

Starlit Path 411

Chapter 411: Inherited Physiques, Tang Yimo's Descent into Madness

"Where... are we?"

"Is that Nie Shuang?"

"Meng Haoran?"

Voices rose one after another, overlapping in confusion.

The air was heavy with an eerie solemnity. A chill crawled up everyone's spine.

Nie Shuang and Meng Haoran locked eyes. They weren't strangers—they'd met once before. Meeting again in this mysterious place sent faint ripples through their hearts.

Meng Haoran swept his gaze across the surroundings and saw nearly twenty figures, all young. Some faces he recognized, others he didn't. There were nervous boys and girls, some trembling with fear, others calm and composed.

His brow furrowed. Spiritual sense surged from him like a tide.

After training under Kong Nanfei and seizing the opportunities of the world's transformation, Meng Haoran had stepped into the Nascent Soul realm. Among everyone present, his cultivation was the highest.

“Zhao Zixu of Western Liang,” a young man in scaled armor announced, nodding toward Nie Shuang and Meng Haoran. He knew them both.

Zhao Zixu glanced around and realized he might be the oldest here. For some reason, that realization brought a subtle pressure.

Bzzz...

Suddenly, a terrifying fluctuation rippled through the strange domain.

Everyone felt a crushing weight settle over their hearts. They lifted their heads, searching the darkness.

Far away, a faint dawn seemed to pierce the gloom. Thick spiritual energy churned and swirled like the first light of morning breaking the night.

Immortal palaces and towers appeared, pavilions reflected in still waters, all wrapped in drifting mist.

It was a true immortal realm.

The twenty young people gasped in unison.

“What is this place?”

“My father once told me that besides the unfathomable Young Master, the Five Phoenixes also hide enigmatic immortals... Could it be that we’ve been chosen by an immortal?”

Nie Shuang’s hair whipped in the wind, his blood and qi surging from years of training.

“An immortal?” Meng Haoran murmured, hands clasped behind his back, his scholar’s robe fluttering.

Zhao Zixu rolled his neck, sensing that something monumental was happening.

In the crowd, Tang Guo shivered uncontrollably. What had she done? How had she ended up here?

Suddenly—

An overwhelming aura exploded outward, shaking the entire space with a deafening roar like mountains crumbling and oceans raging.

The twenty youths trembled.

Then they saw it: a colossal figure seated lazily, towering between heaven and earth.

Blinding radiance poured from it. They couldn't even open their eyes. Their souls quaked, and every single one involuntarily dropped to their knees.

The might of an immortal.

Unseeable. Unfathomable.

"Such terrifying power... Is this really an immortal?" Nie Shuang lowered his head, horror flooding his heart.

Meng Haoran tried to summon his righteous haoran qi to resist the pressure, but it was useless.

"Remember this," a calm, indifferent voice echoed through the void. "Only seven of you will receive the immortal fate."

Nie Shuang, Zhao Zixu, Meng Haoran—all of them froze.

Immortal fate?

Fight for it?

They opened their mouths to speak, but the mysterious immortal gave them no chance.

A soft chuckle drifted through the heavens.

The world spun.

When everything steadied, the twenty found themselves at the foot of an impossibly tall mountain that stabbed into the clouds, as though trying to pierce the vault of heaven.

Spiritual light pulsed from the peak, tugging at their souls.

Nie Shuang looked around. The immortal was gone.

A chill ran through him. In front of that being, they were nothing but ants—toys to be played with.

“We really did meet that legendary immortal...” he whispered.

“The immortal fate... it must be at the top,” Nie Shuang said, eyes blazing. He took a deep breath and started climbing without hesitation.

Meng Haoran and Zhao Zixu exchanged a glance, then followed. The others charged forward too.

If the immortal fate waited atop the mountain, every second counted. From this moment on, they were rivals.

The cliff was sheer and treacherous, offering almost no footholds.

Nie Shuang channeled his spiritual energy and moved like a gecko across the rock face, his powerful body giving him an early advantage. But the higher he climbed, the harder it became. Soon he was panting, advancing inch by agonizing inch.

High above, Lu Fan floated serenely, watching the twenty chosen youths with calm detachment.

At the summit, seven radiant Physique Flowers bloomed—each one a seed of extraordinary potential. To claim one meant limitless future power... if you survived the ordeal.

...

After endless climbing, Nie Shuang finally spotted them: seven flowers swaying atop the peak, radiating mysterious fluctuations that pulled at his very soul.

Every climber saw the same seven flowers, each one calling to them personally.

These were geniuses; they understood instantly. Those flowers were the immortal fate the voice had spoken of.

Fire ignited in their hearts. They climbed faster.

Then—

A terrifying pressure crashed down from the summit like an avalanche.

Groans of pain echoed as the twenty were slammed flat against the cliff.

One youth couldn't bear it. He slid several meters, sweat pouring, staring in horror at the abyss below. One more slip and he would fall to his death.

Cold dread gripped them all.

They tried to use spiritual energy to climb, but the pressure scattered it like smoke.

This was the trial.

Nie Shuang gritted his teeth and kept moving, one torturous handhold at a time.

The higher they went, the worse it became. Mocking voices began whispering in their ears.

“Nie Shuang, give up. Even your father never believed in you. Why fight for something you’ll never get?”

“Meng Haoran, just go back to your books. Why risk your life? One mistake and you’ll plummet into the abyss.”

“Tang Guo, quit while you’re ahead. Hide behind your brother forever. You’re not cut out for this.”

The taunts never stopped.

Some hearts wavered.

Suddenly, one youth let go. His despairing scream faded into the depths.

Nineteen remained, hands white-knuckled on the rock, palms bleeding.

They desperately wished it was an illusion, but the stone was cold and real, and so was the drop.

The pressure grew heavier. The flowers seemed no closer—no matter how far they climbed, the distance stayed the same: five zhang, ten, fifty...

More gave up. Some even looked relieved as they fell.

Nie Shuang's lips bled from clenching his jaw, but he refused to stop.

Meng Haoran's face was expressionless. Zhao Zixu grim and determined.

To everyone's shock, delicate little Tang Guo hadn't quit. She hung at the very back, cheeks scratched raw, yet her eyes burned with unbreakable resolve.

"I can't keep relying on my brother forever. I have to protect myself. I have to get stronger. I won't be his burden—I refuse to drag him down!"

Tears mixed with blood on her face, but she climbed. Each pull left bloody handprints on the stone.

Screams whipped past her, making her flinch, but she never let go.

When the thirteenth person fell...

The pressure suddenly vanished, like clouds parting after a storm.

They surged upward.

They crested the peak.

Seven flowers danced in the mountain breeze, each glowing with different divine colors—gold, black, crimson...

Seven people. Seven flowers.

Tang Guo stood covered in blood, hands ruined, face torn—yet joy flickered in her heart.

A wind swept across the summit, carrying the scent of absolute triumph.

The flowers lifted from the ground, drifting toward their chosen owners.

But the true pain had only just begun.

...

Dawn broke over the Five Phoenixes, yet an uneasy stillness hung in the air.

Every major power was in chaos.

Inside the Great Xuan Academy—

Dantai Xuan, dressed in royal robes, paced slowly.

“That Tang girl... vanished?”

“Where did she go?”

He took a deep breath. Tang Xiansheng had entrusted his daughter to the academy. If anything happened to her, relations with Southern Commandery would collapse.

Especially since her older brother, Tang Yimo—one of the earliest genius cultivators, now reportedly in the Yin Spirit realm—doted on her obsessively. If he learned she was missing, he would tear the academy apart.

“Search the entire capital! Mobilize every soldier! Find Tang Guo!” Dantai Xuan ordered helplessly.

He glanced at Mo Ju, worry in his eyes. “Do you think... this could be the work of that cult?”

Mo Ju waved his feather fan and smiled faintly. “No need to worry, Your Majesty. The cult wouldn’t dare infiltrate the academy.”

“Perhaps some strange power took her away.”

Strange power—maybe an immortal’s doing. Mo Ju kept that thought to himself.

The capital turned upside down. Black Tortoise Guards searched door to door.

Time passed. No trace.

Then reports flooded in from every commandery: genius youths vanishing without a clue.

A day later, Tang Xiansheng received the news in Southern Commandery.

His heart clenched, but he stayed calm. After another day with no leads, he sent word to Tang Yimo.

The moment Tang Yimo emerged from seclusion, demonic energy exploded around him like a storm.

He crossed the Dragon Gate and descended upon the Great Xuan palace.

BOOM!

Inside the Azure Dragon Gate, terrifying aura surged like a tidal wave.

His face was dark, panic flickering beneath the rage. He had believed the academy was the safest place for his sister—that was why he'd allowed her to study there.

Mo Ju appeared.

“Where is my sister?” Tang Yimo’s voice was ice.

Dantai Xuan arrived in person, surrounded by guards.

He knew Tang Yimo well. In the early days of cultivation, the man had been dazzling. Though he later faded from the spotlight, his strength was undeniable.

Mo Ju spoke calmly, eventually convincing Tang Yimo to wait.

“If anything happens to her, this entire academy will bury her with it,” Tang Yimo said coldly, killing intent rolling off him.

He wasn’t unreasonable. He waited.

Three days passed.

Still no sign of Tang Guo.

Even Dantai Xuan grew anxious.

Mo Ju began to doubt his own theory.

BOOM!

The academy's training ground cracked apart.

Black demonic qi twisted like dragons and serpents. The earth became ruin.

Students fled under crushing pressure.

Tang Yimo stood at the center, hair whipping wildly, skin blood-red, demonic qi billowing. He had opened five gates of his Eight Meridian Demonic Technique, looking every inch an archdevil.

Dantai Xuan's expression shifted. He ordered the students evacuated and surrounded Tang Yimo with layers of Black Tortoise Guards.

Was the alliance with Southern Commandery going to shatter over one girl?

And yet—he couldn't blame Tang Yimo. The fault was theirs.

“Bring Ninth Lotus,” he said heavily.

Lu Jiulian arrived shortly after.

“Don’t hold back. Fight me,” she said simply, glancing at Tang Yimo.

BOOM!

The training ground exploded. Stones hung suspended in the air.

Tang Yimo roared and charged like a black beast.

Explosions rocked the academy as their battle spilled beyond the grounds.

“If my sister is dead, I’ll slaughter every last one of you!” Tang Yimo’s voice thundered through the ruins.

“Good,” Lu Jiulian replied calmly.

The clash shook the heavens.

...

Within the preaching platform, Lu Fan watched the transformations atop the Physique Mountain with detached interest.

Seven youths were cocooned in the flowers' energy, screams echoing daily as their flesh and bones were reforged in agony.

This was the final trial.

Seven days later—

Nie Shuang was the first to finish. He sat cross-legged at the summit, feeling power coursing through every drop of blood.

“Sacred King Physique...” he whispered, opening eyes sharp as blades. A single breath sliced hundreds of meters through the air.

Meng Haoran's blood-soaked robes fluttered. “Innate Dao Physique,” he said with a faint smile.

Tang Guo opened her eyes, lashes trembling, cheeks flushed with divine light despite the gore. “Divine King Physique...”

BOOM!

The sacred mountain began to collapse.

The colossal immortal figure reappeared, pressure forcing even the newly awakened physiques to their knees.

The thirteen who had failed watched enviously as radiant auras bloomed around the seven.

A giant hand descended, gently touching each head.

The thirteen felt the world spin.

When they opened their eyes, they were home—memories of the trial erased.

...

Atop a snowy peak, Kong Nanfei opened his eyes. The blizzard behind him stilled.

Meng Haoran reappeared.

“Back?” Kong Nanfei asked.

“Yes.” Meng Haoran nodded.

Kong Nanfei returned to meditation without another word.

Meng Haoran scratched his head. Master really wasn't worried at all...

...

Back at the academy, Tang Yimo and Lu Jiulian's battle had turned half the grounds to rubble.

Demonic qi dragons coiled in the sky. Giant lotus blossoms spun overhead.

Tang Yimo walked on air, skin purple, black runes crawling across his face. He no longer suppressed his technique—each clash pushed him further, gates opening one after another.

Lu Julian's green robes fluttered. Facing a monster who wasn't born with a special physique yet rivaled one, even she felt pressure.

Suddenly she turned her head.

"She's back."

Tang Yimo froze mid-attack.

In the ruins below, a point of white light flared.

Divine radiance pierced the heavens.

When it faded, Tang Guo stood covered in blood, looking up in bewilderment.

"Brother!"

At that single word, the oceanic demonic qi around Tang Yimo melted away like spring snow.

Lu Jiulian's gaze fell on the girl. Sensing the new power within her, her pupils contracted ever so slightly.

Chapter 412: Hundred Zhang of Dragon Qi, Birth of a Divine Dynasty

Tang Guo was back.

The taut nerves of everyone watching the Great Xuan Academy finally eased.

This girl's identity was simply too sensitive—Tang Yimo's beloved little sister. She might not represent the entirety of Southern Commandery, but if anything happened to her, Tang Yimo would lose his mind and turn the whole kingdom upside down.

And fortunately, Great Xuan had Lu Jiulian.

After that earth-shaking battle and the world's transformation, Lu Jiulian had been in seclusion ever since. No one knew exactly how strong she had become.

Only one thing was certain—she was terrifyingly powerful.

Even in his frenzied demonic state, Tang Yimo had been completely suppressed by her with ease.

That was why the people of Great Xuan could finally breathe again.

Without Lu Jiulian, Tang Yimo could have slaughtered his way through the capital unchecked.

“Guo’er, are you alright?”

Tang Yimo’s eyes softened as the demonic aura around him faded.

“I’m fine, brother.”

Tang Guo looked at his tattered training robes and the blood still seeping from his skin, warmth flooding her eyes.

She knew—he had gone mad because of her.

“Good... good...” Tang Yimo pressed his thin lips together.

He took her hand and saw the dried blood caked all over her. His heart clenched.

“Does it hurt?”

Tang Guo touched the crusted blood on her cheek and smiled. It was the residue of her physique rebirth.

Of course it still hurt.

During the Divine King Physique transformation, she had nearly passed out from the agony—flesh being torn apart and reforged, bones shattered and remade. It was worse than having her heart carved out.

But she thought of Tang Yimo. She didn't want him to carry everything alone anymore. She wanted to share his burden.

So she endured.

"It doesn't hurt!"

She grinned.

"Let's go home," Tang Yimo said seriously, gripping her hand.

This academy wasn't safe. She was leaving with him.

“No... brother, I want to stay in the capital. There’s still so much for me to learn here.”

Tang Guo shook her head.

At that moment, Lu Jiulian drifted over like a celestial being.

“Your physique... has changed.”

She looked at Tang Guo and spoke softly.

From afar, Dantai Xuan and Mo Ju approached as well. Hearing Lu Jiulian’s words, they froze.

Only then did Tang Yimo, who had been wholly focused on his sister, sweep his spiritual sense over her. His expression trembled violently.

Inside her body surged a power that made even him—someone deep in the Yin Spirit realm—feel a chill.

“Will you take me as your master? I will teach you cultivation.”

Lu Jiulian regarded Tang Guo calmly.

Of course Tang Guo knew who Lu Jiulian was—the legendary prodigy of the Great Xuan Academy, a monster among cultivators, now standing at the very peak of the world.

“Disciple Tang Guo pays respects to Master!”

Without hesitation, she kowtowed.

She might now possess the Divine King Physique, but she understood it was still in its infancy. She had a long road ahead.

And truthfully, she had her own little schemes.

If she had a master as powerful as Lu Jiulian, she would finally have real backing. Then her brother wouldn't have to exhaust himself protecting her all the time.

“Good.”

Lu Jiulian gave a gentle smile.

Tang Yimo stood awkwardly to the side.

He had just fought the woman tooth and nail... and now his sister was apprenticing herself to her the moment she returned.

“Hahaha!”

“Not fighting means never knowing each other—this is fate! Shall this king host a banquet tonight? Let’s drink until we drop!”

Dantai Xuan strode forward, laughing heartily.

True, half the academy grounds lay in ruins, but a happy ending like this? Dantai Xuan was more than satisfied.

“No need to trouble yourself, Your Majesty.”

Tang Yimo waved him off.

He had just demolished the man’s training field. How could he have the face to stay and drink?

“Guo’er, where exactly did you go these past days?”

This was the question burning in his heart.

Tang Guo hesitated. The immortal had forbidden them from speaking of the immortal realm.

But after a moment, she said, “An immortal patted my head... and I received a great immortal fate.”

Tang Yimo’s eyes narrowed.

Mo Ju’s eyes lit up beside Dantai Xuan.

That mysterious immortal had appeared again!

Tang Yimo understood immediately.

He too had once entered the Land of Immortal Ascension. He knew the rules.

He rubbed Tang Guo’s head gently.

“Train well under your master.”

“If she ever bullies you... tell your brother.”

He looked up at Lu Jiulian, face calm.

“Even if it costs me my life, I’ll get justice for you.”

Tang Guo beamed like a flower. “Okay!”

The next instant, Tang Yimo bowed slightly to Dantai Xuan, then vanished in a streak of black light.

Lu Jiulian turned, hands clasped behind her back, green lotus robes swaying as she walked away.

“Guo’er, let’s go.”

“Ah? Coming!”

“Master—wait for me!”

Tang Guo hurriedly chased after her, trotting happily behind.

...

North Luo City.

Nie Shuang returned.

By the shore of North Luo Lake, a gentle breeze stirred the water.

In the center of the lake, Nie Changqing sat quietly in a small fishing boat, conical hat on his head, raincoat draped over his shoulders, fishing in peaceful silence.

As if sensing his son's return, Nie Changqing's voice drifted across the water.

“Into the lake.”

Nie Shuang stepped forward without hesitation.

The moment his foot touched the lake, he broke into a sprint.

The surface boiled and churned. Fish fled in panic to the depths.

On the shore, Luo Yue and his son Luo Cheng stood with hands behind their backs, smiling as they watched.

“Nie Changqing isn’t worried at all. His son vanished for nearly ten days, and he just... fished for ten days straight.”

Luo Cheng shook his head.

“With Nie Changqing’s current cultivation, he’s far beyond what we can fathom. He probably knew exactly where Nie Shuang was the whole time.”

The two chuckled and turned to leave.

Behind them, rows of Dragon Blood Army soldiers followed their commanders and withdrew.

In the lake—

Water exploded upward.

Nie Shuang's heart raced with excitement.

“Father—here I come!”

He roared.

His blood-stained upper body burst apart into strips of cloth.

Torrents of mighty energy surged. It felt like a dragon was roaring inside him, shaking heaven and earth.

BOOM!

One step sent the lake surface caving inward.

Nie Shuang charged, throwing a punch.

The water around his fist instantly vaporized into steaming mist.

BANG BANG BANG!

In the instant he threw that punch, his aura skyrocketed—cultivation breaking through continuously!

From the peak of Heavenly Lock, he stepped straight into Nascent Soul!

“Hmm?”

Nie Changqing’s brow arched slightly.

He hadn’t expected his son to unleash such a terrifying strike.

Nie Changqing smiled faintly.

He didn’t move from his fishing posture.

