

Beyond the Timescape

Chapter 1011: Spiritsound Absorbing Zimei

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A classified report was sent from the Swordsage Court in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture all the way to the Swordsage Palace in Sea-Sealing County! The Swordsage Palace received the report and immediately assigned a powerful expert to Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. The report was also sent to Xu Qing.

“Twenty days ago, a sect by the name of the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture issued an arrest warrant for a disciple named Li Zimei. The entire prefecture was notified that she had been bedeviled and was no longer human. She had killed fellow disciples in the most brutal manner. She fled, and the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society pursued her for ten days. Of the dozens of teams the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society sent after her, more than half were wiped out.

“During the process, she encountered Swordsage Qing Qiu from the Swordsage Court in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. For some unknown reason, the two of them started fighting, and then ended up disappearing into the Spiritsound forbidden ground.”

The Sageheaven Pagoda that Seven Blood Eyes had mobilized to create was able to cross the Forbidden Sea in only a day. Upon arriving in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture, Xu Qing was seated cross-legged in the pagoda when he received the classified report from the Swordsage Palace.

“Qing Qiu...” he murmured.

As he pulled his divine will out of the jade slip, he thought back to the scavenger basecamp, and the little girl that had later come to be a fellow swordsage. He would never be able to forget her strong determination.

The other name also struck a chord in him. She was someone he had come to know in Seven Blood Eyes, and she was similar to Qing Qiu in some ways. Though she had a timid personality, her sense of pride was sky-high. Later, she ended up being taken into the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society. The last time Xu Qing remembered seeing her was on the Everlasting Immortal Profundity River. Back then, Li Zimei had left him a letter explaining that she was going to accept a legacy. Xu Qing eventually moved on to Sea-Sealing County, and the two of them lost touch.

Never could he have imagined that the next time he heard about either of them, it would be in a situation like this.

“Spiritsound forbidden ground....” Xu Qing looked down at Ling’er sleeping and mulled the matter over.

“Have something to take care of?” asked Grandpa Ninth, who was standing off to the side.

Xu Qing turned to look at him. “I received a classified report from the Swordsage Palace. Two old friends of mine went missing in the Spiritsound forbidden ground.”

Grandpa Ninth looked at Ling’er. Before he could say anything, Erniu interjected, “Spiritsound? That craphole of a forbidden ground? Raze it to the ground, I say! Who went missing there?”

“Qing Qiu,” Xu Qing replied calmly.

Erniu thought about it for a moment, and then smiled enigmatically. “Qing Qiu? The same one who tried to steal our loot on the Nethersprite heist, and then later became a swordsage? The same chick who went to the Holytide Region with us? Right, I remember. She loved that scythe of hers. It had a spirit automaton, right? And I remember she had some kind of blood will domain. That girl was a real freak of nature! Who’s the other one?”

“Li Zimei,” Xu Qing replied.

“Li Zimei? Who? That’s not ringing a bell.” Erniu scoured his memories but couldn’t recall who Li Zimei was. After all, whether it was her time in Seven Blood Eyes or the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society, he had never had any dealings with her.

Meanwhile, Grandpa Ninth looked away from the sleeping Ling’er. “Dealing with one forbidden ground shouldn’t waste too much time. Go if you want.”

Xu Qing nodded, then sent the Sageheaven Pagoda flying over the Eight Sect Coalition and toward the mountain range beyond it. The mountain range was made of undulating black mountains, some of which were very tall, some of which weren’t. They seemed to stretch on endlessly into the depths of Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. Altogether, they resembled the corpse of some massive beast, dark and hazy as if filled with sinister evil. The place overflowed with vile trees and grues.

These were the Emperor-Receiving Prefecture’s Supreme Arbiter Salvation Mountains! In the spot where the mountains approached the sea, the Eight Sect Coalition had made their headquarters. At the other end of the mountains in the Emperor-Receiving Prefecture was the notorious Three-Spirits Dao-Suppressing Mountain.

After Xu Qing’s pagoda sped into the airspace over the Supreme Arbiter Salvation Mountains, it slowed to a halt.

In the direction of the Three-Spirits Dao-Suppressing Mountain, two figures appeared, one short and one tall. Both were looking in the direction of the pagoda.

The tall one was incredibly skinny, almost to the point of looking skeletal. The only thing about him that wasn’t incredibly bony was his back, which was hunched and looked almost like a small mountain. That ‘mountain’ was actually some sort of cancerous growth, covered with horrid, greenish-red veins. It almost looked like that growth had absorbed all of the other flesh and blood on his body.

The person next to him was actually a dwarf.

