing didn't take any action, but his eyes glittered. Although it was only his first time seeing this individual in person, thanks to Grand Prince's jade slip, he knew exactly who he was. He thought back to the description.

*"Fan Shishuang is also in the third stage of Void Returning, and he ranks third. He also has great circle battle prowess. In fact, he actually fought a battle to the death with an expert from another species who had just stepped into Smoldering God, and made it out alive. He's a member of the stewarded nation of High God Moonfire."*

In addition to the general description, there were also some images of him in action. Anyone who he touched would be turned into jade. That was Fan Shishuang's custom. He liked taking enemy cultivators and converting them into jade puppets that followed him around as attendants.

A Firemoon Darkheaven chosen that surpasses Tuo Shishan....

Xu Qing was taking the situation very seriously. Moment's ago, he had experienced an intense sensation of deadly crisis, and that was especially true considering that he had sensed godly power in the jade attack.

As he looked around, one jade puppet after another appeared around him, each dressed in different clothing. All of them stood unmoving as they stared at him.

"Why aren't you saying anything? I guess you're just agreeing to cooperate?" Fan Shishuang smiled as he looked Xu Qing up and down. He looked pleased. "Turning that state of yours into a statue for my house would be perfectly suitable. I advise you to not struggle. If you accidentally ruined that state, it would be a big pity. Also, you're not a match for me."

Fan Shishuang smiled softly and gently swished his sleeve. A pulse of great circle Void Returning energy swept out, causing the sky to tremble and the lands to shake. A tempest spread out from him, connecting the ground to the sky.

Winds screamed, causing the night to undulate. Just barely, it was possible to see streaks like meteors, which were dao lineaments. At first the effect wasn't very dramatic. But as the dao lineaments grew more numerous, they reached a terrifying level that made it seem like it was raining meteors.

An incomparable energy was building that Xu Qing had never seen on a Void Returning cultivator before, and it caused his pupils to constrict. A host of afterimages sprang up behind him, like legions of gods and devils. Every single one was extremely lifelike, and glared downward with terrifying pressure.

This was the hallmark of second-stage Void Returning. That said, Xu Qing had never heard of anyone forming images of gods and devils.

Normally speaking, a third-stage Void Returning expert could convert divine will into illusory bubbles. But Fan Shishuang wasn't doing that.

The bubbles weren't divine will. Instead, they were the gods and devils. They contained both life force and death itself, and as they formed, crumbled, and reformed, they created a massive tableau. It was a super-massive major world that filled the canopy of heaven, sending out endless fluctuations that surpassed those of ordinary Void Returning worlds by ten times over. It was illusory, but it still contained mountains and rivers, suns and moons, and living beings alongside natural and magical laws. It was just like an actual world. In fact, if it was just slightly more true and real, it would be the hallmark of a Smoldering God.

As the scene developed, Fan Shishuang's aura spread, causing Xu Qing's expression to turn grim. That aura... surpassed the middle-aged Whitemarsh by many times over. Comparing the two was like comparing the full moon with some faint stars. Both were manifestations of fourth-stage Void Returning, but the battle prowess disparity was dramatic.

"In ten breaths of time, it will all be over."

Fan Shishuang grinned in a very nefarious way as he looked at Xu Qing, then extended his right hand and pushed out slowly.

That motion caused thunderous rumbling to fill the canopy of heaven outside the city. Astonishingly, the sky was now emanating a jade-like glow. It was the same with the lands below. It was all centered on Xu Qing, and was turning everything the color of jade. The jade light swept around, then shot toward Xu Qing with mountain-toppling, sea-draining force.

A sensation of danger exploded within Xu Qing. His flesh trembled with pain, making him feel like he was facing an actual Smoldering God. At the critical juncture, Xu Qing took a deep breath. The desire to do battle started burning in his eyes. He wanted to know exactly where his limits were, and how far away he was from the number three Firemoon Darkheaven chosen.

He lifted his right hand, and ripples spread out from beneath his feet, turning into a surface of water. It was none other than the beginning of Fishing the Moon in the Well.

Countless gazes and streams of divine will from the city were closely watching the battle. The meaning of the fight had changed significantly once Fan Shishuang stepped in.

However, just as Xu Qing and Fan Shishuang were about to clash, God Mountain suddenly trembled. It was a simple tremor, but it resulted in the sky shattering and the lands cracking.

Fan Shishuang's jade light dimmed, then disappeared. At the same time, the nefarious look on his face transformed into one of piety as he dropped to his knees and kowtowed in the direction of the mountain.

He wasn't the only one. All cultivators in the city started to breathe heavily as they ducked their heads and bowed to God Mountain.

Xu Qing, being unable to release any divine abilities, turned and bowed to God Mountain.

At that point, a coquettish voice echoed through the sky and lands, reaching the hearts of all cultivators. It was a thrumming, godly voice. It was High God Starfire!

"The first round is over, so the idea was to give you all some time to rest. But since you seem so energetic, we can forget the resting. The second round of the Great Hunt will begin with a teleportation to the Mountain and Sea Region!"

Chapter 852: The Pain Will Stop in a Moment

Though the voice was grand and majestic, it also was a touch languid. It was as if there were invisible hooks in the sound of it, which latched onto the hearts of cultivators and made them feel limp and numb both inside and out. The numbness came from the soul. To them, it felt as if their souls had been taken away, leaving them indescribably relaxed. Some were weak in willpower, and ultimately passed out and lay twitching on the ground.

The stronger ones were able to weather the ripples that filled their hearts and minds. After all, they revered gods, so what was happening right now was just considered fate as far as the Firemoon cultivators were concerned.

What was more, this was High God Starfire alone, and the words spoken did not contain much substance. This was just how gods could act. Then, a cold snort echoed out from Starfire, negating the effects of the spoken words. It was like a bucket of cold water poured into the hearts and minds of everyone present.

"Let the teleportation begin!"

All hearts trembled as they recovered. Then thunderous rumblings filled the canopy of heaven. They grew louder and louder until they reached the point of being able to sunder the heavens and crush the earth. Rumbling echoed out, accompanied by rolling shockwaves that quickly turned into a huge vortex. The vortex rotated as it seemingly peeled away sections of the air to reveal a beautiful, seven-colored tunnel made of natural laws.

On the other side of that tunnel was a majestic land full of mountains, rivers, strange plants and flowers, and energetic beasts. It looked like a wilderness. It was also filled with the cries of beasts. This was... the location of the second round of the Firemoon Darkheavens' Great Hunt. It was the Mountain and Sea Region.[1]

Seven-colored light erupted from the vortex, forming countless strands that descended into the city below to snatch up all the cultivators who qualified to participate in the second round.

Grand Prince. Tuo Shishan. Master Gravesparrow.... All participants were covered by the seven-colored light. That included Xu Qing and Fan Shishuang, who were outside of the city.

Three breaths of time passed, and then the teleportations began. Seven-colored light glittered brightly in the city. Any who looked up would clearly see numerous seven-colored flowers blooming in the sky. Every pulse of light would involve people being teleported away. This was an entropic teleportation, which meant that any cultivators who planned to meet up with companions would have to find each other in the Mountain and Sea Region.

Seven-colored light swept over Xu Qing and he vanished into thin air. Hundreds of thousands of cultivators were whisked away into the beautiful image formed by the light.

Moments later, the seven-colored flowers became fewer and fewer. More than half of the cultivators who had been in Heavenfire City were now gone.

God Mountain no longer trembled. The only sound to be heard was a soft laugh from Starfire, which echoed out into heaven and earth.

\*\*\*

The Mountain and Sea Region was shaped roughly like a bottle gourd. There was no flat land within it, only endless mountains covered with rainforest.

The general environment, plus the year-round warm weather, and the fact that the area was sealed to outsiders, ensured that the Mountain and Sea Region was full of life. It was the perfect habitat for beasts to live and multiply. It was also home to numerous beasts that could only be described as fantastic oddities. That was especially true considering... that the mutagen here was very strong. It filled everything, affecting not just the animals, but also the plants.

The entire Mountain and Sea Region was essentially one huge forbidden ground. However, it hadn't been created by the broken face of the god, but rather, by the Firemoon Darkheaven people. Because of being sealed most of the time, it contained plenty of living things that were extremely rare in the outside world. There were also ancient things that wouldn't have been possible to preserve in a normal setting.

\*\*\*

In the highlands of the Mountain and Sea Region, where the rainforest was thick and dark, there was a rotten, gnarled tree that was as dark as night. As it swayed back and forth, vines suddenly shot out from it to snag a white-colored deer from off in the distance. [2]

The white deer struggled in vain. Vines wrapped all around it, pulsating as they absorbed its life force. The white deer let loose a few cries of anguish and pain. It was a miserable sight, as the deer's eyes clearly contained the longing to live.

White deer weren't very common in the Mountain and Sea Region. They were a symbol of beauty, and perhaps because of that, they were a common prey. However, there wasn't much about them that was inherently valuable, so no one bothered trying to breed them. As a result, their numbers had dwindled over the years.

As the cries of the white deer shook heaven on high, seven-colored light sprang into being in the air next to the gnarled tree.

A figure emerged, clad in a black robe. The moment he appeared, the tree shivered and then went still. The white deer also shivered, and instinctively stopped crying out. However, it was soon moaning softly as it clung to life.

The figure who had appeared next to the tree heard the white deer and turned to look at it. He approached it. It only took two steps for him to be standing right above the deer. His mere gaze caused the vines wrapped around the deer to crumble into ash.

The black-robed figure squatted, reached out, and gently stroked the deer. Sadly, despite the vines having been removed, the white deer was too badly injured. It couldn't even stand. It could only express gratitude by the look in its eyes. However, the pain that wracked it made it impossible for it to stop shivering. The sensation of death was spreading through it.

"The pain will stop in a moment," the black-robed figure said softly. He stroked the deer even more gently than before. His comfort caused the deer to struggle less. More gratitude appeared in its eyes. Eventually, it stuck out its tongue and licked the figure's sleeve.

After it was completely relaxed, the black-robed figure put his hand gently on the deer's neck and then snapped it. The pop rang out without any sounds of pain. The white deer spasmed once, and then it was dead.

The black-robed figure slowly stood and looked off into the distance. As rays of light filtered through the tree canopy, his features gradually became clear. He was a young man with his hair bound in a topknot, with a black headband strapped across his forehead. The headband matched his black robe as well as his black boots. From head to toe, he emanated a very cold aura.

Just barely visible around him were a host of blurry, crimson figures that almost looked like they were made from blood. They also emanated the stench of gore.

Any Firemoon Darkheaven cultivator present would recognize this person. His name resounded with such fame that he surpassed Tuo Shishan and Fan Shishuang. Back when Grand Prince introduced the Firemoon chosen to Xu Qing, he had spent extra time introducing this young man.

Master Stillwinter was in third-stage Void Returning, ranked second in their echelon, and was part of High God Sunfire's stewarded nation. His personality was cold and apathetic, and he was known

to be vicious and merciless. He's killed dozens of cultivators from other species, and refined them into blood clones that accompany him wherever he goes.

