

## Timescape 861

### Chapter 861: A Secret Kept by Gods

The bitter voice caused Xu Qing to reel mentally as memories that weren't his bubbled up within him. They were fragmented and didn't connect, almost like random puzzle pieces. Many were missing, and as a result, Xu Qing couldn't really piece them together into a meaningful whole. However, there was one thing that came through very clearly.

Many, many years ago, before the gods came to Revered Ancient, back in the time of Ancient time, the Firemoon Darkheaven people... weren't called by that name. Their species had a different name. They were... the Darkheaven Archmage people. They were both the subordinates of and among the greatest allies of Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity. And there was no species that received more support from humankind. They had a very close relationship with humans, and had worked hard to support Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity as he ascended the throne and conquered Revered Ancient.

Back during those times, their leader, who was called the antemage, and Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity were the closest of friends. During the days before they both reached their peak, they were comrades and confidants. Both had saved the other's life on multiple occasions.[1]

The antemage was shockingly powerful, and was called Dark Serenity's right-hand man. He had performed great services in the effort to unify Revered Ancient. The antemage's only son had even been given his name by Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity.

Those memory fragments flashed through Xu Qing's senses, shaking him to the core. His eyes opened, and they were full of surprise.

"Firemoon Darkheaven people," he murmured. "Darkheaven Archmage people...."

Xu Qing struggled to control his breathing. Whether it was back in the imperial capital or here in Firemoon Darkheaven territory, he had never seen any mention of history like this. Now that he thought about it, all the historical records he had studied only went back to the time of Emperor Eastglory. There wasn't anything further back than that. It was almost as if the two species' interactions in the time of Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity had been erased.

Apparently, nobody had thought about it or had cared enough to look into the matter. Perhaps it made sense that there was no information. But it was still strange.

*Understandings were influenced! And what else could influence two entire species over such a long time... other than the power of a god?*

Xu Qing suddenly thought about the Firemoon Darkheavens' three gods.

Finally, he looked down at the skull he'd fished out. The memory fragments he'd just witnessed were difficult to reconcile, but at the very least, they gave him food for thought about the Ninedawns Forbidden Lands.

Whoever spoke those words talked about 'father-mage.' The 'father-mage' must be that good friend of Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity, who was the antemage of the time. And the speaker was his son, whose name was Ninedawns.... Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity gave him that name. And this place is called the Ninedawns Forbidden Lands.

Xu Qing's heart started to race.

*Don't tell me... there actually isn't any animal called Ninedawns! Rather... Ninedawns was the son of the antemage of the Darkheaven Archmage people? In that case, what did he mean when he said that he 'let down our Darkheaven Archmage people'...? [2]*

Xu Qing looked down at the muck and felt like he could almost see all the way down to that sealed cave.

Is that mountain of bone ash all that remains of Ninedawns' corpse?

For the first time, he was curious to know more about the Ninedawns Forbidden Lands.

After a short time, he cleared his thoughts and checked the violet crystal. Floating within the crystal was a skull that pulsed with mysterious light.

Xu Qing's eyes narrowed. He looked up at the bronze incense burner and quickly made a decision. With the wave of his hand, he dispelled the smoke coming from the incense burner. The barrier it had created disappeared. The gray fog surged in.

But then something very unusual happened. Though it still caused terrifying pressure to weigh down on his godsource and cultivation base, when it came to his fleshly body and soul, the invasion was significantly reduced! That said, he still felt something like the tug of karma, and it was even stronger than before. It made him feel like he was so connected to this place that he could never leave it.

After sensing all of that, Xu Qing's eyes glittered. He pointed at the incense burner, and the smoke emerged again, creating the same barrier from before. Once again, his cultivation base and godsource were active.

The gray fog is from Ninedawns, and it's incredibly domineering. It can reject all other types of essence, and prevent any cultivators who enter this area from leaving. But after absorbing that skull, the gray fog doesn't oppose me as virulently. Does it mean... that it now recognizes me as having some of the same origin?

Now the question is what will happen if I fish out the rest of the skulls? If I was fully part of the same origin as the gray fog, would it oppose me at all? Maybe the tug of karma would still prevent me from leaving.... But what if I took the gray fog with me?

Xu Qing closed his eyes and began to make preparations.

A few days later, he opened his eyes. He could sense that the sundial was close to fully repaired, and could also tell that he was in the position to use Fishing the Moon in the Well again.

Without any hesitation, he moved to a spot that was, as best as he could remember, directly above the second skull. There, he performed an incantation gesture and produced the brown flame wisp again. He connected it to Crimson Mother's flesh, and soon the golden drops of liquid were falling down and melting the muck.

Given his previous experience, success came very smoothly. Although he still needed to worry about damage to the sundial and also his own body, once the tunnel formed, he activated Fishing the Moon in the Well. Rumbling sounds filled heaven and earth as he fished the second skull out of the water.

Just as before, he consumed it. And just like before, the power of the violet crystal swept out and sealed it. Yet again, he was assailed by a storm of memories. This time there were slightly more memory fragments.

Xu Qing suppressed any thoughts of delving into the memories, and instead closed his eyes to rest and recuperate. It was in that manner that half a month passed.

He used the same method repeatedly, and though he met with a few failures, overall, he was successful.

The violet crystal now had four skulls in it, which increased his connection to the Ninedawns Forbidden Lands! In fact, that connection was so shockingly strong that he didn't need the incense burner anymore. The gray fog was no longer trying to invade him, but rather, just flowed around him in an almost friendly fashion. The pressure on his godly elements and cultivation base was still there, but he was able to fight against it to a certain degree.

This was something completely unheard-of among the Firemoon Darkheaven people. In fact, if Master Stillwinter were here and saw what was happening, he would definitely be completely shocked. He might not even believe his eyes. It was downright freakish!

Unfortunately... this was Xu Qing's limit. After the half month that had passed, the brown flame wisp eventually went out. Without a flame wisp, he couldn't melt Crimson Mother's flesh into golden liquid, and he couldn't deal with the muck. Unless he came up with another method, getting more skulls would involve him personally digging through the muck to the cave.

After some consideration, he decided not to do that. As he connected more deeply with the origin of this place, he started to get the feeling that if he went down beneath the muck, the entity in that shrine might think he was actually Ninedawns.... And then he would end up trapped there. If that happened, he wouldn't have any hope of ever escaping. As for how to get more skulls, he was currently out of ideas.

The memory fragments from the four skulls had clicked together in his mind, forming an image of history from countless years in the past. The curtain was being lifted on the secrets of gods.

It was like a wind blowing from ancient times. It was the story of what happened after Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity left.

The antemage of the Darkheaven Archmage people refused the invitation of his good friend Dark Serenity to leave Revered Ancient. To leave his home.

Dealing with the gods had caused a very rare difference of opinion to occur between the two of them. When the Ancient Emperors left, and the broken face of the god arrived, heaven and earth went dark. Everything blurred. In addition to the broken face came a host of other terrifying gods. Almost overnight, the heavenly daos began to weep, and all living beings wailed in grief.

The gods that descended on Revered Ancient did different things. Some chose to protect various species they interacted with. Some went into hiding in the depths of the land. All of them brought catastrophe.

One of the gods that came with the broken face looked like a spider. That god had shocking personhood that surpassed most other gods. In that god's presence, all other gods bowed their heads.

And hīs goal was clear. It was... the Darkheaven Archmage people. Hē wanted to enslave them and make them believers.

But the Darkheaven Archmages didn't want to become slaves. And thus, under the leadership of the antemage, they waged a bitter war against the spider god and the other gods who came with hīm. It was a war in which blood rained from the sky and the lands shattered.

The antemage was a close friend of Dark Serenity, and was fearsomely powerful. His species was similarly spectacular. Cultivating mage arts was different from what ordinary cultivators did. They focused on shapeshifting. Some could transform into giant humanoids, others could transform into giant beasts.

The war shook heaven and earth. Countless Darkheaven Archmages died. As for the gods... it was the same with them. Many of them died, and their corpses fell onto the lands below.

In the end, the antemage sacrificed his life to mortally wound the spider god that all the other gods worshiped. That god was transformed into something called the God-Rejecting Mage Formation, which rejected all types of godly power. That formation's power was sent out to cover the entire species as a protection. Just before dying, the antemage passed his title on to his son. He told him to use the faith of the Darkheaven Archmage people to fight against the gods!

That son's name was Ninedawns.

Ninedawns felt great sorrow. However, that was a time period in which gods filled the world, and he hadn't just accepted the title of antemage and the faith of his species. He had also accepted a great responsibility. And thus, he led all of the archmages of his species outside of the God-Rejecting Mage Formation and waged war on the gods. He never backed down. He never made the decision to simply go home.

To the Darkheaven Archmage people, there was no more qualified antemage than Ninedawns. As he and the other archmages fought the gods, time passed. Within the lands of the Darkheaven Archmages, inside of the God-Rejecting Mage Formation, their species had time to rest and recover.

A new generation of mage cultivators rose up, and one of them was spectacularly talented, and was a born leader. A new chief.

The antemage waged war for such a long time that he became little more than a legend. And the species began to change. That talented leader made a name for himself, and eventually became the grand steward of the Darkheaven Archmage people.

The antemage was in heaven, the steward of the mandate of heaven. The chief was in the mortal world, the steward of mortal authority. And thus, he came to be called the grand steward.

The memories ended there. Xu Qing opened his eyes, and his expression was complicated. That was because he had just recalled the information about Ninedawns that he had studied back at God Mountain.

*“The top beast in the Mountain and Sea Region is called a ninedawns. It had a special place in Firemoon Darkheaven culture. Throughout the entire history of their species, there had only been one instance in which someone tamed a ninedawns. Specifically, it was the*

*very first ancestral chief of the Firemoon Darkheavens, who was also the grand steward who led them to prominence. His mount was a ninedawns."*

Chapter 862: Dirge of Betrayal

Xu Qing didn't say anything. Thanks to the history learned from the memory fragments, he now understood why there were so many corpses in the Mountain and Sea Region. He also knew about the long history of the Firemoon Darkheaven people.

That was assuming everything he'd seen was true. If the history was correct, then the current Firemoon Darkheaven orthodoxy might as well be a mockery. Their antemage had died in war to protect their species, yet his story had been stricken from the histories. And then his son Ninedawns carried on his legacy, only to be defamed, with his name turned into the name of a beast mount. The so-called grand steward of the Firemoon Darkheaven people only managed to come into his own as a Darkheaven cultivator thanks to the protection provided by Ninedawns. It was very thought-provoking.

Xu Qing sighed. His insides were telling him that all of this history was true.

He wasn't a member of this species, but the memory fragments had allowed him to not just see events from countless years ago, but also feel them. To some extent, it was almost like he had gone through those things himself.

So how did Ninedawns die? And what did the grand steward do to change the Darkheaven Archmage species into the Firemoon Darkheaven people? Also... what history do the three gods of sun, moon, and star have with them...? Maybe the answers will come with the memories of the five remaining skulls.

Xu Qing looked down at the muck. Unfortunately, his brown flame wisp had been extinguished, so he had no way to use Crimson Mother's flesh to get into the cave. That wasn't to mention the fact that he was now starting to run low on flesh.

I only have six pieces left.

Xu Qing checked the four skulls in the violet crystal, as well as the connection to the Ninedawns Forbidden Lands.

By now, he didn't need the incense burner, and could dispel the gray fog with a mere thought. He no longer felt trapped. Based on what he could tell, if he wanted to leave, the gray fog would part for him and let him go.

But there was a big problem with the idea of leaving. His cultivation base and godly powers were still gone. Could he really just give up on them? Let the gray fog fill him, enter his soul, and become a part of him?