The dwarf wore a black robe and had tiny, beady eyes along with a bulging forehead. He had two very long eyebrows that drooped down to his cheeks. He had a recessed chin, and a mustache shaped roughly like the character 八, with the ends curled up so they resembled tusks. He was surrounded by a black cloud that looked like it was formed from countless shrieking centipedes.

Obviously, the arrival of the Sageheaven Pagoda, and the pressure it emanated, had shaken these two individuals to the core.

Xu Qing emerged from the pagoda and looked at them. The two enormous figures breathed sighs of relief. Eyes shining, they ducked their heads down and bowed at the waist to Xu Qing.

They were none other than the heavenly soul Sporelight and the earthly soul Sunslaughter! Years ago, Xu Qing had relied on their help to deal with Forbidden by the Zombie, in exchange for a promise to help them break free from the shackles of the Ghost Emperor, and thus earn freedom.[1]

“I don’t break my promises,” Xu Qing said in a low voice. “Once I reach Smoldering God, I’ll live up to my word.”

When Sporelight and Sunslaughter heard that, it was very thought-provoking to them. Although they hadn’t personally witnessed Xu Qing’s rise to prominence, they had been there for two important events along the way.

The first was when the two thieves Xu Qing and Erniu broke in and stole Nethersprite’s clothes. Back then, any one of the three souls had a cultivation base so powerful they could have killed the two with the wave of a hand.

The second was when Xu Qing and Erniu came with Qingqin and asked the heavenly soul and earthly soul for help. At that time, Xu Qing was already showing he had the potential to rise to prominence. Therefore, Sporelight decided to casually place a game piece into play. As far as Sporelight was concerned, that random game piece wasn’t really very important. And he wasn’t very certain that anything would come from making that move.

Neither of them could have guessed that Xu Qing would perform so dramatically, that he would go to Sea-Sealing, and Moonrite, and Holytide, and even the imperial capital.... In fact, he was now a region lord of two regions, plus the tutor to the crown prince, the Grand Darkheaven of the Firemoons, and a person whose name had shaken the entire east of Revered Ancient. And he had single-handedly brought down an entire holy land.

Combined, that surpassed anything they could have imagined. Xu Qing had reached the point where they had to struggle just to lift their heads high enough to see him. Today... was their third encounter.

Keeping their heads down, they bowed respectfully. That casually placed game piece had really turned into good fortune.

Xu Qing looked at the two souls but said nothing further. He went back into the pagoda, which shone with bright light that drove away the darkness of the Supreme Arbiter Salvation Mountains. Surrounded by brightness, the pagoda shot off into the distance.

Sometime later, Sporelight and Sunslaughter looked up, their hearts pounding.

“In all the history of Revered Ancient,” Sporelight murmured, “how many chosen have there been who could surpass him?”

Heaven and earth grew dim as evening fell. As the afterglow of sunset began to fade, Xu Qing spotted a great river ahead of the Sageheaven Pagoda.

Emperor-Receiving Prefecture had a famous mountain range and a famous river. The mountain range was the Supreme Arbiter Salvation Mountains. The river was the Everlasting Immortal Profundity River.

The majestic, ancient river was as wide as a sea, and its waters rushed turbulently, creating a constant crashing sound as the waves frothed. The immortal energy was strong.

It entered the prefecture from the outside, passing through the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society in the east of Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. It passed through the Supreme Arbiter Salvation Mountains, ultimately entering the Spiritsound forbidden ground, before eventually reaching the sea in the distant west. At the spot where the river and the mountains intersected, the Sageheaven Pagoda shot through the air, following the river... to the Spiritsound forbidden ground.

Spiritsound split the Everlasting Immortal Profundity River into two parts.

Before reaching the forbidden ground, the water rushed along filled with life and immortal energy, which helped countless living beings to cleanse themselves of mutagen. But after it entered the forbidden ground, the life in the water vanished, and it turned black and murky. The mutagen of the forbidden ground invaded it. Infected it.

However, there is karma in all things, and counterparts in everything. For years on end, water full of immortal energy had poured into the forbidden ground. Though that water ended up polluted, the reason was that it was taking mutagen out of the forbidden ground. And the result was that, despite how much time had passed, the Spiritsound forbidden ground hadn't expanded its borders.

Though it was officially a forbidden ground, it wasn't close to being on the same level as Forbidden by the Zombie. Nor could it compare to the forbidden ground in South Phoenix.

The lord of this forbidden ground, who was sometimes referred to as Emperor Spiritsound, and sometimes as Lord Spiritsound, occasionally awoke. But when that happened, the combined forces of Emperor-Receiving Prefecture would work together to create a sealing mark to contain him. After all, if the emperor of a forbidden ground ended up dying, as long as the forbidden ground itself remained, a new emperor would eventually arise. And as far as Emperor-Receiving Prefecture was concerned, it made a lot more sense to just keep dealing with an entity they knew, rather than have to handle an unfamiliar entity. Thus, the two parties had existed for a long time without very much friction.