He had mastered many techniques. In fact, he even successfully fought a Smoldering God prisoner. Granted, the prisoner was on his last legs, but in the end, he was still a Smoldering God....

Even Fan Shishuang would be wary when facing him. On the three occasions in which the two of them fought... Fan Shishuang lost every time. In fact, on the last occasion, if it hadn't been for this generation's Sir Firedark interfering and mediating, Fan Shishuang would have been in danger of losing his life.

Tuo Shishan had fought him as well, and had only lasted ten breaths of time before being crushed. It was one of the biggest regrets in his life, as that was the day he failed to win the Firedark daoist name. It was the biggest defeat he had ever endured on his path of cultivation.

Master Stillwinter looked back down at the corpse of the white deer and softly said, "You don't feel pain when you're dead."

Then he turned and walked off. A few paces away, he seemed to recall something.

"Spread news. If anyone sees Xu Qing, I want to be informed of his location."

Master Stillwinter calmly continued on his way. He needed to kill Xu Qing because King Brightsouth had asked him to, and had offered a very attractive deal to make it happen. For him, it would come down to convenience. If he ran into Xu Qing, he would kill him. But he wasn't going to waste time looking for him.

As far as Master Stillwinter was concerned, it wouldn't be anything challenging. Sir Firedark was the only enemy he wasn't confident in being able to kill. The others he could cut down with ease.

Meanwhile, some of the blood-colored figures around him bowed at the waist, then vanished as they left to deliver his message. The other blood clones continued along with him.

\*\*\*

In another location in the highlands of the Mountain and Sea Region, in the very middle of the rainforest, Xu Qing moved along in the concealment of invisibility. He was being careful not to release any of his aura. He was obviously very used to moving around in rainforest environments, and dealing with mutagen. He actually liked places like this.

The Captain had not been teleported with him, but Xu Qing wasn't worried about the Captain. The Captain surely had his own ways of getting to the Mountain and Sea Region.

Eldest Brother said he arranged for me to get a hillworm.... But I can't place all my hopes in his hands.

He had already abandoned any thoughts of going to the Ninedawns Forbidden Lands, which was located roughly in between the highlands and the lowlands. That legendary holy beast had only once been successfully tamed, and Xu Qing didn't think there was anything special about himself that would break that trend. He would rather search for other beasts than waste his time trying to find a ninedawns.

I guess I should hunt for a hillworm!

Xu Qing's eyes glittered profoundly. That seemed like the best method to ensure he met up with the Captain as quickly as possible. It would also increase the chances of him successfully getting a hillworm.

He quickly reviewed the jade slip information about hillworms and their behavior.

They live in the northwest of the lowlands. I guess the first thing I need to do is get my bearings.

Xu Qing blurred into motion, disappearing into the rainforest.

\*\*\*

Three days later, Xu Qing had passed through enough animal habitats to be able to determine his location. Now that he knew which way to travel, he started moving at top speed toward the spot where the lowlands turned into the highlands.

I should get there in about five days. I can skirt the Ninedawns Forbidden Lands. From there, it should only take about half a month to reach hillworm territory. There's going to be a lot more fighting and killing here in the Mountain and Sea Region. I need to be on the watch, especially for... Fan Shishuang!

Xu Qing's expression was grim. If it hadn't been for the start of the second round, he and Fan Shishuang would have begun to fight fiercely.

Xu Qing was already feeling wary of Fan Shishuang. There weren't many opponents Xu Qing had faced in life that he wasn't confident in being able to kill, but Fan Shishuang was one of them.

#### Chapter 853: Mountain and Sea Region

Out of an abundance of caution, Xu Qing chose not to fly through the sky. Instead, he made his way through the rainforest itself, using it as part of his cover. He also had Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior circle around him to keep an eye on things.

In that manner, five days went by. During that time, Xu Qing spotted a handful of cultivators participating in the Great Hunt. He noticed a few who had issued challenges to him. At the moment, he wasn't in the mood to deal with them. Before they could detect him, he moved on.

He spotted quite a few beasts in the rainforest. Some lived in the trees, others hid in the muddy soil. There was no end to them.

Some were very gruish in appearance. For instance, there was one occasion in which the mountains trembled as a long-armed giant strode by in front of him. He saw suns that had arms and legs, some large and some small, and they held hands as they raced around. He saw gigantic singing centipedes, as well as mushrooms that followed him around after they saw him, hopping up and down. He saw a huge tree that actually turned out to be the nose of some bizarre creature sleeping in the ground.

On one occasion, the wind caused Xu Qing's eyes to widen. That wind... seemed intangible, but the reality was that it was evidence of invisible entities. If Xu Qing's senses hadn't been as sharp, he wouldn't have noticed what he was dealing with, and would have been knocked to the ground. They were demonic grues, and a lot of them. There were flying heads, walking skeletons, and an intense coldness filled with singing. They were all invisible.



From what Xu Qing could tell, this Mountain and Sea Region was a very unusual world, the beasts of which had abilities and appearances that upended common sense.

There were headless animals. Hair that shot out of the mud. And there were also ancient, dilapidated temples inhabited by withered, faceless beings that carried stone steles on their backs.

At the moment, Xu Qing had just encountered a rippling sea of multicolored flowers in the middle of the rainforest. Any plants or animals that ventured into the undulating sea would be devoured, and would ultimately become part of the sea.

Close examination revealed that the sea of flowers was actually made of a host of colorful toads. The ripples that flowed across the sea were caused by toads jumping.

But that wasn't what made the area truly terrifying. In the very middle of the sea was a crumbling divine likeness upon which a host of frogs sat. The bare-chested statue depicted a man with four heads, all of which had their eyes closed. With one hand, he cradled a baby at his chest, and with the other hand, he stroked his chin. A sound like snoring drifted out over the sea of flowers.

The statue was in such bad shape that about half of it was missing. That included parts of the four heads as well as the infant he was holding.

Xu Qing spotted the statue from a distance, and his gaze hardened. Over the past five days of travel, he had encountered seventeen divine likenesses. Each looked different, but all of them filled him with a sense of danger. It was the same with the temples. The statues were in such bad shape that it looked as if they had been deliberately damaged. In fact, the one he was looking at now was the most complete statue he had seen so far.

What happened back in the day here in the Mountain and Sea Region...? Why are there so many temples and so many damaged statues...?

Feeling more curious than ever, Xu Qing skirted the sea of flowers before continuing on his way. About an incense stick's worth of time later, his expression flickered, and he shot backward and up into the air.

The moment he did, the air shattered in the spot he had just occupied, and a huge black hole appeared. The black hole hadn't appeared randomly. It came from the ground.

Laying in the swampy forest floor was a massive divine likeness some 30,000 meters from end to end. It was badly broken, but its head was clearly visible. What was more, its mouth wasn't damaged at all. And it was breathing. Every breath it took would cause that black hole to appear. What was more, it exuded the threat of a higher level of life.

Xu Qing had an extraordinary cultivation base and shocking battle prowess. He even had his god states. But this aura seemed so dangerous that he had no choice but to avoid the area.

Meanwhile, the trembling voice of the god's finger echoed out from D-132.

*"Th-this... this..."*

Xu Qing's heart thumped. *"Keep talking."*

The finger shivered and then quietly continued, *"There are dead gods here. And not just a few. A lot.... Holy crap. How come I've never heard about anything like this before?"*

Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior zipped over and transmitted a message with divine will. *“Could it be because you were actually asleep when your true form arrived? Later, after you parted ways, you were suppressed and sleeping....”*

The god’s finger considered the question, and seemed about to offer a retort. However, the finger knew how important the patriarch was to Xu Qing. In fact, the patriarch was more important than the finger. So the finger just snorted and held back from responding.

Xu Qing didn’t pay attention to the patriarch. He was thinking back to all the divine likenesses he had seen so far. Looking out into the rainforest, he took a deep breath. The aura here didn’t seem unusual. But considering how skilled Xu Qing was in medicinal matters, he detected the lingering aroma of blood.

It came from the mud, the plants, the rocks, and in fact, from everything.... It was as if everything in this world reeked of blood.

A great battle was fought here.... A lot of gods died. But who were they fighting?

Xu Qing only knew some surface-level information about the Firemoon Darkheavens. There was a lot he didn’t know, and therefore, he had no way to come up with a theory.

After one last look at the huge statue on the ground, he prepared to go around it. But then he heard screaming winds as eight beams of light appeared in the distance. Just like Xu Qing, they were planning to travel in midair and skirt the huge statue.

But then they saw Xu Qing.

Xu Qing saw them.

They included Firemoon cultivators as well as subsidiary species. There was one Saia present. Apparently, they had formed a small team out of convenience.

After spotting him, the entire team reacted with shock. They stopped in place and then backed up a good distance. A moment later, the Firemoon cultivator who was their leader bowed to Xu Qing, then changed directions and left. The other members of the team also bowed, then followed their leader. The Saia’s eyes glittered, but he quickly ducked his head and bowed like the others. They had all witnessed the fight outside the city a few days ago, and it had been so shocking that they didn’t dare to get close to Xu Qing.

Xu Qing looked at them coldly. Seeing that none of them had tamed any mutant beasts yet, he saw no reason to attack them. Turning, he flew on toward his destination.

When the fleeing cultivators realized that Xu Qing had disappeared, they breathed sighs of relief. Then they exchanged glances, and could see the hesitation in each other’s eyes.

Only the Saia didn’t hesitate for an instant. Taking out a transmission jade slip, he prepared to send a voice message.

And yet, the instant he pulled out the jade slip, a cold voice spoke out of thin air next to him.

“What are you doing?”

All of the cultivators' faces fell, especially the Saia. Gasping, he tried to quickly send a voice message, but he was too late. A hand reached out and grabbed his hand. It clenched down, causing the jade slip to shatter, along with the hand itself, creating a paste of blood and bits of jade.

A scream of pain erupted from the Saia cultivator's mouth. Xu Qing appeared in his fourth-level god state, and he grabbed the Saia by the neck.

The other cultivators backed up, trembling. However, they weren't able to flee, as blood-red tentacles had snaked out from Xu Qing to block their path. With the slightest twitch, those tentacles could stab through their foreheads.

They all stopped in place and looked at Xu Qing.

"Everyone else bowed when they saw me, which makes sense," Xu Qing said calmly. "But you, Saia, had an odd look on your face. Most noteworthy... was that your expression was wrong. Now I remember why. You issued me a fighting challenge earlier."

Although Xu Qing had left earlier, a strange urge of caution had prompted him to come back to check on the cultivators he'd just left. That was what led to him seeing the Saia about to send a voice message.

"Tell me who you planned to message," Xu Qing said quietly.

A look of alarm filled the Saia's eyes, and he opened his mouth to speak.

Before he could, the Firemoon Darkheaven cultivator blurted, "I can tell you, Fellow Daoist Xu! Five days ago, Master Stillwinter sent out a message asking for information about your whereabouts. He said that anybody who spotted you was to send him a message. This Saia cultivator presumably has reasons for wanting to send that very message."