If that happened, I wouldn't be a god cultivator anymore. I would be... a mage!

Xu Qing looked off into the distance.

When it came to mages, Xu Qing felt a sense of familiarity and unfamiliarity at the same time. The unfamiliarity was because he had never actually interacted with a mage. The familiarity came because the gray fog originated with a mage. And now that Xu Qing had absorbed the four skulls, to some extent, he had accepted the legacy of Ninedawns. But that wasn't the path he wanted to walk.

The original antemage died to seriously injure a powerful god.

Xu Qing's eyes narrowed as he looked down at the muck and kept trying to come up with a new plan. He had an idea he thought would work, but the problem was that he needed five skulls to do it. Right now, he only had four.

After some thought, Xu Qing said, "Little Shadow."

No fluctuations came from underfoot. No emotions. It was as if Little Shadow was dead.

Xu Qing's facial expression was the same as ever. After three breaths of time passed, he said, "If you don't get out here now, then don't ever come out again."

A very faint shadow suddenly appeared on the muck below, pulsing with very weak fluctuations.

"Go down past 3,000 meters. And turn into a subatomic particle that I can control with magic." [1]

Little Shadow's fluctuations seemed fretful and very resistant to Xu Qing's idea.

"I'll make sure the gray fog doesn't cause problems for you," Xu Qing assured. He waved his hand, and in accord with his will, the gray fog drifted away.

That caused Little Shadow's fretfulness to diminish a bit, as well as any resistance.

"After you're done, I'll give you a piece of Crimson Mother's flesh," Xu Qing added calmly.

Little Shadow was very fond of Crimson Mother's flesh, and for the most part, was only able to watch as Xu Qing used it. It was not easy to get a taste. Therefore, Xu Qing's promise caused Little Shadow to hesitate slightly. The fretfulness and resistance faded even more.

"If you don't follow orders, then there's no reason to continue this lord-and-servant relationship we have." Xu Qing's voice had turned cold.

It caused Little Shadow to shiver, and finally the combination of rewards and threats caused it to release fluctuations of pure abandon. In order to stay alive, and in order to get some meat to eat, it roared like a wild beast and then dove down into the muck.

In the shortest of moments, it dropped down 300 meters. The gray fog couldn't get close, thanks to Xu Qing's interference. And thus, Little Shadow had no problem descending. Soon it reached the 2,400-meter mark.

At the same time, Xu Qing could clearly sense the sealing power from below. That power was dormant, but he got the feeling that once his aura contacted it, it would immediately send out crushing force. Therefore, at a certain point, he didn't dare to use his aura to interfere with the gray fog.

That was when Little Shadow's progress slowed, and it emitted a howl of anguish. However, it was still better than before. And Little Shadow was going all out. Ignoring the invasion of the gray fog, it dropped past 2,700 meters and then kept going. After all, on the previous attempt, it had split up over and over again, and had not yet recovered. It was currently much weaker.

Seeing that, Xu Qing said, "Two pieces of Crimson Mother's flesh!"

The words caused Little Shadow to tremble, then release some very crazy emotional fluctuations. With an amazing reward like that on the line, it viciously dropped down further. Rumbling sounds echoed out as it shot past 3,000 meters and entered the cave.

Xu Qing couldn't release any of his aura there, so the fog immediately swept over Little Shadow, who howled piteously.

Xu Qing's expression was grave. He knew that this opportunity was going to be fleeting. Thus, it was without hesitation that he extended his right hand and unleashed Fishing the Moon in the Well.

Ripples spread out, forming a surface of water. Five skulls appeared very clearly, and Xu Qing reached down and fished one of them out.

As he put it in his mouth and sealed it in the violet crystal, Little Shadow collapsed. It seemed dead, but there was still a strand of shadow that burrowed back up through the muck to Xu Qing.

Xu Qing wasn't paying attention to the shadow. Little Shadow was inherently cunning and deceitful. Everything from before was partly real, but also exaggerated. Therefore, Xu Qing wasn't worried about it at all. The fact that it had secretly preserved a shadow strand of itself was exactly what he had predicted it would do.

That said, Little Shadow really had come very close to its ultimate limit. It actually looked like it was about to fall into a deep sleep. But then it struggled to stay awake, all while instinctively sending weak emotional fluctuations to Xu Qing, as if to ask for confirmation about something.

"Flesh...."

Xu Qing nodded. He could sense the state Little Shadow was in, and knew that it didn't matter whether or not he had flesh to give it. The shadow was clearly too weak to eat.

That said, being the kind person he was, Xu Qing offered some placating words. "I'll feed you when you wake up."

After hearing that, Little Shadow seemed content, and went to sleep.

As for Xu Qing, he settled down cross-legged to focus on recovering. A few days later he opened his eyes. He now had five skulls, and thus, he could employ the method he'd come up with earlier to get the others.

This method did not involve making a tunnel through the muck. In fact, once he used the method, the remaining skulls below would automatically appear within Fishing the Moon in the Well.

I'll have to trust Eldest Brother on this one!

Eyes gleaming with determination, he tapped into the violet crystal. The crystal vibrated and then sent violet light streaming throughout his body. As the light spread out of him, the five skulls appeared, floating over his head in a pentagonal formation. Looking at the five skulls, Xu Qing performed a double-handed incantation gesture and started chanting.

Ripples started to flow out from the first skull. Then the second and the third....

Ultimately, all five of the skulls sent out ripples and combined, growing more and more intense until they were a black hole vortex.

Looking at the vortex, Xu Qing loudly said, “*Souls in heaven and earth shall return to their origin!*”

His voice seemed to thrum with something very ancient. The moment they rang out, the vortex began spinning with great intensity. Gradually, it was possible to see four balls of fire inside, slowly emerging. Those four balls of fire had the same substructure as the skulls in the violet light!

This was the very same technique the Captain had imparted to Xu Qing some time back. It was called the Grand Five Ox Essence-Tracing Grand Merciless Dao.[2]

The basic premise was to trace the essence of something back to its origin, then draw it out. The prerequisite was to have five pieces of the original.

When the four balls of fire appeared, Xu Qing used Fishing the Moon in the Well to grab them. The four balls of fire shuddered, and three of them emerged from the vortex and appeared in the water in Xu Qing’s palm. Xu Qing’s heart was pounding with excitement. Although he wasn’t able to fish out all of them, getting three skulls in one shot just went to prove how astonishing his Eldest Brother’s technique was. He immediately consumed them.

Memory fragments hit him like a tempest, filling his mind. They connected with the memory fragments from before, and also added new concepts.

The ancient wind blew again, tattered and ragged like a funeral dirge.

The lyrics of the dirge described the story of the grand steward, who had been approved of by Ninedawns as well as his whole species, and who had been entrusted as the leader inside the God-Rejecting Mage Formation. He deserved to be called chosen in every way. He had outstanding ability and grand vision, and under his leadership, the Darkheaven Archmages were united. They thrived and multiplied, and the new generation grew up in complete safety.

On the outside, Ninedawns was very pleased, but eventually stopped paying attention to what was happening inside the formation. His energy and thoughts were all focused on the war with the gods. He had accepted his father’s mantle, as well as the spirit of the Darkheaven Archmage people. As a result, he would never back down.

After all, his species existed behind him only because of his protection. If he died in battle, it would be without any regrets. That was because he had already found a successor. In his heart, the grand steward was the one who would be the next antemage.

Thus, it was without any fear for the future that he led his subordinate archmages during the long war vigil.

Years passed, until eventually, a bloody banquet was thrown by the people he had sworn to protect.

#### Chapter 863: The Ashes of Time

A lot can change in 3,000 years. As the new generation of Darkheaven Archmages grew, they reached great heights. The grand steward’s leadership abilities became apparent. His governance made his species strong. Powerful experts cropped up like *bamboo after a spring rain*. Although their species hadn’t reached the same level as the past, when taking in Revered Ancient as a whole, they were in good shape.



But outside the God-Rejecting Mage Formation, the war continued. The spider god was asleep, and though all the other subordinate gods were strong, Antemage Ninedawns actually surpassed his father in terms of talent. With him in command, the various archmages fought hard and even gave their lives to finally force the invading gods to retreat from the God-Rejecting Mage Formation. It was a victory to go down in the history books.

While other species in Revered Ancient were experiencing catastrophe because of the gods, the Darkheaven Archmages successfully repelled an invasion and kept their homeland safe.

In order to celebrate the victory, the grand steward ascended the Revered Ancestor Altar and offered worship to the dome of heaven. His expression was one of piety and excitement as he invited the antemage and all the archmages back home. In preparation to receive the antemage, he worked with famous people from numerous species to prepare a great feast in the Steward's Lands.

On that day, members of countless species joined the grand steward in shouting the words 'come home.' Those words shook the sky and spread through the lands, reaching outside of the God-Rejecting Mage Formation to be heard by Ninedawns and his subordinates. Everyone was feeling emotional. After 3,000 years of war, all combatants had lost comrades in the fighting, and the survivors were weary to the bone. Normally speaking, they would have remained steadfast and not retreated an inch. But they had won an amazing victory. The gods were in retreat, and they were deeply homesick. They all had family in the mortal world, and all of them wanted to return to their homeland to see the people they had been keeping safe for 3,000 years.

But in the end, Ninedawns said no.

It wasn't the time to lead the archmages home. For all he knew, the gods might strike back. As long as he was alive, he wanted to do his best to make sure his species was safe for as long as possible. With an approving glance at his people inside the God-Rejecting Mage Formation, he sat down cross-legged to guard the formation.

Nine dragons manifested outside his body, which constantly swirled around him. That was his mage state. The other archmages suppressed their longing to return home and entered their own mage states. From a distance, it was like a host of huge beasts, guarding over their home with unswerving determination.

Everyone dies, and they wanted to die fighting for their people. And if they perished, they wanted their souls to become part of the God-Rejecting Mage Formation, just like their comrades who had fallen over the years.

In life, they defended their species. In death, they would do the same.

Time passed. This time it was 2,000 years. During that time, gods would occasionally cause trouble. But with Ninedawns and the other archmages on guard, not one god made it through the formation. The whole world was in chaos, but the lands of the Darkheaven Archmages were like a forbidden region to the gods.

Around then, the grand steward led his officials and the commoners to the Revered Ancestor Altar. From there, they offered worship to the dome of heaven. And they asked the antemage to come home.

Countless voices echoed out into heaven and earth. They contained the passion and hope of all the people.

Outside of the God-Rejecting Mage Formation, the archmages slowly opened their eyes. Behind them, on the other side of the formation, was their home. In that home were numerous statues. Statues that depicted *them*.

5,000 years....

In the end, they looked at their leader, Ninedawns. Ninedawns maintained silence for a long time. Then he opened his eyes. He wanted to say no, but when he looked at his companions, and sensed how tired they were, he couldn't say the words. Sighing, he nodded and stood up. Taking most of the archmages with him, he went home.

It was the first time since his father died and he left the God-Rejecting Mage Formation that he returned home. As he arrived at the Steward's Lands, cheering filled heaven and earth. Countless people bowed, and looks of excitement could be seen everywhere.

The sight of it stirred Ninedawns' heart. He was exhausted after the last 5,000 years, but at the same time, felt warmth. How could he ever have imagined that the people who he trusted more than anything, that he had safeguarded for 5,000 years, and especially the successor he had personally picked, would prepare a blood-soaked reception for him?

He never came out of the Steward's Lands....

The reality was that the Steward's Lands were a trap prepared specifically for him and his subordinate archmages. They were actually a burial ground.

The people he had trusted ended up making a deal with the gods. And over the thousands of years that had passed, they had secretly constructed a god formation. It was a formation that could kill, that could seal, and that could summon gods.