But today, catastrophe loomed over the Spiritsound forbidden ground. As the haze of evening spread out in heaven and earth, a nine-floor pagoda shining with seven-colored light appeared. It pulsed with a chaotic, primeval aura, and emanated terrifying pressure as it came to hover above the forbidden ground.

As soon as it arrived, Xu Qing stepped out of the pagoda and hovered in the air.

The afterglow of sunset would make it hard to see most things, but it didn't obscure Xu Qing at all. He stood tall and straight, his eyes glittering profoundly.

"The lord of this forbidden ground will come out immediately to see me."

In response to his words, countless sounds erupted from the forbidden ground.... They included the sound of the wind, the sound of rustling leaves, the sound of water dripping, and the sound of swamp lands stirring.... Countless sounds, including those of innumerable living beings and everything else that existed in the forbidden ground, erupted uncontrollably. Every single one of those sounds existed within Xu Qing's authority of sound. Every movement was within his god perception.

As of this moment, all of those sounds didn't belong to the forbidden ground. They belonged to Xu Qing! As they converged, they became part of the words he had spoken, causing heaven to shake and the earth to quake.

When facing the authority of sound, this forbidden ground had no choice but to acknowledge allegiance.

Countless images and perceptions appeared to Xu Qing. He saw everything, including... Li Zimei in the depths of the forbidden ground. She was trapped inside of a gruish tree. Her long hair was draped around her, and her eyes were closed, but her expression was fierce, and she pulsed with a baleful aura. Her aura was very gruish, and seemed to be on the verge of fusing with the forbidden ground around her.

It was at that exact same moment that the entire forbidden ground came to be under Xu Qing's control....

The only part of Li Zimei that was visible was her head. Suddenly, her eyes opened, and they shone with a fiendish, bloody glow. In the past, her face had been delicate and pretty. But now it was ferocious, covered with black veins that formed the image of a ghost face.

The sight of it caused Xu Qing to sigh inwardly. He suddenly thought back to the letter Li Zimei had left for him when they parted ways last.

The past was now vividly in mind.

"Elder Brother Xu Qing, I've been doing well in the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society...."

“I’m going to participate in one of the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society’s ceremonies of enlightenment.... If I succeed, it’s possible that my personality will change.... I’ve never liked my personality anyway. Sometimes I’m too weak....

“I don’t know if I’ll succeed, and if I do, I have no idea how I’ll transform....

“Finally, Elder Brother, I want to offer you my sincere well wishes. I hope you do really well in life. Forever. Always.

“Li Zimei.”

1. The part in which Sporelight and Sunslaughter helped Xu Qing with Forbidden by the Zombie started in the second part of chapter 500. ❹

Chapter 1012: Purifying a Forbidden Ground

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Thoughts of former days filled Xu Qing’s mind, until the images blurred together like spilled ink.

The ink covered everything, eventually turning into the tree with Li Zimei’s distorted face on it. It was very clear. Thus, the fiendish will was incredibly prominent.

The scene in front of him, plus that letter from Li Zimei, caused a cold light to appear in Xu Qing’s eyes as he turned to look in the direction of the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society. He could see what was going on. Because Li Zimei had begun cultivating a special technique, her soul had developed problems.

Some sort of baleful energy had invaded it, inflicting severe damage. That invasion hadn’t happened overnight. In all likelihood, it began with that ceremony of enlightenment she had mentioned.

Because of the pain inflicted during that invasion, Li Zimei’s personality had become distorted, and her mind had changed. She had once been weak, but the pain she had gone through turned her into an increasingly insane killer. Eventually, Li Zimei’s soul was completely fractured to the point where it didn’t even exist. Perhaps that meant that the ceremony had succeeded. When she returned, she wasn’t Li Zimei anymore. Instead, she was a freakish and monstrous killer.

Yet, clearly, something unexpected happened that caused Li Zimei to flee, leading her into a state of conflict with the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society.

Presumably that’s why the classified report mentioned the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society saying she was bedeviled.

The coldness in Xu Qing’s eyes deepened. He could see now that the supposed fiendish will was actually a soul! And it was a very ancient and cruel soul.

The supposed ‘invasion’ was actually a remodeling. A possession. Li Zimei had been changed into an embryonic form to be taken over by that ancient soul. And that was why Li Zimei was stuck in a huge tree in the very middle of the Spiritsound forbidden ground.... It was because her transformed, embryonic state was perfectly suitable to be used by the lord of this forbidden ground.

Parasitizing this body would be the perfect way to get out of the forbidden ground... Xu Qing thought.