The Dragon Slayer at his waist flew out on its own, slicing across the water.

A groove split the lake.

Water sprayed into the air, twisting into a blade of pure liquid.

Nie Shuang's fist collided with the water blade!

A horrific explosion erupted. Shockwaves rippled outward in perfect circles.

Splash!

Rain seemed to fall upside-down as water droplets hammered down.

Nie Shuang's body glowed with golden light. He planted his feet in a solid horse stance.

Behind him, a vision appeared—stars shattering, galaxies swirling.

BOOM!

He threw another punch.

This time, even Nie Changqing couldn't stay calm.

The fishing boat beneath him shattered.

He flipped through the air, tapping the incoming fist with the tip of his toe, then shot upward like a carp leaping from the water. Dragon Slayer hovered at his side.

BOOM!

Power exploded from his foot.

Nie Shuang was forced back several steps across the water. He huffed in frustration.

"Dad, that's cheating! You promised to only use power at my level!"

Nie Changqing landed lightly on the lake, sheathed Dragon Slayer again, stroked his stubbled chin, and said nothing—just gave his son a sideways glance and a cold chuckle.

Use the same level of power?

Then I'd be the one getting beaten!

Nie Shuang's physical body had suddenly become monstrously strong—far beyond what Nie Changqing had anticipated.

His son had clearly obtained an extraordinary immortal fate.

“Special physique?”

Nie Changqing asked.

Nie Shuang grinned, clenched his fist, and the air thundered.

“The Sacred King Physique.”

Nie Changqing laughed.

“Good. Looks like you can take more of a beating now.”

Nie Shuang's smile froze.

A line streaked across the lake.

Ding.

Like a single drop falling into still water.

An overwhelming blade intent slammed into Nie Shuang.

Before he could react, he was smashed straight to the bottom of North Luo Lake.

Damn it!

This has to be a fake dad!

...

Origin Lake, Lake Heart Island.

With the special physiques distributed, Lu Fan considered one small goal accomplished.

These seeds wouldn't show their brilliance yet, but as they grew, they would surely dazzle the world.

Still, special physiques had limits. To reach the absolute peak, they would still need to rely on their own effort.

Lu Fan took out his spiritual pressure chessboard, warmed a pot of plum wine, and leisurely drank while placing pieces.

After only a few moves, he paused, rolling a black piece between his fingers, eyes narrowing.

Soon, lines danced in his pupils.

He checked on those who had received the Four Kings' inheritances from the ancient tomb.

Jiang Li was training in Great Xuan, his cultivation soaring after receiving the Soldier King inheritance, completely immersed in the study of military formations.

Consolidating his explosive growth would still take time.

Luo Mingyue had returned to Western Liang to stabilize the Piano King inheritance in seclusion.

Mo Liuqi was consolidating in the desert.

Ximen Xianzhi, heir to the Sword King, secluded himself atop Mount Zhongnan. The sword intent leaking from his retreat benefited countless disciples of the Sword Pavilion.

Lu Fan withdrew his gaze and fell into thought.

These ancient tomb inheritances—he couldn't quite judge if they were good or bad.

But their benefits were undeniable. The rise in strength of these individuals also increased his own spiritual energy reserves. Lu Fan was happy to let it be.

He had originally planned to create more inheritances himself, but now he changed his mind.

He had a few fixed candidates in mind—people he favored.

But giving them inheritances directly felt too forced. It might even limit their growth.

Better to let nature take its course. Perhaps that would bring even greater surprises.

The piece hovered above the board, faint killing intent humming around it.

Lines flickered in his eyes again as he observed several figures.

...

Outside a small city near Wolong Ridge.

Bai Qingniao, bored and squatting by a chicken coop, suddenly felt something.

The Nine Phoenix Transformations in her mind began spinning wildly.

The little chicks running on the grass erupted with terrifying auras.

Flames burst from their bodies—fire phoenixes that seemed to blot out the sky.

“The sixth transformation of the Nine Phoenixes...”

Bai Qingniao murmured.

This time, it wasn't just the chicks that changed.

Her own body transformed dramatically.

Her clothes seemed covered in fiery feathers. She grew taller, more regal...

Her black hair danced like flames. Her eyes burned. Faint golden light shimmered in her pupils.

...

Last night the east wind returned to the small tower.

Sima Qingshan painted by the window. Outside, the mountains after fresh rain were quiet and serene, filled with the cooing of birds.

His brush moved like a swimming dragon. The scroll on the table seemed to come alive.

As he painted, his aura grew denser. The painting gradually turned into a real world.

Sima Qingshan closed his eyes.

When he opened them again, the entire world looked like an ink wash painting.

Everything was within his scroll.

With a lift of his hand, he could change anything.

He smiled.

With a splash of ink, a mountain shifted. An ancient tree shot toward the heavens.

The world within the painting had become his domain.

...

Atop the snowy peak.

Kong Nanfei opened his eyes.

Biting wind and snow had piled thick layers upon him, but he paid it no mind.

Lines of poetry seemed to form in his chest.

He laughed.

Facing the vast white expanse, he opened his mouth.

Righteous haoran qi poured forth like a great river, sweeping across the snow-capped mountains.

Snow melted. Green sprouts pushed through the earth.

Behind him, Meng Haoran sucked in a stunned breath.

His master... had grown stronger again!

A single breath of righteous qi, altering the very terrain.

It was practically a divine ability!

After a long while, Kong Nanfei closed his eyes, then opened them again.

Snow began falling once more.

He sighed wistfully.

“Righteous haoran qi is truly powerful.”

“If the Master were still alive, how terrifying would his haoran qi have been?”

Meng Haoran fell silent.

After a long pause, Kong Nanfei grabbed his wine gourd and took a huge swig.

Laughter echoed across the peak.

“What a glorious era... what a pity.”

...

Lu Fan withdrew his gaze and smiled.

Plop.

The piece fell onto the board with a crisp sound.

Bai Qingniao’s Nine Phoenix Transformations were mysterious—even he couldn’t fully grasp them.

Sima Qingshan had walked the path of painting and formed the prototype of a domain. Its power was immense—he could easily fight above his level and trap experts with a flick of his brush.

Kong Nanfei, with the righteous haoran qi passed down from the Master, had developed techniques comparable to divine abilities. Though still weaker than Zhulong’s innate gifts, they were nonetheless divine-ability-level moves. Nothing to scoff at.

Therefore, Lu Fan decided—he would no longer grant inheritances.

Let them grow naturally.

He believed the future would bring great surprises.

Time flowed on.

Ni Yu sat before the Dao Stele, her black pot confiscated. Strangely, she had entered a profound state of enlightenment.

At the Primordial Spirit Platform, many figures sat in meditation, trying to capture stray primordial spirit energy drifting in the air, hoping to comprehend the primordial spirit.

Ye Shoudao's breakthrough into the Spirit Unity realm had shocked everyone.

Ni Chunqiu, Du Longyang, Young Master Tianxu, and other top experts all gathered here from time to time.

Overlord, Nie Changqing, Ning Zhao, and others visited occasionally.

The Nine Prison Secret Realm of Wolong Ridge also drew countless cultivators hoping to comprehend Dao intent from the steles.

Lu Fan paid special attention to Lu Changkong.

After the River of Time disappeared, his father had left the immortal ruins and returned to the ancient tomb to continue researching spiritual herbs.

He was still crossbreeding spirit plants, using herbs touched by the River of Time as catalysts. He had entered a state of total immersion, forgetting the passage of years.

Rumble...

Beyond the void, the massive sundial hovered.

The great time formation spun endlessly, cloaked in drifting clouds.

Under its influence, time in the Five Phoenixes flowed ten times faster than the outside world.

One year passed quickly.

At the Primordial Spirit Platform, majestic essence, qi, and spirit surged.

Du Longyang broke through!

He stepped into the Spirit Unity realm, earning the title of Grandmaster!

One thrust of his spear pierced a hole through the vast sea that refused to heal for a long time.

Ye Shoudao strode out from the Absolute Blade Gate, laughing heartily as he slashed the air.

His blade scattered like pear blossoms in a storm—thousands of blade lights raining down. It was the very slash Lu Fan had once taught him.

This blade celebrated Du Longyang's ascension!

Another primordial spirit statue shattered.

Du Longyang stood in the void for a long while, waiting.

Alas, Lu Fan did not appear.

He sighed in deep regret.

Ye Shoudao had been the first to reach Grandmaster and received personal instruction.

Second place had always been forgotten by history.

Though disappointed, Du Longyang felt no dejection—only greater drive.

If he became the first to reach the Tribulation Realm... would Young Master Lu teach him personally?

Another year passed.

Someone else broke through.

From Martial Emperor City, Du Longyang soared into the sky.

From Absolute Blade Gate, Ye Shoudao flew out.

They both thought it would be Ni Chunqiu this time.

Yet to their shock...

It was Young Master Tianxu who stepped into the Spirit Unity realm.

Ni Chunqiu had actually been one step behind.

Time trickled on.

Changes quietly swept through the Five Phoenixes.

For high-level cultivators, years felt like moments—seclusion could last decades.

But for the mortal kingdoms... for Dantai Xuan...

The passage of time brought monumental change.

In just a few short years, Great Xuan had become the supreme mortal empire of the Five Phoenixes.

Southern Commandery and Western Liang reached an agreement to support Great Xuan's growth. With no major rivals, Great Xuan dominated the mortal world.

When the cultivation sects resisted Dantai Xuan's decrees, he didn't bother arguing.

The cult west of Demon Continent had infiltrated many of those sects.

So Dantai Xuan issued cold orders.

In one month, Jiang Li and Xue Tao led the Black Tortoise Guards on a campaign that shook the continent.

The cultivation sects were uprooted. Countless died.

Cultists were hunted beyond Great Xuan's borders, fleeing back west of Demon Continent.

But Liu Yuanhao, leader of the cult, refused to yield.

His followers disguised themselves as Great Xuan cultivators, slaughtered demon tribes, and harvested demon crystals—sparking war between demons and Great Xuan.

Learning from past failures, Liu Yuanhao did not act personally.

He sent several Nascent Soul cult elders to assassinate Dantai Xuan in the capital.

That night—

Golden dragon qi soared a hundred zhang above the imperial city.

Dantai Xuan uttered a single command.

Every Nascent Soul assassin was annihilated—body and soul turned to ash.

The world was stunned!

The cultivation realm boiled over!

This assassination attempt had finally awakened the sleeping lion that was Great Xuan.

Dantai Xuan sat high upon his throne, eyes blazing like torches.

With a wave of his hand, he commanded the world.

Domestically, he poured resources into the Great Xuan Academy—waiving tuition for the poor, showering rewards, igniting a cultivation frenzy.

Externally, he gave the order.

Great Xuan's iron cavalry, led by Jiang Li and Xue Tao, marched through Tianhan Pass.

Even when three Demon Kings personally blocked their path, they could not stop the tide.

Had the mysterious Demon Lord not intervened, Jiang Li's military formations might have trampled the entire Demon Continent flat.

After negotiations with the Demon Lord, Jiang Li chose not to linger. Their true target was not the demons, but the cult.

So the cavalry swept past Demon Continent and charged westward.

From the west, Xichu's Xu Chu and Zhao Zixu, alongside Tang Yimo's Southern Commandery army, poured through Tiger Entwining Pass, straight toward the cult's headquarters.

Liu Yuanhao rallied his forces, but they shattered at the first clash.

The cult collapsed.

Within a year, the western Madden Dynasty was smashed to pieces by Great Xuan's armies.

Dantai Xuan swept his arm and annexed the entire western dynasty into Great Xuan territory.

As for Demon Continent, he held back out of respect for the mysterious Demon Lord.

Still, it remained a thorn in his heart.

Non-humans could never truly be trusted—especially demons.

So Dantai Xuan personally led an army into Demon Continent.

The three Demon Kings greeted him with utmost courtesy.

In their eyes, Dantai Xuan was the Human Emperor. How could they dare show disrespect? This concerned the future relations between humans and demons.

Dantai Xuan spoke amiably with the three kings and learned of the demons' tragic history—how the Madden Dynasty had deceived and slaughtered countless demons for their crystals.

His wariness toward the demon race eased.

The three Demon Kings led Demon Continent in pledging allegiance to Great Xuan.

Dantai Xuan laughed heartily and held a grand enthronement ceremony on demon soil, bestowing upon the three kings the title of Great Xuan's heterodox princes.

When Dantai Xuan returned from Tianhan Pass, commoners lined the roads for hundreds of li, cheering until the heavens shook.

He stood atop his war chariot.

Imperial dragon qi surged once more—finally breaking past a hundred zhang!

With hundred-zhang dragon qi cloaking him, a single shout carried the fury of a Spirit Unity Grandmaster.

With Mo Beike and Tang Xiansheng at his side...

Dantai Xuan finally began his ultimate ambition—

To found the Great Xuan Divine Dynasty!

Chapter 413: Ni Yu's Dao Intent — Gluttony!

The Divine Dynasty shall rise!

Word spread like wildfire across the cultivation world, leaving countless cultivators stunned.

A divine dynasty was utterly different from a mortal empire. Any cultivator could topple a mortal kingdom with ease, but a divine dynasty—even the strongest cultivators would have to bow. Such dynasties could endure for endless ages.

Never before had the Five Phoenixes seen such splendor.

No nation in history had ever succeeded in founding a divine dynasty.

Yet Dantai Xuan, cloaked in a hundred zhang of dragon qi, beloved by the people, diligent in governance, and backed by numerous experts... perhaps he truly could.

The news sent ripples across the entire continent.

In the cabinet hall, Mo Beike and Tang Xiansheng worked tirelessly, drafting plans for the divine dynasty. For men of their age, this was their final chance to etch their names into eternity. Otherwise, they would long since have retired to secluded cultivation.

The allure of establishing a divine dynasty was simply too great—even for them.

The western cult had been crushed, scattered to the winds. Only a few stray remnants remained, no longer a threat.

The Madden Kingdom's demon-crystal cultivators had been trampled beneath Great Xuan's iron hooves.

The Five Phoenixes continent was unified.

The demon continent issue had been temporarily resolved; demons and humans coexisted in fragile peace.

Great Xuan's national fortune and momentum soared ever higher.

Preparations for the divine dynasty began in earnest.

One year. Two. Three.

While Great Xuan prepared, the cultivation world exploded with growth.

Someone witnessed the Overlord of Western Liang punch the Vast Sea, his demonic qi piercing the heavens, creating a whirlpool that refused to close.

Fishermen off East Sun Commandery saw a swordsman thrust his blade skyward, sword qi tearing a hole through the firmament.

Others beheld a youth bathed in golden light, visions of inverted star rivers swirling around him.

The cultivation world was thriving.

...

Northern Commandery, Great Xuan Capital.

Within the palace hall, charcoal crackled softly in the brazier, sparks dancing.

Dantai Xuan leaned back in his chair, eyes half-closed, deep in thought. Frost now touched his temples.

These years, he had poured his heart and soul into Great Xuan, determined to make it the strongest nation on the continent.

And he had succeeded.

Yet deep down, he still felt profoundly insecure.

He feared enemies from beyond the heavens. Every time he closed his eyes to sleep, he saw the blood-soaked battlefield at Tianmen Gate—countless defenders erased by a single strike from an otherworldly powerhouse, leaving not even bones behind.

It was his recurring nightmare.

He would wake drenched in cold sweat.

After finishing the memorials on his desk, he rested, sipping fine wine.

Footsteps approached outside the hall.

A servant announced the visitor.

A stooped figure slowly entered.

“Your Majesty.”

Mo Beike bowed.

Dantai Xuan rose barefoot, smiling as he helped the old minister up.

“Old Mo, what brings you in such a hurry?”

Mo Beike’s heavy eye bags trembled slightly.

“After discussion among the cabinet elders, the ninth day of next month has been chosen—the day Your Majesty will ascend Mount Taihan and perform the ceremony to establish the divine dynasty.”

“The beginning of the Great Xuan Calendar.”

Dantai Xuan’s eyes flashed with sharp light.

“Good.”

Next month.

Anticipation stirred in his chest.

To be the first in the Five Phoenixes to found a divine dynasty—how could he not be excited?

Mo Beike smiled, the deep wrinkles on his face folding like valleys. He exhaled slowly.

Then his expression grew solemn.

“Your Majesty, establishing a divine dynasty will inevitably entangle us with the cultivation world. This old minister begs Your Majesty to issue invitations to the leaders of every major cultivation force. Their presence will solidify the dynasty’s fortune.”

“Naturally.”

Dantai Xuan agreed immediately.

A divine dynasty unrecognized by cultivators was no divine dynasty at all.

But then hesitation crossed his face.

“Old Mo... when sending these invitations, is there one power... we should invite?”

His tone was grave.

Mo Beike paused, then understood.

The power Dantai Xuan spoke of...

Was the unfathomable White Jade Capital.

“Your Majesty, if we are to found a divine dynasty, White Jade Capital must be invited.”

“Without White Jade Capital’s acknowledgment... the dynasty will lack true legitimacy.”

Mo Beike said seriously.

Dantai Xuan smiled, but there was nervousness in his eyes.

Could they truly invite Young Master Lu?

Soon, Mo Beike took his leave.

Snow continued to fall outside, year after year, as though the world itself was caught in an endless cycle.

For the next month, undercurrents surged across the Five Phoenixes.

News of Great Xuan’s divine dynasty spread like lightning.

The common people were ecstatic, chanting Dantai Xuan’s name until their voices shook the heavens.

Cultivation forces reacted differently—some curious, some wary, some eager.

Every major power received a personally written invitation from Dantai Xuan, brimming with sincerity.

All accepted. They would attend.

...

In a small city near Wolong Ridge stood the Nine Phoenix Institute.

Jiang Li, clad in silver armor, rode a fiery red steed into the city.

The city lord hurried out with his entire guard to greet him.

Jiang Li—Great Xuan's God of War.

His status alone was enough to terrify any official, never mind the countless Nascent Soul cultivators who had died beneath his military formations when he crushed the western cult.

But Jiang Li was not here for the city lord.

He rode alone to a quiet corner of the city.

A humble farmhouse courtyard.

Nine Phoenix Institute.

Once one of the top powers—One Institute, Two Nations, Three Sects, Four Pavilions.

As Jiang Li stepped through the gate, his expression grew complicated.

Six years.

Great Xuan was about to found a divine dynasty, and he had been campaigning for five of those years.

He felt almost dazed.

Was the innocent chicken-raising girl from back then... still the same?

The wooden gate creaked open.

Chi Lian, dressed simply, saw him and froze.

“General!”

Joy flashed across her face as she cupped her fists.

When Jiang Li marched to war, he had left Chi Lian behind to protect Bai Qingniao.

Though he knew Bai Qingniao was strong, he still worried.

Six years. Chi Lian had reached Nascent Soul realm—clearly she had not neglected her training.

“Where’s Qingniao?”

Jiang Li tied his horse and asked.

“Stewing chicken soup.”

Chi Lian led him inside.

Nine fluffy chicks scampered across the yard.

Jiang Li swept his spiritual sense over them and was stunned.