Once Ninedawns and his subordinates arrived, the formation was activated. On that day, the Steward's Lands became soaked with blood. On that day, the God-Rejecting Mage Formation that had protected the Darkheaven Archmage people... was breached. On that day, the spider god, who had largely recovered, returned, along with a host of subordinate gods. On that day, howls of anguish and screams of rage echoed out from the Steward's Lands.

Death became the prevailing theme. Ninedawns' heart filled with grief, indignation, and madness. He had been stabbed in the back by the very people he had been keeping safe. It left him bitter, confused, and enraged. But his fate had been sealed!

There was no God-Rejecting Mage Formation to offer protection. And the betrayal had been effected from both outside and in, with the help of his own people. All of his subordinate archmages died horrifically. Ninedawns fought ferociously, but all he could do was injure the spider god.

Ninedawns himself ultimately died on the blood-soaked field of betrayal. His corpse was sealed in the depths of the ground, with the spider god suppressing him and slowly feeding on his flesh to recover.

The flesh, blood, and mangled souls of his dead subordinates were piled into the Steward's Lands. The spell formation that had been set up stayed there for all time....

The ancient wind slowly blew away, taking with it the dirge of betrayal.

Xu Qing opened his eyes. His heart was still full of the rancorous energy from the memory fragments, as well as the pain of betrayal by one's own trusted people. They were not his emotions, but they were strong nonetheless. He could tell that they actually came from Ninedawns.

It took a long time for Xu Qing to regain his composure. Eventually, he suppressed Ninedawns' memories, but afterward, he still had a complicated expression on his face. Although he had suspected much earlier that the story ended like this, to experience it through the memory fragments gave him a much deeper understanding of Ninedawns and the surrounding lands.

Although Ninedawns' memories ended with his death, Xu Qing could imagine what happened after that. In the years after his death, the remains of his archmages became food for the beasts that appeared there.

They were bizarre in appearance, vile in behavior, and were completely and utterly vicious. And it was because they were all full of rancorous energy. It didn't matter their physical form. The reality was... they bore similarities to the archmages who had died years ago. Their mage states inherently involved looking like a beast.

Later, the 'Steward's Lands' got a different name. The Mountain and Sea Region. At long last, Xu Qing understood the background of the beasts in the Mountain and Sea Region. Looking around, Xu Qing knew that this very place had once been the Steward's Lands.

After a long moment passed, Xu Qing took a deep breath and got rid of the last scrap of emotion from Ninedawns.

He was Xu Qing. Not Ninedawns. His thoughts and emotions were back in order, but he still had a question. Based on the history from the memory fragments, the spider god ultimately chose to seal Ninedawns' corpse and absorb his flesh and blood to recover. But from what Xu Qing had seen, that spider god was eventually sealed by the three gods of sun, moon, and star.

There's more history involved here.... When did those three gods come along?

After a while, he decided not to worry about it. It wasn't important right now. What he needed to do now was get that final skull.

With eight skulls, he was already in the position to leave. He could even absorb the gray fog. But if he could get eight... then he didn't want to give up on the ninth. When you do something, do it all the way.

His eyes glittered as he performed a double-handed incantation gesture. The violet crystal thrummed, light spilled out, and eight skulls swirled out to form the Captain's formation. This time, he wasn't using five items to acquire his target, but eight!

Ripples spread out from the eight skulls, combining to make a black hole that revealed the ninth skull. Xu Qing performed another incantation gesture, activating Fishing the Moon in the Well. A watery surface formed, and he extended his hand to fish something out of it.

However, just as he was about to grab the ninth skull, a terrifying fluctuation erupted from 3,000 meters down in the muck. The shrine had begun vibrating, and was now emitted a horrifying aura. That aura shook everything. The Ninedawns Forbidden Lands began to tremble, and the fluctuations quickly spread out to fill the entire Mountain and Sea Region.

In the blink of an eye, the entire region was shaking. Wild colors flashed in heaven and earth, mutagen levels skyrocketed, and everything blurred. It was just like when the broken face's eyes opened!

The countless beasts in the region shivered. Eyes crimson, they began to exude rancorous energy and howls of anguish.

Hundreds of thousands of Firemoon cultivators participating in the Great Hunt, regardless of the level of their cultivation base, felt intense dread rising up within them. They looked around with wildly flickering expressions as they wondered what was happening.

Master Stillwinter was among them. As he flew through the sky, the sudden upheaval occurred, and he stopped in place. Breathing heavily, he turned to look in the direction of the Ninedawns Forbidden Lands. He could clearly sense that the source of fluctuations was that very location! Normally speaking he wouldn't have thought much of it. But right now, he couldn't stop thinking about Xu Qing entering the Ninedawns Forbidden Lands. A sudden sense of unease rose up within him.

#### Chapter 864: The Ninth Skull!

In the Mountain and Sea Region, the sky had turned blurry, and powerful winds battered the lands. Innumerable beasts in different habitats all threw their heads back and howled. The sounds joined together into something that shook the clouds and caused intense colors to flash. The howling was accompanied by cries of rage, anguish, and complaint.

It was as if they were complaining that heaven was unfair and earth was unjust! They were complaining about the betrayal of an entire species and their own misplaced loyalties. It made it seem like deep within these beasts' souls, the legacy of their bloodline still existed. Perhaps it was hidden extremely deeply. Maybe they weren't even aware of it. But the dramatic aura spreading through the Mountain and Sea Region woke up what was deeply hidden, and caused them to react on an instinctual level.

One after another, the Great Hunt participants looked over with varying expressions. Some were shocked, some were aghast, some were taken aback. A variety of emotions assailed them with storm-like force.

"What's going on here?"

"Why's the Mountain and Sea Region acting like this?"

"It's like the beasts are being stimulated in some way!"

It wasn't just the ordinary participants who were shaken. The Firemoon chosen in the region were reacting similarly.

Fear still lingered in Master Stillwinter because of the Ninedawns Forbidden Lands. In another part of the region was Fan Shishuang, seated in meditation. His eyes opened, and his expression flickered as he turned to look in the same direction as everyone else. His expression turned serious, and his eyes narrowed.

It's coming from the Ninedawns Forbidden Lands! But... what's happening there?

Fan Shishuang suddenly felt very uneasy. He had never experienced nor even heard of anything like this happening. Sir Heavenink and Tuo Shishan were in different locations as well, and they were similarly shaken by what was happening. Everyone was feeling increasingly uneasy.

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In the lowlands of the Mountain and Sea Region, in hillworm territory, a figure was racing along frantically. He was moving so fast he was almost a blur. But if you looked closely, you would notice that he seemed very shifty. He was none other than the Captain.

He could also sense the majestic fluctuations. He glanced up at the sky.

Why do I get the feeling this has something to do with little Junior Brother?

He blinked a few times and mused that perhaps the reason his little Junior Brother hadn't met up yet was that he'd come across some amazing treasure...

Even as those thoughts ran through his head, a shout rang out from behind him, specifically, from his pursuer, who was a young man with beautiful facial features.

The youth didn't seem to care at all about the dramatic upheavals, and was completely focused on chasing the Captain. Were there any other Firemoon cultivators present, they would instantly recognize this young man. He was actually the number one Firemoon chosen. He was the mighty and famous Sir Firedark!

Being the number one chosen, with a position and status far above everyone else, there wasn't anyone among his contemporaries who would dare to provoke him. By extension, there were few situations in which he had chased someone like this. But here it was happening right out in the open.

What was even more noteworthy was that Sir Firedark was clearly in bad shape. His expression was grim, and his eyes burned with killing intent, as if the Captain was so vile to him he couldn't stand to live under the same sky as him. For something like this to happen was extremely rare.

Voice both vulgar and emotional, the Captain shouted, "Little Swallow, what are you chasing a manly man like me for? My heart belongs to another! Just give up!"

With that, he accelerated through the rainforest, a crazy look just barely visible within his eyes. His words caused the pursuing Sir Firedark's eyes to turn even more bloodshot. Killing intent spiking, he gritted his teeth and continued the chase.

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A storm had hit the Mountain and Sea Region. And the middle of it was the Ninedawns Forbidden Lands. Xu Qing was also feeling shaken by the terrifying aura coming from 3,000 meters beneath the surface of the muck. He felt like a rowboat in the middle of a raging sea, on the verge of being ripped to shreds.

Clearly, taking the final skull had triggered this change in the shrine.

Resolving the situation would be simple. Xu Qing could just put the skull back. But he wasn't willing to do that. He had already fished out eight, and this was the final one to make the set complete. Giving up just wasn't an option.

What was more, Xu Qing had the strong premonition that fishing out the ninth skull would provoke some dramatic transformation to the other skulls. He had no way to know exactly what it would be, but it would surely be dramatic.

The downside was that he was going to have to pay a heavy price to get the ninth skull. Forcibly fishing it out was provoking an absolutely terrifying aura from the shrine. This was a god that was superior to Crimson Mother, and Xu Qing knew full well that he wasn't in the position to fight against power like that.

In the past, before he learned about the history of the Firemoon Darkheaven people, he wouldn't have hesitated to give up in a moment like this. After all, staying alive was the most important thing.

But now... he understood the truth about Firemoon Darkheaven history. Because of that, Xu Qing felt that he was in position... *to succeed at snatching food from the tiger's mouth!*

Mentally, he reviewed the situation in the cave below.

The shrine was suppressed by three gods.... The fact that the spider god is stirring means that hē's definitely affecting the sealing marks of those gods. Considering what I know about history, it seems there must be some animosity between the three gods and the spider god....

With such thoughts on his mind, Xu Qing's eyes shone with determination, as well as a bit of the craziness that had just appeared in the Captain's eyes. Sometimes in life, you can't just *follow the compass and obey the measuring stick*. Sometimes, you have to put things on the line!

The energy of Fishing the Moon in the Well had been affected by the upheaval, and was on the verge of collapsing. Even the Captain's formation was in bad shape, and clearly wouldn't last much longer.

Without any hesitation, Xu Qing unleashed all of his cultivation base and godly power. It became a surge of force that entered Fishing the Moon in the Well, grabbed the final skull, and viciously fished it up.

As the sound of splashing water echoed out, Xu Qing shivered from head to toe. The force of fishing up the skull had nearly destroyed his body; he was now covered with so many wounds he looked like he was made of blood.

By paying that price, he was now able to lift his soaked hand to look at the ninth skull resting on the palm. Without taking any time to think, he put it in his mouth, then shot straight up into the air as even more wild fluctuations rolled up from the muck.

There was also an awakening will that began to spread out. The sky cracked. The lands crumbled. The end of days had arrived!

A chanting from ancient times spread out in all directions, causing everything to tremble as a huge vortex formed.

The spinning of the vortex kicked up masses of muck. And though it started slowly, and only about 3,000 meters across, in the blink of an eye, it was spinning rapidly, and had expanded to tens if not hundreds of thousands of meters. In fact, it quickly covered all of the Ninedawns Forbidden Lands, spinning faster and faster, and sending muck spraying everywhere.

At the same time, the area 3,000 meters below the surface was made visible by the vortex. The cave was now open to the world!

As for the shrine there, it began to float upward! It cast light that illuminated the dome of heaven, and from a distance, it was possible to see that the gray fog was being dispelled.

The powerful fluctuations from the shrine carried the chanting to every corner of the Mountain and Sea Region. Instantly, the howling of the beasts intensified, causing the souls of the cultivators to tremble. The Mountain and Sea Region... was fully erupting! The source of it all, the spider god, was now showing even more signs of awakening.

Sunfire's power was affixed to the spider's forehead. The spider's body had traces of Moonfire, and was surrounded by evidence of Starfire. But all of those things were weakening and clearly on the verge of being discarded.