As for whether or not this was a coincidence... Xu Qing didn’t bother trying to figure it out. The Swordsage Court in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture would have plenty of time to run an investigation later.

Qing Qiu was also stuck in the same tree. She was completely surrounded by the tree, and the blood-red light she emitted had become nutrients that Lord Spiritsound was using as part of the parasitization process.

All of this was actually a natural rule that governed the cultivation of all living things. The weak were the prey of the strong.

Floating Fiend had followed that rule, as did the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society. And it was the same with Lord Spiritsound.

Regardless of what fate had in store for the weak, they would experience similar things.

Given Xu Qing’s current level of strength, he couldn’t do anything to change the natural rules that governed the cultivation of all living things. But what he could do was prevent things like that from happening to the people close to him.

Therefore, he started walking into the depths of the Spiritsound forbidden ground. Every step he took caused the forbidden ground to tremble. The mutagen here could invade countless creatures, but it couldn’t affect Xu Qing at all. That was because Xu Qing also emanated the aura of a god, which meant he had his own personal mutagen. And it spread around him in all directions.

The two types of mutagen clashed invisibly, causing the forbidden ground to lurch about. Trees swayed and mountains rumbled. The sound quickly grew louder.

As the sound spread out, Xu Qing took control of it. It became part of his god perception. It became a tool that he sent speeding from all parts of the forbidden ground toward the tree in the middle. It was a deadly sound, like a shocking tempest. Previously intangible sound waves suddenly took shape, bearing down on the huge tree with mountain-toppling, sea-draining force.

Li Zimei’s head suddenly tilted up, and with a twisted facial expression, she opened her mouth and unleashed the most piercing scream imaginable. It was a sharp sound that could flay metal and shatter rock. Heaven and earth trembled, and everything in the area shook.

The sound in the forbidden ground that Xu Qing had taken control of immediately showed signs of breaking away from him.

This was the Spiritsound forbidden ground, and to some extent, that very name, Spiritsound, represented the power of the lord of this place. Although it wasn't on the level of a god, as the lord of a forbidden ground, he had an amazing status, and obviously had the strength to fight back violently. As the piercing cry spread out, it shook Xu Qing's control, and also bore down on him with deadly force.

Xu Qing's expression remained the same as before as he lifted his right hand and slowly closed his fingers into a fist. It was as if he were crushing the void, and taking away everything there. In an instant, his shaken sound authority became as majestic as a mountain. Not even winds from heaven could shake it.

There was more than that. The scream from Li Zimei's mouth, which had become raw killing intent, was also crushed by Xu Qing.

It was sound seizing! Heaven and earth went quiet!

Next, Xu Qing extended his hand and waved it at the forbidden ground. In an instant, the power of sound authority was fully unleashed.

Countless sounds shattered the silence. It was like the sunrise breaking the dark of night. The entire Spiritsound forbidden ground exploded with sound.

The sound of rushing water from shattered rivers. The sound of leaves falling from exploded evil trees. The sound of howling animals throughout the forbidden ground. Everything became a deadly attack. Rumbling rose high into the heavens. Innumerable trees shattered. Countless mutant beasts screamed as they died.

From high above, it was possible to see the power of the destruction, starting from the borders of the forbidden ground. It spread ferociously, like a huge hand covering everything. As it shot toward the huge tree in the center, nothing could block it. Everything in its path was crushed.

Then it slammed into the tree itself! The tree vibrated. And then, unable to stand up to the force, it collapsed into pieces!

Wood shavings and dust billowed out as Li Zimei and Qing Qiu were revealed. However, they did not fall down as the tree collapsed. Instead, they floated there in midair in a very gruish manner. It was almost as if some mysterious power were controlling them.

Behind the two women, amidst the haze of dust, emerged a three-inch-tall wooden marionette. The marionette was in bad shape, and hanging from his neck was a broken flute. One of his eyes was missing, while the other eye was wide with confusion. From the look of it, his mind was in a state of complete chaos. And yet, he pulsed with clear fluctuations of godliness.

The moment the marionette appeared, the devastated forbidden ground once again surged with life force. The mangled mutant beasts and grues all involuntarily prostrated to the marionette.

And yet, the marionette wasn't paying attention to the forbidden ground. He was completely focused on Xu Qing. Then, the chaos in his eye rippled, as if he was struggling to force himself into a state of lucidity.

“Leave!” he shouted.

Xu Qing ignored him and kept walking forward.

Upon seeing that, the marionette’s eye became more chaotic and insane. Taking control of Li Zimei, he sent her flying toward Xu Qing.

Powerful killing intent surged out of Li Zimei as she closed in. A freezing wind sprang up in the area, altering perceptions and distorting any line of sight. It was a will domain of killing.