This Firemoon Darkheaven was an intelligent person, and didn't want to be dragged into the suicidal Saia's actions. He knew that Xu Qing was a decisive killer, and he also knew that if the Saia cultivator was the one to answer the question, the rest of them could easily end up dead. Therefore, he chose to speak up first, and hopefully, have a better chance at surviving. The other cultivators in the group quickly chimed in with similar information.

Xu Qing looked at the trembling, terrified Saia. He had his answer. His right hand tightened, and a popping sound rang out as the Saia was killed in body and soul.

The other cultivators stopped talking and looked at Xu Qing, trembling from head to toe. Xu Qing looked at them briefly, then waved his hand to send taboo poison seeds into them. When they sensed what was happening, their faces went pale.

"If you don't cause trouble," Xu Qing said coolly, "then you can come find me after the second round. I'll get rid of the poison."

With that, he turned and vanished.

The other cultivators stood there silently and helplessly. After a short time, they also turned and left. After they were gone, Xu Qing appeared again. He frowned. "Master Stillwinter, huh?"

## Chapter 854: Hunting Xu Qing

Xu Qing had never laid eyes on Master Stillwinter. But based on Grand Prince's information, he knew some about him.

He's ranked second in the Firemoon Darkheavens' echelon!

Xu Qing's expression was grim. Fan Shishuang was ranked third, but Xu Qing had sensed that, even going all-out, it wasn't guaranteed that he would win. And even if he did win, it would have been extremely draining, and would have required a significant recovery time. That wouldn't have been ideal with the second round pending. He had the recovery powers of the violet crystal, but damage to godsource and soul threads would require time to recover from.

Xu Qing remembered that Master Stillwinter had fought Fan Shishuang three times and came out on top easily each time. What was more, the jade slip indicated that in their most recent fight, Sir Firedark interfered, otherwise, Fan Shishuang would have been killed.

Xu Qing knew full well he wasn't a match for battle prowess like that. In the final analysis, his reserve powers weren't sufficient.

Xu Qing didn't care that Master Stillwinter had asked for information about his whereabouts. It was already said and done. As for why exactly Master Stillwinter wanted to find him, well, there was plenty of room for speculation.

Xu Qing stayed quiet as he maintained his invisibility and stayed on guard. He really didn't want to run into enemies before finding a beast. For one thing, he didn't want to get involved in a life-or-death fight, and also, he had other plans.

I'm currently about ten days away from my destination....

Xu Qing sped through the rainforest for another five days.

During that time, he stayed out of sight as much as possible. He avoided any Firemoon cultivators, either by keeping his distance or by hiding in place until they passed by.

On some occasions, he couldn't control how things played out. Cultivators weren't the only thing to worry about in the Mountain and Sea Region. There were plenty of terrifyingly strong beasts and grues. As long as Xu Qing had Little Shadow around, it wasn't hard to either avoid or scare off the grues. As for the beasts... encounters with them came down to luck.

But Xu Qing couldn't rely on good luck all the time. On the fifth day, he reached the spot where the lowlands of the Mountain and Sea Region rose into the highlands. That was also where the Ninedawns Forbidden Lands existed. In that location, Xu Qing encountered a flock of mountain sparrows.

Upon spotting them, Xu Qing unhesitatingly got out of their way and hid off to the side.

These 'mountain sparrows' were sparrows that carried mountains on their backs. They were enormous, and because they moved about with mountains on them, what cultivators normally saw first were the mountains floating through the air. It was similar to how the cultivators in the first round of the Great Hunt would carry around mountains.

The ferocious mountain sparrows lived in large flocks, and they hunted in groups, although they left their infants behind. Only the healthy and vigorous would go hunting, and they generally had Void

Returning battle prowess, with the weakest being first-stage and the strongest being in the great circle.

When you added in the advantage of numbers... any second round participants who encountered them knew they were trouble. After all, the mountain sparrows weren't picky eaters. In addition to other beasts, they would also eat cultivators.

Xu Qing had just encountered a flock of hunting mountain sparrows. Given their unusual innate abilities, they noticed Xu Qing right away. Circling around, they flew right toward him.

Xu Qing frowned as he looked at the group of well over a hundred mountain sparrows. After a moment of thought, he turned and fled as fast as he could.

Rumbling sounds filled heaven and earth as the mountain sparrows gave chase. Astonishing fluctuations rolled out in all directions, accompanied by piercing cries as they called out to others of their kind in the area.

Xu Qing's eyes glittered coldly, then turned pitch black. The violet moon rose behind him, and the threatening aura it sent out caused the pursuing mountain sparrows to slow down. Xu Qing took advantage of the time bought to accelerate.

Unfortunately, the mountain sparrows and their fluctuations had attracted the attention of passing cultivators. Those cultivators looked over in shock, and then flew in the opposite direction. They didn't dare to get too close. Among them were two Saias. Noting the commotion, they quickly took out jade slips.

They were obviously unique jade slips, as they were the color violet, and they pulsed with glittering light. After checking the jade slips, the two Saias' expressions flickered, gritting their teeth, they backed away and prepared to send some voice messages.

But then a wind screamed, and a black mist rose up around them. Taboo poison erupted, and hoarse screams echoed out. When the mist faded away, the only thing left behind were puddles of black blood and a few bags of holding.

Xu Qing sped along across the rainforest floor. Scooping up the bags of holding and the two unique jade slips, he shot off into the distance without so much as looking over his shoulder. Yet his brow remained furrowed.

He had managed to kill the two Saia cultivators quickly enough that they didn't have time to send any messages. But the two violet jade slips gave him a very bad feeling.

After examining them closely, he realized why. *They're made with the blood of violet moon believers, plus a special curse magic. And that allows them to sense me specifically*

....

He crushed the jade slips. As of now, he realized that it didn't matter if people relayed information about his position to anyone. There were jade slips that could be used to track him down, and he refused to believe that they didn't have an auto-transmit function built into them.

Maybe I'm overthinking things. And I'm only five days from my destination anyway.

Eyes narrowing, Xu Qing turned to look in the direction of the Ninedawns Forbidden Lands. He wasn't very far from its border.

From this distance, the Ninedawns Forbidden Lands seemed to be covered with gray fog that the sunlight couldn't penetrate. It gave off a sensation of age and decay. Occasionally, anguished faces would appear in the fog and emit noiseless screams. There were other images that were too blurry to make out, and were impossible to remember. But it was possible to hear despairing and insane screams coming from the fog.

The sound of it could shake the soul and make one tremble in unease. Especially noteworthy was the fact that Xu Qing's godsource felt suppressed, as though godly power was incongruous with this location. The fog seemed extremely mysterious and incomprehensible.

"Ninedawns Forbidden Lands..." he murmured.

Though not much about the place was visible, he could sense a stifling pressure. The wind from the place carried with it a sensation of rot as it reached him and stirred his hair. Just the breeze caused his hair to start curling sickeningly, as if the life force was being sucked out of it. All of this only caused Xu Qing to feel even more leery of this habitat of ninedawns.

He had been to many forbidden regions in his life, as well as some forbidden grounds. But this place was different from any of them.

It seems like a graveyard.

After taking a final close look, he turned away and continued on his way to hillworm territory.

He also tried sending a message to his Eldest Brother. He had been making such attempts on a daily basis. Unfortunately, he was out of range, and thus, sending voice messages was *as good as throwing a stone ox into the ocean*. He got no responses.

Xu Qing shook his head, put away the transmission jade slip, and continued noiselessly through the rainforest.

The next day, on the border of the lowlands, rumbling booms echoed out, and the surrounding mist seethed. A Saia stumbled out into the open, then collapsed into a pool of blood.

The mist faded, and Xu Qing appeared. Some distance behind him were a few dozen Saia cultivators, all of them dead. Xu Qing looked back at the dissolving corpses and scowled. He had been ambushed.

The enemy had seemed very confident in knowing his location, and had seemed completely suicidal. They had used all sorts of methods in their attack, eventually resorting to insane uses of self-detonation. From that, he could only surmise that they hadn't been trying to kill him, but rather, to buy time for someone else. What was more, every single one of them had one of those special violet jade slips.

I was right....

He looked in the direction of hillworm territory. He was now only four days away from it.

If these people were trying to buy time, it seems to indicate that Master Stillwinter is probably nearby. The next four days... probably won't go very smoothly. If he can really track me, then even if I reach hillworm territory, I'll have a potential calamity breathing down my neck. So that seems kind of pointless.

I need to figure out a way to deal with this Master Stillwinter. And also how to avoid being tracked. Otherwise, things are going to get very difficult.

Xu Qing knew that turning around a deadly situation often involved lots of careful planning.

After some thought, he looked away from hillworm territory and focused instead on the Ninedawns Forbidden Lands. It was one of the most dangerous zones in the Mountain and Sea Region, and it was only a day away. After some more thought, his eyes shone with determination.

I probably can't match up to Master Stillwinter in battle prowess. But if you want to talk about survival skills....

Xu Qing took a moment to check the violet crystal, then calmed himself, turned, and shot toward the Ninedawns Forbidden Lands.

As it turned out, Xu Qing made the right call. About four hours later, a beam of light appeared. It reached the spot where Xu Qing had stopped earlier, then transformed into Master Stillwinter. As he hovered above the rainforest, he spotted the dead Saia cultivators. He closed his eyes and cast his senses out.

"He's heading toward the ninedawns?" he murmured. "Very clever. However... it's still unlikely you can escape me."

Master Stillwinter turned, whereupon a sonic boom echoed out as he locked onto Xu Qing's position and headed in that direction.

And thus, the chase began.

Six hours later, Xu Qing's expression flickered and he looked over his shoulder. He saw the clouds on the horizon shifting and seething. Then a blood-colored light swept out with mountain-toppling, sea-draining force. It was like a blood sea, within which was a figure in black, looking coldly at Xu Qing.

Chapter 855: Looks Like a Fourth God

A sea of blood filled the dome of heaven, covering the sky, and turning everything red. From a distance, it looked like an impending apocalypse. Within that sea of blood was a figure in black, tall and imposing, and pulsing with an arrogant spirit that could conquer mountains and rivers.

Down in the rainforest, Xu Qing's aura couldn't compare at all. The mere pressure he felt caused his head to spin. Every fiber of muscle and flesh quivered with an intense sensation of deadly crisis. At the same time, his heavenly dao was screaming to him that this enemy was strong. Very strong! This was the strongest chosen Xu Qing had ever faced.

Neither Tuo Shishan nor Fan Shishuang imparted a sensation like this. The former he had defeated. The latter he could probably fight to a draw. But Xu Qing knew without a doubt... that he wasn't a match for Master Stillwinter.

Therefore, he backed up, fully unleashed his cultivation base, and sent countless soul threads spreading out to form his fourth-level god state. Then he fled at top speed.

"You're smart," Master Stillwinter said coolly. "But the moment you saw me, you lost the qualifications to stay alive."