His eyes fluttered as if they were about to open. [1]

Seeing that, Xu Qing started breathing heavily. He was currently right over the vortex, trying to get away. The gray fog swept up toward him, surrounding him and bolstering him. Unfortunately, that level of blessing didn't help very much when dealing with this spider god.

As the sensation of awakening grew stronger, a gravitational force erupted, sweeping over Xu Qing and preventing him from fleeing. Instead, he tumbled in the opposite direction. Apparently, he wouldn't be allowed to leave unless he abandoned that skull.

Don't tell me I was wrong! Are the three gods not connected to this spider god?

In that critical moment in which Xu Qing started pondering whether or not to give up, something dramatic happened!

The branch from Sunfire that was stabbed into the spider god's forehead emerged by about an inch. But then, dazzling light shone out from it. It was like the light of the sun, filling heaven and earth. To Xu Qing, it felt as if an actual sun was emerging from the spider god's forehead.

A howl of anguish erupted from the spider god. The sound entered Xu Qing's mind and caused blood to spray out of his mouth. It was too much for him to sustain. Thankfully, because Xu Qing's violet crystal now had all nine skulls, the gray fog was now like a part of him as well, and it helped dispel the force.

Simultaneously, the four spears from Moonfire became sharper. Exuding a sense of frigid cold, they blurred into numerous afterimages, then once again stabbed into the spider god. A moan of agony echoed out.

Finally, the eight clay jars from Starfire seemed to get much heavier.

The vortex spinning in the Ninedawns Forbidden Lands suddenly stopped moving. The shrine that had been rising up shivered. Then the combined power of the sun, moon, and star gods forced it back down into the cave.

The gravitational force faded.

Xu Qing trembled. The moan from the spider god had filled him with intense pain, causing his fleshly body to crumble further, and his soul to go dim. Without the protection of the gray fog, he

would have been destroyed in body and soul. Forcing himself to stay focused, he took advantage of the waning of the gravitational force to start moving at top speed.

Rumbling sounds echoed out as he broke free. Soon he was some 3,000 meters away. Without the slightest hesitation, he bit the tip of his tongue to prevent himself from going unconscious.

When he was around 50 kilometers away, a huge shockwave rolled out thanks to the pressure from the three gods.

Gasping for breath, Xu Qing turned around to take a look. The spider god's shrine was still above the vortex. Higher in the sky, something majestic and awe-inspiring appeared.

There were three enormous shrines! One shrine was shaped like a chariot, and within it was enshrined a sun. One shrine had the form of a phoenix palace, and enshrined within it was a moon. One shrine looked like a red sedan, and enshrined within it was a star.

When they appeared, golden light filled the sky. Then they viciously dropped down!

Chapter 865: A Figure on a Mountain of Bone Ash

Ripples spread through heaven and earth, going out in all directions.

Xu Qing, meanwhile, was surrounded by countless wisps of gray fog. It was the essence power of the mages, and was the only reason he could stay so close and also watch what was happening.

However, after only a quick glance, he turned back around and kept going. From a distance, it was possible to see the gray fog swirling around him, blessing him and augmenting his speed. Around ten breaths of time later, Xu Qing vanished over the horizon.

There was about thirty percent less fog in the area. More precisely, about thirty percent of the fog in the central area ended up leaving, as though it possessed a life of its own. It went with Xu Qing, making it seem as if the fog in the Ninedawns Forbidden Lands had been split into two portions.

About four hours later, the fog on the border of the Ninedawns Forbidden Lands seethed and parted. The actual border was now visible to the outside world. Soon, a huge ball of fog shot out from inside. The fog was terrifying, and was so dense that it was like a huge gray vortex. The cultivators in the area who could see it were completely stunned. The vortex of fog was nothing short of stunning. From the time the Ninedawns Forbidden Lands formed until now, it was the first time the fog had ever gone past the border.

There was a figure in the vortex. It was none other than Xu Qing. He had successfully emerged from the Ninedawns Forbidden Lands!

Those who entered the place were forever bound by the karma of the gray fog. As a result, they could never leave. But Xu Qing came up with the idea of... taking the fog with him. As for the tumultuous upheavals deep inside, he didn't have time to consider their ramifications. The moment he appeared outside, he accelerated and shot off into the distance.

He desperately needed to find a place to hole up and recover from his injuries. At the moment, he wasn't able to bring the gray fog inside of him, which made it very eye-catching. If things proceeded in this manner, he would have a hard time concealing himself. Given his current state, he would be in a very bad position if he ran into Master Stillwinter or one of the other major chosen. He needed more time to be able to absorb the gray fog.



Dropping down out of the air, he slammed onto the ground and pierced down beneath the surface, taking the fog with him. When he passed the 3,000-meter point, there was no longer any trace of the fog outside.

He finally breathed a sigh of relief. That said, he knew this location wasn't completely safe, as he was still quite close to the Ninedawns Forbidden Lands.

Gritting his teeth, he continued onward under the ground. About a day later, he found a good hiding spot. It was a mountain range in the depths of the rainforest. The mountains were a good place to conceal the gray fog, and also formed a natural protective barrier. Xu Qing carved out a cave under the mountains and settled down cross-legged.

There's no point in trying to find a different hiding spot. I need to stay out of sight of the other Great Hunt participants, not the three gods. If the three gods want to find me, it doesn't matter where I'm hiding in the Mountain and Sea Region. They'll find me.

After weighing matters up, he closed his eyes and let the violet light from the violet crystal spread through himself.

The time had come to focus on recovery. Three days later, Xu Qing opened his eyes, and they glittered with a lingering violet glow. His external injuries were all healed, but his internal injuries were still in the process of recovering. He had sustained some very serious wounds; even the violet crystal needed time to fix them. That said, his battle prowess was in good shape.

Next up, I need to bring the gray fog into the violet crystal...

Xu Qing's eyes narrowed. He was fully aware that the gray fog hadn't followed *him*, but rather, Ninedawns' nine skulls. After some thought, he sent his mind into the violet crystal in the hopes of having it absorb the gray fog.

Considering it involved deeply studying the nine skulls, it wasn't something that happened quickly. But as he proceeded with his work, the gray fog slowly started to seep from the surrounding soil and into the violet crystal. Bit by bit, it entered his chest. It was a slow process.

Two days later, the violet crystal glittered brightly. He opened his eyes.

It took effort, but I got my mark onto all nine of the skulls. Now they're unified, and also, they aren't working against me!

He put his right hand in front of his chest.

"Mage essence!"

As the words left his mouth, violet light flared around him, within which were nine skulls. They looked vicious, but at the same time, were exuding a sensation that made them seem like they had the same essence as Xu Qing.

"Return!"

He performed an incantation gesture with his right hand, then pushed it out.

The gray fog meandering around him suddenly stopped moving. Then it went crazy, piercing madly through the soil toward the nine skulls.

The fog diminished. Gray flesh started to build up on the nine skulls. Ultimately, as the fog continued to pour into the nine skulls, something big happened. They... became lanterns of flesh! They were gray in color, and the 'flesh' that covered them was actually gray fog. As they slowly rotated around Xu Qing, they also flickered with violet light.

Xu Qing looked around at the nine lanterns made from the Ninedawns skulls. He could sense that they had the same essence as him, although the connection to him was weak, as though it might be wiped away at any moment.

In the final analysis, it was because they were sealed in the violet crystal. It wasn't that they were truly fused with him. In other words, they weren't completely his.

They're still partially foreign to me....

At the same time, thanks to having all nine skulls, the memory fragments within his mind were now complete. He now had a complete picture of that part of ancient history. For the most part, it all conformed to his previous speculations. It was a story of betrayal and backstabbing.

The memory fragments didn't contain any details about what happened later in history. After all, the memories in the skulls ended with Ninedawns' death. The memory fragments didn't explain why the grand steward had done what he did. Nor was there any explanation about when the three gods of sun, moon, and star showed up, or why.

Given the clues he had, it was hard to even speculate what happened. Perhaps the three gods and the spider god were once part of the same faction. Or maybe they came along later and just took over.

Regardless, there was likely one particular day in which God Mountain appeared in the dome of heaven over the territory of the Darkheaven Archmage people. The mountain descended, and three gods emerged, mighty and glorious. Because of their arrival, the Darkheaven Archmages changed into the Firemoon Darkheavens. And then history led them to their current heights of glory.

Given how things ended up, Xu Qing could only come to the conclusion that this species had both upsides and downsides.

Regardless of the downsides, in the end, the species survived and eventually rose to prominence.

Regardless of the upsides, the betrayal that had played out in the past was both tragic and sorrowful. That was especially true considering that, in the modern era, Ninedawns had been vilified and said to be the grand steward's mount. And the beasts that had descended from the slain archmages suffered a similar fate.

The fact that later generations had fabricated their own version of history left Xu Qing sighing deeply.

Only those who survive qualify to write history. And thus, the grand steward made himself look like the hero. Apparently, the gods were willing to go along with that.

Xu Qing thought about how he'd witnessed those three gods suppressing the spider god shrine. And then he thought about the enigmatic smile on the face of the Captain back in the city when Xu Qing had been doing research into the Ninedawns Forbidden Lands. Back then, the Captain had pulled a shrimp apart into two pieces. Now Xu Qing understood. The shrimp represented a blind person, unable to see the truth of a completely fabricated story. [1]

Xu Qing shook his head.

As for when the three gods showed up, and whether or not they were connected to the larger conspiracy, it was frankly irrelevant to Xu Qing right now.

Right now, the most important thing... is that I have to take the Ninedawns skulls sealed in my violet crystal and convert them into battle prowess, or improve my cultivation base! I need to truly fuse with them!

Xu Qing already had an idea of how to do that.

I currently have three god troves, one Emperor's Sword secret trove, and one incomplete trove that's in the great circle. Previously, I could form it by entering a state like Crimson Mother. But that comes with potential calamities.

Right now... if I could turn Ninedawns into a secret trove, then I could solve all my problems. Ninedawns reached the peak of the dao of mages. Considering how seriously the spider god took him, it was obvious that his personhood must not have been any weaker than Crimson Mother's. In fact, it was probably higher.

It would make perfect sense to use this for my fifth secret trove. In that case, it would be a mage trove! With it as a mage trove, it would obviously be completely part of me. I wouldn't need to worry about losing it. And the Ninedawns fog could be a great asset to use!

Xu Qing's eyes glittered mysteriously.

The intensity of the mage essence fog made it obvious that it rejected gods and cultivation base alike. It was extremely domineering. Having reached this point in his train of thought, Xu Qing rose to his feet, his expression serious. Turning in the direction of the Ninedawns Forbidden Lands, he bowed deeply at the waist.

That bow was for karma, and it was an expression of respect for true glory.

Then Xu Qing sat down, closed his eyes, and got to work!

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Some distance away in the depths of the Ninedawns Forbidden Lands, the three shrines had completed their task. Thus, they faded away, and the marsh went back to normal. Fog swirled, covering everything.

Beneath the muck, the spider god's sealing marks were stronger than ever, and the last scraps of energy that had been released were about to fade away. The bone ash mountain was back to normal. It was as if nothing had happened.

However, in the depths of that mountain, a sigh echoed out. There was a figure hidden in the depths of the bone ash.

He was extremely ancient and unmoving, almost like a corpse. But just now, his eyes had opened.

Were any Firemoon Darkheaven cultivator there to see him, they would be completely and utterly astonished. He looked exactly like... the very same grand steward who had perished many, many years ago!

Chapter 866: Fifth Secret Trove - Mage Trove

Seven days passed in a flash.

The big stir in the Mountain and Sea Region ended after the Ninedawns Forbidden Lands was sealed again. The beasts in the region stopped howling. The struggle that had emerged from their souls and blood went away, and they went back to being animals.