Qing Qiu’s eyes opened, and they were blank with confusion, as if she had just woken from a deep sleep. A blood-colored light suddenly erupted from her, turning everything around her into a hell of blood. Gruish laughter erupted from her mouth.

“Heh heh heh.” That laughter contained a horrifying will. As it echoed out, Qing Qiu’s blank eyes turned to look at Xu Qing. “You... seem really familiar....”

Even as she spoke, the blood from the mutant beasts that had died in the area swirled toward her.

Xu Qing looked closely at Qing Qiu. He was well aware that the strange phenomenon manifesting with Li Zimei and Qing Qiu was called a will domain.

Li Zimei’s will domain focused on slaughter.

And Qing Qiu used the Supreme Arbiter Blood Will Domain! Years ago, his Eldest Brother had explained that the latter was a taboo secret magic from the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society. Even achieving minor success with it was very difficult. Supposedly, someone who succeeded in gaining enlightenment of the Blood Will Domain would develop two or more personalities! Each personality would result in one’s view of the world losing some of its color. After reaching ten personalities, the only thing left would be the color of blood, which was considered the level of ultimate success! However, throughout the history of the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society, no one had ever reached the level of ten personalities. All of them died violently before reaching that point. [1]

Back in the era of Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity, the Sword Division studied will domains, all in the hopes of identifying ways of subjugating gods.... But in the end, such efforts failed.

Xu Qing also thought back to the cultivation advice the Heir Apparent had given him years ago in the Moonrite Region.[2]

As Li Zimei and Qing Qiu attacked him, Xu Qing didn’t pause for a moment. He kept walking forward, all while gathering essence power in his right eye, causing a dao lineament to appear! The arrival of that lineament caused the cosmos to shiver. It was the authority of erasure!

Using the authority in that eye, Xu Qing looked again at Li Zimei and Qing Qiu. Immediately, the countless threads connecting them to the marionette were visible to him. And if he could see them, he could erase them.

Xu Qing closed his right eye, and that motion was like an act of cutting. Instantly, Li Zimei and Qing Qiu lurched to a halt and stood in place, trembling.

There were no more invisible threads connected to them. Xu Qing's act of closing his eye had severed all of them. The two women opened their eyes, only to close them again and fall to the ground, where they lay unmoving. The will domains they had summoned quickly dissipated.

At the same time, a miserable shriek rang out from the mouth of the marionette whose strings had been severed. The marionette shivered, and then shot toward Xu Qing, bursting with madness and hatred. He shrieked, and it turned into a semi-transparent spear of sound waves that sped viciously toward Xu Qing's heart!

Xu Qing didn't do anything to evade the spear. When it touched him, it was as if it had slammed into an immovable mountain. The spear shattered. It was destroyed in an instant.

The backlash affected the marionette. And thus, Lord Spiritsound was sent tumbling backward, cracks spreading out over him. Then the instinctive fear of death that all living things took over. Despite the chaos in his mind, the marionette turned and fled at top speed.

He was too slow.

Xu Qing took a step forward, and a great sun took shape in his sea of consciousness. Outside of him, brilliant light and endless heat erupted as he became a magnificent sun. And he rose over the Spiritsound forbidden ground!

At the moment, evening was giving way to the darkness of night. But all of a sudden... night reversed, and the dome of heaven grew bright! The pitch black forbidden ground was inundated with beams of light, causing the mutagen-filled river to suddenly seem clear and distinct.

All living things were being purified!

1. The Supreme Arbiter Blood Will Domain was explained in [chapter 336](#). Incidentally, when I originally translated that chapter, I misinterpreted how the technique works. I originally mistakenly said that the color of the user's eyes changed, when in reality the true meaning was that their view of the world changed color. I've since gone back to change that so it conforms with the correct interpretation, which is the same explanation reiterated here in 1012. ❷

2. The Heir Apparent talked to Xu Qing about will domains in [chapter 660](#). Li Zimei and Qing Qiu were mentioned in that chapter as well. ❸

Chapter 1013: A New Ruler in Spiritsound

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The sun rose into the sky, lighting up the night, illuminating the Spiritsound forbidden ground, filling everything with brightness and heat. Though it was not the same as a real sun, and could not nourish all living beings in Revered Ancient, as far as this forbidden ground was concerned, the rising sun that was Xu Qing was more than enough to suppress everything that was within his gaze.

Within that gaze was the forbidden ground, which was currently rumbling loudly. And the river water within it was seething violently. Overhead, the dome of heaven rippled and distorted, all while the ground underfoot blurred dramatically.

The moment the sun rose, Xu Qing was the lord of this place. The mutagen native to the Spiritsound forbidden ground tried to struggle. Fluctuations rolled out, and endless howls filled the air, including those from the marionette with the broken flute.