The weakest among them possessed aura comparable to Yin Spirit realm.

Little Phoenix One, now massive and domineering, bullied Little Phoenix Eight and Nine away from the food like a tyrant.

Sensing Jiang Li's gaze, it shot him a sharp glare, then spread its wings protectively over its meal and turned away, presenting only its wriggling tail feathers.

The rich aroma of chicken soup wafted from the kitchen.

Jiang Li looked over.

A graceful, elegant figure stood there.

Thanks to cultivating the Nine Phoenix Transformations, Bai Qingniao now carried an otherworldly aura. She had grown even more beautiful, more mature. The childishness of youth had faded, replaced by quiet poise.

A faint noble fire seemed to flicker in her eyes.

“Uncle Jiang.”

She smiled gently, a little surprised but warm.

“You’ve grown up, little girl.”

Jiang Li smiled, emotions swirling.

“I just finished a pot of soup. Perfect timing—Uncle Jiang gets to enjoy it.”

She led him inside, still smiling.

But Jiang Li felt a subtle distance between them now.

One bowl of soup went down—still as delicious as ever, making his blood roar and surge.

This was no ordinary soup.

He reached out instinctively to pat her head, but his hand froze mid-air.

She was no longer that little girl.

He withdrew his hand and handed her Dantai Xuan's personally written invitation.

Bai Qingniao accepted it, glanced at the contents, and smiled brightly.

“Don't worry, Uncle Jiang. Qingniao will definitely attend the founding ceremony.”

Jiang Li nodded.

After sitting a while longer, he stood to leave.

“Cluck cluck cluck...”

Once he was gone, Bai Qingniao scattered spirit crystal crumbs in the yard, playing happily with her nine phoenix chicks.

...

Martial Emperor City.

A Yin Spirit elder hurried along, leading a man in Great Xuan's fish-dragon robes—Xue Tao, Commander of the Black Tortoise Guards.

Xue Tao had been sent by Dantai Xuan to deliver the invitation.

Martial Emperor City, Absolute Blade Gate, Qiannu Kingdom, and Heavenly Void Palace—the four great powers ruled by four apex experts—were the top forces beneath White Jade Capital.

Du Longyang sat upon his throne, glancing at the invitation.

The overwhelming pressure of a Grandmaster bore down on Xue Tao, making him pale.

Grandmaster...

A terrifying realm.

Fortunately, these four powers harbored no hostility toward Great Xuan.

Xue Tao visited all four. All agreed to attend.

Invitations had been sent to nearly every major power.

Only one caused Dantai Xuan endless headaches:

How to invite White Jade Capital?

He sent men to Nie Changqing—they were refused.

“I cannot represent White Jade Capital. Unless the Young Master speaks, I will not go.”

Nie Changqing’s reply.

Ning Zhao refused similarly.

Dantai Xuan knew only Young Master Lu himself could move White Jade Capital.

But White Jade Capital floated somewhere in the boundless Vast Sea—how could it be found?

Mo Beike personally sailed out, searching for half a month.

Nothing.

White Jade Capital seemed to have vanished from the Five Phoenixes entirely.

Mo Beike grew anxious, his aged face etched with worry.

If they could not secure White Jade Capital's presence, the divine dynasty would always feel incomplete.

...

Lu Fan, of course, had no idea anyone was looking for him.

For years, he had been in seclusion, refining his qi.

Host: Lu Fan

Title: Qi Refiner (Permanent)

Refinement Level: 6

Spiritual Energy Reserves: 5,423,500 / 10,000,000 strands

Primordial Spirit Power: 99 yuan

Chaos Energy: 32 he

World Rating: Five Phoenixes Small World [High Martial]

Mystic Qi Refinement: 5,423,500 / 4,223,400 strands

Abilities: Preaching Platform (Upgraded), Spiritual Energy Deployment (Upgraded)

With the time formation active, six years had passed in the Five Phoenixes.

Multiple Grandmasters had emerged, and the cultivation world had grown explosively. Lu Fan's spiritual energy reserves had skyrocketed.

Yet he was mildly disappointed—only two people had comprehended Dao Intent in six years, and both were low-tier, seventh or eighth sequence.

Both were students from Great Xuan Academy.

He wasn't too bothered. Dao Intent could not be forced.

Over the past five years, aside from occasionally playing chess, Lu Fan had focused on Mystic Qi Refinement—tempering his spiritual energy for perfect control.

With reserves growing so rapidly, much of it had been wild and unresponsive.

Now, after refinement, every strand obeyed his will perfectly.

That was the purpose of Mystic Qi Refinement.

Buzz...

Suddenly, Lu Fan, who was placing pieces on White Jade Capital's pavilion, looked up.

A strange Dao resonance emanated from the Dao Stele.

His eyes lit up.

"This girl... finally comprehended her Dao Intent."

"Five years. I wonder what tier it is."

He smiled in anticipation.

The next moment, he vanished.

Appearing before the Dao Stele.

Ni Yu sat cross-legged.

Five years had passed in a flash, yet her body remained childlike—round-faced and baby-fat.

No one could blame her.

She had eaten far too many Body Tempering Pills.

Her hair floated. Her chubby cheeks trembled.

Rumble!

On Lake Heart Island, the Bluefall Peaches swayed. Sky-Reaching Chrysanthemums roared.

This girl's breakthrough was far more intense than Lu Fan had expected.

Soon—

The Dao Stele revealed her intent.

Ni Yu — Third-Sequence Dao Intent: Gluttony

Brilliant light poured down like a waterfall, shaking heaven and earth.

Lu Fan's brow arched in shock.

Third-sequence?!

Even he was stunned.

This girl... how?!

The lazy glutton who only wanted to eat her way to supremacy—how did she comprehend third-sequence Dao Intent?!

Currently in the Five Phoenixes, only two beings possessed third-sequence intent: Lu Fan himself... and the Overlord.

Now there would be a third.

Ni Yu.

“Gluttony Dao Intent...”

“Even her Dao Intent is about eating.”

Lu Fan didn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

Beneath the stele—

Ni Yu opened her eyes, filled with melancholy.

GURGLE!

A thunderous growl erupted from her stomach.

“Young Master... Ni Yu is starving to death...”

She turned, completely oblivious to what she had just achieved, looking at Lu Fan with tragic, resentful eyes.

Speechless, Lu Fan flicked his finger, returning her modified black pot from his spatial ring.

Ni Yu hugged the pot and zoomed away, eager to refine pills—and eat.

Lu Fan sat in his Thousand-Bladed Chair, shaking his head in exasperation.

Once, Ni Yu refined pills because he forced her.

Now she refined pills just to fill her stomach.

Hmm?

Lu Fan's brow suddenly rose.

Far away, across the Vast Sea, a large ship had entered the Giant Whale's immortal island territory.

“Mo Beike?”

Lu Fan blinked.

Perhaps Ni Yu's breakthrough had been so dramatic that it guided Mo Beike here through the endless sea.

With a thought, Lu Fan allowed the ship to approach Lake Heart Island.

He rarely interfered with the outside world these years, letting it develop naturally. Unless a cultivation extinction event occurred, he wouldn't intervene.

Thus, though he occasionally checked on the Five Phoenixes, he hadn't delved deeply.

Lines danced in his eyes. His primordial spirit stirred.

Soon he understood Mo Beike's purpose.

"Mo Beike greets Young Master Lu."

The old minister's wrinkled face lit up with excitement.

Stepping onto the island, every pore in his body seemed to relax.

A true immortal realm.

Among the peach blossoms, the sound of wheels crushing fallen petals rang out.

Mo Beike looked up and saw the familiar white-robed youth, unchanged as ever.

Among the peach trees, the youth plucked a blossom and waved lightly.

The invitation flew from Mo Beike's hand.

Lu Fan glanced at it.

Written personally by Dantai Xuan, far more respectful than the others.

It requested White Jade Capital's presence at the founding of the divine dynasty.

“Founding a divine dynasty?”

Lu Fan smiled.

He looked at Mo Beike.

On the island, Mo Beike suddenly trembled and fell to his knees.

Just meeting Lu Fan’s gaze felt like a mountain crushing down on him.

He felt as though he stood before a true god.

Young Master Lu... had become even more unfathomable.

“Founding a divine dynasty is fine...”

“Ni Yu.”

Lu Fan called.

From the purple bamboo forest, Ni Yu zoomed over, mouth stuffed with pills, mumbling unclearly:

“Young Mashtur, I’m here!”

Lu Fan smiled warmly.

“You’ll attend the ceremony.”

Ni Yu’s eyes instantly sparkled.

She swallowed all the pills in one gulp and stared at Mo Beike with burning intensity.

“Will there be food at the ceremony?”

Mo Beike was briefly stunned, then bowed.

“Of course. You may eat as much as you like.”

Ni Yu cheered.

But her stomach growled again like thunder.

She hurriedly stuffed another handful of pills into her mouth.

“Go.”

Lu Fan waved her off in disdain.

Mo Beike rose and solemnly took his leave.

Ni Yu, black pot on her back, happily followed behind him.

The ship drifted away, swaying as it vanished into the Vast Sea.

Once they were gone, Lu Fan leaned back in his Thousand-Bladed Chair, one hand propping his chin, the other idly spinning his spatial ring.

“A divine dynasty...”

“A Human Emperor who is not a cultivator has limited lifespan. When the emperor changes... can the dynasty withstand the turmoil?”

“Only a dynasty that flows long and enduring is truly divine. If it collapses from mere upheaval...”

“Then it’s nothing but a joke.”

Chapter 414: Good News for the Five Phoenixes

East Sun Commandery, East Sun Harbor.

A grand ship slowly emerged from the endless Vast Sea, cutting through the waves as it returned.

Dantai Xuan had long been waiting on the shore with his hundred officials.

Mo Beike had ventured into the boundless sea to seek White Jade Capital and deliver the news that Great Xuan was about to establish a divine dynasty, hoping to invite Young Master Lu himself to the grand ceremony.

Now Mo Beike was returning.

Dantai Xuan could barely contain his anticipation. He had come personally with his entire court to greet him.

Xue Tao and rows of Black Tortoise Guards formed an impenetrable defensive line along the harbor, eliminating any possibility of danger.

When the luxurious vessel finally appeared on the horizon,

Dantai Xuan shot up from his shaded chair, staring fixedly, breath quickening.

The ship docked.

Dantai Xuan hurried forward in great strides.

But his heart sank.

Only a small girl with a black pot on her back stepped off the deck, cheeks bulging as she chewed nonstop.

The white-robed, peerless Young Master Lu he had hoped for was nowhere to be seen.

“Your Majesty... Young Master Lu did not come in person. He sent only his attendant, Lady Ni Yu, to represent White Jade Capital.”

Mo Beike reported.

Dantai Xuan swallowed his disappointment and smiled.

“It is regrettable that Young Master Lu himself could not attend, but White Jade Capital has sent a representative all the same. That alone is cause for celebration.”

He laughed heartily.

Orders flew.

Great Xuan’s ritual officers stepped forward, ringing bronze bells and striking great gongs. Solemn sacrificial chants filled the air.

“The sea offering begins.”

Because White Jade Capital drifted upon the ocean, Dantai Xuan had chosen to hold a sea sacrifice. Otherwise, he would have skipped the formality.

The grand procession returned to Northern Commandery.

With White Jade Capital's representative confirmed, preparations for the grand ceremony began in earnest.

Great Xuan Calendar, Year One.

Dantai Xuan personally ascended Tianji Peak, sought out Lü Mudui, and through the power of Tianji Pavilion, proclaimed to the world:

Great Xuan establishes a divine dynasty.

It was a once-in-a-millennium spectacle.

From every commandery across the land, delegations poured toward Mount Taihan.

After years of chaos, the Five Phoenixes continent was finally unified.

On this day, common folk from every corner flocked to Mount Taihan to celebrate the founding of the divine dynasty.

But the true focus was on the arriving cultivators.

One after another, cultivators streaked across the sky in dazzling displays of power.

Nascent Soul cultivators flew on their own. Sword cultivators rode flying swords.

Recluses who had secluded themselves for years emerged from their mountains and caves to attend the founding of the divine dynasty.

The Institute, the Three Sects, the Four Pavilions—all sent representatives.

Bai Qingniao rode a blazing fire phoenix that spread its wings across the heavens, radiant as a celestial maiden.

Sima Qingshan stood atop an unfurled painting scroll, drifting in like an immortal.

From the Tianyuan Domain came Martial Emperor City, Heavenly Void Palace, Absolute Blade Gate—Du Longyang, Ye Shoudao, and other Grandmasters all appeared.

For a time, Mount Taihan became the gathering place of the era's strongest.

Even the Azure Dragon, who had been flirting with female students at the Great Xuan Academy, nearly jumped out of his scales at the sight of so many top experts converging. He hurriedly transformed back into dragon form and returned to guard the Azure Dragon Gate.

Sword Pavilion, Dao Pavilion, Tianji Pavilion—all sent delegations.

Qi Liujia arrived with Li Sansui. Dantai Xuan had personally visited Qi Liujia, and the Human Emperor's invitation could not be refused.

As White Jade Capital's representative, Ni Yu naturally drew countless eyes.

Nie Shuang was delighted to see her, but when he noticed she was still the same petite, doll-like girl, he was momentarily speechless.

Nie Shuang himself had grown into a dashing young man. With the Sacred King Physique, his vitality and presence radiated the aura of a heaven-chosen genius.

Nie Changqing and Jing Yue arrived together. Seeing Ni Yu stuffing her face nonstop, they smiled.

"How fares the Young Master?"

"The Young Master is doing very well."

Ni Yu answered while shoving another handful of pills into her mouth.

Most who approached her only wanted news of Young Master Lu. Aside from a few familiar faces, she ignored everyone else.

“Aiya! Little Yu Yu!”

Ni Chunqiu arrived in a swirl of crimson robes, breathtakingly gorgeous. Many male cultivators were entranced, but none dared approach—she was simply too exalted.

Ni Chunqiu swept Ni Yu into a big hug. The two quickly fell into animated discussion about the perfect sugar-to-syrup ratio for pill coatings.

The topic was so arcane that no one else could get a word in.

DONG! DONG! DONG!

The founding ceremony began.

Drums and bells thundered without cease.

A crimson carpet unfurled from the Great Xuan Palace all the way to the foot of Mount Taihan.

Escorted by ritual officers, Dantai Xuan appeared in majestic black imperial robes and a crown with dangling jade beads, walking slowly and steadily.

Every cultivator in the world turned to watch.

Mo Beike and Tang Xiansheng, dressed in splendid court attire, eyes shining with excitement—few things could still stir men of their age.

DONG!

Drums and gongs shook the earth beneath Mount Taihan.

ROAR!

Atop Wen Tian Peak, the Azure Dragon materialized, its colossal shadow blotting out the sky.

The worshipping masses screamed in fervent ecstasy, kneeling and shouting toward the dragon.

Outsiders saw spectacle. Experts saw truth.

Cultivators paled as they watched Dantai Xuan approach step by step.

Terrifying golden dragon qi soared into the heavens, coiling like a divine golden dragon. Overwhelming essence, qi, and spirit surged.

Imperial dragon qi of the Human Emperor!

Many recognized it instantly.

And under the grandeur of this ceremony, the dragon qi continued to swell.

Soon—it surpassed a hundred zhang!

Even Du Longyang, Ye Shoudao, and the other Grandmasters grew solemn.

This ceremony was not just celebration.

It was Great Xuan's show of force to the entire cultivation world.

And indeed it was.

Beyond the sacrifices came martial demonstrations.

Students of the Great Xuan Academy displayed astonishing prowess.

Jiang Li transformed into a blood-soaked war god, leading the Black Tortoise Army in perfect formation, marching from the distant horizon.

The earth quaked. A crimson war deity seemed to roar at the heavens.

Every cultivator present was stunned.

Even the Grandmasters wore grave expressions.

In terms of raw military might, the Great Xuan Divine Dynasty was terrifying.

Though it lacked a Grandmaster of its own, Jiang Li—who had inherited the Soldier King legacy—commanded the Black Tortoise Guards with killing power rivaling a Grandmaster.

Dantai Xuan stood atop the high platform, resplendent in imperial robes. Though frost touched his temples, his spirit was indomitable, his gaze swallowing mountains and rivers.

“Today—I found the Great Xuan Divine Dynasty!”

He raised his arm. Imperial robes flared. Jade beads clinked.

The Imperial Dragon Seal in his hand blazed with light.

Hundreds of officials knelt.

Millions of commoners prostrated.

Overwhelming dragon qi pierced the firmament like a blazing sun, bathing Wen Tian Peak in blinding golden radiance.

Far away,

The court historian recorded with trembling brush:

“Five Phoenixes, Great Xuan Calendar Year One, Spring.

Northern Xuan King Dantai Xuan ascends Mount Taihan, raises the Imperial Dragon Seal, questions the heavens. Dragon qi breaks one hundred zhang. Founds the Great Xuan Divine Dynasty and proclaims himself Emperor.”

...

Origin Lake, Lake Heart Island.

Lu Fan sat leisurely in his Thousand-Bladed Chair, gentle breeze stirring his robes.

He was not playing chess atop White Jade Capital’s pavilion today. Instead, he strolled unhurriedly across the island.

When dragon qi pierced the heavens, dyeing the sky gold,

Lu Fan’s eyes flickered.

“Who would have thought—the most underestimated Dantai Xuan would be the first to found a divine dynasty.”

He smiled, fingers lightly tapping the armrest of his wheelchair.

The Overlord had abandoned worldly conquest for pure cultivation. He was now half a step into Grandmaster and could break through any day in the coming years.

Tang Xiansheng, surprisingly, chose to support Dantai Xuan instead of scheming.

Lu Fan had not expected that from the old fox.

“A divine dynasty rises. But alas... it is not as stable as it appears.”

Lines danced in Lu Fan’s eyes.

He saw through many things.

Whether the demon continent or the remnants of the western cult and Madden Kingdom—though Dantai Xuan had ordered their extermination, progress was slow.

Though Great Xuan had crushed the Madden Kingdom, its king had escaped and now colluded with the cult leader Liu Yuanhao.

That force was quietly growing stronger.

“Liu Yuanhao... what a resilient cockroach. Still alive and kicking.”

Lu Fan raised a brow.

“And he seems to have realized something.”

“He’s waiting.”

No matter how mighty a divine dynasty, time was the most terrifying blade—it could erode everything.

If it could not withstand time’s erosion, it would eventually crumble.

Hm?

While strolling the island, Lu Fan suddenly paused.

His figure blurred into a stream of light and vanished.

When he reappeared, he was beyond the Five Phoenixes continent.

Six years had passed inside due to the time formation, but outside, less than one year had gone by.

In the void,

A streak of Buddhist light flashed past.

The long-absent Venerable Joyful arrived, trembling.

His face was bitter. He truly did not want to come to the Five Phoenixes—the only High Martial in the Nihility, shrouded in strangeness.

The death of the Venerable Justice had shaken him deeply.

That Lu Ping'an was a complete madman—he dared kill anyone.

Even when the Great Venerable had entered the Nihility, Lu Ping'an had slashed off a chunk of his flesh without hesitation.