However, the Firemoon Darkheaven cultivators participating in the Great Hunt were unable to calm their hearts. All sorts of speculations ran wild among them. Many of them used different ways to confirm the source of the upheaval. And as a result, most of them kept their distance from the Ninedawns Forbidden Lands.

Because the mountains that were Xu Qing's hiding place were comparatively close to the Ninedawns Forbidden Lands, not many people passed through. Add in the fact that he was well-concealed, and the violet crystal had absorbed the gray fog, it ensured that nobody discovered him.

Seven peaceful days passed in which Xu Qing was fully immersed in working on the Ninedawns mage trove. He wanted complete control of the Ninedawns skulls. They needed to be a part of him, and thus, he had no choice but to make them into a mage trove.

However, it wasn't exactly a simple process. First, he needed to fully fuse with the nine skulls. And to do that, he needed the foundation of a secret trove in his sea of consciousness to put them in. The foundation was extremely important for this secret trove. For one thing, there needed to be a spot for the skulls. What was more, it would be integral to the fusion process.

After some thought, Xu Qing made a decision. The flesh would be the foundation, and the bones would be the mountain!

During the seven days that passed, he tapped into his own flesh, bringing it into his sea of consciousness to build the secret trove foundation. The process required a huge amount of flesh, so much so that normally speaking Xu Qing would never have been able to meet the requirement.

At a certain point, he thought about the white wind from the Greenhair Badlands in the Moonrite Region. It was a terrifying and chaotic wind that caused random growths of flesh and blood. Back in the Greenhair Badlands, anyone who the wind touched would develop bizarre deformities that could ultimately lead to them becoming a mountain of flesh, then dying. Xu Qing had done a lot of studying and experimentation before ultimately using that wind as the basis for his cursequelling lozenge. One thing he was certain of was that the deformed flesh was part of the body that grew it.

After some more thought, Xu Qing gritted his teeth and took out some pills from his bag of holding that contained the white wind. He consumed them, and almost immediately, chaotic growths of flesh appeared all over him.

Seven or eight arms. Dozens of legs. A few heads. In a very short time, his body became large and bloated. As the flesh grew, Xu Qing carefully cut it off. Thus, the secret trove foundation began to take shape in his sea of consciousness.

The more white wind pills he consumed, the more chaotic flesh grew. It was very dramatic, and on a few occasions it grew so quickly he nearly turned into a mountain of flesh. At the same time, he was assailed by sensations of weakness. Thankfully, the violet crystal was hard at work keeping his strength up.

Ultimately, he built a 30,000-meter-tall mountain of flesh in his sea of consciousness. That was his limit. Every single bit of that flesh belonged to him, and as the foundation of his secret trove, it was naturally part of his essence.

Atop the mountain of flesh were piles of his own bones, nine in total. From the look of it, the nine piles of bones were all made of skulls. He did it that way in imitation of the setup of the cave in the Ninedawns Forbidden Lands.

The land was made of his own flesh. The bone mountains were made from his own bones.

When it was done, he opened his eyes from his position underneath the mountain range that was his hiding place. His face was pale, and he felt very weak. Even his eyes were dull. It had been extremely draining to do this.

But at the same time, light glittered in his eyes.

The foundation of flesh and bone is done. Next, I absorb it!

Xu Qing looked up at the nine lanterns floating around him. Lifting his right hand, he pointed out, and one of the lanterns trembled and flew over to him.

It touched his finger, and then was absorbed inside of him. It reappeared... in his sea of consciousness atop the 30,000-meter mountain of flesh, where it landed on one of the piles of bones.

The instant it landed, the gray fog within it poured out and entered the pile of bones. When the process was complete, the pile of bones trembled, and the gray fog transformed into flesh. At the same time, two black flames appeared within the previously empty eye sockets.

All of a sudden, the roar of an ox echoed out from the skull. Next, its shape transformed into that of an ox clad in a golden suit of armor. It had a draconic head, and when it threw its head back and roared, the sound was like the chanting of a god.

“Mage Life: Ox-Dragon!” [1]

As it appeared, its energy surged, and Xu Qing’s sea of consciousness trembled. It was now completely connected to him.

What was more, Xu Qing realized that this ox-dragon was one of Ninedawns’ mage states from long ago.

Nine skulls. Nine different mage states!

Seeing that this method worked, Xu Qing excitedly performed an incantation gesture, pulling the second lantern inside of him. It soon landed on the second pile of bones, where another animal took shape.

It was a jackal-like animal with a draconic head. It emanated a sense of violence and brutality, and seemed to personify death. Its pitch-black color and towering killing intent left Xu Qing feeling shaken. It was like the ultimate warrior. The shocking killing intent Xu Qing had experienced when facing Master Stillwinter was like nothing compared to that coming off of this beast. Along with the killing intent came a deafening roar.

“Mage Life: Jackal-Dragon!”

*Such formidable killing intent....* Xu Qing was truly shaken.

A moment later, his sea of consciousness went calm, and he waved his right hand and pointed toward the next three lanterns. After absorbing the three lanterns, they flew toward the third, fourth, and fifth pile of bones. The moment they were in his sea of consciousness, an incredible tempest raged.

Three fantastic creatures appeared, all of them imbued with a spirit that could conquer mountains and rivers.

Xu Qing trembled as though his body couldn't sustain the force, and he had to rely on the regenerative powers of the violet crystal. He also sent out soul threads, entering his third-level god state.

Three beasts appeared. The first was somewhat blurry, making it difficult to see clearly. It left behind a string of afterimages as it moved with such speed it bordered on teleportation. It was just barely possible to see that it looked somewhat like a winged lizard. It was also surrounded by a constant, screaming wind.

“Mage Life: Phoenix-Dragon!”

The fourth looked almost completely like a dragon, except it was much smaller than the other beasts. It floated there peacefully for a moment, then suddenly opened its mouth and released a heaven-rending, earth-crushing roar.

“Mage Life: Roaring-Dragon!”

The sound caused Xu Qing to shake from head to toe, and provoked instabilities in his third-level god state. He quickly entered the fourth-level god state to compensate.

The fifth beast was completely and utterly shocking. It was shaped like a lion, and was surrounded by an aura of smoke and fire. It hovered above the fifth pile of bones, emanating incredible majesty that seemed to surpass everything in heaven and earth! Within the swirling joss flame, it seemed like an actual god. Its deep roar echoed out in all directions.

“Mage Life: Lion-Dragon!”

The sensation from the fifth beast caused Xu Qing's mind to feel like it would split apart. It was just too strong!

Although he still wasn't sure what any of these beasts could actually do, from their auras, he could sense that they were vastly more terrifying than the ghost chariot he had seen in the past.

Eyes gleaming with determination, he calmed his sea of consciousness, then pointed at the rest of the lanterns. The sixth, seventh, and eighth piles of bones surged with the fire of the underworld as additional beasts appeared.

One of them had the head of a dragon and the body of a turtle. It pulsed with something extremely domineering, to the point where Xu Qing felt like his sea of consciousness might not be able to sustain it.

“Mage Life: Turtle-Dragon!”

Next came a beast with the body of a tiger and the head of a dragon, with a mouth full of huge teeth. The moment it appeared, a sensation of sealing emanated off it, rippling through Xu Qing's mind and spreading to the outside. The entire mountain range blurred as it entered a state of being sealed. Within that sealed area could be heard an echoing chant.

“Mage Life: Tiger-Dragon!”

Next came a beast that looked like a dragon, except that it was slender and elegant. As it swirled about, it emanated blue light that nourished the sea of consciousness. Xu Qing's soul felt cool and relaxed, as if it had suddenly been encased in a suit of armor. It was a silent and constant blessing to his soul. His eyes shone brightly as he sensed the blessing, and realized... how astonishingly beneficial it was.

It's like the blessing of a god!

As he came to understand that, the beast's voice echoed out softly.

“Mage Life: Graceful-Dragon!”

Next was the final lantern! After absorbing it, the lantern appeared above the ninth pile of bones. The mountain beneath it trembled, and as the underworld flame lit up, a creature appeared with the head of a dragon, the body of a lion, and the tail of a fish.

There was no heaven-shaking, earth-shattering blast of energy. There were no strange and grisly phenomena. But when it appeared, it looked at Xu Qing, and his fleshly body trembled. He felt his previous injuries being completely healed, along with his soul. It was as if they had received the ultimate blessing. What was even stranger was that all the fluctuations that had filled his sea of consciousness faded away. It was as if this beast's gaze caused everything to reverse.

“Mage Life: Fish-Dragon!”

Ninedawns' nine skulls had fused with Xu Qing's flesh. His skulls formed the connection. The 'mage life' states had all appeared! Next, the foundation of flesh sank down, and rumbling sounds echoed out as the nine beasts roared in unison, the sound converging as if to light an enormous furnace.

RUMBLE!

The fifth secret trove was complete! The mage trove was finished! The aura of the great circle of Spirit Trove spread out from Xu Qing in all directions.

Chapter 867: Target - Master Stillwinter

The mountain range trembled. Cracks appeared in the boulders, spreading out rapidly from the spot where Xu Qing was holed up. They proliferated like a spiderweb, growing increasingly dense.

After three breaths of time passed, the entire massive mountain collapsed as surely as if it had been made from clumps of dust that lost their ability to adhere to each other. The wind blew, causing something like a sandstorm to spread in all directions. What also spread was the terrifying aura from the depths of the ground.

There was something domineering about that aura, and also something as majestic as a god. It spread out like a shock wave. Wherever it passed, huge ravines opened up the ground. At the same time, the plants in the surrounding rainforest wilted and became part of the sandstorm.

The same thing happened to any beasts nearby. The effects spread for about 500 kilometers before they stopped. At the very center of the sandstorm, in what had once been the mountain range, were countless ravines snaking out from a central crater.

Floating up from the bottom of the crater was a person. He exuded a pressure that would shake anyone to the core, and caused the sandstorm to become even more violent. The wind affected the dome of heaven, which also transformed thanks to the emergence of this figure. Black fire radiated off him, filling the ravines and making the entire place seem like the Yellow Springs, full of death and slaughter. Countless soul threads whipped about, obscuring the sky and surrounding the figure.

In the gaps between the fire and the soul threads, it was possible to see a young man. His facial features weren't clear, but he had a long head of hair that glittered with violet light within the fire. As he emerged from the crater and hovered in the sandstorm, his black robe whipped in the wind, making him seem unusually fierce.

He looked up. His features were spectacularly good-looking, like a god that no one would dare to profane. He had a cold, apathetic look in his eyes, and on his forehead glittered a nefarious, circular mark that was the sign of a mage!

He was none other than Xu Qing.

Spirit Trove... great circle.

He looked down at the ravines below, then at the soul threads around him. He took a deep breath. He had spent more time in Spirit Trove than any other level. It wasn't because of the difficulty level, per se, but rather, because his secret troves were all different from the ordinary kind.

Other people had secret troves. He had god troves, an emperor trove, and a mage trove. Because his standard was set so high, he had to take his time. Now, he had finally reached the great circle. However, in order to break through to Void Returning, he needed to meet a certain requirement.

"Heavenly daos...."

His eyes glittered.

What he wanted now was to go to the place where his Eldest Brother said it was possible to acquire heavenly daos. And that was the third round of the Great Hunt, which was held in a god domain!

When the Firemoon Darkheavens open the god domain, I should be able to reach Void Returning! Right now, I lack four heavenly daos. However, it's a totally different picture when it comes to my battle prowess.

After some thought, he stopped worrying about the future. He exercised a thought, and soul threads began to wrap around him. In the blink of an eye, he had formed his first-level god state. That gave him battle prowess equivalent to first-stage Void Returning.