The marionette tumbled backward, eyes full of madness, shrieking and howling in defiance. He wanted to fight back, but the light from the immense sun made that completely impossible. At that critical moment, he put the broken flute to his mouth and blew, causing an ear-piercing sound to pierce through the air. That was his attempt to fight Xu Qing.

It was somewhat effective in dimming the light of the sun. However, it only lasted for an instant before everything went back to normal. And all that was left behind was despair. The marionette's mind was muddled, but right now, he gained a moment of clarity, and his face became a mask of bitterness. He knew that his success came from this forbidden ground, but he also knew that this forbidden ground had limited his growth.

As the marionette wallowed in bitterness, the flute music shattered. The flute trembled, and several horrifying cracks spread out through it. Loud cracking sounds rang out from the marionette as a network of cracks spread out over him as well.

Immortal light flowed out, shining on everything from the sun that was Xu Qing. Then, most of the marionette crumbled into fragments, while the portion that remained was smashed out of the air by the pressure. A boom rang out as he landed right on the spot where the enormous tree had stood. He struggled mightily, but it was to no avail, as if a gigantic invisible mountain was on top of it. He couldn't even rise to his feet.

The mutagen in the forbidden ground was suppressed along with the marionette. The river went still and all living things prostrated.

Only Xu Qing was still in motion, striding over the horizon until he was right above the marionette. He looked down at him.

The marionette could barely look up. When he opened his mouth, nothing came out except the rough swoosh of wood shavings scraping against each other. Then the clarity in his eyes faded away, replaced again with chaos and madness as he glared at Xu Qing.

Voice calm, Xu Qing explained the truths he had come to realize. "When you realized that you couldn't rely on the forbidden ground to grow stronger, and that you would be forced to wait for the gaze of the broken face, you got impatient. You decided that you might as well take a risk and try to free yourself from the restrictions of the forbidden ground.

"Thus, you possessed Li Zimei. At the same time, you paid a steep price. The process caused your mind to flee, resulting in your devolution into chaos."

The marionette responded by struggling to free himself.

Xu Qing shook his head and looked over to the unconscious Li Zimei and Qing Qiu.

Qing Qiu seemed to be doing well. Xu Qing had arrived with time to spare to help her. Though she had lost some life force, her foundation had not collapsed, and she could be saved.

But Li Zimei... was struggling to breathe. Her soul had suffered immense damage, and looked like it was about to rot away completely. Plus, Lord Spiritsound had halfway succeeded in possessing her.... That possession was a tribulation, but at the same time, had kept her alive. If Lord Spiritsound died, then the half that had been possessed would disappear, and Li Zimei's spiritual souls would leave, and her physical souls would dissipate.

If this situation had occurred before Xu Qing faced Floating Fiend, then he wouldn't have been able to reverse things. Without help from Empress Summer Departure or his Master, he would have been forced to just watch Li Zimei die, unable to change her fate.

But right now, he *did* have a way to change things.

The dao lineament of the authority of erasure in Xu Qing's right eye glittered. At the same time, he waved his right hand and pulled a needle out of nowhere. It glittered with frigid light. That needle looked completely ordinary in nature. But the moment it appeared, a host of projections appeared around it.

That needle came from Floating Fiend's son. In the Vivifiend holy land, it had been a legacy treasure handed down by a peak Grand Emperor. And it had the power to stitch karma. It could be used on its own, although the results would be crude. However, when it was combined with the authority of erasure, the results could be considered perfect.

Because of the authority of erasure, Xu Qing's view of the world was completely different from that of an ordinary person. He could see the numerous threads of karma. Earlier, he had severed the threads connecting Li Zimei to the marionette. However, that was a temporary thing. Those threads hadn't ceased to exist. And now, they were already forming anew. If they were permanently and completely severed, then given Li Zimei's weakened state, she would die immediately.

Therefore, before preparing to sever Li Zimei's karma, he needed to connect her karma to something else that would keep her alive. And the best karma available was right in front of him. Xu Qing's gaze took in the forbidden ground around him.

After some thought, he waved his hand, and the needle glittered as it shot toward Li Zimei, then began whizzing about her as the stitching began. It was taking the karma between Li Zimei and the forbidden ground and stitching it tight.

At the same time, Xu Qing called out a pair of rusty shears, which appeared above the marionette's head. Then, Xu Qing used his authority of erasure to control it, causing it to snap closed loudly.

A loud snipping sound rang out. The karma between the forbidden ground and the marionette was thus severed. The marionette spasmed and released a howl of anguish.