That was the Great Venerable!

A Transcending Tribulation cultivator who had condensed both Primordial Spirit Flower and Golden Body Flower!

Yet Lu Ping'an had still drawn his sword with absolute confidence.

So the Venerable Joyful was terrified. If he accidentally provoked Lu Ping'an and got chopped down, the Great Venerable might not even avenge him.

Rumble!

He sped through the Nihility.

Countless Low and Mid Martial worlds glimmered faintly under their protective barriers as they drifted past.

Many wanderers on cold, dead continents saw him and stood up.

Another Grandmaster from Pingyang Heaven heading to the Five Phoenixes?

Was something big about to happen again?

To the wanderers of the Nihility, the Five Phoenixes had become a legend.

It had offended countless Grandmasters and many High Martial worlds of Pingyang Heaven—yet not only survived, it had faced no retaliation.

But most believed the reckoning would come eventually.

So many experts had fallen in the Nihility—several Holy Lords and Venerables among them.

The matter would not end so easily.

The Venerable Joyful paid the wanderers no mind.

To him, they were less than ants.

Suddenly,

His expression changed drastically.

A colossal hand formed of spiritual energy shot toward him through the void.

It seized him instantly. Terrifying aura surged. Countless formation runes cascaded down like razor-sharp blades.

“Lord Lu, mercy!”

“It’s good news this time! Good news!”

The Venerable Joyful’s soul nearly left his body.

He hadn’t expected the formations around the Five Phoenixes to have multiplied again!

He could try to break through by force, but that would be declaring war on the incredibly petty Lu Ping’an—and he might actually get killed.

So he shamelessly shouted for mercy.

Within the Five Phoenixes,

At the height of the ceremony,

Qi Liujia's aged eyes flashed.

He vanished and reappeared outside the continent.

Soaring forward, he saw the Venerable Joyful trapped within the formation.

"Sect Leader Qi, perfect timing! Please explain to Lord Lu—monk brings only good news this time!"

"What good news?"

Qi Liujia asked.

"Sect Leader Qi must know of the 'Heavenly Grand Tournament,' yes?"

The Venerable Joyful hurriedly said.

Qi Liujiā froze. His old face flushed slightly.

“Impossible! The Heavenly Grand Tournament is held only once every thousand years!”

“The last one was only seven hundred years ago...”

He knew these things well.

“The Upper Realm has issued a decree. This tournament is being held early—in ten years. And the designated location... is the Nihility, the Five Phoenixes.”

The Venerable Joyful’s eyes narrowed into joyful slits.

What wonderful news!

The surrounding wanderers were stunned.

Qi Liujia, however, paled.

“Held in the Five Phoenixes Small World?”

“Why?!”

Instead of joy, terror flooded his heart.

The Upper Realm’s supreme powers... had finally set their sights on the Five Phoenixes?

“The Five Phoenixes has only just become High Martial. Even if we win nothing in the tournament, hosting it grants five strands of Dao Intent as reward. This is a heaven-sent opportunity!”

The Venerable Joyful laughed.

He truly believed it was good news. High Martial worlds struggled to produce even one strand of Dao Intent in centuries or millennia.

Hosting the tournament alone earned five strands—like manna from heaven.

In the past, only Sixth-Tier High Martial worlds qualified to host.

“Sect Leader Qi, please inform Lord Lu. As for the previous matter with the Venerable Justice, the Upper Realm has ruled he abused his authority and deserved death. As long as the Five Phoenixes properly hosts the Heavenly Grand Tournament, the Upper Realm will pursue it no further—and the five Dao Intent rewards are guaranteed!”

Qi Liujia’s face grew even whiter.

His lips trembled.

He saw far more clearly than the Venerable Joyful.

The Upper Realm was never benevolent.

Offending it never ended well.

Even the Great Venerable feared touching the Venerable Justice.

Yet now the Upper Realm was offering sweets?

Dismissing the Venerable Justice's death entirely?

Something was deeply wrong.

"Venerable Joyful... can the Five Phoenixes refuse to host the Heavenly Grand Tournament?"

Qi Liujia asked gravely.

What the Five Phoenixes needed now was to keep a low profile and develop quietly.

They had many heavenly geniuses. In recent years, Qi Liujia had discovered numerous special physiques. Given time, they would become the pillars of the Five Phoenixes.

And given the Five Phoenixes' unique nature, staying hidden was essential.

The only High Martial in the Nihility—it clearly harbored enormous secrets.

Wasn't Lu Fan's time formation meant precisely to accelerate quiet growth?

Yet the Upper Realm had deliberately chosen the Five Phoenixes to host the tournament.

If this wasn't intentional, Qi Liujia would eat his hat.

“Re... refuse?”

The Venerable Joyful was stunned.

Then realization dawned. His expression flickered.

His heart pounded.

Delivering this “good news” suddenly felt incredibly dangerous.

If Lu Ping'an blamed the messenger... he might be the first to die.

His face darkened.

Suddenly—

Terrifying aura surged.

A sea of thunder roared from the distance.

Countless lightning bolts danced.

A white-robed figure sat within the thunder sea, hair whipping wildly.

Lu Fan appeared in his Thousand-Bladed Chair, one hand on the armrest, fingers tapping rhythmically, crisp sounds echoing endlessly.

He looked at Qi Liujia and spoke calmly:

“Refuse?”

“Why would we refuse?”

“This tournament—the Five Phoenixes accepts.”

Chapter 415: The Human Emperor Grows Old

Accept... accepted?!

Lu Fan's sudden appearance and completely opposite answer stunned both Qi Liujia and the Venerable Joyful.

Qi Liujia froze in place.

Even the Venerable Joyful was dumbfounded.

He had originally thought this was purely good news for the Five Phoenixes. Only after Qi Liujia's reminder did he realize the danger. He had fully expected Lu Fan to refuse—and perhaps beat the messenger while he was at it.

Yet to his utter shock, Lu Fan accepted.

“Lord... Lord Lu, you truly mean this?”

The Venerable Joyful took a deep breath.

Lu Fan sat calmly in the Thousand-Bladed Chair and glanced at him.

“This Young Master always keeps his word.”

The Venerable Joyful’s heart clenched. Yes—keeps his word. Says he’ll kill you, and you die.

But since Lu Fan agreed, the mountain of pressure on the monk’s shoulders instantly vanished.

He was delighted. He couldn’t afford to offend Lu Fan, but he also couldn’t defy the Great Venerable and the Upper Realm.

“In that case, allow this monk to be the first to congratulate Lord Lu. Five strands of Dao Intent simply for hosting!”

The Venerable Joyful’s eyes narrowed into happy crescents.

To upgrade a High Martial world, Dao Intent must be etched into its origin.

There were several ways:

1. Let time slowly accumulate it—most High Martial worlds relied on this, as did many Mid Martial worlds that eventually became High Martial.

2. Geniuses who comprehended Dao Intent could feed it back into the world's origin.

That was the most common method for advancement, which was why every High Martial world nurtured geniuses so obsessively.

3. External rewards—like the Upper Realm's prizes or, in the Heavenly Grand Tournament, stripping Dao Intent from defeated worlds.

Yes—the Heavenly Grand Tournament was essentially a carnival of plunder and ascension for High Martial worlds.

An enormous opportunity for any world.

“Young Master... absolutely not!”

Qi Liujia was panicking.

Why did the Young Master agree so easily?

He knew Lu Fan was strong and probably intended to cause chaos in the tournament.

But this time, chaos wasn't something Lu Fan could just decide to create.

The Heavenly Grand Tournament concerned the entire Nine Heavens. Nearly every High Martial world would pay attention—even the top-tier First and Second Evolution worlds.

For the Five Phoenixes to stand in the spotlight now would invite calamity.

Countless ancient experts had died in the Nihility during the primordial war. Nearly every top High Martial world in the Nine Heavens had ancestors buried there.

Moreover, the Nihility itself hid immense secrets. As the only High Martial world within it, the Five Phoenixes would become a target for everyone.

“No harm.”

Lu Fan merely waved a hand, expression serene.

Qi Liujia didn't understand, but since Lu Fan had made his decision, he gradually calmed.

The Venerable Joyful sensed the heavy atmosphere and let his smile fade.

“Lord Lu need not worry—there are still ten years until the tournament. Also, after careful consideration, the Great Venerable asked this monk to inform Lord Lu...”

“Originally, according to Upper Realm rules, the Five Phoenixes should fall under Pingyang Heaven and the Great Venerable’s jurisdiction. You would have needed to participate in Pingyang Heaven’s preliminary selection for the tournament.”

“However, the Nihility is also one of the Nine Heavens, equal to Pingyang Heaven. Since the Five Phoenixes is the only High Martial world within the Nihility, the Great Venerable has waived the preliminaries. The Five Phoenixes may directly enter the main event.”

The Venerable Joyful bowed with a wide smile.

“Congratulations.”

Yet neither Lu Fan nor Qi Liujia acknowledged him—no smile, no response.

The air turned painfully awkward.

The monk wiped his palms on his robe.

“This monk has delivered the message. Lord Lu, Sect Leader Qi—this monk takes his leave.”

He stepped onto a Buddhist lotus and fled in a streak of light, vanishing from the Nihility as though his monastery were on fire.

Lu Fan remained seated, fingers slowly tapping the armrest.

With the monk gone, silence fell.

Qi Liujia said nothing.

Far away, the wanderers' eyes turned red with excitement.

The void erupted.

“The Five Phoenixes will host the Heavenly Grand Tournament?!”

“Is this real? The Nihility actually gets to host?!”

“This is a once-in-eons event! Even Fourth and Fifth Evolution worlds rarely qualify! We might witness the prodigies of Third Evolution worlds and above!”

Gasps and ecstatic shouts echoed through the emptiness.

Compared to the wanderers' jubilation, Qi Lijia felt only bitterness.

He simply could not understand why Lu Fan had agreed.

The whole point of the time formation was to develop quietly.

A new system prompt had appeared before Lu Fan's eyes.

He had thought the quest system was gone forever after the upgrade.

Yet here it was again—triggered only under special conditions.

With a thought, the panel appeared.

A new quest glowed brightly.

“Honor and duty are the roots that drive a world to grow stronger.”

【Glory Quest】 : Accept and host the Heavenly Grand Tournament. Let the beings of the Five Phoenixes Small World feel glory and mission. Compete against the geniuses of the Sacred Lands and seize rankings.

(Reward evaluated based on completion.)

Lu Fan read it twice, then the corner of his mouth curved upward.

“Instill a sense of honor and duty in the people of the Five Phoenixes...”

He fell into thought.

Indeed—mere quiet development would eventually scatter a world’s cohesion. Only honor and mission could elevate its spirit.

If the beings of a world possessed true pride and responsibility, they would stand united against any future crisis instead of betraying their home.

“Glory Quest... difficulty seems quite high. Reward depends on performance—ranking is only part of it.”

Lu Fan smiled and stopped dwelling on it.

Ten years remained—plenty of time.

Ten years outside meant a full century inside the Five Phoenixes.

In a hundred years, Lu Fan believed Tribulation Realm experts might even emerge!

The subtle pressure radiating from Lu Fan made Qi Liujia afraid to breathe.

“Old Qi, tell me about this Heavenly Grand Tournament.”

Lu Fan finally spoke, breaking the icy silence.

Qi Liujia exhaled in relief, but quickly grew solemn again.

“Young Master... you truly don't know what the tournament is?”

His face paled.

Lu Fan looked at him oddly.

“Why would this Young Master know?”

“Besides, free Dao Intent? I’d be a fool to refuse.”

Qi Liuja clutched his chest in pain.

One day, he thought, the Young Master would destroy the Five Phoenixes through sheer recklessness.

Agreeing to host without even knowing what it entailed?

Yet strangely, the absurdity lightened his heart.

“The Heavenly Grand Tournament is the grandest event of the Nine Heavens.”

“As the plane lord of a High Martial world, Young Master should understand how difficult further ascension is. Natural accumulation over time is far too slow—this is true for every High Martial world in the Nine Heavens.”

“That is why the tournament exists.”

“It began in the primordial era, jointly established by the ancient Great Emperor ‘Hao’ and several supreme beings of the Nine Heavens. It paused during the great war, then resumed once peace returned...”

“Beyond rankings, victors may strip Dao Intent from defeated worlds and merge it into their own origin, witnessed by the Great Dao of the Nine Heavens.”

Lu Fan’s brow furrowed.

“Strip Dao Intent from the losers?”

“All of it?”

“Not all—negotiated between both parties under the Great Dao’s oath.”

Qi Liujia nodded.

“That is why the tournament has endured. Weak High Martial worlds can become dark horses, rise overnight, and soar in evolution. Bottlenecked worlds can break through in a single leap. Waiting naturally would take far too long.”

“It is gambling a world’s foundation.”

“Win—you ascend brilliantly. Lose... you fade into obscurity.”

Lu Fan leaned back, cracking his knuckles.

“Interesting.”

Whoever designed this tournament was truly ruthless.

Winners shone like stars. Losers were left in the dust—some worlds even demoted to Mid Martial.

Qi Liujia hesitated before continuing.

“Young Master... the Great Venerable waiving the preliminaries seems generous, but the Five Phoenixes actually loses out greatly.”

“Without preliminaries, we miss the chance to plunder Dao Intent from weaker worlds.”

“Even in preliminaries, victors can only take one strand per win...”

Lu Fan understood instantly.

No wonder the monk fled so fast.

He had conveniently omitted that detail.

Very well, Venerable Joyful.

Lu Fan cracked his knuckles again—CRACK!

This one, I’ll remember.

“No matter.”

Lu Fan remained calm.

“Old Qi, how exactly is the tournament fought?”

Qi Liujia knew the rules well—he had once participated representing the Little Thunder Buddha World.

“It is divided into team battles and individual battles. Participants are capped at the Grandmaster level and below—no Transcending experts allowed. This restricts overwhelmingly strong worlds and gives weaker ones a chance.”

Lu Fan raised a brow.

Capped at Grandmaster?

That did indeed level the field somewhat.

With ten years—nearly a century inside the Five Phoenixes—the outcome was far from certain.

Qi Liujia took a deep breath.

“Young Master, besides team and individual battles, there are also side competitions for flair.”

“Oh?”

Lu Fan grew curious.

Qi Liujia coughed, a faint blush on his old face.

“This old man once participated in one...”

“There are three professions: Array Masters, Alchemists, and Artifact Forgers. These are gentler contests—no killing, but Dao Intent is still wagered, so they cannot be ignored.”

Lu Fan’s interest sharpened.

Professions too?

Then something clicked. His eyes narrowed.

“Old Qi, in the Array Master competition... will those disciples of yours who hold the Nine Character Array Words participate?”

Qi Liujia stiffened.

After a long silence, he nodded.

“They will.”

Lu Fan smiled.

“Perfect. Then this Young Master will be sure to greet your dear disciples properly.”

Qi Liujia looked at Lu Fan’s innocent expression and actually laughed.

“In that case... this old man thanks you in advance.”

The two fell silent, then turned into streaks of light and returned to the Five Phoenixes.

The tournament was a decade away. For now, it changed nothing.

...

Pingyang Heaven, Little Thunder Buddha World.

Only after returning did the Venerable Joyful finally relax.

He shook out his robes and headed toward the pagoda.

Rumble...

The Great Venerable's overwhelming aura spread.

The monk grew solemn, pressed his palms together, and bowed.

“Great Venerable.”

“Did Lu Ping'an agree?”

The majestic voice echoed.

“He did.”

“He actually dared...” Surprise colored the Great Venerable’s tone.

“But he had no choice—even whoever stands behind him cannot stop this.”

“Still, his ready acceptance is unexpected. He must have great confidence in the Five Phoenixes. A pity... once the Upper Realm’s supreme beings turn their gaze upon it, that confidence will be crushed to dust. When the tournament begins, every secret the Five Phoenixes hides will be dragged into the light.”

The Great Venerable’s murmurs thundered.

Cold sweat beaded on the monk’s forehead.

Great Venerable... please never send me with dangerous messages again!

I’m afraid Lu Ping’an will kill me!

“Enough. Begin preparations for Pingyang Heaven’s preliminaries. It is time the Little Thunder Buddha World ascends once more.”

...

The Five Phoenixes.

Great Xuan founded its divine dynasty amid worldwide celebration.

Dantai Xuan's dragon qi exceeding a hundred zhang was etched into every heart.

But after the festivities, silence returned.

Cultivators dispersed to their sects and resumed training.

The divine dynasty continued governing, mediating between mortals and cultivators.

Great Xuan Academies spread across the land—even into the former western territories.

Remnants of the Madden Kingdom and the cult went completely silent, as though erased from existence.

Yet Prime Minister Mo Ju never let down his guard, repeatedly submitting memorials urging thorough purges.

Dantai Xuan agreed.

Great Xuan's iron cavalry swept the west, exterminating evil wherever it lingered.

The cultivation world entered a brief period of quiet growth.

Overlord and Nie Changqing consecutively achieved Grandmaster realm.

At the Primordial Spirit Platform, as dawn broke, they shattered their statues and stepped into Spirit Unity.

Demonic qi roared to the heavens as Overlord's axe seemed to split the sky.

Nie Changqing's scruffy beard trembled as Dragon Slayer cleaved the Vast Sea in two, the wound refusing to heal for days.

Du Longyang, Ye Shoudao, and others came to congratulate. The cultivation world shook.

Qi Liujia appeared, spoke briefly with Overlord and Nie Changqing, then the two vanished from the continent as though they had never existed.

Thereafter, statues at the Primordial Spirit Platform shattered from time to time—more broke through, yet all kept utmost secrecy.

The cultivation world was a pot of water on the verge of boiling, brimming with power.

Time flowed silently.

The first decade of the Great Xuan Divine Dynasty passed in the blink of an eye.

The land prospered under stable rule.

Mo Beike and Tang Xiansheng retired.

Tang Xiansheng returned to Southern Commandery.

Mo Beike rebuilt a mechanism city atop the ruins of the old Mohist City of the West.

Though two pillars departed, the dynasty did not falter.

Great Xuan Academies flourished. Dantai Xuan instituted grand examinations to select officials.

Some lingering sect remnants rebelled, attempting to challenge the dynasty.

Dantai Xuan sent Jiang Li and his cavalry—they were crushed effortlessly.

Before the mighty divine dynasty, sects were nothing.

The second decade—Great Xuan's iron cavalry patrolled every corner. Spirit stones became currency, commerce boomed. Alchemists and artifact forgers who graduated from the academies became the most sought-after professions.

Old aristocratic clans decayed; new merchant clans rose to prominence.

Pills and spirit tools spread across the land—even commoners could afford basic artifacts.

The third decade—the first rebellion erupted.

Tianyuan natives rose against discriminatory Five Phoenixes officials stationed there. It was called the Tianyuan Uprising.

Many cultivators fanned the flames.

A Yin Spirit cultivator interfered, destroying an entire city in one strike—blood flowed like rivers.

Dantai Xuan was enraged. Dragon qi pierced the heavens.

He personally led the campaign, quelled the uprising, and with one shout shattered the offending cultivator's soul.