Next, the soul threads converged, and his second-level god state appeared. The fluctuations of second-stage Void Returning battle prowess spread out. More soul threads appeared as his third-level god state formed. Third-stage Void Returning power rocked the area.



Things weren't done yet, though. As the last of his soul threads emerged, so did his fourth-level god state. The Crimson Mother form was the ultimate manifestation of the god state. The battle prowess of fourth-stage Void Returning swept through the sky, shook the lands, caused the air to vibrate, and made mutagen flourish.

This used to be his most powerful state, as it combined his cultivation base power and all the godly authority he had developed up to this point. Both his sundials and his violet moon were part of it.

This was my ultimate state before acquiring the Ninedawns skulls. But now....

He closed his eyes, and his fifth secret trove erupted like a volcanic furnace. The roars of the different Ninedawns skulls echoed out from within him. The sky trembled. The clouds split apart. The air vibrated. The nine skulls of Ninedawns appeared in the open, swirling about to create a huge vortex.

Each one looked different, but they all worked together to form crushing power. It looked extremely ghastly.

After the fluctuations couldn't get more intense, the ox-dragon emerged from the vortex, turning into an illusory totem that shot toward Xu Qing and formed a helmet around his head! It could bolster all of Xu Qing's abilities that were related to sound. When Xu Qing was in his fourth-level god state, his voice sounded like the chanting of a god. With the blessing of the ox-dragon, that chanting became even more terrifying.

Next, the phoenix-dragon flew out of the vortex and merged with Xu Qing. A pair of black wings appeared behind him, each flap of which sent gale-force winds out in all directions. It provided a huge boost to his speed!

Next came the roaring-dragon, the tiger-dragon, and the fish-dragon. The roaring-dragon became vambraces and boosted divine abilities and magical techniques, and would thus improve his battle prowess dramatically. The tiger-dragon became a breastplate, which would boost his sealing abilities. Whether it was D-132 or anything else, in this state, they would be far more terrifying. As for the fish-dragon, it was the backplate, and it had a simple function. It could mitigate any type of disastrous attack!

Next came the turtle-dragon and the graceful-dragon. The former filled in the rest of the torso armor, covering all other vital spots, and boosting Xu Qing's fleshly body defense power. Going forward, Xu Qing's defenses would be astonishing. The latter had a similar function, except not for the fleshly body, but rather, the soul. In this state, the undying graceful-dragon would make Xu Qing's soul unable to perish. Going forward, he would have defenses for his body and soul that were vastly different compared to before.

Most unique was the lion-dragon! Its function was a surprise even to Xu Qing. It didn't turn into armor, but rather, into smoke that floated behind him, connected to the dome of heaven, and blessed... his godliness! With its blessing, his fourth-level god state was improved from the godsource up. Xu Qing could only speculate that the lion-dragon didn't do this before, but had experienced some sort of mutation after being suppressed and devoured by the spider god. That was the only explanation as to why the lion-dragon of Ninedawns would have something to do with gods.

Forgetting about that for the moment, Xu Qing focused on the final of the Ninedawns skulls. It was the jackal-dragon. It turned into a terrifying mask that flew onto Xu Qing's face. It boosted slaughter; going forward, all of his magical treasures and weapons would benefit from it and become more deadly and fierce. As it connected with his face, the canopy of heaven dimmed, rumbling echoed out, and lightning crashed like dancing silver snakes.

The sandstorm became more violent as Xu Qing hovered there, looking completely different from before. He was now a gruish combination of a god state and a mage state.

The grayish-black dragon armor was somber, desolate, and mysterious. The Ninedawns totems pulsed with an ancient, wild aura. He had wings behind him, and a violet moon hovering above. Beneath the dragon armor was a god body, thus combining the mage and the god. A thick gray fog spread out around him, filling heaven and earth, pulsing outward in a way that could shake the heart and mind.

Being in this state gave Xu Qing a very unique feeling. He could turn the canopy of heaven black with a thought. He could shatter the lands with a gaze. He could eradicate all living beings with no effort. He could ignore natural laws with the wave of a hand.

So, this is the battle prowess of the great circle of Void-Returning....

Thinking back to the major chosen of the Firemoon Darkheaven people that he had encountered, his eyes gleamed. He could tell that with the full set of Ninedawns skulls blessing him, his battle prowess surpassed fourth-stage Void-Returning and reached the level of the great circle. Just like Tuo Shishan, Fan Shishuang and Master Stillwinter, his battle prowess existed at a peak level. This was Xu Qing's strongest state!

But it isn't the strongest state for my mage trove! Based on the memory fragments from the Ninedawns skulls, the mage state wasn't like this originally.

From what Xu Qing saw in the memory fragments, when Ninedawns sat outside the God-Rejecting Mage Formation, he had a boundless gray fog behind him. In the depths of that fog was a colossal creature with a terrifying aura. It was something that could extinguish heaven and pulverize the earth, but it was not dragon-shaped. Rather, it was humanoid!

That was the true mage state of Antemage Ninedawns of the Darkheaven Archmages!

Moved, Xu Qing tried to pull more out from his mage trove, but no matter what he did, it didn't produce any sort of supernatural phenomena. It was as if certain imperceptible limitations had settled onto his heart and mind. It was an impenetrable barrier that he couldn't bypass.

His eyes narrowed as he analyzed the situation.

I guess I'm not strong enough to do it now.... Either that or I need to have four heavenly daos and break into Void Returning first. Maybe then I can truly unleash Ninedawns's mage state.

Having concluded that this was the best way to think of it, Xu Qing put such thoughts aside and looked off into the distance.

Thinking back to everything that he had experienced in the Mountain and Sea Region, from when he encountered Master Stillwinter to the chase into the Ninedawns Forbidden Lands, he had experienced a lot of deadly situations, but had also benefited greatly. Coupled with the true history he had witnessed, he felt indescribable emotions. After a time, his eyes shimmered with cold light.

Since I made it out of the Ninedawns Forbidden Lands, now... I need to find Master Stillwinter!

As killing intent appeared in his eyes and thunder crashed above, he shot off into the distance.

#### Chapter 868: Waiting to Fight You

The second round of the Great Hunt was destined to be soaked with blood. Things were on a completely different level than they had been in previous Great Hunts. For example, the dramatic events in the Mountain and Sea Region were totally unprecedented.

Although the three god shrines had ultimately come to suppress the heart of the Ninedawns Forbidden Lands, before that happened, the fluctuations of the spider god had caused all the beasts in the region to be filled with bloodlust. The Mountain and Sea Region, which had already been filled with fierce beasts, became even more brutal. There were even some areas where the beasts stampeded out of control.

The result was that the cultivators participating in the Great Hunt had to become even more ruthless. On a nearly daily basis, there were Firemoon cultivators who died in the region, lending their flesh and blood to the soil as nutrients. Some people took advantage of the chaos to achieve successes that normally wouldn't have been possible. Some of them won very precious mounts. But overall, the Mountain and Sea Region was doomed to descend into chaos.

Xu Qing sensed it immediately once he left his session of secluded meditation in the mountains.

The first thing he saw was a large group of beasts stampeding by. They looked like horses, except they had six legs and the heads of snakes. They were called firereaders. The reason for the name was that when they galloped, green flames would appear beneath their hooves. Wherever they went, green fire abounded, and it could even immolate souls. In the fire that surrounded them, it was possible to see the souls of both beasts and cultivators, trapped and shrieking in agony.

As Xu Qing floated up into the air, the firereaders exhaled green smoke and rushed in his direction.

But then Xu Qing released a bit of the aura of Ninedawns. It was just a bit, but it caused the raging firereaders to suddenly shiver, stop in place, then prostrate toward the canopy of heaven while howling in anguish. Those howls weren't because of any injury they were sustaining, but rather, because of the bitterness and sorrow they felt in their souls. It was an instinct that came from their blood.

The blood of Antemage Ninedawns was paramount in these lands. And most of the beasts in the Mountain and Sea Region descended from Ninedawns's archmage subordinates. When they sensed Ninedawns' aura, it drew out memories from their blood.

Xu Qing stopped and looked at the prostrating firereaders, then shot off into the dome of heaven.

As he traveled, similar scenes played out repeatedly. For example, at one point, a flock of birds that normally didn't hesitate to unleash a storm of violence all stopped in place when Xu Qing neared. Trembling, they bowed and let loose cries of anguish.

It really emphasized to Xu Qing how sorrowful the beasts were, as well as the status Ninedawns commanded. In fact, he gradually started to feel as if this entire area belonged to him. But that feeling was really the result of Ninedawns' emotion. Xu Qing didn't like being affected in that way, so he blotted out all of Ninedawns' emotions.

He picked up speed. A few hours later, his eyes gleamed as he found what he had been looking for.

It was a middle-aged Saia cultivator being chased by mountain sparrows. He clearly had some skills, because despite being chased by multiple mountain sparrows, he was about to make his escape. But then a calm voice slammed into his mind like a bolt of heavenly lightning.

“Be sealed.”

It was a sealing magic bolstered by Ninedawns’ tiger-dragon, which was unusually exceptional, and locked down the entire area surrounding the Saia cultivator. In the blink of an eye, he shivered, then stopped in place. He was unable to move, with his fleshly body and his soul both completely immobilized.

The pursuing mountain sparrows shivered as if they had just been given new orders. Turning in place, they flew off into the distance.

The Saia remained, completely immobile in midair, his heart raging with astonishment. Then a figure appeared, strolling toward him, surrounded by black fire. The moment the Saia cultivator saw his face, a tempest erupted within him. He recognized Xu Qing! Based on the information he’d been given, Xu Qing was supposed to have been killed by Master Stillwinter! But here was Xu Qing right in front of him!

The shock caused the Saia cultivator’s body to instinctively want to tremble, except he was sealed so tightly he couldn’t even do that. His eyes were absolutely pulsing with astonishment and terror. What was more, as Xu Qing neared and flames built up around the Saia cultivator, intense pain swept through his fleshly body. But what was most terrifying to him was the pressure radiating off Xu Qing. The pressure alone caused cracks to start spreading out on his skin. It felt like facing a Smoldering God!

“Where’s Master Stillwinter?” Xu Qing asked coolly.

The seal binding the Saia loosened slightly, but at first, the only thing that came out was a sharp gasp of shock. And he finally was able to tremble thanks to the sensation of imminent death. Unfortunately, he couldn’t do anything to get rid of that deathly sensation. All he could do was shake his head, because he had no idea where Master Stillwinter was.

“Don’t know?” Xu Qing asked, his expression placid. He waved his hand, and a soul thread spread out, wrapped around the Saia, and then viciously dragged him behind Xu Qing.

Xu Qing had only bound the Saia’s cultivation base, not his ability to speak. What was more, the sealing was so incredible that it allowed Xu Qing to open his bag of holding and check what was inside. All he had was a transmission jade slip. Xu Qing didn’t plan to kill him right away. After all, it seemed a lot more convenient to get Master Stillwinter to come to him rather than try to track him down. That said, he needed the cooperation of the Saia cultivator.

Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior flew out and started circling around the Saia, occasionally flying close enough to slice open wounds on his flesh. The sensation of frigid cold caused the Saia cultivator to tremble.

A projection of the patriarch appeared, seated cross-legged atop the iron skewer. Looking at the Saia, he said, "Are you going to save yourself? Or would you like me to help you? Just pick a spot and I can poke some holes there. You'd better hope people like you, or else.... heh heh."

When the Saia cultivator saw the look in the patriarch's eyes, he unhesitatingly did as requested and sent some messages to fellow members of his species asking for them to save him.