He waved his hand in Xu Qing's direction. That motion caused the sky-obfuscating sea of blood to seethe. Waves raced as it expanded to a 500-kilometer area, all while closing in on Xu Qing.

The air shattered, and the lands shook. It was all centered around Xu Qing. Blood rain fell, staining the plants red and turning the mud into a gory sludge. Within the 500-kilometer area, everything howled in anguish. Beasts. Grues. They all melted into pools of blood, which rose up to join the blood sea.

From a distance, it looked like endless volumes of blood floating up to form a prison. Within the blood sea were hosts of shadowy, blood-colored figures who stared greedily at Xu Qing and let loose piercing howls. All it took was one move to shake heaven and earth, all while locking down the entire area.

A sensation of deadly crisis exploded in Xu Qing, causing his expression to turn grim. He knew that he'd been locked down, and thus abandoned thoughts of fleeing. The godsource of his fourth-level god state spread out, causing mutagen to flourish in the area.

Then, a chanting like that of a god drifted from Xu Qing's mouth.

"Blood!"

It was one word. But as it echoed out, the sea of blood trembled, and the blood rain stopped. A massive force of attraction came along with Xu Qing's blood authority, forming a powerful vortex around him. If the process was completed, he would be able to take control of the sea of blood.

"Nice authority," Master Stillwinter said, his expression calm. "But what's your limit?"

He waved his hand again, and the blood sea surged again. The shadowy figures inside all howled as they melted.

It was a terrifying scene that was shocking even to Xu Qing.

There were thousands of the shadowy, blood-colored figures, and after melting into blood, they made the surrounding sea even more astonishing. After having absorbed the shadowy figures, the blood sea spread out to a size of 3,000 kilometers. And it kept going.

3,500. 4,000. 4,500.... All the way to 5,000 kilometers.

A 5,000-kilometer blood sea raged. Its mere aura was full of destructive power, such that not even Xu Qing's blood authority could possibly influence it. That was even truer considering that 5,000 kilometers wasn't the limit. More blood-colored figures melted, and then it reached 10,000 kilometers.

15,000. 20,000.... After thousands of the shadowy, blood-colored figures melted, the blood sea reached the terrifying level of 50,000 kilometers. The blood rain spread in kind.

50,000 kilometers was a vast area. In fact, it was impossible to see from one end to the other. It really had supplanted the dome of heaven. And it continued to expand as it dropped down toward Xu Qing.

Xu Qing shivered as he sensed that he had reached his limit. His body was destabilizing, and pain wracked his soul. It was a moment of crisis, but thankfully, Xu Qing's fighting intuition came in handy at exactly the right time. Eyes shining with determination, he gathered his blood authority close to him, where it became a blood-colored light, and then, a spinning vortex.



Within the vortex, he was also the color of blood. His body melted, collapsing into blood that splashed everywhere. Since he couldn't fight back, he decided he might as well jump in head first.

The blood sea smashed into the ground. Intense rumbling echoed out for 500,000 kilometers in all directions. All Firemoon Darkheaven cultivators in the area could sense it. Shaken, they turned to look off into the distance.

The rainforest was incinerated. Plants, beasts, and grues were all exterminated. The ground shook as craters appeared, which filled in with blood. The 50,000 kilometers of blood was so boundless it changed the terrain.

At the same time, a host of blood droplets emerged from the sea and formed back into Xu Qing. The moment he appeared, blood sprayed out of his mouth, and his god state crumbled. Face turning pale, he rapidly fell back. At the last moment, he chose to merge with the sea of blood to save himself. But the power disparity was so immense that he still ended up being badly hurt.

"Thus it ends," said a cold voice from just ahead of Xu Qing as he backed away.

A finger appeared near Xu Qing, packed with the power of extermination as it shot straight toward him.

Although Xu Qing was clearly in a very bad position, he remained calm and collected. He knew that every action was critical, and if he got alarmed, it could have severe consequences. Next, his eyes turned pitch black as taboo poison erupted from him, creating a boundless black mist that swept toward the incoming finger. Black spots immediately covered the finger, and it started to decay, slowing its momentum.

But then a second finger appeared, coming from a different direction.

Seven flames appeared around Xu Qing, which went out one after another. It was none other than the Seven Lamps Underworld Fire Curse. As a result, the second finger crumbled before it could reach him.

Xu Qing fell back even faster than before.

An exclamation of surprise echoed out. Clearly, Master Stillwinter hadn't been expecting Xu Qing to negate those fingers one after another so quickly.

"Well, isn't this interesting?" he said with a soft laugh.

Next to appear in front of Xu Qing were not fingers. Instead, it was an entire blood-colored hand! Explosive energy swept out that surpassed anything from before, seemingly unstoppable. In fact... it contained Smoldering God power!

It ignored the taboo poison. It disregarded the underworld curse. And in the shortest of moments, it was the only thing in Xu Qing's field of vision. An unprecedented sensation of death filled him!

He wanted to fight back, but was having a hard time holding himself together. He trembled as the last vestiges of his god state fell apart into countless soul threads. They quickly formed back together, but then collapsed again. Collapse, reform. Again and again. Eventually the soul threads couldn't form anew. They dissipated, and Xu Qing's true form was revealed, hovering there with his eyes closed.

Master Stillwinter waved aside the soul threads and shoved his hand toward Xu Qing.

Then Xu Qing's eyes opened, revealing violet pupils. He had been waiting for this exact moment. Everything had been an attempt to weaken his opponent.

A violet moon appeared between Xu Qing and Master Stillwinter's hand. It wasn't illusory. It was material. It started out small, but then rapidly expanded until a stone stele was visible on it, upon which were carved the names of a host of believers.

At that moment, countless Violet Lord temples through the Nightspirit Region trembled. Innumerable believers there prostrated in worship, sending faith power out in the form of violet light. It all flickered into being right in front of Master Stillwinter in the Mountain and Sea Region.

The hand suddenly turned violet and stopped moving. He tried to pull it back, but it was too late. The rapidly expanding violet moon shot toward it with unstoppable force. They clashed, and a huge boom echoed out as the hand was sent flying backward.

Shock waves spread out, which revealed the outline of Master Stillwinter some distance away. As he appeared, his expression was one of surprise. He was about to unleash another palm attack, except the violet moonlight erupted blindingly, surrounding him.

Next, the soul threads that were the remains of his god state suddenly shot forth, not toward Xu Qing, but toward Master Stillwinter. Millions of them wrapped around him with restraining force.

All of this takes a bit of time to describe but happened in an instant. As Master Stillwinter was struck by the violet moon and then bound with soul threads, Xu Qing's eyes flared with killing intent, and he thrust his hand toward Master Stillwinter.

Rumbling echoed out everywhere, along with ripples that resembled the mouth of a well. The well water rippled as a reflection of Master Stillwinter appeared there, along with all of his magical techniques, plus images of his past and future. It also showed Master Stillwinter's soul!

There were even secrets that Master Stillwinter had never revealed to anyone. For example, his soul....

When Xu Qing saw it, his pupils constricted. Master Stillwinter didn't have one soul inside of him. He had ninety-seven! And within every single soul was a golden god monument. Each of the ninety-seven god monuments featured a carving of a different figure. None looked the same, but all emanated the aura of a god.

Xu Qing was shaken to the core. The god monuments were carved with ninety-seven gods! One of them was the same divine likeness he had seen in the rainforest earlier! It made it seem to Xu Qing that Master Stillwinter was more like a receptacle for god monuments! Xu Qing wasn't sure what ceremony this corresponded to, but it made him think back to what Fifth Prince had said in the emperor's palace hall.

*"In recent years, the mutagen levels in Firemoon territory have tripled. King Firecrusher's assessment was that... the Firemoons are grooming a fourth god!"[1]*

Chapter 856: Seething Killing Intent

It was no exaggeration to say that Master Stillwinter was currently stunned. He had never seen any divine ability or magical technique like this. Nor had he experienced a sensation like this. But he

could clearly sense the majesty of the rippling water. A profound sense of deadly crisis rose up within him.

He could sense that he had lost some of his ability to move, and his cultivation base was locked down and totally still. Combined with the pressure from the violet moon and the encircling soul threads, it meant that even if he did have some heaven-overturning, sea-inverting abilities, they couldn't be used at the moment. All he could do was think.

Because of that, he was reeling at the thought of all his secrets being made visible. He looked down at the water and saw that everything about himself was reflected there, including the entire path he had walked so far in his journey of cultivation. Everything that belonged to him and all his secrets were there, whether they were illusory techniques or material items.

He suddenly came to the conclusion... that if his reflection sustained damage, the same would happen to his true form. That premonition prompted him to struggle to free himself, except that he couldn't move a muscle.

The version of himself in the water grew clearer. The sensation of death grew more intense.

Meanwhile, Xu Qing's eyes glittered. By means of the divine ability of Fishing the Moon in the Well, he had learned something very unexpected. And that related to Master Stillwinter's reserve powers! Clearly, this was why he ranked second in the Firemoon Darkheavens' echelon.

Ninety-seven god monuments. Totems of ninety-seven perished gods!

The sensation caused Xu Qing's chest to tighten. However, he knew that now wasn't the time to speculate or analyze. Therefore, after a brief glance, he unhesitatingly reached out and closed his fingers into a fist.

"This world of heaven and earth can be considered a well..." he said, his voice thrumming as if with ancient time as it echoed over the water.

Every word he spoke contained some of the dao. And the elements combined into a water drop that was the beginning of the mysterious daoist magic.

The water drop hit the surface of the water, and ripples spread out. They distorted the reflection of Master Stillwinter, as well as the ninety-seven souls. The ripples became a huge hand, which then reached down, and grabbed the ninety-seven souls to fish them out!

Xu Qing wanted them all!

Master Stillwinter's mind spun as a painful tearing sensation swept through him. At the same time, the ninety-seven souls in the water trembled.

As Xu Qing put more force into his effort to fish out the souls, they distorted, slowly bending up toward the surface of the water. It looked as though Xu Qing would fish them out into the open at any moment.

But then, the god monuments that contained the souls flickered with golden light. The totems that depicted the various gods then opened their eyes as if they were alive. The golden pupils all locked onto Xu Qing.

Xu Qing's heart started racing. Despite being separated by the water, it was no surprise the gazes of ninety-seven gods caused him to immediately show signs of mutation. Fleshy tendrils sprouted all over him, and his soul filled with intense pain.

At the same time, the ninety-seven gods erupted with a force of expulsion, which instantly affected the well, and caused Xu Qing's fishing effort to fail for the first time ever!

Simultaneously, Master Stillwinter started to struggle against the binding effects.

Xu Qing's expression was grave as he sent out godsource to maintain his current state. His eyes narrowed. He now had two theories regarding the ninety-seven god monuments.

The first theory was that they were some type of ceremony. And since he couldn't fish them all out, then maybe he would just try taking one. Perhaps that would interrupt the ceremony.

The second theory was that one of the ninety-seven souls was Master Stillwinter's life essence soul. If he could extract that one, it could be deadly.