Instead of punishing Tianyuan natives, he executed corrupt Five Phoenixes officials and promoted locals to govern the region.

Returning to the palace, he ordered Tianji Pavilion to devise a new official selection system.

He personally visited Kong Nanfei and invited him to teach righteous haoran qi within the Great Xuan Academy.

All officials were required to cultivate haoran qi—any corruption or evil thought would shatter their qi, leading to immediate dismissal.

The court trembled, but corruption nearly vanished.

The divine dynasty prospered as never before.

The fifth decade—Dantai Xuan's dragon qi fell below a hundred zhang.

He chose his eldest son as Crown Prince among seven imperial sons.

The eighth decade—his black hair turned snow-white. Age finally showed.

The world sighed: the Human Emperor grows old.

Though not a cultivator, abundant spiritual energy allowed commoners to live past a hundred. With dragon qi sustaining him, the emperor lived longer still.

That year, the Human Emperor was 127. The Crown Prince was 58.

Jiang Li resigned, taking one hundred Black Tortoise Guards into the ancient tomb—never to be heard from again.

Mo Ju retired and wandered the world.

One by one, those closest to the emperor departed.

Deep within the cold, silent palace,

The emperor sat alone, turbid eyes staring toward the eastern sea, lost in thought.

Great Xuan Calendar, Year Ninety, Spring.

The Crown Prince, backed by one Yang God and ten Yin God experts, stormed the capital.

The Human Emperor was old.

The Crown Prince rebelled.

Chapter 416: Dragon Qi Scattered, the Human Emperor Sleeps Forever

Great Xuan Calendar, Year Ninety, Spring.

Northern Commandery, Divine Dynasty Capital.

Streaks of spiritual energy tore across the sky. The terrifying aura of a Yang God expert enveloped the city, making every commoner tremble.

On the blue-stone streets of the imperial capital, silver-armored soldiers sprinted past, the clanging of their armor deafening.

Black-robed Yin Spirit cultivators hovered in the air, robes fluttering.

The sky was dark. Cold rain fell.

The Crown Prince had rebelled.

The entire capital was sealed. For years, the forces he had secretly nurtured now surged from every corner, seizing the imperial palace.

Behind the Crown Prince stood more than just himself.

The Human Emperor—what a being he had been. Ninety years on the throne, ninety years of impeccable governance. Order. Prosperity. Harmony.

Who did not revere such an emperor?

Yet wherever there was reverence, there were also interests. And ninety years was a long time.

The Human Emperor could not cultivate. His lifespan drained away like any mortal's. Now he was truly old—hair white, body frail.

The once-vigorous Dantai Xuan who had swallowed mountains and rivers with a single glance was now a lion in his twilight.

This, perhaps, was the tragedy of mortals compared to cultivators.

The Crown Prince could wait no longer.

He had waited year after year. He dared not cultivate—because the one who would become Human Emperor could not cultivate. That was the rule set by White Jade Capital. He did not dare break it.

Though White Jade Capital had vanished from the world after the divine dynasty's founding, and he had only ever heard its legends, the name still commanded awe.

He had grown up on tales of the Five Phoenixes' first sacred ground—few in number, yet even the divine dynasty was nothing before it.

So he never cultivated. And without cultivation, he too aged.

From twenty to thirty, thirty to fifty... now sixty-eight.

He could wait no more.

The Crown Prince wore the same black imperial robe and pearl-crowned hat his father had worn at the founding ceremony.

Face cold and stern, he advanced step by step.

Behind him, ten Yin Spirit experts and one Yang God landed silently.

They were about to face the Human Emperor—even an aged one. They dared not fly.

Along the palace path they walked.

Old Confucian scholars, faces flushed with fury, stood upon the stone steps cursing the Prince.

Rebellion was the gravest sin. A crown prince's rebellion was unforgivable.

But the Prince no longer cared.

Not all officials in the divine dynasty were cultivators. Many never even entered Body Tempering. Their lifespan was limited.

The Human Emperor had always valued ability—governance and administration—over cultivation.

The Prince raised a hand.

A Yin Spirit cultivator shot forward, spiritual energy forming a giant palm to seize the scholar.

“Filthy traitor! Keep your hands off this old man!”

The scholar roared. His voice, infused with righteous haoran qi, shattered the energy palm.

Yet he was still dragged away.

The Prince did not dare kill these scholars—they belonged to the Haoran Sect.

Mo Ju had retired. Jiang Li had entered the ancient tomb...

Even Xue Tao, the emperor's once-mighty general, was said to be dead.

The emperor, relying on his dragon qi, had never surrounded himself with truly powerful guards. The strongest were mere Nascent Soul.

The Prince was certain of victory.

Creak...

The sealed palace doors slowly opened.

The Yang God expert stood silently beside the Prince. The ten Yin Spirits charged inside.

Blood flowed. Corpses of palace guards littered the ground. White marble steps ran red.

Finally, they reached the deepest palace—the emperor's sealed sanctuary.

The Prince stopped, swept his sleeve, and bowed.

“Imperial Father, you are old. It is time to rest.”

His voice rang out, yet trembled slightly.

So many years...

At last, the throne would be his.

Lord of the divine dynasty—how intoxicating.

His words echoed in eerie silence.

Then came a faint cough from within.

Creak.

The vermilion doors opened.

High threshold crossed, hair unkempt, wearing only simple robes, Dantai Xuan stepped out.

He was old—face etched with deep lines, body thin and frail. The heroic air was gone.

Yet he was calm. Hands behind his back, aged eyes deep and serene.

He gazed toward the eastern sea, then slowly sighed.

“Time passes in a blink.”

“This king is old too. All the familiar faces... nearly gone.”

He shook his head.

Old men grew nostalgic. Memories surfaced—of the last radiance of Emperor Yu Wenxiu of the Great Zhou.

But he was different. He had ruled diligently, given his all. He believed himself a good emperor.

Yu Wenxiu had been a tyrant, feeding lives to the black dragon.

Yet now, Dantai Xuan felt his own ending resembled Yu Wenxiu's.

"Your Majesty!"

Blood-soaked old scholars rushed forward, tears streaming, kneeling before him.

They glared at the Prince, trembling fingers pointed in accusation.

They were heartbroken—they had helped choose this prince.

"Your Majesty!"

The Prince's face darkened.

"Drag them away!"

Yin Spirits moved like shadows, seizing the scholars by their necks.

The old men roared, "Do not touch us!"

Some even tried to dash their heads against the ground.

Dantai Xuan looked at these loyal ministers and smiled.

Different.

He was different from Yu Wenxiu.

His life had lacked immortal fate, but compared to secluded cultivators, it had been magnificent.

His gaze upon the old scholars was gentle.

He could almost hear the commoners kneeling in the streets, chanting his name.

Old men and women, supported by their families, cursed the Prince.

Dantai Xuan smiled wider.

The Prince grew furious.

From the moment Dantai Xuan stepped out, he had not once looked at him.

“Imperial Father!”

He raised his voice.

“You dare face His Majesty?!”

An old scholar spat at the Prince.

“Silence!”

The Prince flushed with rage.

“Kill him!”

“Kill anyone who resists or curses!”

He roared.

Yin Spirits raised their hands to the scholars’ throats.

Dantai Xuan finally looked at his son.

“You have disappointed me greatly.”

He shook his head regretfully.

“Are you truly ready to be emperor?”

“Are you truly prepared to rule a divine dynasty?”

The Prince’s breathing quickened.

But Dantai Xuan gave him no chance to speak.

His gaze swept across the black-robed Yang God and the Yin Spirits.

“You are not Young Master Lu. Who gave you the audacity to interfere in divine dynasty affairs as cultivators?”

He smiled.

His hoarse voice made many cultivators pale.

“Release these old men.”

Then—he stepped forward.

BOOM!

Faint dragon qi surged from his body.

It was weak—no longer the terrifying hundred-zhang tide of old.

“Father... your dragon qi is spent. You truly are old!”

The Prince said.

He turned to the Yang God behind him.

“Your Majesty, forgive me.”

The black-robed Yang God bowed, then shot forward.

Spiritual pressure and energy whipped the capital into a vortex.

He became a streak of light, hurtling toward Dantai Xuan.

Dantai Xuan laughed.

He took a great stride, eyes wide with fury.

One shout—thunder rolled.

The Yang God coughed blood and staggered back, shattering stone tiles beneath his feet.

Shock filled him. He hadn't expected the aged emperor's voice to still wound him.

After that shout, Dantai Xuan's dragon qi faded. He seemed a withered log once more.

He shook his head at the bleeding Yang God.

"Alas, this emperor is indeed old..."

"In my prime, one spit could have nailed you into ash."

He smiled, then looked at the Prince.

"Do you know why fewer and fewer people remain at my side? I sent them away..."

"I wanted to draw out that cult leader Liu Yuanhao, eliminate all threats in my final years, leave you a stable throne. Yet the one who struck... was my own son."

“Using cultivators against me—how could I have ever chosen you as heir?”

“You could have persuaded the officials to petition me. I was tired. If you convinced them, I might have abdicated.”

Dantai Xuan spoke much—old men do.

The Prince’s expression shifted. Bitterness touched his lips.

But the arrow was loosed.

“Attack!”

He shouted, fear creeping into his heart.

Dantai Xuan sat upon the stone steps.

Such a scene meant nothing to him.

He had faced far worse storms in his youth.

BOOM!

The Yang God struck again.

Another Yang God hidden in the city as the Prince's trump card joined the assault.

The sky above the capital darkened. Yang God experts—capable of shaking heaven and earth!

Spiritual energy surged like a tidal wave toward the frail old man on the steps.

Dantai Xuan watched calmly, lost in thought.

Countless attacks rained down. The Prince's eyes gleamed coldly.

Yet the emperor's heart was still as water.

Boom!

A figure appeared at his side.

The Prince's heart jolted—Xue Tao!

The very guard thought dead!

Xue Tao, now four or five steps into Yang God realm—terrifyingly powerful.

But even more shocking—

Unnoticed, another figure hovered before Dantai Xuan.

Towering. Heroic. Hair wild. Eyes deep as starry seas.

Axe and shield on his back. Muscles like coiled dragons. Feet floating silently above the ground.

The two attacking Yang Gods froze in horror.

That silhouette... impossibly familiar!

Dantai Xuan was stunned. Surprise and warmth flooded his aged face.

Puff! Puff!

The hovering figure raised a hand without looking back.

Fingers flicked.

Vast power surged like oceans rising and falling—everything collapsed.

“Spirit Unity Grandmaster aura!”

“Damn it! A Grandmaster?!”

“It’s the Overlord! The Overlord of Western Liang!”

The two Yang Gods, barely one step into their realm, paled and tried to flee.

They never made it.

Terrifying force reduced them to blood mist.

Their primordial spirits fled—only to be annihilated by Overlord’s spirit pressure.

The Yin Spirits didn’t even manage to turn before they crumbled to dust.

The Prince did not recognize Overlord—he had been born long after the Overlord vanished into seclusion.

But he knew the name.

The man who once contested the world with the Human Emperor and nearly crushed him.

Ninety years later, Overlord looked younger, his aura infinitely more terrifying.

Thud.

The Prince collapsed, all strength gone.

A Grandmaster...

So this was the emperor's true trump card.

Overlord looked calmly at Dantai Xuan.

"You grew old."

"You haven't changed at all."

Dantai Xuan laughed.

Back then they had fought for dominion. Overlord chose cultivation. Dantai Xuan chose mortal empire.

Had Overlord chosen the throne, Dantai Xuan would never have had a chance.

"Do you regret it?"

“If you had walked the path of cultivation, your lifespan would still be vast.”

Overlord’s expression was complex.

“Regret?” Dantai Xuan laughed heartily.

“Xiang Shaoyun, my life has been far more splendid than yours. You and your little wife secluded yourselves for decades—how could that compare to ruling this vast land?”

“No regrets. Only... a little regret.”

“What regret?”

“That from the very first immortal encounter on Wolong Ridge, I never once tasted immortal fate... All because of this damned immortal-fate insulation. Never knowing immortal fate—that is my only regret.”

Dantai Xuan slapped his knee and cursed, laughing.

Even the stern Overlord’s lips curved.

“You didn’t have to come. This was a small matter. I could handle it.”

“Just visiting an old friend.”

Overlord glanced at the terrified Prince.

He raised a hand and pressed downward lightly.

BOOM!

The Prince’s army throughout the capital coughed blood and collapsed.

Cultivator clans outside the city fled in panic.

Hooves thundered.

Black Tortoise Guards poured in like a flood.

Mo Ju arrived in feathered robes, gently waving his feather fan.

Students of the Great Xuan Academy marched down the main streets toward the palace.

Mo Beike and Tang Xiansheng arrived in a flying carriage.

A drunken, disheveled scholar staggered along the official road, laughing loudly.

Within the capital, a youth in lotus robes appeared, a graceful young woman trotting behind him.

On this day, radiant auras soared into the sky. Great cultivators arrived one after another.

The world was stunned. It was as if the founding ceremony ninety years ago had returned.

The Prince felt ice in his veins.

His rebellion... had been a joke.

In the power of cultivators, the Human Emperor far surpassed him.

The rebellion failed.

Yet the emperor did not order the Prince killed—only stripped him of his title and exiled him to the western desert.

The Human Emperor still stood.

Five more years passed.

His dragon qi gradually dimmed, as though fading into nothingness.

He began compiling the Great Xuan Code.

Among its laws: Cultivators were forbidden from interfering in divine dynasty affairs. No official could exceed Body Tempering realm.

The world erupted in shock.

Commoners rejoiced. Many officials were furious.

Yet the emperor enforced it rigorously.

All powerful cultivator-officials were replaced—except those who solely cultivated righteous haoran qi.

From the capital to the smallest village, every post was changed.

When the law was fully implemented,

The Human Emperor's dragon qi vanished.

A generation fell.

Great Xuan Calendar, Year Ninety-Five, Winter.

The Human Emperor named his fifth son Crown Prince.

In the cold, dark inner palace,

Mo Ju stood silently by the bed, feather fan in hand.

Dantai Xuan lay frail and weak, eyes unfocused.

The once-hundred-zhang dragon qi was now barely a wisp.

He watched snow falling outside, cheeks trembling faintly.

“Ju... how goes the implementation of the Code?”

“All is arranged as Your Majesty commanded.”

Mo Ju answered.

Dantai Xuan smiled.

Then suddenly—his eyes blazed with sharp, brilliant light.

“Let my hundred zhang of dragon qi scatter and protect the divine dynasty. Half to shield the common people, half to shield the officials. Should any cultivator harm an official, dragon qi shall become karmic fire, burn their spirit, regress their cultivation—or reduce them to ash.”

He stared into the void, each word solemn.

“I beseech Young Master Lu... grant this wish.”

Suddenly,

Outside the window, the blizzard ceased.

The world fell utterly silent.

In Dantai Xuan’s ear, a gentle voice sounded.

“As you wish.”

ROAR!

His body on the bed shuddered.

All dragon qi surged from him, no longer sustaining life.

Golden dragon qi roared skyward, scattering across the heavens.

Mo Ju trembled. His feather fan snapped in his clenched fist.

That day, golden dragon qi was seen piercing the heavens above the capital, dispersing across the Nine Heavens to protect the realm.

That day,

The Human Emperor slept forever.

...

His eyes slowly closed.

When they opened again—only a moment had passed.

Dantai Xuan, who thought himself dead, found himself drifting above the Vast Sea.

In the distance, an immortal island carried upon a giant whale appeared.

On the island,

A white-robed youth placed a chess piece and gently nodded toward him.

Chapter 417: Born as Human Emperor, Died as Nether Emperor

Great Xuan Calendar, Year Ninety-Five.

The Human Emperor ascended on a dragon and passed away.

The entire capital quaked. The world felt it in their hearts; thick sorrow surged.

Golden light spilled across the sky. A golden dragon coiled and roared. Thunderous rumbles echoed like the emperor's murmurs in life.

The divine dynasty mourned as one.

The news spread like wildfire—one to ten, ten to a hundred.

From Northern Commandery to Southern, Eastern, Western, and even the far west.

The day the Human Emperor passed, the world trembled.

On the long snow-covered streets, people poured from their homes, walking the icy stone roads.

A hollow grief gripped every heart. Everyone saw the faint golden dragon lingering above the capital.

The man who had forged their peaceful golden age was gone.

Someone began to weep. The sound was contagious. In moments, the streets filled with sobbing that rang through the capital.

The people walked toward the palace.

They grieved. They came to send off their emperor.

Within the palace, aged Confucian officials felt their hearts shudder and sighed.

Many who had served Dantai Xuan from the beginning were overwhelmed with emotion.

From prefect of Northern Commandery, to King of Northern Xuan, to Human Emperor—he had never had an easy path.

A mortal body in an age of rising cultivation, yet he carved out a divine dynasty and suppressed countless cultivators.

Many trembling officials knelt in the snow and kowtowed toward the inner palace.

This kowtow was to send the Human Emperor on his final journey.

...

Southern Commandery, Tang Estate, a quiet courtyard.

Snow drifted gently.

Tang Xiansheng sat in a rocking chair that creaked softly, crushing the falling flakes.

He lifted his hand; snowflakes landed on his palm, bringing a slight chill.

“Farewell, Human Emperor.”

He murmured.

At the gate, Tang Yimo strode in. His aura was now terrifyingly powerful, shattering the falling snow without effort.

“The Human Emperor has passed.”

Tang Yimo’s feelings toward Dantai Xuan were complex.

“I saw it coming. It was only a matter of time... yet when the day truly arrived, my heart is not as calm as I imagined.”

Tang Xiansheng said.

“A great tribulation is coming. If Great Xuan survives it, the divine dynasty may truly endure forever.”

“If it does not... it will shatter like the Great Zhou before it.”

Tang Yimo's eyes narrowed sharply.

"Let's go. We must head to the capital. This dynasty carries my blood and sweat too—it will not fall so easily."

Tang Xiansheng rose slowly from the chair.

"Need my help?"

Tang Yimo supported him. Over the years, the grudge in his heart had faded.

Tang Xiansheng patted Tang Yimo's hand with an aged smile.

"No need. A small matter."

"Focus on your cultivation—that is what matters most."

He hunched over, hands behind his back, and walked step by step into the snow until he vanished.

...

Western Liang, the raging East Flow River.

Overlord stood with arms crossed, axe and shield on his back, hovering above the water. The river itself seemed suppressed by his presence.

Snowflakes shredded apart in his aura.

On the bank stood Luo Mingsang, still graceful with time.

She too walked the path of cultivation. Though her talent was ordinary, with Overlord's guidance she had reached Nascent Soul and gained long life.

Golden dragon roars faintly echoed in the clouds.

Overlord exhaled slowly.

The man who once contested the world with him had reached the end of his lifespan.

Luo Mingsang's expression was also complicated.

The Human Emperor who had risen from that era of heroes could not withstand time's blade.

"Ruled the world for a century, turned the heavens with a flip of his hand... Dantai Xuan lived brilliantly."

Overlord said.