However, given the level of Xu Qing's cultivation base, that severing couldn't be absolute. It was only temporary. The severed threads immediately tried to start connecting again. Thankfully, the needle was already stitching the karma threads together between Li Zimei and the forbidden ground. As the needle sped around, it caused a host of afterimages to build up.

The process repeated several times over. He continued to sever karma threads with the shears, while simultaneously stitching Li Zimei and the forbidden ground together with karma threads. Eventually, they were inextricably linked, at which point, the marionette's karma had been permanently and completely severed!

The marionette shivered from head to toe as more cracks spread out over him. Black blood sprayed out of his mouth, and he fell unconscious. The broken flute hanging from his neck faded into nothing.

Meanwhile, Li Zimei's aura skyrocketed as she became one with the forbidden ground. The extreme damage to her soul also began to heal.

Branches snaked out, spreading in all directions, and surrounding Li Zimei, converging to form an enormous tree. Li Zimei was sucked into the tree until only her face was visible. However, this time, her face wasn't twisted and distorted. It was tranquil.

In the spot where her chest was, there appeared a broken flute. That was the symbol of rulership over the Spiritsound forbidden ground.

At a glance, Xu Qing could tell that though Li Zimei was currently asleep, once she woke up, she would become... the new ruler of Spiritsound. She would be Lady Spiritsound.

"Li Zimei, I hope you do really well in life. Forever. Always."

He was returning the same well wishes to Li Zimei that she had given to him years ago.

When the words reached Li Zimei's ears, she shivered slightly despite being asleep. Then her eyelashes fluttered, and though she couldn't open her eyes, tears leaked down her cheeks and onto the ground. Perhaps when she woke up, the spot where the tears had landed would be full of little flowers that would preserve the memories of this moment forever.

Xu Qing left. He took the sleeping marionette with him to give as a gift to Emperor Ancient Spirit.

With the wave of his hand, Xu Qing pulled Qing Qiu floating up into the air. Along with her, he flew up to the Sageheaven Pagoda floating above.

Once inside, he turned and looked off into the distance. Dozens of figures were approaching from over the horizon.

They included the grand elder from Emperor-Receiving Prefecture's Swordsage Court, representatives from Sea-Sealing County, as well as top experts from the Church of Departure and the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society. Even just seeing the Sageheaven Pagoda from a distance provoked reactions of shock from them. Then they spotted Xu Qing. The Swordsage Palace grand elder immediately bowed formally.

"Well met, Your Excellency!"

The people sent from Sea-Sealing County to help out didn't include anyone Xu Qing recognized. They were nonhuman cultivators who had been recruited recently. Though none of them had ever

seen Xu Qing in person, all of them had seen images of him. The moment they laid eyes on him, they reeled in astonishment, and immediately bowed.

The experts from the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society and Church of Departure also offered greetings. The representatives from the former were visibly nervous, while the latter seemed concerned.

Among the people from the Church of Departure was someone Xu Qing had seen before. He was Qing Qiu's older brother. Because he was in the Junior generation, he was located in the back of the group. The mere sight of Xu Qing left him shaken to the core. After all, he had heard a lot about Xu Qing from his little sister, and how she had once called him Big Bro Kid. Of course, he knew all about who Xu Qing was, and how important he was. He had heard the stories, which were already becoming legends. But to see him in person now was a totally different matter. He just couldn't stop thinking about that dirty kid he'd seen so many years ago in the scavenger basecamp. It was impossible to predict what would happen with the passage of time. Back then, he'd hardly spared a passing glance for Xu Qing. But now, didn't hesitate to incline his head and bow at the waist.[1]

Shortly after, Xu Qing went back into the pagoda.

The people from the Church of Departure took Qing Qiu with them, saying that they had a secret magic that would speed up her recovery. They also respectfully told Xu Qing that though the teachings of their Church of Departure had previously been closely related to the holy lands, a new way of thinking had taken hold, and thus, going forward they would steadfastly side with Revered Ancient. As for Qing Qiu, she would become a holy daughter of the Church of Departure in the east of Revered Ancient, and would receive the legacy of their Arbiter of Destiny.

Xu Qing decided to let the Swordsage Palace deal with the problems with the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society. They would be put on trial, and if it turned out that they had colluded with Lord Spiritsound to set him free, then they would be severely punished.

In formal and respectful fashion, everyone waited as the pagoda glittered with seven-colored light and disappeared over the horizon. Then they went their separate ways, all of them thinking different things.

Night returned to the dome of heaven.

The Spiritsound forbidden ground filled with mutagen once more, and barely discernible flute music drifted out from the huge tree in the middle of it.

Two days later, the clouds parted as the Sageheaven Pagoda appeared in the sky above an area filled with massive trees. It was the ancestral land of the Wood Spirits in Sea-Sealing County.