However, the difficulty level would be extreme, and he didn't have enough time to go slowly and carefully. Eyes glittering with cold light, he scanned the ninety-seven souls, picked one, and then reached out with his right hand and unleashed the full power of Fishing the Moon in the Well.

He focused on that one specific soul. A huge illusory hand appeared on the surface of the water. It dipped down, surrounded that one soul, and then jerked up.

The sound of splashing water was accompanied by the enraged roars of the other ninety-six souls. That alone caused the hand formed by Xu Qing to start falling apart. The soul he'd grabbed was struggling, and the other souls were rejecting his presence. Because of that, despite having grabbed onto that one specific soul, he couldn't get it out of the water.

Seeing that nothing was working, Xu Qing took a deep breath, lifted his right foot, and then stomped it down onto the surface of the water. Muffled rumbling swept out as the water rushed toward the crumbling hand, entered it, and bolstered it. Because everything was focused on the hand, the entire well started to fade away.

The hand continued crumbling; Xu Qing continued bolstering it. Eventually, just before the hand was about to collapse into nothing, Master Stillwinter's ninety-seventh soul broke through the surface of the water to appear in front of Xu Qing.

When Xu Qing sensed it, he felt slightly disappointed to discover that it didn't contain Master Stillwinter's life essence soul. Yet it was without the slightest hesitation that Xu Qing then turned and fled.

A piercing cry rang out behind him, accompanied by the sound of splashing water.

Fishing the Moon in the Well had disappeared!

A terrifying aura erupted from Master Stillwinter, who was still howling loudly. Being able to move once again, his bloodshot eyes locked onto the fleeing Xu Qing. At the same time, fear lingered within him.

Xu Qing had speculated correctly. The ninety-seven souls did contain one that was Master Stillwinter's life essence soul. If Xu Qing had fished that one out, Master Stillwinter would have

been on his way to death now. It was the first time since he had begun practicing cultivation that Master Stillwinter had felt such an intense level of deadly crisis.

What was more, though Xu Qing hadn't been able to extract the soul he wanted, it didn't change the fact that Master Stillwinter was now missing a god monument, which was equally damaging. The tearing sensation that filled him caused his face to distort. The only thing he could think of at the moment was to give chase, get that soul back, and put it back inside to make himself whole again. Though he still felt lingering fear, he also sensed raging killing intent within himself.

"Time to die!" he roared, taking a step forward. That single step took him all the way to Xu Qing, where he viciously shoved his hand out.

Seeing the incoming blow, Xu Qing's eyes glittered with mysterious light and he waved his left hand. His ancient sun appeared.

This was a trump card that could be considered overwhelmingly powerful. Unleashing it would have terrifying consequences, and Xu Qing wasn't even sure if he would be able to evade the blast if he detonated it.

That consideration was the main reason that, after arriving here in Firemoon Darkheaven territory, he had only used the power of a Dawning Sun as a threat.

The moment the ancient sun appeared, the pursuing Master Stillwinter directly referenced that very concern.

"A Dawning Sun! Xu Qing, if you dare to detonate a Dawning Sun here, you'll wipe out the Mountain and Sea Region. You might as well just declare war on the Firemoon Darkheavens! Based on my species' temperament, we'll immediately send troops against humankind. After all, you're human, and the Dawning Suns are humankind's domain treasures!

"Don't use the Dawning Sun, and you're just a dead person. But use it, and you'll still die, but so will the rest of humankind! Do you really dare to do something like that, Xu Qing?"

Master Stillwinter was enraged, but managed to keep his cool. Having directly stated Xu Qing's biggest concern, he didn't hesitate to raise his hand and then drop it in an attack.

Unfortunately, the presence of a Dawning Sun was not something he could just discount. Thus, he held back some of his cultivation base power in case he needed to defend himself. A boom rang out as Xu Qing was sent spinning back, blood spraying out of his mouth.

He did not detonate the ancient sun. However, it wasn't because of anything Master Stillwinter had said. His entire reason for bringing the sun out to begin with wasn't to detonate it, but to use it as a threat. It was a message to Master Stillwinter that he had a trump card and was willing to end their fight in mutual destruction. He simply wanted to distract his enemy with misgivings. Those misgivings would limit how much his enemy could do overall.

Xu Qing's facial expression didn't change when he saw that his plan was working. He hung the ancient sun at his belt, all while simultaneously backing up and pulling out the soul he had fished

out. He squeezed his hand down onto the soul. He had been holding it ever since extracting it, as it was another trump card he could use. As he squeezed down on it, Master Stillwinter shivered, and intense pain swept through him.

Next, Little Shadow and Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior appeared. Along with the violet moon, they attacked Master Stillwinter.

Xu Qing didn't slow down at all. He just kept fleeing at top speed.

Master Stillwinter was starting to get irritated, and his killing intent was intensifying. With the wave of his hand, he sent the shadow and the patriarch spinning away. Bypassing the violet moon, he continued his pursuit.

However, after only ten breaths of time passed, Xu Qing clenched his right hand tighter onto the soul, which creaked as though it might shatter.

Intense pain erupted from Master Stillwinter's soul. Howling shrilly, he prepared to make a move. But then Xu Qing's eyes turned pitch black. Looking over his shoulder, he sent a mist of taboo poison spreading out to cover Master Stillwinter.

At the same time, he took out a command medallion and sent some divine will inside.

"Food's here, Your Majesty."

He threw the command medallion out to activate it. But only a moment later, the medallion tumbled right back into Xu Qing's hands. A fluctuation rolled out of it.

*"Corpses of dead gods? No way! I only eat live food!"*

Frowning, Xu Qing kept running.

Master Stillwinter closed in again and was about to launch his attack. But then Xu Qing squeezed down harder on the soul in his right hand while simultaneously saying,

"This world of heaven and earth can be considered a well..." Heaven and earth distorted as water ripples appeared.

Master Stillwinter instinctively stopped in place. Except that, an instant later, nothing happened. The water vanished.

Xu Qing couldn't possibly use Fishing the Moon in the Well twice in such a short period of time. His words had been a bluff. And he took advantage of Master Stillwinter's hesitation to shoot as far off into the distance as possible. At the same time, he kept crushing the soul in his hand.

Master Stillwinter seemed on the verge of going mad. Blood-red light flared off of him as he once again gave chase.

But then a host of prison cells appeared overhead. It was D-132.

Xu Qing knew how people thought. When people felt a sense of danger, only to find out they had been tricked, they would instinctively start to relax. At the same time, if you inflicted pain on the soul of the enemy, it would distract them and prevent them from thinking clearly. Attacking at a moment like that would bring the best chances of success.

It was why Xu Qing hadn't just crushed the soul completely from the beginning. One big blast of pain wasn't as effective as continuous pain. That said, it was something that couldn't be done repeatedly, as the enemy would quickly acclimate to the pain. Therefore, the best tactic seemed to be to keep up the continuous pain before releasing a huge blast at the end.

Sure enough, when D-132 appeared, it quickly surrounded Master Stillwinter.

At the same time, the fleeing Xu Qing didn't even look over his shoulder. He just squeezed down with all his might, detonating the soul in his hand. The soul shattered, releasing a huge blast of dangerous force.

The god monument connected to the soul was covered by Xu Qing's godsource. Then Xu Qing, gritting his teeth against his own injuries, shot at top speed toward the Ninedawns Forbidden Lands.

Just as he disappeared over the horizon, howls of grief rose up from the inmates in D-132. The prison shattered in all directions, and Master Stillwinter appeared, his hair disheveled as he dragged a huge finger behind him. His expression was completely ferocious. The pain from the shattered soul was hard to bear.

The finger, meanwhile, shivered. Then a face appeared on its surface, and it was clearly terrified.

"Don't kill me! I was forced to do all this. I'll help you! I've been wanting to put an end to that fiendish killer for a long time now. Let's work together! We want the same thing!"

"Shut up!" Master Stillwinter shouted, his killing intent spiking. Looking at Xu Qing disappearing, he gave chase at top speed.

#### Chapter 857: Entering Ninedawns

Xu Qing sped through midair as fast as possible. The Mountain and Sea Region was packed with mutagen. In addition, the sealing marks put in place by the Firemoons' three gods made it difficult to perform long-range teleportations. And some teleportation items didn't work at all. However, after all of his successive plans worked out, Xu Qing bought himself some time and put some distance between himself and his enemy.

The price to pay had been significant. Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior was injured. Little Shadow had faded significantly. And Xu Qing himself was hurt. Because of those things, the fight had reached the point where proceeding further wouldn't have been good.

Then there was D-132.

Xu Qing's eyes narrowed. He had left D-132 behind, but it wasn't gone. And as long as it bought him the time he needed, its loss would be worth it. And given enough time later, he would be able to redevelop the D-132 cell block.

As for the authority of misfortune from the god's finger, he had already mastered it. And the amnesia came from adding destiny aura.

It's too bad about the finger and the inmates. They're gone. Now I'll have to refill the cells.

He felt a bit of regret. But then he thought about how useless the god's finger usually was, and realized there was no point in worrying about it.

After confirming he was going in the right direction, he shot forward. The path he picked was going to be very important at a moment like this. A day ago, if he had picked to continue on his way to hillworm territory, he would never have been able to escape like he was now.

Things were different now, though. He was about three or four hours away from the Ninedawns Forbidden Lands, maybe even closer.

Before I pulled out my ancient sun, Master Stillwinter might have been able to catch up to me. But now... he's not going to risk getting too close. What's more, he's going to be worrying about what else I might throw at him....

Around that time, he sensed D-132 collapse. His heart sank.

That quickly? That finger really is useless!

Expression turning cold, Xu Qing bit onto the tip of his tongue to get an added burst of speed.

About two hours passed. Xu Qing was now only about an hour away from the edge of the Ninedawns Forbidden Lands. As he flew through the air, he suddenly dodged to the side.

As he did, a beam of red light stabbed through the spot he had just occupied, then exploded into a flower of blood. More blood flowers appeared, exploding one after another and turning everything bright red.

A figure shot like lightning over the horizon.

Xu Qing scowled as he dodged back and forth amongst the exploding blood flowers. There were so many that he knew eventually there would be one that he didn't notice or couldn't avoid. As the flowers exploded, they turned into strands of blood-colored light that swept toward Xu Qing.

He blurred to the side, sending out soul threads to fight against the blood strands. Sadly, the blood strands were extraordinary. Though he destroyed a few, there were still plenty left to wrap around his waist. He had no choice but to lurch to a stop.

As that happened, the pursuing Master Stillwinter shot forward with a burst of speed, piercing through the air to appear in front of Xu Qing.

His expression was malicious, and his eyes burned with killing intent. But instead of launching a blow, he quickly performed an incantation gesture.

The exploding blood flowers all turned into blood-colored strands that whipped through the air to entangle Xu Qing. In the mere blink of an eye, they wrapped him up. Xu Qing's face was pale and his expression anxious as he saw the blood strands slowly forming a cocoon around him.

"You won't be getting away this time!" Master Stillwinter, whose soul still ached with pain, saw Xu Qing trapped, and his killing intent grew even stronger. Blurring forward, he entered the interior of the blood cocoon. As he did, he finally spotted Xu Qing's face.