Indeed—compared to the monotony of cultivation, Dantai Xuan's life had been spectacular.

Yet Dantai Xuan had no regrets, and neither did Overlord.

If Xiang Shaoyun had to rule for a hundred years, he could not have faced death as calmly as Dantai Xuan, without chasing immortality.

Actually, Dantai Xuan could have sought immortality. As Human Emperor, commanding countless cultivators and the greatest power beneath White Jade Capital—why couldn't he?

He simply chose not to.

Overlord exhaled.

His breath parted the river like a cannon blast.

He gazed toward the eastern sea, eyes flickering.

“It is time to focus.”

Then he looked beyond the heavens, battle intent and passion surging.

His blood boiled, making the entire East Flow River tremble.

He too should live a little more brilliantly!

That Heavenly Grand Tournament Qi Lijia spoke of...

Come!

Overlord clenched his fist. Storms swirled around him.

...

Within the ancient tomb.

Jiang Li, seated in meditation, opened his eyes with boundless complexity.

“Your Majesty...”

He saw again Dantai Xuan laughing heartily, clapping his shoulder, calling him “Brother Jiang.”

Everything felt like another lifetime.

He remained unchanged, while the Human Emperor had become history.

Jiang Li closed his eyes once more. Silence returned to the tomb.

He was waiting—for the day he fulfilled his promise to Dantai Xuan.

...

The Human Emperor's death shook the Five Phoenixes deeply.

The cultivation world learned of it and ripples spread through the calm.

Martial Emperor City, Qiannu Palace, Absolute Blade Gate, Heavenly Void Palace—all sent experts to the capital for the funeral.

Mo Ju presided over the rites.

Commoners from every corner of the divine dynasty flooded the capital, wailing as they lined the streets to send off their emperor.

The entire court mourned.

Snow fell heavily.

The coffin was interred.

The newly appointed Crown Prince, the fifth imperial son, stood in awe, feeling the overwhelming legacy of his father. Fear and reverence mingled in his heart.

Countless attended the funeral—officials from every region, cultivators of every faction—standing in silent rows.

Mo Beike's heavy eye bags trembled as he stood with Tang Xiansheng on a hillside, gazing at the imperial mausoleum and sighing deeply.

On that day, great cultivators crossed the sky to pay respects.

Some even glimpsed a supreme Demon King shrouded in black robes bow slightly toward the funeral.

To Mo Beike and Tang Xiansheng's surprise, the cult and the remnants of the Madden Kingdom made no move during the funeral.

But thinking it over, they understood.

Even Liu Yuanhao must be sighing at this moment.

To him, Dantai Xuan had been a worthy and fearsome opponent.

The day the funeral ended,

Tianji Pavilion broadcast the emperor's final decree to the world.

The realm shook.

White Tianji doves flew across the heavens, wings scattering feathers.

On profound yellow paper, words written in blood flowed.

Atop Tianji Peak, an elder coughed blood as he wrote with fervent strokes.

"The Human Emperor scatters his hundred zhang of dragon qi, concerned for the peace of the realm. Imperial dragon qi is taken from the people and now returned to them. Half is severed to protect the common folk—may the nation be prosperous and the people live in peace. The other half transforms into karmic flame to guard all officials and solidify the divine dynasty. Should any cultivator harm an official, dragon qi shall become karmic fire, burn their spirit, strip their cultivation, and reduce them to death and oblivion."

"Farewell, Human Emperor."

The decree spread.

The world was stunned!

Confucian scholars paled, beating their chests and weeping. No wonder the emperor could have lived decades longer—yet he severed all dragon qi to protect the realm and the dynasty.

When commoners heard, they were dumbfounded.

As the news spread, faint golden dragon qi seemed to coil across the heavens above the Five Phoenixes.

The gravely ill recovered.

The frail felt warmth course through their bodies and grew strong.

The people were awestruck, then overcome with gratitude.

Most moving of all—half the dragon qi now protected officials.

With the new laws, no official could exceed Body Tempering realm—they were essentially mortal.

Even those who cultivated righteous haoran qi were fragile before true cultivators.

Now, with dragon qi's protection, officials stood taller. They could serve the people without fear, strengthening the dynasty's foundation.

And this rule had been acknowledged by the Lord of White Jade Capital himself.

No cultivator dared test it.

Many felt dazed. This decree seemed to completely separate the mortal and cultivation worlds of Great Xuan.

For ordinary people unable to cultivate, it was a blessing.

At the very least, it shielded common life from many dangers brought by cultivators.

...

Origin Lake, Lake Heart Island.

Dantai Xuan drifted down onto the island.

Birdsong and fragrant flowers—truly an immortal realm.

His heart, surprisingly, grew peaceful.

He was dead, yet with Lu Ping'an's power, appearing here was no trouble. Even resurrection would be easy.

Lu Fan sat in white robes, still youthful, long black hair loose, exuding leisurely freedom.

Glug glug...

Warm wine bubbled in the pot.

Lu Fan waved him over.

Dantai Xuan appeared atop White Jade Capital's pavilion.

Clouds churned. The lake of origin qi rippled endlessly.

Dantai Xuan marveled.

So the Young Master truly had moved the island onto a giant whale and sailed into the Vast Sea.

Nearly a century had passed, yet Young Master Lu looked exactly as he had the day Dantai Xuan first visited North Luo City.

“Human Emperor, sit.”

Lu Fan smiled warmly.

Dantai Xuan laughed heartily, setting aside all worries, and sat across from him.

Lu Fan set out the spiritual pressure chessboard and played a game with him.

Dantai Xuan’s chess was truly abysmal. After a few moves, he was stumped.

“Young Master Lu’s skill is superb. This emperor yields.”

Dantai Xuan laughed, cupping his hands.

“No matter.”

Lu Fan waved it off.

With a thought, bronze cups filled with warm wine floated before them.

He sipped lightly.

“A century flies by—for cultivators, merely one seclusion, the snap of a finger...”

“How do you feel about your life, Human Emperor?”

Lu Fan asked with a smile.

“Passable. Decent enough.”

Dantai Xuan drank. Young Master Lu's wine was rare and excellent.

"You still had thirty or forty years left. Why scatter all your dragon qi?"

Lu Fan asked.

Dantai Xuan paused, then laughed.

"Instead of letting it slowly fade, better to do something for the people. Dragon qi came from them—returning it is only right."

Lu Fan nodded slightly.

Then he asked,

"This Young Master has always wondered..."

"With your authority as Human Emperor, why in your later years did you never sail out to seek me for immortality? You knew—if I granted it, you would live forever."

Dantai Xuan's cheek twitched.

Immortality... that counted as immortal fate, right?

He could have it too?

But he only thought this—he did not say it.

Outwardly, he laughed freely.

“Immortality? Birth, age, illness, death—the way of man. This emperor could have cultivated, but preferred to live a mortal life. Only by tasting joy, anger, sorrow, and death can one truly understand the people's suffering.”

Lu Fan chuckled, seeing straight through him.

He said no more and let Dantai Xuan wander the island freely.

Dantai Xuan was happy to relax. As emperor he had worked late into every night handling memorials. Now he could rest.

Lu Fan sent him away from the pavilion.

Dantai Xuan strolled the island.

He saw the Dao Stele—any cultivator would feel their soul tremble before it.

Dantai Xuan felt nothing. He glanced, then walked on.

He reached the alchemy room.

There was Ni Yu, still childlike.

Nine black pots orbited her. Her baby-fat cheeks jiggled with utmost seriousness.

She struck again and again with heavenly mysterious fire.

The pots glowed red-hot.

Powerful spiritual waves and Dao Intent surged. Pill fragrance wafted.

Dantai Xuan watched with great interest.

Then—BOOM BOOM BOOM!

Explosions rocked the alchemy room nearly to rubble.

From the wreckage came Ni Yu's frantic shriek.

Dantai Xuan jumped and fled.

"This emperor is already dead! You can't blame your exploded pots on my immortal-fate insulation!"

He wandered the island for days.

Under the Sky-Reaching Chrysanthemums, among the peach blossoms, grinning foolishly.

Through the purple bamboo forest, he sat before the Master's tomb, reminiscing and chattering for hours.

Though they had once stood on opposite sides, Dantai Xuan deeply respected the Master. The righteous haoran qi he created had stabilized the dynasty's bureaucracy.

Finally,

Days later,

Dantai Xuan returned to Lu Fan.

"Human Emperor, you are now a soul. Besides dissipating into heaven and earth, you have three choices..."

Lu Fan leaned back in the Thousand-Bladed Chair, fingers tapping the armrest.

He had found it hard to decide Dantai Xuan's fate.

So he would let the man choose.

"Oh?"

Dantai Xuan grew interested—three choices!

“In honor of your achievements as Human Emperor...”

Lu Fan said.

“First: I can forge you a new flesh body and let you live again.”

Dantai Xuan frowned, thought long, then sighed and shook his head.

“Dead is dead. Why live again? Fight my own sons for the throne again? Pointless.”

“Young Master Lu, what is the second choice?”

Lu Fan raised a brow.

“Second: I can let you reincarnate with all memories intact. You may walk the true path of cultivation...”

That tempted Dantai Xuan greatly.

His heart stirred.

Yet after a long while, he still wanted to hear the third.

“Young Master Lu, and the third?”

Dantai Xuan asked solemnly.

Lu Fan’s tapping fingers stilled.

He looked at Dantai Xuan and exhaled softly.

“You have lived a mortal life and stood against cultivators. What did you feel?”

Dantai Xuan was taken aback.

After a moment, he answered,

“Mortals... are far too fragile compared to cultivators.”

Indeed—mortal lives were as frail as ants, easily crushed.

“Do you remember the Nine Hells Secret Realm?”

Lu Fan asked.

“The Nine Prisons hold nine ghost cities. The souls of the dead drift there... a chaotic netherworld where souls cannot transcend.”

“You always complained about never receiving great immortal fate.”

Lu Fan smiled faintly.

“The third choice is the greatest immortal fate of all...”

“Enter the Nine Prisons. Judge good and evil. Establish reincarnation. Bring order to the netherworld.”

“If you govern it well...”

Lu Fan tapped the armrest, eyes gleaming.

Then his voice grew ethereal:

“Born as the Human Emperor of the divine dynasty, die as the Nether Emperor of the Nine Hells.”

Chapter 418: Cause of Yesterday, Fruit of Today

Dantai Xuan’s soul trembled. A majestic feeling crashed over him like a tidal wave.

Compared to the first two choices, this third one... was simply earth-shattering!

His head nodded almost on its own.

Overseeing the netherworld, establishing reincarnation—it felt immensely important.

Yet at the same time, he couldn’t shake the feeling that Young Master Lu had dug a massive pit and was waiting for him to jump in.

But his head had already nodded. That meant he had chosen the third path.

In truth, Dantai Xuan did not resist the third option. The second—reincarnation with memories intact—was tempting, but after decades as Human Emperor striving to give the people peaceful lives, the idea of entering the Nine Prisons after death to protect the souls of the departed... felt right.

At the very least, with him in the netherworld, the souls of the common folk would not be bullied too harshly.

With that thought, Dantai Xuan made his decision.

Lu Fan nodded.

“This path may be difficult at first, but I believe you can handle it.”

He smiled lightly.

“Young Master Lu...”

Dantai Xuan hesitated.

“Is this... really immortal fate?”

Lu Fan burst into laughter.

“Of course it is.”

A heaven-defying immortal fate.

If not for Dantai Xuan’s satisfactory performance as Human Emperor, dreaming of becoming Nether Emperor of the Nine Prisons? Keep dreaming.

“Go.”

Lu Fan said.

Dantai Xuan stood and bowed deeply.

Lu Fan smiled. The spiritual pressure chessboard appeared. He lifted a piece.

Plink. The black piece fell.

Stars shifted. Mountains crumbled.

The scene before Dantai Xuan changed instantly—he crossed thousands of li in a blink.

From the Vast Sea, he arrived at the Wolong Ridge secret realm.

Rumble!

The earth cracked. The nine prison gates hanging in the Nine Hells Secret Realm erupted with heaven-shaking fluctuations.

Above the nine gates, the faint outlines of nine ghost cities appeared—ancient, cold city walls lined with yin soldiers in rusted armor clutching corroded spears. Their deathly eyes stared at Dantai Xuan, sending chills down his spine.

“Go.”

Lu Fan’s voice echoed, both ethereal and majestic.

Lake Heart Island vanished completely from Dantai Xuan’s sight.

Mountains split. The earth floated and sank. A path leading straight into the ghost cities appeared before him.

The path divided into yin and yang.

Dantai Xuan stood at the entrance of the Yin-Yang Path, took a deep breath, swept his sleeve, clasped his hands behind his back, and stepped forward with head held high.

From this day on, he was no longer the emperor of the mortal realm.

Buzz...

Nine massive thrones materialized—fierce, cold, grand, majestic...

Nine ghost kings of the cities appeared, looking at Dantai Xuan. Feeling the terrifying pressure from Lu Fan across the eastern sea, all nine ghost kings cupped their fists in salute.

Dantai Xuan narrowed his eyes. These nine ghost kings... did not seem welcoming.

Of course. He had come to seize control of the netherworld from them.

As expected—this would not be as simple as Young Master Lu made it sound.

Yet Dantai Xuan only smiled. No fear—only excitement for the unknown challenge.

His mortal life had already been rich enough.

His afterlife as a ghost... would be even more spectacular!

Enter the Nine Prisons. Judge good and evil. Establish reincarnation...

The pressure was immense.

Facing the nine ghost kings, Dantai Xuan stood with hands behind his back. The natural majesty of a Human Emperor radiated from him—equal to the nine kings, not the least bit inferior.

On the Yin-Yang Path torn open by Lu Fan, a figure stood smiling, waiting.

“This one is Beigong. By the Saint’s command, I have long awaited to assist you.”

Dantai Xuan froze, then laughed heartily.

The two figures vanished at the end of the path.

Faintly, a tenth ghost city began to coalesce...

...

Having sent Dantai Xuan off, Lu Fan felt one matter settled.

He leaned back in the Thousand-Bladed Chair, eyes glimmering.

Establishing reincarnation and judging good and evil was no simple task. If Lu Fan had to do it himself, he would have a headache.

But professionals should handle professional work. As Human Emperor, Dantai Xuan possessed a sense of justice far beyond ordinary men.

And with Beigong's assistance, it would be much easier.

With Dantai Xuan scattering his dragon qi, the cultivation and mortal realms were somewhat separated. Reincarnation would better connect the netherworld and mortal realm, stabilizing the Five Phoenixes' development.

Moreover, the sooner reincarnation was established and ghost cultivation arose, the sooner Lu Fan could collect "royalties" from ghost qi—another form of spiritual energy. Why not?

Ni Yu's nine pots failed simultaneously again. She wiped her tears, unbowed, and began another attempt.

Only diligence was rewarded by the heavens—and filled her stomach.

After Lu Fan's second enhancement, her black pot could now split into nine. Over the past century, she had practiced refining with all nine.

One additional pot every decade. Now she perfectly controlled all nine.

Nine pots meant nine times the pills—enough to sate her appetite.

Moreover, Qi Liujia had informed her that in a hundred years, she would represent the Five Phoenixes in the alchemy side-competition.

At first she didn't care—she just wanted to eat, sleep, and pop pills.

But when Qi Liujia said it was important to Young Master Lu, Ni Yu became serious.

Though only a maid, to her, Young Master Lu was family—her closest family.

“For Young Master! I’ll do it!”

Her alchemy skill skyrocketed. Even Lu Fan’s repeatedly upgraded Alchemy Manual was beginning to fall short.

With Gluttony Dao Intent, her talent in alchemy had become terrifying.

Lu Fan strolled leisurely across the island.

Suddenly he looked toward the Vast Sea.

Qi Liujia arrived, parting the waves, Li Sansui at his side.

Li Sansui—Qi Liujia’s most cherished disciple—had received his complete teachings.

Especially after foreseeing that his former disciples might appear in the upcoming array competition, Qi Liujia placed all hope on Li Sansui to win honor for him.

The daoist nun Li Sansui had grown ever more composed. She still preferred being called Li Mochou.

She knew Master's wish—that she suppress those senior brothers in the array competition and restore his pride.

Stepping onto Lake Heart Island, Li Sansui's heart trembled. Nearly a century since she had last been here.

Seeing the white-robed Young Master Lu, unchanged as ever, immense pressure bore down on her.

“Young Master.”

Qi Liujia, in plain robes, approached.

Li Sansui followed and bowed slightly.

“What is it?”

Lu Fan asked curiously.

“Ninety-five years have passed in the Five Phoenixes. The ten-year deadline outside is almost here. We must begin selecting participants for the Heavenly Grand Tournament—both main events and profession side-competitions.”

Qi Liujia said gravely.

“Young Master, these contests cannot be taken lightly. Dao Intent is wagered. With our current reserves, the Five Phoenixes cannot afford many losses. Too many defeats would gravely wound our foundation!”

Li Sansui and Ni Yu (mouth stuffed with pills) both grew solemn.

It was that serious?

“Selection? Fine by me.”

Lu Fan smiled, curious.

“You handle everything.”

Qi Liujia felt the weight on his shoulders grow heavier.

He wanted the Five Phoenixes to flourish—it was the only High Martial in the Nihility.

He could not let the tournament cripple it.

“By the way, Old Qi.”

Lu Fan suddenly recalled something, tapping his armrest.

“Put Zhulong’s name on the list, but she doesn’t need to fight. Girls should be gentle and reserved. All that killing isn’t good.”

Qi Liujia froze. His aged face twitched.

Young Master... are you serious?

“Alright.”

Since Lu Fan said it, he would not refuse.

Besides, Qi Liujia intended to keep Zhulong as the Five Phoenixes' trump card.

With divine abilities, bathed in ancient tomb dragon blood, enhanced by ancestral dragon qi, and nearly a century of growth—who knew how strong she was now?

Perhaps only Young Master Lu knew.

“Young Master, Sansui has learned all I can teach. To perform well in the array competition, I hope you might personally guide her.”

Qi Liujia bowed.

Lu Fan nodded and did not refuse.

“Then let her stay on the island these next few years.”

Qi Liujia was overjoyed.

Li Sansui beamed and thanked him.

Ni Yu, cheeks bulging with pill-coated candy, looked thrilled—finally someone to keep her company!

But Lu Fan glanced sideways.

His eyes seemed to speak:

Play?

Have you mastered alchemy yet?!

Ni Yu's heart jolted. The pills in her mouth... suddenly lost their flavor.

Qi Liujia left Li Sansui and departed.

He had to begin selection.

He knew the rules well and already had candidates in mind.

Alchemy competition: unquestionably Ni Yu.

Array competition: Li Sansui.

Artifact forging competition: still needed careful selection.

...

After the Human Emperor's funeral, the Great Xuan Divine Dynasty returned to normal operation.

Yet because of Dantai Xuan's final laws, the dynasty experienced more turbulence than in previous years.

Mo Ju had planned to retire and wander, but at the new emperor's repeated requests, he stayed to assist.

With Mo Ju's help, everything ran smoothly.

The new emperor consolidated power.

Half a year later, Mo Ju finally retired.