Xu Qing flew along, dragging the Saia behind him with soul threads.

The Saia's messages included some devious tricks, but Xu Qing didn't care. The more people who came, the better. Unfortunately, whether it was because Xu Qing's reputation was too ferocious, or the Saia wasn't very popular, after several hours passed, not one member of his species showed up to save him.

Xu Qing, starting to get impatient, accelerated.

A few days passed.

During that time, the Saia's pleas for help grew weaker and weaker. It didn't matter how Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior threatened him; the Saia was helpless to do anything other than moan. Thankfully, the more people he contacted, the more word spread.

As the days passed, Xu Qing occasionally encountered Whitemarshes or Saias, and he would immediately attack them, bind them, and start dragging them behind him. He now had dozens of them....

All of them were overwhelmed with despair. With Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior tormenting and threatening them, they kept sending out messages for help. At the same time, their cries grew increasingly hoarse.

The very first Saia cultivator Xu Qing had captured saw more and more captives being gathered, and it only caused his terror to grow. Over the days that had passed, he hadn't just witnessed Xu Qing's ferocity. He saw with his own eyes how unusual the Mountain and Sea Region beasts were behaving! He saw numerous instances in which beasts that he would have personally fled from actually prostrated to Xu Qing. It didn't matter if they were alone or in groups. They always did the same thing.

It was like government officials encountering a monarch or king! It was both astonishing and confusing.

He had never heard of anything like this happening, not in any of the ancient records he had read. His understanding was that the beasts in the Mountain and Sea Region were ferocious and cruel. Taming them required both strength and destined opportunities. Normally speaking, once you tamed one, taming a second was even more difficult.

But right now... he had personally seen numerous beasts prostrating to Xu Qing, and many of them were the high-ranking variety that people longed to have as mounts. Regardless of their ranking, they bowed to Xu Qing, and some even ran over with the hopes of being able to follow him.

*Th-this... this....* The mere thought of it caused the Saia cultivator to tremble.

Six days went by. By that point, Xu Qing had captured well over a hundred Saias and Whitemarshes that he was dragging behind him. It was truly a shocking sight. All of them were sending voice messages asking for help.

A huge commotion had struck the Mountain and Sea Region. By now, everyone was talking about the fact that Xu Qing wasn't dead. Word was also spreading rapidly that he was looking for Master Stillwinter. Whether it was Firemoon cultivators or those from other species, when they saw the scene from a distance, they were struck to the core.

As a result, Xu Qing's name became even more deeply fixed into the hearts of the other participants. By his actions, Xu Qing was sending a clear message to Master Stillwinter.

"I'm waiting for you!"

Chapter 869: Encountering a Fiend

Three days passed.

During that time, the storm caused by Xu Qing only got bigger in the Mountain and Sea Region. With the exception of a few random people who isolated themselves and didn't contact anyone else, just about everyone heard about the situation between Xu Qing and Master Stillwinter.

Among the Firemoon Darkheaven people, Master Stillwinter was universally recognized as the number two chosen. Whether through direct experience or not, all Firemoons knew that he had terrifying battle prowess. Therefore, after hearing about the way Xu Qing was challenging Master Stillwinter, none of them put much stock in his ability to come out on top of a fight. Although Xu Qing was certainly making a dramatic show, it wasn't enough to change the minds of all those cultivators.

After all, it was only two months before that word had spread rapidly about Master Stillwinter seeking Xu Qing. Then, an announcement was made that Xu Qing had perished. Although that proved to be incorrect, the fact that he went missing for that period of time seemed to be an indication of how the clash between them ended. How much could have changed in two months?

But what many people found strange was that Master Stillwinter didn't respond to Xu Qing's challenge. In fact, many Firemoon cultivators came to the realization that nobody knew where Master Stillwinter was. That was very thought-provoking, and it didn't take long before speculations began to run wild.

The more than one hundred Saia and Whitemarsh cultivators that Xu Qing was dragging behind him only got weaker and weaker, while at the same time, they also started wondering what was going on. They had been doing everything they could, and had reached the point where they had sent messages to everyone they could think of. And yet, Master Stillwinter never showed up. In fact, not one person that they messaged ever came to their rescue. That actually wasn't surprising considering that... these people weren't idiots. None of them wanted to put their own lives on the line to save people unless they were completely confident in succeeding.

But eventually, it did happen. At around noon, when the sunlight was brightest in the Mountain and Sea Region, yang energy flourished, and yin-based grues and beasts were normally resting.

As the bright sunlight shone down, illuminating heaven and earth, Xu Qing suddenly stopped in midair and looked toward the horizon. The over one hundred cultivators behind him instantly

ceased their wailing and moaning, and nervously looked in the same direction. Before long, they all caught sight of four beams of prismatic light shooting over the horizon.

Within each of them was a cultivator with an exceptional demeanor and a powerful cultivation base. Three of them were Saias, and they had murderous looks on their faces.

The fourth was a Whitemarsh with a powerful fleshly body. He was like a small mountain pulsing with an intense aura of energy and blood. The beating of his heart was like muffled thunder, and imparted the sensation of invincibility.

Most shocking was that all four of them had extraordinary mounts. The Whitemarsh was riding a huge winged python that was completely ferocious in appearance. The three Saias all had different mounts. One had the head of a lion and the body of a wolf, and emanated an aura that could stun the soul. The second looked like a turtle, and emanated a boundlessly powerful sensation.

Unexpectedly, the last mount looked like an evil ghost. It was pitch black, blurry, and incomparably gruish. The mounts provided significant blessings to all of them. Powerful fluctuations rolled out in all directions, causing the dome of heaven to turn as dark as if it was stained by ink.

When the captives saw these four cultivators racing toward Xu Qing, their hearts leaped with joy. These four were chosen cultivators from their own species, so it was only natural that they recognized them.

The three Saias were the strongest representatives of their species in the second round of the Great Hunt. All of them had second-stage Void Returning cultivation bases, yet could unleash battle prowess equivalent to the fourth stage. Although they weren't as exceptional as Master Stillwinter, they were extremely respected by most species.

As for the burly Whitemarsh, he had a fleshly body equivalent to fourth-stage Void Returning, and was also a member of the nobility. He was the second-born son of the leader of the Whitemarsh species!

These four had received messages asking for help. Knowing that Xu Qing was involved, they had joined forces to come deal with him. The fact that they had shown up after all this time seemed to indicate that they were very confident in the chances of success. The moment they appeared, it was without a moment of hesitation that they shot toward Xu Qing to attack him. They didn't even exchange any words.

The first to arrive was the young lord of the Whitemarsh species. The burly young man had a cruel facial expression, and the fluctuations of energy and blood that pulsated off him created an intense pressure. As he closed in, he performed a double-handed incantation gesture and then shoved his hand out. The air around Xu Qing filled with the sharp sound of rifts tearing open. Natural and magical laws shattered, then formed anew in a way that conformed to the Whitemarsh's dao.

Next, the third eye on his forehead opened, and it radiated a furious red color that spread out around him. An instant later, the projection of a blood-red giant appeared behind him. The giant had two horrid warhammers that caused wild colors to flash and winds to scream as it smashed them toward Xu Qing. At the same time, the Whitemarsh's mount opened its mouth in brutal fashion to snap at Xu Qing.

Further back, the Saia cultivator with the evil ghost mount circled around to cut off Xu Qing's avenue of retreat. He simultaneously performed a double-handed incantation gesture and started

chanting something. Countless netherworld souls appeared, quickly turning into a sea of souls that didn't just block his path, but also swept out to encircle him.

As for the other two Saia, one of them appeared above Xu Qing, while the other appeared below him. The one above didn't unleash a divine ability. Instead, he produced a red candle that he ignited.

"Godly binding!" he said. Instantly, an image of Xu Qing appeared in the candle's flame.

The Saia beneath Xu Qing sat down cross-legged and performed an incantation gesture. Instantly, his body decayed as he unleashed a mysterious curse magic. It became a stream of gray light designed to infect the soul. It shot right toward Xu Qing.

The four acted simultaneously with mountain-toppling, sea-draining force. The Whitemarsh attacked in a way that couldn't be stopped. The first Saia blocked Xu Qing's path of retreat. The second used a special treasure to target Xu Qing's fleshly body and make resistance difficult. And the third Saia used a trump card curse magic designed to corrupt Xu Qing's soul.

Of course, the mounts of the three Saia's also launched attacks.

Meanwhile, the clouds seethed on the horizon as yet another figure appeared and raced toward them. This person's aura wasn't on the same level as Master Stillwinter, but it was very close. Because he was wreathed in clouds, it was impossible to make out his facial features, but he was clearly very domineering.

For some unknown reason, as this mysterious newcomer neared, he suddenly stopped in place within the clouds. His foot was almost frozen in place, as if he didn't dare to proceed any further. Within the clouds, his expression was one of shock and astonishment, and all of his domineering attitude disappeared.

The moment he stopped in place, Xu Qing's eyes filled with gray fog. Then the gray fog erupted from within him, sweeping out to cover a 3,000-meter area and obscure both his over one hundred captives and the four would-be rescuers.

The descending warhammers were affected, as was the sealing magic. Most shocked of all were the four mounts. They shivered, then suddenly switched sides and attacked their masters with unrelenting ferocity.

Xu Qing's expression was calm as he looked up at the Saia cultivator with the red candle. Their gazes met, and Xu Qing shot upward.

The Saia reeled mentally as the candle in his hand suddenly started burning much faster. It was as if it had been stimulated into action, and in fact, over the course of only two breaths of time... it burned out!

The Saia tried to fall back, but it was too late. Xu Qing appeared in front of him, reached out, and grabbed him by the neck. As an agonized howl echoed out, countless strands of gray fog entered the Saia's eyes, ears, nose, and mouth, as well as all of his pores. He shivered from head to toe, all while screaming in agony. His cultivation base was rejected, his body decayed, and he was killed in body and soul.



Xu Qing let him go and vanished. When he reappeared, he was in front of the Saia cultivator who had unleashed the sealing magic. The Saia backed away in terror as he realized that Xu Qing was not revealing Void Returning strength. It was more like Smoldering God! That unexpected twist filled him with the utmost terror.

“Brother Heavenink,” he blurted, “you—”

Except, his longevity couldn't sustain him for long enough to finish speaking. He crumbled into pieces, all while countless soul threads emerged from him.

Xu Qing vanished again, to reappear in front of the final Saia.

The Saia shivered and turned to flee. But the gray fog exerted a karmic tug, making it impossible for him to do so. As Xu Qing approached, his eyes went wide with madness and he unleashed his curse power to the fullest extent possible.

“Die, die, DIE!!”

Curses streamed out of him, causing his body to wither dramatically. Unfortunately, when those curses entered Xu Qing, they did as much good *as as throwing a stone ox into the ocean*. Nothing happened. Xu Qing approached him calmly and took his life.

Finally, Xu Qing turned to the young Whitemarsh lord, who was currently trying to get away.

With a single step, Xu Qing appeared in front of the blood-red giant. Ignoring the warhammers, he passed the giant and closed in on the Whitemarsh.

The young Whitemarsh lord was astonished to the core. In fact, he had been shocked from the moment the gray fog appeared and the plan they had agreed upon went awry as their fifth member failed to intervene. The fact that the three Saia chosen had died so quickly went to show the massive level disparity. And that crushed him mentally.

Dammit, dammit, dammit!! Didn't they say that Master Stillwinter chased this guy away when they fought? He... he's actually far more terrifying than Master Stillwinter! And that gray fog... it's from the Ninedawns Forbidden Lands! How can he be using it here? Don't tell me... that he's got something to do with the dramatic events that went down there earlier!