Strangely, Xu Qing didn't seem worried at all. Instead, his eyes shone with aggressive light as he lifted his right hand. Astonishingly, floating above his palm was a finger-nail sized, brown-colored flame wisp. The flame wisp flickered dully, occasionally expanding and occasionally contracting. It



looked unstable. What was truly shocking about it was how it caused the clouds in the sky to turn black. Thunder boomed and lightning crashed.

Master Stillwinter's heart seized with a sensation of danger. Every scrap of his flesh and muscles suddenly seemed to be conscious, and screamed at him that this flame was extremely dangerous.

Without the slightest hesitation, he backed up. He was too slow.

Xu Qing gently tossed the brown flame wisp toward Master Stillwinter. As he shot through the air, it rapidly grew larger. At the same time, its unstable nature grew more prominent. Rumbling sounds echoed out as a sheet of brown fire erupted from the flame wisp. Along with it came a terrifying aura. It was a destructive aura that seemed capable of immolating anything and everything. As it spread, the blood cocoon couldn't stand up to the heat, and burst into flames. Bolts of lightning fell like rain, instantly smashing into the ground.

As thunder crashed, the brown flame expanded explosively. A terrifying flame lightning swept out with heaven-shaking, earth-shattering force, destroying everything it touched. The force was so majestic that it even caused Master Stillwinter's heart to leap in his chest as a gray whirlwind swept over him.

This fire was the very same mysterious fire that Little Shadow formed after devouring a number of forbidden regions. Its name was... 'Ruuuuuumble, Ruuuuuumble, Ruuuuuumble!' [1]

Xu Qing had been prepared for what would happen; as soon as the detonation occurred, he had Little Shadow spread out to cover him. Although Little Shadow issued a soul-piercing cry upon being burned, it still managed to naturally resist the fire. Therefore, though Xu Qing was affected to a small degree, he wasn't hurt.

He didn't take time to look back and see the result. Though it was theoretically possible that the fearsome detonation had killed his opponent, Xu Qing had always been a cautious person, and didn't want to give his enemy room to pull a fast one.

It was a complete unknown, and when dealing with unknown factors, the probability of success or failure was always 50/50. But if he didn't go to investigate, then the chances of something unusual happening went down to 0. That was why he didn't hesitate to simply flee.

\*\*\*

Shortly after he was gone, the power of self-detonation erupted from the spot where Master Stillwinter had been inundated with the brown fire. It spread out for 50 kilometers in all directions, shaking everything. The power of the blast wasn't on the same level as the brown flame, but it was still incredibly destructive.

Thankfully, Xu Qing was long gone, so he wasn't within the range of destruction.

A moment later, as the shock waves died down, and the brown flames were wiped out, a huge crater was revealed. Everything within the range of the mysterious fire had been wiped out. And the 50-kilometer area was filled with the aura of self-detonation.

At the same time, a figure could be seen zooming toward the area from over the horizon, looking down from midair, his expression grim. He was, of course, Master Stillwinter.

This Xu Qing is proving to be very hard to kill!

His eyes glittered with cold light. In his caution, he had sent a blood clone of himself out front, while keeping his true form further back. That was how leery he was of Xu Qing's gruish methods.

It was the self-detonation of the blood clone that released such deadly power. He had been thinking that his tactic would at least result in Xu Qing being injured. But now he could see that this opponent was both more decisive and more gruish than he had anticipated. His own cautious nature was what led to the self-detonation of his blood clone being absolutely meaningless.

"Dammit!"

He looked up in the direction Xu Qing had fled, his expression steely and his heart full of regret. He had previously believed that Xu Qing would be easy to kill. After everything he had done during the chase, he still felt like he had the upper hand. But Xu Qing just had too many tactics to deploy, which made it impossible for Master Stillwinter to be optimally effective.

Should I keep chasing him...?

Master Stillwinter's soul hurt. He took a deep breath, and his eyes glittered coldly.

You want to go into the Ninedawns Forbidden Lands? In that case... I'll send you on your way!

As a top chosen in the Firemoon Darkheaven people, it was only natural that Master Stillwinter knew quite a bit about the Ninedawns Forbidden Lands. He was fully aware it was a danger zone.

There were always people in the Great Hunt who considered themselves favored by fortune, and would go into the Ninedawns Forbidden Lands. The reality was that no one could get out of that place once they went in. It was a death trap.

With such thoughts on his mind, Master Stillwinter continued the chase. However, he wasn't moving as urgently as before, and he suppressed his killing intent.

\*\*\*

Xu Qing sensed the change almost immediately. For a moment, hesitation flickered in his eyes, but it quickly turned back into determination. Now was not the time to change his mind. He would proceed according to his original plan to enter the ninedawns' territory.

Having reached this point in his train of thought, Xu Qing rubbed his chest at the spot where the violet crystal was. He pushed down, causing his cultivation base to bubble to life and violet light to fill his body. The stimulation from the violet crystal caused him to regenerate more quickly.

Not slowing down at all, he shot toward the Ninedawns Forbidden Lands. About an hour later, it appeared in front of him, covered with gray fog. The fog seemed filled with anguished faces, and cries echoed out from within it, filled with despair and madness.

Xu Qing took in the sights and sounds, then breathed in deeply and shot forward, disappearing into the fog.

\*\*\*

After the time it takes an incense stick to burn, Master Stillwinter appeared outside of the Ninedawns Forbidden Lands. Looking at the gray fog, he chuckled coldly.

This Xu Qing has probably heard about the Ninedawns Forbidden Lands. Sadly, he doesn't know the dangers lurking inside. Only members of the echelon know the truth. If even a bit of that fog touches you, you can never leave the place....

#### Chapter 858: The Gray Fog of Ninedawns

In the Mountain and Sea Region, the Ninedawns Forbidden Lands was both physically and figuratively the core of the region. From an outside perspective, it was covered with fog rife with both mystery and death.

Every time the Great Hunt occurred, there would be people who went inside and never came out. However, the stories that constantly spread about the ninedawns ensured that, from generation to generation, there was no end to the Firemoon cultivators that were drawn to the place.

Master Stillwinter could be considered among them. In the past, he had considered entering the place to explore it. But the more he learned about the location, including secrets that weren't known to the public, the more speculations cropped up.... In the end, he didn't dare.

Ninedawns... is a very special name.

Master Stillwinter's eyes gleamed as he looked into the fog. Thinking back to the fight with Xu Qing, he had to admit that, though Xu Qing wasn't on his level, killing him wasn't exactly something easy to do.

He definitely counts as this generation's number one chosen in humankind. Or at least... he was.

Master Stillwinter looked away and flicked his sleeve. A blurry blood clone appeared in front of him and bowed deeply.

"Go tell King Brightsouth that Xu Qing is dead," Master Stillwinter said coolly. He turned, floated up into the air, and vanished. From his perspective, it didn't matter exactly when Xu Qing died. The fact was that he had entered the Ninedawns Forbidden Lands, and thus, the infection of the fog would ensure that he could never leave.

\*\*\*

Xu Qing... had already picked up on that point!

He was surrounded by gray fog, and his expression was dour. The moment he entered, the fog swept toward him with such greed and longing that it seemed alive. It seemed like it wanted to absorb him. The fog wasn't mutagen, but rather, something else.

When Xu Qing's violet godsource touched the gray fog, it felt like it was permanently restricted. At the same time, his soul threads wilted listlessly. It was as if the Ninedawns Forbidden Lands was specifically antagonistic to gods, and thus, everything related to gods was rejected by it. Xu Qing's god state began to melt away and destabilize.

My violet moon godsource comes from Crimson Mother.... Although it's not comparable to her, on a substructural level, and a personhood level, it's the same. Yet this gray fog can suppress it!

Xu Qing had known from the beginning that the Ninedawns Forbidden Lands was a complicated place, and now that was clearer than ever.

If it was just a suppression of things related to gods, it might not have been a big deal. But Xu Qing quickly realized that his cultivation base power was also being rejected and suppressed. The furnaces in his secret troves were about to go out. Even his heavenly dao... was unexpectedly going to sleep.

Everything is being rejected?

Xu Qing frowned. What was even more unexpected was that he was able to sense some of the special power of the gray fog. Like bonds of karma, he was restricted and bound... making it impossible to flee this place.

After some thought, he tried to take a step back. He unleashed all the strength he could muster to make it happen, but after taking only one step, felt like he couldn't even move.

Then he experienced a sensation of deadly crisis hundreds, thousands, or even tens of thousands of times as powerful as he had sensed when dealing with Master Stillwinter. It filled him from head to toe and made him shake so hard he felt like he might collapse.

Then he heard whispering sounds coming from the surrounding fog. All of the voices were saying the same thing, and their sounds combined became like the roar of heavenly thunder.

“Die!”

The word contained infinite fury and rage. In fact, Xu Qing hadn't encountered killing intent as intense as this ever before in his life.

He could sense that if he took another step back, then the Ninedawns Forbidden Lands would unleash destructive power that he couldn't possibly defend against. He would be killed in body and soul. However, because of the force of expulsion pushing against him, moving forward was going to be very difficult. And if the force of expulsion kept up, he would eventually be turned into a mortal. Going back meant certain death.

It wasn't a common thing for Xu Qing to find himself in an impossible situation. Eyes narrowing, he suppressed his frustration and forced himself to remain calm as he studied his surroundings.

He was currently in the Ninedawns Forbidden Lands, but had only just passed over the border. The fog here was thick compared to the outside, but was actually thin compared to the depths of the place.

Things weren't very clear, but they were clear enough to get a general idea of what was around him. There were no plants. There were no mountains. There was no mutagen! The ground beneath his feet was a spongy marsh. Within the black marsh were countless skeletons. It was impossible to say how many years they had been there, untouched by sunlight.

The entire area seemed both ancient and desolate. The only sound to be heard was the sizzling of Xu Qing's god state as it continued to melt. That was the sound made by the invasion of the fog.

As his god state continued to destabilize, he became less and less capable of defending himself.

If I just stand here, I might be able to resist the invasion for a bit longer. However, that's not going to resolve the situation. And since I can't go back, then... rather than sit around and wait to die, I might as well go in further. Let's see what these ninedawns are like. Maybe... I can figure out a way to survive.

Xu Qing's eyes glittered as he made his decision and started walking. He took every step with full vigilance, taking care not to sink down into the muck, but at the same time, defending himself against the fog.

Six hours passed.

As Xu Qing trekked into the Ninedawns Forbidden Lands, he didn't see any signs of life. Nor did he find any of the ninedawns beasts.

The place was so huge it seemingly had no end. Other than the enveloping fog, it had nothing inside. The only change he noticed was that the ground got softer as he went in.

Eventually, his speed declined. His fourth-level god state couldn't last any longer, and reverted to his third-level god state. After that he dropped to the second-level god state. And finally the first-level god state.

Ultimately, all of his soul threads went still. The violet moon was dormant. Xu Qing's true form was now visible on the marsh. The fog invaded, while taboo poison spread from inside of him.