The new emperor was not Dantai Xuan.

Mo Ju had served Dantai Xuan for a century—his heart had room for no other emperor.

Despite repeated pleas, Mo Ju left.

On a snowy day, atop the city wall, the new emperor bowed deeply as Mo Ju walked away in his crane-feather cloak, feather fan swaying, disappearing into the blizzard.

Mo Ju's departure lit the fuse.

The divine dynasty began to shake.

Aristocratic clans grew restless.

While Mo Ju was prime minister, they dared not act. Now that he wandered the world, they bared their fangs.

Yet the new emperor Dantai He did not disappoint. With iron and blood, he crushed the brewing rebellions and awed all sides.

Though Mo Ju was gone, many aged Confucian ministers remained to share the burden.

But as the second half of the year approached,

A pressure that kept Dantai He awake at night finally surfaced.

Great Xuan Calendar, Year Ninety-Six, Winter.

The sect world reignited.

Nascent Soul cultivators founded sects without imperial permission, openly recruiting disciples.

Thousands of sects sprang up like bamboo after rain in a single month.

The new emperor was furious and prepared to dispatch the Black Tortoise Guards.

Yet at the same time—rumors from the west.

The cult and Madden Kingdom remnants, hidden for a century, began to stir.

Worse still—the Demon Continent.

With the three Demon Kings in seclusion,

The cult hunted demons and framed Great Xuan cultivators. Even more horrifying—students at Great Xuan Academies were discovered cultivating with demon crystals.

A demon delegation was sent to the capital.

But they were ambushed by the cult and Madden remnants. Black Tortoise armor and corpses were left behind.

The Silver Wolf King emerged from seclusion.

He was no fool—he sensed something amiss.

So he personally entered the capital.

A century of peace between demons and the dynasty—he did not wish to break it lightly.

Dantai He spoke with the Silver Wolf King for a long time.

The Wolf King left the capital.

Yet on his return—sandstorms blotted the sky.

Several Yang God experts ambushed him.

Among them—the century-hidden Liu Yuanhao appeared, his cultivation unfathomably deep.

The Silver Wolf King was slain.

In the endless sandstorm, his mountain-like corpse lay across the desert, surrounded by Black Tortoise corpses.

Xue Tao's sword pierced the wolf's skull, shattering its demon crystal.

The Wolf King's subordinates discovered the scene—and raged.

This time, the demons were truly enraged.

When Dantai He received the news, he trembled, face ashen.

He understood—the century of peace was cracking. Terrible conflict loomed.

The cult and Madden remnants had planned for a hundred years. Now they revealed their claws.

Internal aristocratic clans were nothing.

But the proliferating sects were trouble.

Beset by internal and external threats, Dantai He felt exhausted.

Only now did he understand why his father had been so reluctant to abdicate.

The divine dynasty was not as stable as it appeared.

Dantai Xuan had tried to draw out the cult—only for his eldest son to rebel.

Now Dantai He could only curse his elder brother—pitiful schemer.

Had their father eliminated the cult, even with troubles, the dynasty would not be so overwhelmed.

Silver Wolf King dead.

The demons furious.

Tiger Demon King emerged, his roar shaking the desert. His friend murdered so gruesomely—how could he accept it?

A Yang God demon crossed Tianhan Pass and charged the capital.

Xue Tao met him. They battled. The Tiger Demon King left unsatisfied.

The rift between demons and dynasty appeared.

Under Liu Yuanhao's leadership, the cult fully surfaced.

"This seat will reclaim everything that belongs to this seat..."

Liu Yuanhao's black-robed figure spoke coldly.

The western lands were quickly overrun. Murder, arson, plunder—the Madden Kingdom was reborn, raising armies against the dynasty.

Yet just when the world believed the divine dynasty was crumbling...

The sect crisis dissolved rapidly.

Because one imperial official, unafraid of death, led troops with official writs to destroy a sect.

The sect's Nascent Soul founder slew the official in rage.

As the official died, he laughed.

Dragon qi descended from the heavens. Karmic fire burned...

The Nascent Soul cultivator was reduced to ash!

The world was stunned. They remembered the Human Emperor's final decree.

Countless officials marched out of cities to purge sects. Many dyed the land with their blood.

Karmic fire consumed countless cultivators—even one Infant Transformation expert turned to ash.

The sect crisis collapsed like melting ice before these upright officials.

Dantai He rejoiced at the resolution, yet felt complex emotions.

So his father had foreseen everything.

Even more moving—

Jiang Li emerged from the ancient tomb with a hundred Black Tortoise Guards.

That invincible iron-blooded army charged west and crushed the cult's lair in one fell swoop.

Liu Yuanhao was shocked and furious—he had been tricked again!

In the Demon Continent,

The same day Jiang Li emerged, the Demon Monkey King dragged his iron staff, leading countless demons to slaughter into the Madden Kingdom.

One swing—tens of thousands fell.

The Madden Kingdom's demon-crystal God Legion was no match for the demons who had developed for nearly a century.

The Monkey King, demonic aura soaring, battled the Madden King who had transformed into a twelve-winged celestial god across the desert.

Sand seas overturned. Sand waterfalls raged.

The Madden King's twelve demon-crystal wings were shattered one by one.

Finally,

The Monkey King raised both arms, demonic qi piercing the heavens.

With a roar, he tore the Madden King's body apart.

Blood dyed the boundless desert red.

Cause of yesterday—fruit of today.

Chapter 419: This Young Master... Has Finally Hit a Bottleneck

The sudden reversal of the situation left countless onlookers dumbfounded.

The war between the Great Xuan Divine Dynasty and the cult engulfed the cultivation world.

Jiang Li emerged from the ancient tomb, silver armor ringing, the thunder of hooves echoing as if from the depths of eternity.

He had not appeared at the Human Emperor's funeral. The world assumed he was in death seclusion. Even the cult let down its guard.

Yet no one expected—

Jiang Li had been waiting. Waiting for the cult. Waiting for Liu Yuanhao.

Even when the Human Emperor he had served so closely passed away and was entombed in the imperial mausoleum, Jiang Li remained unmoved.

What kind of resolve was that?

Rumble!

The western lands shook as though mountains collapsed and seas overturned.

One hundred iron riders—Jiang Li's soldiers, each at Infant Transformation realm—charged from the ancient tomb like a crimson tide.

A blood-colored war god coalesced around Jiang Li. The Dao of Military Formations blazed in glory!

The cult's headquarters in the west was trampled flat by Jiang Li's army.

Cult experts tried to flee. They had developed in hiding for a century—yet they could not escape the Human Emperor's calculations!

That day, blood dyed the western lands red.

The cult crumbled.

Liu Yuanhao roared in fury. His black robes tore apart. No longer hiding his power—

Yang God nine steps. Half-step Grandmaster!

Terrifying half-Grandmaster aura exploded, as though he alone could turn the tide.

Jiang Li's face was expressionless, silver armor dazzling under the sun.

Liu Yuanhao had reached half-Grandmaster.

Yet Jiang Li feared him not. He thrust his silver spear straight at Liu Yuanhao.

Pfft!

One clash.

Liu Yuanhao was sent flying, carving a deep trench through the earth.

He was stunned!

Grandmaster!

Jiang Li had achieved Spirit Unity—true Grandmaster realm!

And with the Dao of Military Formations—how could Liu Yuanhao fight?

Liu Yuanhao was decisive. He turned and fled without hesitation. He was used to running anyway.

“I skipped even His Majesty’s funeral just to wait for you. Did you think I’d let you escape?”

Jiang Li's voice was ice.

Step by step, he rose into the air.

Grandmaster primordial spirit power surged like a terrifying storm, crushing mountains and shattering stone.

Liu Yuanhao turned back. His eyes turned pitch black. Eerie flames danced.

His body became a skeleton, flesh seemingly burned away by the flames.

The flames formed a giant skull, radiating cold Dao Intent, and charged at Jiang Li.

Half-Grandmaster Liu Yuanhao could easily slay the Silver Wolf King.

But against a true Grandmaster like Jiang Li—his fate was the same as the wolf's.

Pfft!

Jiang Li's spear stabbed down from the heavens.

It pierced Liu Yuanhao's brow in an instant.

Liu Yuanhao arched in extreme unwillingness, head thrown back, spear through his forehead, pinning him to the ground.

His primordial spirit surged upward—only to be shattered by Jiang Li's spirit pressure.

A wretched scream echoed across the western lands, filled with Liu Yuanhao's boundless resentment.

Rumble!

From the direction of the Nine Hells Secret Realm,

Cold chains clanked.

A powerful suction erupted. Liu Yuanhao's twisted soul was dragged away by that force.

Not just him—all the souls of the slain cult experts and Madden Kingdom warriors across the west were pulled toward the Nine Hells.

Jiang Li stood motionless, silver armor stained with blood.

Liu Yuanhao was finally dead.

The cult had always been the dynasty's greatest threat.

A mortal enemy—unlike any sect.

Jiang Li's emotions were complex.

He closed his eyes.

He had fulfilled the Human Emperor's trust.

Yet strangely, he felt... empty.

In the endless desert,

The Demon Monkey King sat upon the ground. Blood dripped from his cold iron staff.

At its tip hung the torn corpse of the Madden King...

Fur whipping in the sandstorm, the Monkey King gazed into the distance.

...

Cult destroyed. Madden Kingdom shattered.

In the capital, the new emperor received the news and exhaled deeply.

He sat upon his chair and laughed.

Then his laughter faded, and sorrow crept in.

He had once believed he could be a good Human Emperor.

Yet since ascending, he had nearly brought the dynasty to ruin.

Had it not been for his father's countless contingencies—he would have been overwhelmed. The dynasty might have fractured, the people displaced and suffering.

Snow fell silently.

New emperor Dantai He dismissed his attendants. In loose robes, barefoot, he walked the palace halls step by step.

He was imitating his father's anxious pacing—countless nights the Human Emperor had walked thus, worrying for the realm.

Dantai He walked and walked...

His eyes gradually hardened with resolve.

He understood the weight on his shoulders.

He resolved to spend his life being a good Human Emperor.

...

Nine Hells Secret Realm.

Liu Yuanhao's soul drifted in a daze.

He was dead. Finally dead.

Looking back on his life—so absurd, so meaningless.

He drifted and drifted, until he saw countless souls walking a great path.

Sunlight bathed the path.

Elders laughed with joy. Maidens blushed shyly. Scholars brimmed with spirit—all in their finest state, full of life.

Liu Yuanhao landed on the path.

His sinister appearance was gone. The path was like a mirror—he saw himself as the carefree youth he once was.

“When one dies, they walk to the underworld alone on the Yin-Yang Path.”

His heart trembled.

On this path, one walked in their most dignified form, savoring the final splendor of life.

“So my happiest time... was when I was young.”

Liu Yuanhao’s emotions were complex.

Then he adjusted his mindset and walked toward the end of the path.

At the end stood a city.

Upon its walls sat a tall figure on a throne, holding a ledger.

The youthful Liu Yuanhao looked curiously at the seated figure—then froze.

“Hu... Human Emperor?!”

Dantai Xuan!

How could Liu Yuanhao not recognize him?

Nearly a century of enmity—how could he forget that face?

Especially now—Dantai Xuan appeared as he had at the founding of the divine dynasty, full of heroic spirit.

Dantai Xuan smiled faintly at Liu Yuanhao.

He opened the ledger.

“Liu Yuanhao, though you were the cult leader, you committed no great evil in life. You merely sought to restore Great Zhou—our ideals clashed.”

“Now that I govern the Nine Hells and judge good and evil, I offer you two paths...”

“One: sever your cultivation, erase your memories, reincarnate.”

“Two: you opposed me in life. Serve me in death.”

Dantai Xuan held the ledger and spoke.

“Which do you choose?”

His words boomed with overwhelming pressure.

Liu Yuanhao’s heart was endlessly complex.

He looked at Dantai Xuan and sighed.

Ruler of the mortal world in life, lord of the ghost prisons in death.

After a long while,

Liu Yuanhao laughed.

He chose the first path—sever cultivation, erase memories, reincarnate as a mortal.

He could have served Dantai Xuan and lingered as a ghost cultivator.

But for once... Liu Yuanhao chose pride.

Perhaps he was tired of the path of cultivation.

Reborn as a mortal—it wasn't bad.

Liu Yuanhao entered the city.

Beigong seized his soul, severed his cultivation, erased his memories, and cast him into reincarnation.

...

Origin Lake, Lake Heart Island.

Liu Yuanhao's death surprised Lu Fan.

As the first cultivator to comprehend Dao Intent to fall, his death drew Lu Fan's attention.

Dantai Xuan offering Liu Yuanhao two paths—and Liu Yuanhao choosing reincarnation as a mortal—shocked Lu Fan even more.

When a cultivator who comprehended Dao Intent dies, does their Dao Intent vanish?

With a thought, the system panel appeared.

Host: Lu Fan

Title: Qi Refiner (Permanent)

Qi Refinement Level: 6

Spiritual Energy Reserves: 9,999,999 / 10,000,000 strands

Primordial Spirit Power: 99 yuan

*Chaos Power:

* 39 he

World Rating: Five Phoenixes Small World [High Martial]

Mystic Qi Refinement: 9,999,999 / 9,976,889 strands

Glory Quest: Active

Lu Fan looked at the panel and exhaled softly.

“Chaos Power still 39 he. This means Liu Yuanhao’s death did not remove the Dao Intent etched into the Five Phoenixes’ origin...”

Lu Fan pondered, relieved.

“In fact, because the Dao Intent is etched into the origin, the Five Phoenixes may birth new cultivators who comprehend Liu Yuanhao’s Dao Intent in the future...”

He murmured.

Withdrawing his gaze from the panel, Lu Fan's expression remained calm.

Even seeing 9,999,999 strands of spiritual energy, his heart was unmoved.

In truth, he had reached this number ten years ago—like a bottleneck.

Normally, he should have broken through to Qi Refinement Level 7.

Yet this time, he was stuck.

After long study, Lu Fan concluded it was likely because his Mystic Qi Refinement had not fully tempered all his spiritual energy, or perhaps due to the system upgrade.

“This Young Master... has finally hit a bottleneck.”

Lu Fan sighed, but felt a spark of excitement.

If there were no bottlenecks, how dull would cultivation be?

His spiritual energy reserves were capped, yet still accumulated beyond the counter. How much exactly, Lu Fan wasn't sure—over the past century, the Five Phoenixes had produced countless experts, feeding him immense spiritual energy.

Once he broke through, all accumulated energy would flood in.

But another issue troubled him—his primordial spirit power had stagnated for years.

How to breakthrough? Lu Fan was puzzled.

Both spiritual energy and primordial spirit seemed bottlenecked.

Yet he had a faint hunch...

The Five Phoenixes... might soon face another tribulation.

...

Jiangnan, misty with spring rain.

A small city in Southern Commandery.

Mist tore apart.

Qi Liuji in plain robes landed on the street. Mortals bustled around, unaware of him.

His primordial spirit stirred, guiding him forward.

Clang! Clang! Clang!

In an ordinary blacksmith shop, clear hammering rang out.

A'lu, shirtless, hammered red-hot ore.

His bronze skin glistened with sweat. Sparks flew with each strike.

It was precious ore. A'lu used no spiritual energy—only raw physical strength, swinging the heavy hammer in thousand-fold tempering.

Inside, a diminutive elder dozed in a rocking chair to the rhythmic hammering.

Feeling Qi Liujia's powerful primordial spirit, Gongshu Yu opened his eyes.

"Senior Qi."

A'lu stopped, wiped sweat, and grinned with bright teeth.

Qi Liujia nodded warmly, then looked at Gongshu Yu.

For the artifact forging competition, the only one the Five Phoenixes could field with confidence was Gongshu Yu—former master of the Refining Pavilion under Young Master Lu.

Qi Liujia stated his purpose.

Gongshu Yu smiled and waved a hand.

"This old man is too old. Let A'lu go."

Qi Liujia was taken aback, turning to the honest-looking A'lu.

A'lu was equally shocked.

His honest face flushed red, at a loss.

“Master...”

“What are you shouting for? Compete well. Don't disgrace the Five Phoenixes—or I'll break your legs.”

Gongshu Yu said sternly, hands behind his back.

A'lu fell silent, feeling immense pressure.

He had forged for years but never competed. He had no idea how he measured up.

But since his master said so, A'lu resolved to give his all and not shame his master or the Five Phoenixes!

Qi Liujia laughed, chatted briefly with Gongshu Yu, then took A'lu and departed.

Beyond the profession side-competitions, the Heavenly Grand Tournament included individual and team battles—three slots for individual, five per team.

Specific participants were less important than strength.

Victory or defeat affected the world's origin Dao Intent.

Every world would field their strongest.

Qi Liujia visited Martial Emperor City, Heavenly Void Palace, Absolute Blade Gate, and Qiannu Palace.

He met Du Longyang and the others who had secluded themselves for years.

He explained the gravity of the coming tournament.

For a time, Qi Liujia traveled the Five Phoenixes, speaking in detail with many cultivators.

The current Five Phoenixes had no shortage of Grandmasters.

Du Longyang, Ye Shoudao, Young Master Tianxu, Ni Chunqiu—the original four.

Plus Overlord, Nie Changqing, and many who had quietly achieved Grandmaster realm.

Finally, Qi Liujia settled on the first roster.

...

After much travel, Qi Liujia brought A'lu to Lake Heart Island.

Lu Fan played chess alone atop White Jade Capital's pavilion.

Seeing the white-robed figure, Qi Liujia's aged eyes flickered.

Sometimes, Qi Liujia felt Young Master Lu was very lonely—as though he did not belong to this world.

A gentle breeze blew.

Peach blossoms danced.

Ning Zhao emerged from the wind in flowing white, leading Qi Liujia up the pavilion.

“Young Master.”

Qi Liujia bowed.

“Roster decided?”

Lu Fan held a piece, frowning at the board.

Qi Liujia smiled.

“All are Spirit Unity Grandmasters.”

He handed over a golden silk list.

Lu Fan took it and unfolded it.

The first representatives of the Five Phoenixes:

Individual Battle: Xiang Shaoyun, Tang Yimo, Lu Jiulian

Team Battle: Du Longyang, Ye Shoudao, Young Master Tianxu, Ni Chunqiu, Jiang Li

Lu Fan raised a brow.

The list was both surprising and expected.

“Acceptable.”

He folded the silk and tossed it back to Qi Liuja.

...

Beyond the Nihility,

Terrifying rumbles began to echo.

To enter the Nihility, one had to pass through Pingyang Heaven.

At the border between Pingyang Heaven and the Nihility, countless terrifying auras gathered.

Ancient warships crossed the void, shaking space itself.

Though the ten-year deadline had not yet arrived, many experts had already come.

The Upper Realm designating the Nihility as the tournament venue had drawn immense attention.

The Nihility—a forbidden land of terror. The primordial war had seen ancient Great Emperors and countless experts fall there.

For eons, the Upper Realm had ignored the Nihility. Many powers treated it as ruins.

Yet now the grandest event of the Nine Heavens would be held there.