Numerous thoughts ran through his mind as Xu Qing approached. Then the gray fog streamed into him, and all he could do was howl in agony as he was killed in body and soul. The gray fog disappeared. The over one hundred cultivators that Xu Qing had taken captive were no longer useful. They died.

Sunlight streamed down, illuminating Xu Qing.

Looking at the distant patch of clouds, he coolly said, “Sir Heavenink.”

The clouds dissipated, revealing a young Firemoon cultivator. He was in third-stage Void Returning, but had battle prowess in the great circle. He was listed as fourth among Firemoon chosen, and was part of the stewarded nation of High God Starfire. In the past, he had fought Tuo Shishan and defeated him, which went to show the quality of his battle prowess. Right now, he looked extremely respectful as he clasped hands and bowed formally to Xu Qing.

“Greetings, Brother Xu! I, Heavenink, have come here today to give you two gifts. The first gift came in the form of those four flunkies. I hope you enjoyed venting your fury on them. The second gift is information about Master Stillwinter! I secretly carried out my own investigation, all for the purpose of helping you find him, Brother Xu!”

Sir Heavenink took out a jade slip he had prepared moments ago and respectfully offered it to Xu Qing.

#### Chapter 870: The Monarch Arrives

As the jade slip floated over, Xu Qing looked at it coldly. He didn't reach out to grab it. Instead, he sent a soul thread over to pierce into the jade slip and shatter it. Most people who saw that would tremble inwardly thinking that it was a display of overt killing intent.

But Sir Heavenink was a top chosen. The reason he hadn't attacked Xu Qing earlier was because he had picked up on certain clues that caused him to hold back. He was perceptive. And thus, he maintained a very respectful attitude.

“That thug Master Stillwinter had originally been aiming to tame a hillworm,” he said. “But then something unexpected happened, and about a month ago he went to the Ghost Chariot Wildwood. Based on the information I was able to dig up, quite a few cultivators have gone after ghost chariots. And that includes the followers of that bastard Fan Shishuang. But when you add the brutal beast Master Stillwinter into the picture, that changes things.

“That villain Fan Shishuang is a real schemer, and he made a lot of secret preparations for this Great Hunt. Because of that, when that sissy Master Stillwinter went into the Ghost Chariot Wildwood, he never came back out. It seems likely to me that those two jokers locked horns and got stuck at an impasse.”

Sir Heavenink didn't hide anything. He explained everything he knew, and continuously managed to use insulting terms for both of the cultivators who had previously attacked Xu Qing. In fact, he didn't repeat any of the insults even once. He was clearly working very hard to make sure he put himself on Xu Qing's side.

Of course, the reason he knew so much about the situation was that he had previously been planning to go into the Ghost Chariot Wildwood. He had been hoping to seek an opportunity once Master Stillwinter and Fan Shishuang were injured and tired.

After finishing his explanation, Sir Heavenink did one more thing to play things really safely. Having heard that Xu Qing was a godherald of the Starfire Temple, he released some of the aura of that very temple.

Xu Qing's expression remained placid. Though he had used the soul threads to destroy the jade slip, he had also extracted the information from it by means of the soul thread. For all intents and purposes, it was the same as what Sir Heavenink had just divulged verbally. Whether it was his verbal attacks or the aura of the Starfire Temple, his intent was clear. Xu Qing obviously picked up on the fact that he was trying to present himself as an ally.

Eyes gleaming with profound light, Xu Qing looked Sir Heavenink up and down. He really had no reason or justification to kill him considering everything so far. From beginning to end, Sir Heavenink hadn't done a single thing that could be considered courting death.

Therefore, Xu Qing chose not to bicker with him over anything. He started moving. He passed Sir Heavenink, and in the blink of an eye, disappeared over the horizon.

After he was gone, Sir Heavenink breathed a sigh of relief. Looking at the spot where Xu Qing had disappeared, he felt relief at having survived, but also other conflicting emotions.

When this Xu Qing fought Master Stillwinter, I don't think he was intentionally holding back. He probably wasn't a match for Master Stillwinter. But in the two months that have passed, he experienced a cultivation base breakthrough. He's the kind of chosen who causes heaven-shaking, earth-toppling transformations when he achieves breakthroughs.

As for that gray fog.... I bet the dramatic events in the Ninedawns Forbidden Lands were connected to him. And if he was able to bring the gray fog out of the Ninedawns Forbidden Lands, and even control it perfectly....

Sir Heavenink knew what that implied, and it caused a lot of speculations to rise up within him.

Don't tell me... that he tamed a ninedawns!

Sir Heavenink inhaled deeply. He was starting to get the feeling that in the final rankings of this Great Hunt, the number one spot wouldn't be taken by a Firemoon cultivator.

He already took first place in round one. And he's probably going to take first in the second round. If he does the same in the third round.... Grand Darkheaven!

Sir Heavenink reeled mentally. It had been a very, very long time since the Grand Darkheaven appeared in the Firemoon Darkheaven people. In fact, the last time was ten thousand years in the past.

If the Grand Darkheaven appears this time....

Sir Heavenink's mind was racing. Eventually, his eyes shone with determination, and instead of going off in a different direction, he shot after Xu Qing.

"Brother Xu!" he shouted. "Master Stillwinter is just as devious as Fan Shishuang! I'd say there's a good chance the two of them will join forces. I'd be happy to join you if that would help! It could save you some trouble!"

Xu Qing's eyebrows shot up as he looked back at Sir Heavenink. Meanwhile, he received a projected warning from Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior.

*"Milord, something's fishy about this ruffian. He's definitely up to something. I suggest you cut down this snake right now!"*

Xu Qing ignored him. After a final glance at Sir Heavenink, he neither refused his offer nor accepted it. Turning, he continued on toward the Ghost Chariot Wildwood.

Sir Heavenink's spirits lifted when he saw that Xu Qing wasn't rejecting him. In the hopes of creating an even better impression, he then went on to explain even more about the Mountain and Sea Region. Much of it was information that couldn't even be purchased on the outside, and was

new to Xu Qing. For example, he learned about the characteristics of some of the unusual beasts, hidden dangers that could be encountered in the rainforest, and other such things. And thus, the two of them got closer and closer to the Ghost Chariot Wildwood.

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In the Mountain and Sea Region's highlands, in the part of the rainforest occupied by the hillworms, a months-long chase was still playing out. It was different from the 5,000-kilometer chase in which Master Stillwinter pursued Xu Qing. Instead, this entire chase took place in hillworm territory.

The quarry was the Captain. The pursuer was Sir Firedark.

The Captain had used some outrageous methods to lead Sir Firedark in circles, all while shouting very licentious things.

"Aren't you tired yet? All I did was interrupt you when you were taming a beast! Who cares if you're neither a man nor a woman? What's your problem??"

"My goodness, can you just stop chasing me? Look, I can introduce you to a daoist partner! How about that?"

"Listen, I have a little Junior Brother..."

Behind the Captain, Sir Firedark unleashed an attack that was comparable to the might of a Smoldering God, which blotted out the sky and caused immense pressure to weigh down.

Rumbling booms echoed out as heaven and earth shattered. The Captain was ripped to shreds, but a moment later, a blue worm popped out of the mud. Moments later, the Captain was back in one piece and fleeing.

The reality was that the Captain's attitude didn't match the words coming out of his mouth. Things had not been going well for him over the past few months, and he was starting to fear that he had reached the end of the line.

Why hasn't little Junior Brother shown up?

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In the lowlands of the Mountain and Sea Region, two figures sped through the sky toward a dark section of the rainforest.

"Brother Xu, that's the Ghost Chariot Wildwood. It's inhabited mostly by fierce and brutal grues that most people can't even defend against.

"It's also the primary habitat of the ghost chariots. They actually prey on grues. They have terrifying battle prowess, and some of them are even as strong as Smoldering Gods. Because of that, coming here to try to tame infant ghost chariots is actually very risky."

Xu Qing looked at the jungle up ahead. All of the plants and vegetation were black. Even the sky was filled with dark clouds, within which crackled red bolts of lightning. There was something very

sinister about this part of the rainforest. From the outside, it was possible to sense something tugging at your soul, as if the jungle was a whirlpool.

There were some cultivators present, but they were wandering around numbly like the walking dead.

“Those are cultivators who died here recently. After their souls were devoured, their fleshly bodies were resurrected, whereupon they wandered around looking for their souls.... Eventually, the plants and vegetation will cause their fleshly bodies to decompose and turn into nutrients.”

The fear in Sir Heavenink’s voice was clear. “By the way, this place is huge. That son of a bitch Master Stillwinter and that asshole Fan Shishuang have been inside for a while now. They’re basically hiding in the shadows while we’re out in the open. Things could get difficult.”

Sir Heavenink looked at Xu Qing out of the corner of his eye and noticed that Xu Qing was just hovering there. He blinked a few times, then took out a stick of incense which he lit. “Don’t worry, I came prepared. Any cultivator who wants to come here and tame a ghost chariot will get some incense like this. It’ll protect your soul to a certain degree so that you can enter the Ghost Chariot Wildwood safely. I have seven or eight sticks after this one. That should be more than enough.”

Xu Qing looked away from the Ghost Chariot Wildwood to Sir Heavenink. “You can stop digging for information.”

Sir Heavenink smiled woodenly. The truth was that though it seemed like he’d been providing a useful introduction to the area, the reality was that he *had* been digging for information. He wanted to find out if the beasts in this area would prostrate to Xu Qing like all the others.

Xu Qing ignored Sir Heavenink. He was aware that he couldn’t hide the fact that he had succeeded in the Ninedawns Forbidden Lands. It was only a matter of time before everyone found out. What was more, he also wanted to find the extent of what he could do thanks to ‘taming’ Ninedawns.

Looking at the terrifying Ghost Chariot Wildwood, Xu Qing coolly said, “Ghost chariots. Come here!”

As the words left his mouth, he unleashed the aura of Ninedawns.

The clouds shattered and lightning crashed, sweeping down to create a web of electricity. The plants and vegetation in the dark jungle trembled and bent over as if bowing. The grues howled in agony, and the zombie-like cultivators dropped to the ground and lay there unmoving. The ground began to tremble as the entire Ghost Chariot Wildwood seemed to come alive.

Next, a host of heaven-shaking, earth-shattering auras spread out from the darkness of the jungle. An instant later, numerous vicious-looking ghost chariots charged out into the open.

There were well over a hundred of them, some large and some small. Their cultivation bases ranged from Spirit Trove to Void Returning, and they roared as they raced straight toward Xu Qing. They crushed everything in their path, and their eyes shone with underworld light as they stopped in front of Xu Qing and dropped to the ground. It was as if they had met their monarch.

Their auras spread out, combining to create a dust storm that filled the area.

Meanwhile, Xu Qing stood in front of them, his expression placid.

Sir Heavenink was stunned to the core. But what was truly astonishing was that things weren't over yet.

As the ground shook, three terrifying Smoldering God auras erupted from within the rainforest. An instant later, three profoundly ancient and enormous ghost chariots appeared in the air. They looked in Xu Qing's direction.

Sir Heavenink gasped, and his hair stood on end as beads of cold sweat broke out all over him.

Then Xu Qing spoke again. "Show me the outsiders."

The ground shook as all of the plants and vegetation in this section of the rainforest suddenly bent down and to the side.

As a result, all of the Firemoon cultivators who had been hiding in the jungle were revealed. All were trembling and had looks of disbelief on their faces. The events playing out completely surpassed anything they could have imagined, to the point where it seemed like they were witnessing something from myth or legend.

Some distance away were two cultivators who were facing off and were about 3,000 meters apart from each other. They were none other than Master Stillwinter and Fan Shishuang. Both were visibly shocked as they slowly turned to look at Xu Qing.