The taboo poison personhood was on a higher level than Crimson Mother's godsource, so it lasted longer. But as time passed, Xu Qing's anxiety increased as his taboo poison weakened. And then, under the pressure of the fog, the taboo poison... went dormant.

Also dormant were Xu Qing's secret troves. They went dark one by one. Finally, the flames in the secret trove furnaces went out. The greed of the gray fog grew stronger, until it was like a fiendish devil stalking around him, looking for any opportunity to pounce on him.

But then a bronze incense burner appeared atop Xu Qing's head. It looked completely ancient, and emanated strange fluctuations and streams of black smoke. It was some 300 meters high in the air, and its black smoke flowed down like a waterfall, surrounding Xu Qing and blocking the fog. This was the same incense burner Xu Qing had taken from the Whitemarsh cultivator named Sir Heavenhark, back during their fight over the ninth forbidden mountain in that forbidden region. [1]

With that item, Sir Heavenhark was able to defend against Xu Qing's taboo poison, and thus successfully step into that ninth mountain. That alone made it obvious how formidable it was.

With the protective smoke around Xu Qing, his dormant cultivation base and godsource stirred again. That karmic-like tug was only getting stronger; to a certain degree, it also reduced the pressure on Xu Qing.

Unfortunately... he could sense that the incense ring inside the incense burner was being worn away rapidly, and wouldn't last very much longer. Given the intensity of the invasion, it wouldn't last much more than an incense stick's worth of time.[2]

I don't have that much time to get my godsource and cultivation base back to normal. But even that will only be a temporary solution....

Xu Qing's expression was grim as he looked around. From what he could tell, he was fairly deep into the Ninedawns Forbidden Lands, but wasn't anywhere near the center. Other than fog, he hadn't seen much other than marshlands.

I wonder what's under the surface of the marsh?

Xu Qing looked down at the black marsh and decided that he shouldn't be the one to experiment.

“Little Shadow,” he said. His shadow appeared beneath his feet on the surface of the marsh. It sent weak fluctuations his way and made sure to highlight the portions of itself that had been burned. It was clearly trying to remind Xu Qing that it was injured.

Xu Qing ignored it. “Go see what’s below the surface.”

Little Shadow felt it was very unfair, but after all the years, it had come to accept its fate. Thus, it sank into the muck below and then spread out.

After going down only about 9 meters, the shadow suddenly spasmed and let loose a howl of grief. It even started to fade away.

“Pain... decay... disperse... afraid....”

Xu Qing remained unmoved, and focused on just sensing what was below.

When Little Shadow realized Xu Qing was ignoring it, there was no choice but to ignore the feeling of being dispersed and simply go deeper.

Soon it reached a depth of 30 meters. 150 meters. Eventually it was 300 meters down. It was surrounded by muck. The sensation of fading into nothing was stronger than ever, but Little Shadow managed to send out some pleading emotional fluctuations.

“Continue... die... afraid... please....”

Xu Qing mulled the situation over. “If I die here, so do you. But if you help me get out of here, then I promise that after you die, I’ll figure out a way to resurrect you.”

Little Shadow could sense the determination in his voice. Shivering, it erupted with even stronger fluctuations as it dropped down further.

600 meters. 900 meters. 1,500 meters....

The sensation of fading into nothing caused Little Shadow to moan with agony. It began to crumble, until eventually turning into dozens of threads, one of which headed back toward Xu Qing. The rest kept going down further in a very suicidal fashion.

The shadow threads crumbled one after another. The remainder interlocked like a web as they continued to descend. The howling and destruction continued. After about ten breaths of time passed. Little Shadow had collapsed dozens of times, turning into hundreds of shadow threads. But eventually there was only one left that reached a depth of 3,000 meters.

Just before it collapsed, it transmitted an image into Xu Qing’s mind.

When he saw that image, he shivered from head to toe. “Is that...?”

Chapter 859: In the Depths of the Marsh

The image transmitted to Xu Qing by Little Shadow was shocking beyond comparison.

3,000 meters down in the muck was an absolutely spectacular cave. From the perspective of the cave, the muck was the sky. And the cave itself was like an isolated, standalone world. Everything was dark, but it was possible to see wisps of gray fog floating everywhere.

However, that wasn't what had Xu Qing's head spinning. What shook him to the core was the gigantic shrine floating in the middle of the cave. [1]

The shrine took up about ten percent of the entire space in the world of the cave. It was roughly rectangular, such that it initially could be taken to be a coffin.

Rotten ribbons hung down from it, which swayed back and forth like tentacles. The long ones descended into the darkness below, while the short ones were still some 3,000 meters in length.

The shrine was dark gold, but didn't shine at all, as if it were completely corroded. It seemed to have existed for such a long time that it was completely infused with ancientness.

There was something terrifying enshrined within. It was a creature that resembled a spider. It had dark golden spots all over it, a male head, and sixteen legs. A tree branch had been stabbed into its forehead. Though the branch was old and faded, to Xu Qing, looking at it felt like looking at a sun. Four long ice spears pierced into the body of the spider, firmly locking it into place in the shrine. Xu Qing's keen senses could detect moon fluctuations coming from all four spears. There was more. There were eight clay pots on eight of the terrifying entity's sixteen legs. All of them exuded intense pressure that contained the aura of a god of stars.

This terrifying entity had been sealed to death! This shrine really was a coffin! It gave off the sensation of both storage and sealing.

Looking closely, it was also possible to see a host of sealing marks carved into the exterior of the shrine. Every one seemed to pulse with a godly sensation.

Xu Qing was shaken. However, everything up to this point was only part of the whole. In fact, it could barely be considered half.

What was the most shocking of all was... what was beneath the shrine. Underneath the shrine in the void of this cave world, where the mist swirled, there was something *as rare as phoenix feathers or qilin horns*. It was... a gigantic mountain made of gray-colored bone ash!

It was slightly smaller than the shrine, but not by much.

The mountain of bone ash emitted a constant stream of gray fog. Obviously, this was the source of the fog in the Ninedawns Forbidden Lands. [2]

It was hard to imagine exactly what kind of entity could create a pile of bone ash like this after dying. Surrounding the main pile were nine smaller mountains.

To be more precise, they weren't actually mountains. They were nine skulls! They looked almost like the skulls of dragons, being completely vicious and pulsing with a sensation of ancient wildlands. They had no flesh on them, but from the gaping maws, it was possible to sense how furious and insane they had been in life. They pulsed with an ancient feeling, while at the same time, the sensation of a sealing was very strong.

The vision ended there.

Back on the marshy surface of the Ninedawns Forbidden Lands, Xu Qing shivered, coughed up nine mouthfuls of blood, and staggered backward. Although he had only seen the image as sent to him by Little Shadow, it was still difficult for him to sustain.

As for Little Shadow... it gave off no fluctuations at all, making it impossible to tell if it was alive or dead.

At the moment, Xu Qing wasn't inclined to worry about Little Shadow. His expression flickered as he looked at the ground and pondered what he had just seen. He was already speculating like wild.

That shrine is itself a sealing mark. And the spider inside of it is a god! It has the power of the three gods of sun, moon, and star on it. It was suppressed by those three, but still needs additional sealing techniques to deal with. How formidable. And then there's that pile of bone ash under the shrine....

Xu Qing took a deep breath. He wasn't sure who that bone ash came from, but the nine skulls made him think of a name.

“Ninedawns?”

Xu Qing wasn't sure. Based on the information he'd studied, the ninedawns resembled something with nine lanterns, which wasn't exactly what he had seen just now. Xu Qing was starting to get the feeling that the information circulating about the Ninedawns Forbidden Lands was largely fictitious. That said, he wasn't sure what the truth really was.

Whether or not that thing is a ninedawns, the fact that it's here means it's important. If it is a ninedawns, and the ninedawns is the national animal of the Firemoons, and has special significance, then what is it doing imprisoned down there? And why is it being sealed even though it's obviously dead?

There was a scaffolding of sealing going on here. Three gods had sealed some unknown god, and that unknown god was sealing the pile of bone ash and the nine skulls.

There had to be some karma at play, but Xu Qing wasn't sure what it could be. Frowning, he checked the bronze incense burner.

It's going to burn out soon....

Thanks to Little Shadow's work, it was now clear that the area 3,000 meters below the marshy surface was an important location in the Ninedawns Forbidden Lands.

And now Xu Qing knew where the gray fog came from. As far as he was concerned, there weren't many options to pick from.

Maybe the key to getting out of here lies in the source of the gray fog. I wonder what would happen if I got some of that bone ash... or maybe one of those nine skulls....

It seemed like a completely crazy idea.

Xu Qing mulled it over briefly, then checked his bag of holding.

There's another possibility that might help me last a bit longer here....

Xu Qing took out a piece of Crimson Mother's flesh and tossed it into the incense burner. The incense burner vibrated, then more smoke spilled out of it. However, in this environment, the only result was that the breakdown of the incense burner slowed. And a side-effect was that the fog beyond the smoke grew thicker.

Again, it's not a long-term solution. The more godly power I use, the stronger the confinement around me.



Xu Qing looked at the incense burner and sighed.

Thanks to the barrier created by the smoke, his godsource power had recovered to a degree. After doing some time calculations, he thought back to what he had seen just now.

The mountain of bone ash is beneath the shrine, so it won't be easy to reach. The nine skulls, though, are further away from the shrine....

Xu Qing's eyes glittered with determination and a bit of craziness. Looking at the marshy land beneath his feet, he unhesitatingly put away the surviving remnants of the incense burner.

As the gray fog swept toward him, his godpower surged, and he sank down into the muck. The instant he was submerged, he felt intense pain. It was a feeling like corrosion, whether from the muck or the fog. And the invasion corroded both his body and his soul.

Xu Qing forced himself to endure. With the help of his cultivation base and godsource, he dropped down. In the blink of an eye, he was at the 300-meter depth. The pain and corrosion were terrifying, and there were parts of Xu Qing's flesh that had simply disappeared.

But he kept speeding downward. 600 meters. 900 meters.... When he reached the 1,200-meter depth, he looked like hardly more than a skeleton. Gritting his teeth, he dropped down another 300 meters. He was now at 1,500 meters.

That was his limit. His body was completely rotted away, and his soul was heavily damaged. In that critical moment, Xu Qing took out a piece of Crimson Mother's flesh, put it in his mouth, and wolfed it down. The moment he did, something like the fire of a sun erupted in his belly. As it rippled through him, godsource proliferated within him.

His emaciated form nearly collapsed. Truth be told, in any other situation, directly eating some of Crimson Mother's flesh like that would cause Xu Qing to crumble to pieces. That was why he hadn't done so during the fighting with Master Stillwinter. But in this regard, the force of expulsion against godly things here plus the gray fog and the muck, were all helping Xu Qing. It was similar to how placing an overfull balloon under water could prevent it from popping.

With the addition of Crimson Mother's flesh, he could continue a bit longer. Taking advantage of the new burst of force, he continued down.