Many sharp-minded experts suspected the Nihility's secrets were about to surface.

The land where an ancient Great Emperor fell, the battlefield of that cataclysm—suddenly the center of attention.

And the Five Phoenixes Small World—the only High Martial within the Nihility—entered the sights of High Martial worlds across the Nine Heavens.

Saint Lord Qingling smiled as he watched a warship vanish into the void, then his smile faded.

“The Heavenly Grand Tournament has not yet begun, but the profession side-competitions are already drawing countless eyes... The Five Phoenixes has truly become the center of the storm.”

Saint Lord Qingling took a deep breath.

Yet thinking of that white-robed, wheelchair-bound, rather short-tempered Saint Lord Lu... he had a feeling things might become very interesting.

Buzz...

Suddenly,

Within Pingyang Heaven,

A terrifying aura erupted.

From the Little Thunder Buddha World,

Buddhist light illuminated the heavens. A giant lotus sped forth, space rippling violently.

At one point in Pingyang Heaven,

Spatial array patterns suddenly crisscrossed.

Nearby Low and Mid Martial worlds were shredded by the terrifying spatial fluctuations. Wretched screams rang out.

Saint Lord Qingling's expression changed drastically.

Not just him—nearly every High Martial sacred land and expert rushing to Pingyang Heaven looked horrified.

They dared not breathe.

A spatial array formed in Pingyang Heaven.

An ancient warship radiating primordial aura slowly emerged.

“Emissaries of the Upper Realm!”

Saint Lord Qingling’s heart jolted.

Figures stepped from the warship, shrouded in mysterious energy—faces and forms unseen.

Boom!

The Great Venerable of the Little Thunder Buddha World arrived seated upon a lotus, solemn and majestic.

He bowed respectfully toward the ancient warship.

A terrifying being seemed to recline within. Primordial spirits clashed across heaven and earth as the Great Venerable conversed with the entity.

Many hearts raced.

To make the Great Venerable of a High Martial Buddha World so reverent...

Were there... true Immortals aboard that ancient warship?!

Yet many also understood—with the Upper Realm emissaries' arrival, the prelude to the Heavenly Grand Tournament had begun.

Rumble!

The Great Venerable sat solemnly upon his lotus.

He watched the ancient warship crush the void, spatial array patterns crisscrossing, charging into the Nihility.

Clang!

Countless rules of the Nihility turned into sharp blades.

They slashed against the warship's surface—but left it unscathed.

Spatial fluctuations rippled.

In a few flashes, the warship surpassed countless others traversing the Nihility.

It appeared above the Five Phoenixes.

Like a god high above, looking down upon ants.

Chapter 420: Alchemy Side-Competition, Ni Yu Takes the Stage!

A terrifying aura spread, like a colossal giant standing tall, overlooking the world.

The entire Nihility boiled over.

Countless wanderers stared fanatically at the ancient warship hovering above the Five Phoenixes. Every single rune etched upon it drove them mad with obsession.

It came from the Upper Realm!

It represented the will of the Upper Realm—and signified that the Heavenly Grand Tournament was about to begin.

These wanderers lost in the void had waited far too long.

Nearly ten years. Finally, the Heavenly Grand Tournament had arrived!

Rumble!

One warship after another slowly sailed through the Nihility. Runes glowed on each, resisting the rules of this realm.

Many were mighty, but compared to the ancient warship representing the Upper Realm, they paled.

Of course, the experts from various High Martial worlds aboard those ships were in no hurry to rush to the Five Phoenixes.

Instead, they watched with great interest as the ancient warship reached its destination.

In Pingyang Heaven, the Venerable Joyful, Saint Lord Qingling, Saint Lord Tuoba, and others all observed.

Upper Realm emissaries were supremely domineering. Even the Great Venerable had to bow before that ancient warship.

Would Saint Lord Lu bow?

They were extremely curious.

...

Origin Lake, gentle breeze.

Lu Fan rolled up his sleeves, holding a chess piece, about to place it—when his hand suddenly paused.

“Hm. They’re here.”

Lu Fan said.

On Lake Heart Island, Qi Liujia, who had been circulating his qi, abruptly opened his eyes, aged gaze filled with gravity.

“Young Master... they’ve come.”

“Though the ten-year deadline has not yet arrived, if I’m not mistaken, they are here early for the profession side-competitions.”

Qi Lijia said.

Lu Fan leaned back in the Thousand-Bladed Chair and nodded slightly.

The profession side-competitions?

A warm-up before the main Heavenly Grand Tournament?

Breaking sounds filled the air on the island. Ning Zhao brought Ni Yu. Li Sansui and A’lu also rushed over.

“Old Qi, go take a look.”

“As for the competition venue—just use the Bloodstained Battlefield.”

Lu Fan said.

Qi Liujia was stunned.

Then he gave a wry smile. Young Master was stirring trouble again.

But he said nothing more. He stepped forward and soared into the sky.

Lu Fan picked another piece from the box and placed it on the board once more.

...

Over the Vast Sea, calm as ever.

Behind the nameless tombstone, the ancient tomb.

In a dim chamber, an ever-burning lamp flickered.

Outside the hall, four skeletons stood in the four directions, heads raised to the sky, ghostly flames dancing in their eye sockets.

“General, someone has come.”

The skeleton in the pink dress spoke.

Her voice echoed around the ancient hall.

After a long while,

A faint voice emerged from within.

“The Heavenly Grand Tournament is to be held in the Five Phoenixes... Those old monsters have finally set their sights on the Nihility.”

“The birth of a High Martial in the Nihility means the seal on the ‘Imperial Weapon’ is loosening. It’s no surprise they’re making moves.”

“No matter... As long as they do not invade, let them be.”

The voice was calm, tinged with contemplation.

The pink skeleton’s ghostly flames flickered.

“Understood.”

The four skeletons returned to motionless silence. The ever-burning lamp inside steadied, and the oppressive aura slowly dissipated.

...

The ancient warship exuded terrifying pressure.

Rumbling filled the air.

“To use the ‘Lin’ Character Array Word to construct a time formation... Even among the nine secret words of Ancient Emperor Hao, this usage is remarkable.”

A light laugh drifted from within the ancient warship.

A servant stepped out. His aura was powerful, his face shrouded in mist—features indiscernible.

He walked step by step from the warship.

Buzz...

From the Five Phoenixes,

Qi Liujia shot forth and cupped his fists toward the servant.

“We represent the will of the Upper Realm. Though the ten-year period has not yet arrived, the profession side-competitions shall first be held in the Five Phoenixes.”

The servant spoke arrogantly. Though his face was hidden, his natural superiority and haughtiness were palpable.

Yet to the surprise of the watching wanderers and experts from other High Martial worlds,

The servant did not press aggressively. He did not question why only Qi Liujia had come to greet the Upper Realm emissaries.

After all, the Upper Realm and the Nihility were as gold to sand.

Even the Great Venerable of the Sixth Evolution Little Thunder Buddha World in Pingyang Heaven had personally come to greet them.

“Where will the profession side-competitions and the subsequent Heavenly Grand Tournament be held?”

The servant, body wreathed in mist, spoke with an ethereal, noble air.

Qi Liuji took a deep breath and cupped his fists.

“Young Master says... the honored extraterrestrial battlefield of the Five Phoenixes shall serve as the venue for both the side-competitions and the main tournament...”

As he spoke, he stepped back and waved a hand.

The clouds below instantly parted, revealing the vast, boundless Bloodstained Battlefield.

At the same time, under Lu Fan’s will, the time formation ceased operation.

Crimson sand rolled, exuding thick blood qi.

The moment the Bloodstained Battlefield was revealed,

The servant was shocked.

Though his face was hidden, Qi Liuja could feel his shock—quickly turning to fury.

“Insolence!”

The servant roared.

Rumble!

The rules of the Nihility itself seemed to stir. This servant’s cultivation was terrifying!

Whoosh whoosh whoosh...

With his shout,

More servants appeared at the prow of the ancient warship, each with aura no weaker than the enraged one.

“The Heavenly Grand Tournament is of utmost importance. Your world’s saint not appearing is one thing, but since you accepted the hosting duty, show some respect!”

“As a High Martial world, do you lack famous mountains or blessed lands? Why choose such a desolate, wretched place as the venue?”

The servant’s voice was cold as a blade, slicing relentlessly.

Qi Liujia felt immense pressure, his face paling slightly.

He knew it...

Young Master’s decision would definitely enrage the Upper Realm emissaries.

Was Young Master planning to tear faces with them before the tournament even began?

Just as Qi Liujia opened his mouth to speak in Lu Fan’s defense,

A light laugh seemed to drift from the ancient warship.

Then a primordial spirit fluctuation transmitted something to the servant.

The mist-shrouded servant bowed and listened.

Then he straightened and cupped his fists.

“Understood.”

He turned back to Qi Liujia.

“The emissaries are magnanimous and understand the Five Phoenixes is a newly ascended High Martial world. They agree to use this desolate extraterrestrial battlefield as the venue.”

“Lead the way.”

The servant said coolly.

Qi Liujia’s prepared defense died in his throat.

These Upper Realm emissaries... were surprisingly reasonable?

Without another word, he turned and flew toward the Bloodstained Battlefield.

Rumble!

The ancient warship shifted sideways, massive as a towering palace.

Heavy. Ancient.

Qi Liuja and the servant flew ahead, the warship following behind.

After a long while, they reached the Bloodstained Battlefield and landed on the cold, blood-soaked ground.

The many wanderers in the Nihility who thought conflict was inevitable were dumbfounded.

No clash occurred.

Not only them—even the spying experts rushing to the Five Phoenixes were stunned.

Most of these experts came from Yuanci Heaven and Xuesha Heaven—realms controlled like Pingyang Heaven.

In their understanding, the Upper Realm was mysterious, noble, and powerful. For the Five Phoenixes to be chosen as host yet pick such a barren land as venue—the Upper Realm emissaries surprisingly did not erupt in anger.

Boom!

The ancient warship descended onto the Bloodstained Battlefield.

It carved a chasm-like furrow through the ground.

The servant also landed on the crimson earth.

Qi Liujia felt slightly embarrassed. The Bloodstained Battlefield... was truly too desolate.

If any other world had been chosen, they would have shown off their most glorious landscapes.

Yet Young Master Lu just tossed the whole tournament into this lifeless wasteland.

The ancient warship was enormous, towering a hundred zhang, its cold hull radiating ancient aura.

Buzz...

A powerful primordial spirit wave surged from the warship.

It instantly swept across the Bloodstained Battlefield.

Boom!

The entire Five Phoenixes seemed to change.

Every cultivator felt crushing oppression—like some terrifying existence was emerging. An overwhelming noble aura forced many to their knees.

The powerful primordial spirit swept past.

The nameless tombstone over the Vast Sea instantly released a terrifying aura.

It shot into the heavens.

An equally powerful fluctuation spread from the ancient tomb.

The two primordial spirit forces clashed silently in the void, whipping up a spiritual energy storm.

The probing spirit from the warship rapidly withdrew.

The ancient tomb fell silent once more.

On Lake Heart Island,

Lu Fan suppressed his own primordial spirit force. He hadn't expected the mysterious "General" in the tomb to act faster.

Lu Fan was happy to let it be. Things were growing more interesting.

On the Bloodstained Battlefield,

The powerful primordial spirit withdrew. Light laughter once again drifted from the ancient warship.

“Some tidying up will do.”

A faint voice rang out.

Servants flew forth, hovering above the battlefield.

In their hands appeared cyan orbs.

The orbs were dropped like rain.

Plink plink plink!

Each orb transformed into a cyan brick. The bricks spread across the Bloodstained Battlefield, forming three massive plazas.

They surrounded the ancient warship.

Boom!

One servant flung out a black stele that smashed into a corner of the three plazas.

Dust fell from the stele, revealing flowing script of different professions:

Alchemist, Array Master, Artifact Forger.

Three plazas—three different profession competition zones.

Qi Liujia watched, dumbfounded.

Then the corner of his mouth twitched...

Even the Upper Realm emissaries couldn't stand it anymore? They personally sent servants to tidy the venue?

Atop White Jade Capital's pavilion,

Lu Fan held his bronze wine cup and chuckled.

Once the servants finished, they returned to the front of the ancient warship.

Qi Liujiu stood awkwardly—there was nothing for him to do.

After a long while,

A servant drifted over.

“The venue is prepared. Over the next three days, participants who passed their world’s preliminaries will arrive.”

“Three days hence, the profession side-competitions begin.”

With that, the servant vanished like teleportation, returning to stand before the ancient warship.

A bronze ancient bell appeared.

The servant struck it hard.

DONG!

The bell's toll echoed as though through all realms.

Warships drifting leisurely through the Nihility suddenly changed expression and accelerated toward the Five Phoenixes.

In Pingyang Heaven,

Saint Lord Qingling leaped aboard a spirit boat, bringing Qingling Small World's alchemist, array master, and artifact forger to the Five Phoenixes.

A fierce bird spread its wings—Saint Lord Tuoba laughed heartily as he set off with his people.

Buddhist light flashed, lotus spun—the Little Thunder Buddha World also departed.

The entire heavens seemed to come alive, bustling with activity.

The once-deathly silent border between the Nihility and Pingyang Heaven now saw countless figures entering the Nihility.

The Nihility, once a quiet ruin, suddenly became the center of attention.

This was the charm of the Heavenly Grand Tournament—even the Nihility, called the ruins of the heavens, became the focus of all realms when chosen as host.

...

Qi Liujia returned to Lake Heart Island.

After the ancient warship representing the Upper Realm settled on the Bloodstained Battlefield, it showed no further activity.

Nor did it probe the Five Phoenixes further.

“The Nihility has its own rules, so the Upper Realm cannot send supreme experts. Whoever is aboard that warship may be strong, but not excessively so.”

Qi Liujia said.

Lu Fan nodded slightly.

“Young Master, shall you not meet them?”

Qi Liujia asked.

Lu Fan shook his head.

“This Young Master has hit a cultivation bottleneck and is in a foul mood. Besides, I may break through any day now—so I will not see them...”

Qi Liujia said no more.

“Take Ni Yu and the others to compete...”

“By the way, how exactly are these profession side-competitions conducted?”

Lu Fan asked curiously.

But Qi Liujia shook his head.

“The profession side-competitions are a major attraction as warm-ups to the main tournament, and the rules change every time. Even I do not know. We must wait for the competition day when the Upper Realm emissaries announce them.”

Lu Fan nodded, leaned back in the Thousand-Bladed Chair, and closed his eyes.

Qi Liujia descended from the pavilion and walked the island.

He gathered Ni Yu, Li Sansui, and A’lu and gave them a serious pep talk.

Though he wasn’t competing himself, Qi Liujia was far more nervous than if he were.

...

The disturbance on the Bloodstained Battlefield naturally drew the attention of the Five Phoenixes’ cultivators.

The cultivation world instantly erupted.

Some went to investigate and discovered countless terrifying experts had appeared outside the Five Phoenixes, their auras making hearts tremble.

But Qi Liujia soon appeared and explained.

When cultivators learned that a competition—alchemists, array masters, and artifact forgers—would be held on the Bloodstained Battlefield, interest surged.

Many cultivators rushed to the battlefield to watch.

Of course, anyone who got too close to the three competition plazas was driven back by the cold gazes of the ancient warship's servants.

The Five Phoenixes cultivators could only watch from afar.

The Great Xuan Divine Dynasty also learned of the news and was shocked.

Now the world knew there were many realms beyond the Five Phoenixes, and for the Five Phoenixes to host such a grand event—excitement filled many hearts.

The new emperor was quite interested.

Protected by Black Tortoise Guards, he ascended the Bloodstained Battlefield and had viewing platforms specially constructed to enjoy the profession side-competitions.

Mo Tianyu arrived with Lü Mudui of Tianji Pavilion. The two chatted and laughed.

Gongshu Yu came with Xie Yunling and several old friends from the Hundred Schools era—how could they miss A’lu and Li Sansui’s competitions?

Three days passed in a blink.

On Lake Heart Island,

Qi Liujia’s face was grave and serious.

He repeatedly instructed Ni Yu, Li Sansui, and A’lu. Though he wasn’t competing, he was far more anxious than if he were.

“Young Master, we’re off!”

Qi Liujia said.

“Go.”

Atop White Jade Capital's pavilion, the white-robed youth remained calm as still water.

Qi Lijia felt a surge of admiration—only Young Master could remain so unflustered.

The next moment, he led the three straight to the Bloodstained Battlefield.

On the Bloodstained Battlefield,

What had been an empty wasteland was now bustling.

Besides Five Phoenixes cultivators who came to watch, the rest were all participating alchemists, array masters, etc.

A sea of people.

The three competition plazas, however, remained empty—no one dared step inside under penalty of death by the Upper Realm emissaries.

Thus, alchemists, array masters, and artifact forgers all waited outside the plazas.

These were the finalists who had passed their worlds' preliminaries—powerful experts whose crisscrossing auras created suffocating tension above the battlefield.

Through the hazy mist array, one could clearly see countless warships, flying palaces, spirit boats, fierce birds...

Experts from myriad worlds watched the Bloodstained Battlefield.

DONG!

A deafening bell toll rang out, as though echoing through all realms.

A servant stood aboard the ancient warship.

“First event: Alchemy Side-Competition, Round One. Total participants: 13,872.”

The servant announced.

Seated alchemists opened their eyes, gazes instantly sharpening.

“The Upper Realm has prepared a sixth-grade pill recipe. Each participant has one attempt. Success advances to Round Two. Failure—elimination and forfeiture of wagered Dao Intent.”

The servant swept his gaze across the crowd.

Breathing instantly grew rapid.

The competition was brutal.

The very first round was a threshold—weed out the unqualified.

“Now... ascend the stage.”

At the servant’s command,

The many alchemists outside the plaza erupted with powerful auras and shot toward the plaza like streaks of light.

“Go.”

Qi Liuja patted Ni Yu's head.

Ni Yu's eyes gleamed. She tightened the black pot on her back.

Took a deep breath.

Then, with small running steps, she trotted toward the plaza, pot bouncing.

It looked rather comical.

The Upper Realm emissary's servant glanced at Ni Yu.

His eyelid twitched.

This little girl... was the Five Phoenixes' alchemist representative?

The Nihility's sole participant?

Were they giving up already?

On the plaza, Ni Yu's cheeks flushed with excitement. She waved at the surrounding alchemists, but everyone ignored her coldly.

The servant scanned the plaza.

Once all 13,872 were in position,

His gaze sharpened.

He raised a fist, robes fluttering.

Then slammed it into the floating ancient bell beside him.

DONG!

"Alchemy Side-Competition, Round One—Begin!"

BOOM!

As the words fell,

Heavy breathing swept the plaza.

Then—dazzling lights erupted.

Alchemists from countless High Martial worlds summoned their personal cauldrons.

Clang clang clang!

The sound of cauldrons hitting the ground echoed endlessly.

Ni Yu jumped in fright.

The little girl pursed her lips, looking left and right.

Finally, she grabbed the black pot from her back and slammed it down, baby-fat cheeks quivering.

Momentum!

Who didn't have momentum?!