1,800 meters. 2,100 meters. 2,400 meters. Around that time, the extra energy provided by Crimson Mother's flesh was almost gone. 2,700 meters was another limit.

Xu Qing knew that he couldn't just keep devouring Crimson Mother's flesh. Even considering the environment, his body couldn't take that for long. Extending his nearly vanished right hand in the direction of the nearest skull, he then closed his hand into a fist. That grasping gesture caused a well to appear. It was hard to say if it was illusory or corporeal, but that didn't matter.

Unfortunately... that area was sealed, plus, he was quite a distance away. Therefore, all Fishing the Moon in the Well did was cause some ripples.

Xu Qing grasped nothing!

The fishing failed!

Xu Qing's body was truly starting to melt away now. It was as if the muck was devouring him. But then a life lamp flew out and turned into a sundial. It activated, and the power of time erupted out.

Time reversed. Xu Qing vanished. When he reappeared, he was still in the muck. But instead of being at a depth of 2,700 meters, he was only at 300 meters. The environment affected everything here; even the time power of the sundial.

Without any hesitation, Xu Qing shot up. When he burst out of the muck, blood sprayed out of his mouth. His body was in really bad shape. He quickly took out the incense burner to float overhead.

Thanks to the barrier created by the incense burner, he could sit down cross-legged and focus completely on recovery.

Time passed. Every time the incense burner was about to burn out, Xu Qing would toss in a piece of Crimson Mother's flesh to keep it going. It was an extravagant waste, but it kept the fog at bay.

Unfortunately... he was out of options. It didn't matter that his current actions were like *drinking poison in the hope of quenching one's thirst*. There was nothing else he could do.

Half a day later, he opened his eyes. His injuries weren't completely gone, but his godsource was on the way to recovery. His soul threads were also lively again thanks to consuming some of Crimson Mother's flesh.

His heart ached at how much he had wasted. But all he could do was suppress that pain and continue focusing on recovery.

A day passed.

When Xu Qing opened his eyes again, his godly power was about half restored. Looking down at the muck, he thought back to his earlier failure.

There's one more option... that could theoretically work!

Chapter 860: Darkheaven Archmage

Using fleshly body power, I forced my way down 2,700 meters. It's just too difficult doing it that way, not even with all the augmentations and blessings at my disposal. Of even greater significance is the fact that I only got out by using a sundial to reverse time. There are limits to that too. If I use it too often, I'll end up killing myself.

Fishing the Moon in the Well failed. One reason was the interference of the gray fog, but the other is that... I was too far away for Fishing the Moon in the Well to actually work. Considering all that, I wonder if I could somehow create a tunnel that goes past 3,000 meters, all the way to that cave. Then I could try Fishing the Moon in the Well again....

His eyes flickered thoughtfully. If he could make that method work, it would be a lot safer and would also increase the chances of success.

This tunnel wouldn't need to be very big. More like a crevice. A pinhole, really.

As Xu Qing looked at the muck, ideas came and went.

The muck had its own special properties, and he also had to consider the gray fog. Most of the ideas he came up with didn't stand up to scrutiny, so he discarded them. Ultimately, he waved his hand to produce a brown flame wisp!

Little Shadow had created that flame wisp after devouring a host of forbidden regions, and it was something akin to godfire. The terrifying fire was something not permitted to exist in the world, so if Xu Qing took it out anywhere but here, heavenly lightning would fall to destroy it.

But this was the Ninedawns Forbidden Lands, where heavenly daos were rejected. Thus, the flame wisp could exist in the open without provoking heavenly lightning. Unfortunately, it seemed to stimulate the gray fog, causing it to churn and seethe. There was also the sound of countless whispers and murmurs, which merged together into something like an echoing howl.

The fog rushed toward Xu Qing with mountain-toppling, sea-draining force, only to be stopped by the smoke. There it gathered, battering against the smoke as it tried to get inside and exterminate the flame wisp. They seemed as incongruent as fire and water.

Gaze hardening, Xu Qing performed an incantation gesture and pointed at the incense burner. As a result, it started burning with more fervor, sending out more smoke to resist the violent fog.

Why's the gray fog reacting like this...?

Xu Qing looked down at the muck, then at the flame wisp. He had started out with three such flame wisps. He had used one on Master Stillwinter, leaving two behind.

I guess I'll test it out!

Eyes narrowing, he unhesitatingly threw the brown flame wisp toward the muck. The instant it made contact, the muck melted like a snowflake in boiling water! The flame wisp dropped down with nothing to block its path.

As it proceeded down, the muck melted. However, at the same time, the gray fog raced into the hole toward it. It took only an instant for it to sweep over the flame wisp. It clearly wanted to extinguish it. However, the flame wisp was an astonishing thing. Although it showed signs of instability, it didn't stop moving down. And as it went, it melted all the muck around it.

300 meters. 900 meters. 1,500 meters. 2,100 meters....

More fog rushed in.

At the same time, the muck itself exerted a force of expulsion that was even greater than what Xu Qing or Little Shadow had dealt with.

The brown flame wisp grew fainter and fainter. Yet it was strong enough to reach the 3,000-meter point. Unfortunately, as it went down, the muck around it began to grow back, and the tunnel got smaller and smaller. Eventually, the flame wisp reached the exact same cave that Little Shadow had projected an image of.

The moment it reached the cave, all of the gray fog there exploded into a frenzy. Neverending gray fog overwhelmed the brown flame wisp, extinguishing it in an instant. The moment it was gone, the tunnel in the muck closed up.

Xu Qing's expression turned serious. He had considered using his final flame wisp, or possibly trying Fishing the Moon in the Well. But it seemed too risky, and the opportunity too fleeting. So instead, he just observed.

What he had just done could be considered a test. And he had learned something vital.

One flame wisp could work. But I lack something to follow it up with. It won't last long before the gray fog extinguishes it. Furthermore, the tunnel through the muck won't last long. Now that I'm rested, I can use Fishing the Moon in the Well again. But to use it a second time would require rest and recovery for my soul.

Xu Qing mulled over the different options. After a short time passed, he looked at the muck.

He had a way of dealing with the tunnel sealing up.

I can use sundial power to lock it in place temporarily!

Given that he had already done something similar when he tried to descend into the muck, he was confident that it would work.

But how do I make the flame wisp burn brighter and hotter?

Glancing at the incense burner, he waved his hand to produce some of Crimson Mother's flesh.

Crimson Mother's flesh works well with the incense burner. So theoretically speaking, it should be able to bolster the brown flame wisp....

Having reached this point in his train of thought, he took a deep breath, produced his third flame wisp, and sent it close to Crimson Mother's flesh.

He paid very close attention to every step of the process. This was his only hope. If it didn't work, then he would be down to his last option, which would be to use all of his remaining Crimson Mother flesh to try to break free from the Ninedawns Forbidden Lands.

As he watched very carefully, the flame wisp made contact with Crimson Mother's flesh.

Xu Qing was ready for something unexpected to happen. But after the long spate of bad luck, it seemed things were turning around. A hissing sound rang out, and then Crimson Mother's flesh showed signs of both igniting and melting. The brown flame wisp didn't wink out. It kept burning, and at the same time, seemed to push the flesh further toward the point of melting. Eventually, a drop of golden liquid like oil emerged from the flesh. The sparkling and translucent oil pulsed with the aura of a god, and the fluctuations it sent out caused the gray fog to again seethe.

Xu Qing was about to take the golden liquid, but then thought twice. Instead, he kept the flame wisp burning, and before long, the golden liquid grew large enough that it dropped down toward the muck. The muck melted just like it had for the flame wisp, and the golden droplet fell down and down.

Xu Qing's spirits lifted. Although this wasn't exactly what he had planned, it seemed to be achieving the same result. Thus, without the slightest hesitation, he kept the flame wisp burning.

The first drop of golden liquid dropped down several hundred meters before the gray mist destroyed it. And before the pinhole-sized tunnel could close up, a second golden droplet fell. It fell in the same spot, piercing through the muck like a hot knife through butter. All of the spots that had been about to close were destroyed. Then it reached the spot where the previous drop had stopped, and continued past that.

The ground trembled. The golden droplet pulsed with the aura of a god, melting everything around it and dropping down to 2,100 meters.

After that came a third, fourth, and fifth drop. All followed the same pattern. The tunnel was constantly opened and expanded. Eventually, it pierced all the way through the muck from top to bottom.

Xu Qing instantly performed an incantation gesture with his left hand and pointed out. A sundial appeared behind him, and the time-freezing power erupted into the tunnel. The tunnel, which had already started sealing up again, froze.

Taking advantage of the moment, Xu Qing's eyes blazed with a crazy light, and he sent out a burst of cultivation base power and godsource. His fourth-level god state formed. With a double-handed incantation gesture, he pushed toward the tunnel.

The entire world suddenly seemed to become a well. A boundless power surged out of Xu Qing, causing ripples to flow in all directions. Everything became the watery surface of a well. Thanks to the tunnel, the cave beneath, and everything in it, was now visible on the water. Although it wasn't extremely clear, it was better than before. At the very least... Xu Qing could now see the skull he had been targeting originally.

However, Xu Qing's actions were like those of a mayfly trying to shake an oak tree. He had used a clever way of opening a passage with the golden oil, and had then locked it open with sundial power. But it wasn't a very stable solution. The sundial was already emitting cracking sounds, and gray fog was rushing into the tunnel like the tide from the sea.

In that critical moment, Xu Qing reached out toward the reflection of the skull and forcefully fished it out! The motion caused a tremor to pass through him. The force opposing his grabbing action caused blood to spray out of his mouth.

More cracks spread out on the surface of the sundial. The gray mist grew thicker and stronger. The tunnel was starting to close.

Xu Qing's eyes were increasingly bloodshot. Gritting his teeth viciously, he held nothing back in his attempt to fish out the skull. He shook from head to toe, and wounds opened up all over him, quickly soaking him with blood. He looked like he was about to collapse. A howl escaped his lips.

Finally, his trembling hand pulled up a bit of water. Reflected in the water was a skull!

Then his sundial couldn't last any longer, and he had to dispel it. Endless amounts of fog shot up through the tunnel, and not even the drops of golden liquid could stop it. The tunnel closed.

More blood sprayed out of Xu Qing's mouth. He was covered in wounds and couldn't see clearly. However, it was with complete excitement that he looked down at his mangled right hand.

His face fell. The water in his hand did have a reflection of a skull in it, but it was blurry and fading away. There seemed to be no way to stop it!

Xu Qing was really getting anxious. It looked like the skull was about to disappear. Then, a crazy look appeared in his eyes as he opened his mouth and inhaled deeply. The reflection from the water zipped into his mouth. At the same time, he activated the violet crystal.

Rumbling sounds filled him, along with an uncontrollable power of self-detonation. Just before he exploded, violet light flared from his chest, spreading out to cover him with sealing power. At the same time, an ancient voice echoed in his mind, like something from long, long ago. It was both defiant and bitter.

“Father-mage, your son Ninedawns truly let down our Darkheaven Archmage people!”