The moment the pagoda appeared, terrifying pressure radiated down. The Wood Spirits' chief, grand elder, and other powerful experts rose up into the air suspiciously. Then Xu Qing emerged from the pagoda. After him came Grandpa Ninth and Erniu.

When the Wood Spirits' chief and grand elder saw it was Xu Qing, they breathed sighs of relief and bowed in greeting. After a brief reunion, Xu Qing explained his reason for coming.

When Xu Qing requested access to the subterranean tunnel leading to Emperor Ancient Spirit, the Wood Spirits immediately parted to make a path for him. Soon, Xu Qing and the others were walking down the dark passageway.

Once inside the cool, damp cave, Grandpa Ninth expressionlessly stepped forward. Xu Qing followed him. Erniu kept pace curiously. It was his first time here. Together, the three of them jumped over the edge and shot down.

An aura of death rose from below, cold and sinister. It was accompanied by mysterious cries that one would expect to hear in the Yellow Springs. They were constantly hit with a force of expulsion.

To the three of them, though, none of those things were worth mentioning. All of them exuded pressure that destroyed the aura of death, suppressed the howls, and shattered the force of expulsion.

The bottom grew nearer and nearer.

"What a lovely place, little Ah Qing!" Erniu said, his eyes shining as they sped along. He licked his lips. "However, in terms of karma, this place exists outside of the influence of the heavenly daos. It's not part of reincarnation. The only thing here is death.... This place has nothing going for it except that it's the perfect hiding spot! Also... I can smell the aroma of treasure!"

Erniu was going to keep talking, but then they reached the bottom. Upon piercing through it, they entered a world of illusions. There was mist everywhere, making it difficult to see very far.

Of course, Xu Qing was a very different person compared to the last time he was in this place. When he sent his god perception out, he was easily able to identify the path he had walked in the past, as well as the enormous snake.[2]

Erniu just kept smacking his lips in excitement.

Grandpa Ninth looked cold and apathetic, and didn't say a word.

After an incense stick's worth of time passed, Xu Qing's god perception picked up something unusual.

"Hmm?" He stopped moving and turned to look in that direction. He had just noticed a very faint trace of something that glittered briefly. It was something ancient, hidden, and full of malevolence.

"Nothing worth worrying about," Grandpa Ninth said coolly.

Erniu also looked in that direction, then licked his lips dramatically.

Xu Qing looked away and kept going forward.

Shortly after, they reached their goal. It was a gargantuan, decomposing snake that pulsed with a strong aura of death. Resting atop the head of that dead snake was a major world, blurry and filled with anguished howls that filled Xu Qing's god perception. His eyes flashed as he vanished. When he reappeared, he, Erniu, and Grandpa Ninth were above the world that existed atop the snake's head.

"This is the place!" he said, leading the way inside.

Eventually, a heaven-rending, earth-crushing rumbling sound echoed out as they broke through the world barrier.

The aura was familiar. The sky had no sun or moon, only ghostly stars that cast dim light. The ground was made of decomposing flesh. There were no mountains or trees, only endless death.

This was the Ancient Spirit world!

The moment the three of them arrived, a huge eye opened above an imperial palace made of flesh.

"Dammit! What are you doing here again??"

1. We originally met Qing Qiu's brother in [chapter 29](#). [📖]

2. Xu Qing first went to this world in [chapter 468](#). He went back in [chapter 535](#) and also [chapter 693](#). [📖]

Chapter 1014: A Fair Trade

Chapter 1014: A Fair Trade

"The Ancient Spirits," Grandpa Ninth said calmly, looking around at the world of death with its dusky dome of heaven. "Before the time of Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity, this species conquered Revered Ancient! As a people, they were known for being skilled at warfare. They are born as snakes, but can take human form later, whereupon they live life accompanied by dragons and snakes. Ultimately, they can master the Ancient Spirit Battle Body. Back when they ruled Revered Ancient, they dominated all other species, forcing them to bow their heads. At that time, humans were weak and fragmented."

As Grandpa Ninth strode forward, his footfalls caused the dome of heaven to tremble, and sent rumbling sounds through the lands. Countless deceased souls fled, and the zombies in the mire trembled. Grandpa Ninth surged with energy as he moved forward, and it contained something that didn't belong to Revered Ancient, just barely discernible. And it seemed to be calling out to something from the outside world.

Xu Qing and Erniu followed him.

Erniu glanced around curiously, and would occasionally squat down and scoop up some soil, or reach out to grab a deceased soul. His eyes shone more and more brightly with every moment that passed. He was obviously very interested in this place.

Meanwhile, Xu Qing had an attentive look on his face as he paid close attention to Grandpa Ninth. Although he was somewhat familiar with the Ancient Spirit people, he also knew that considering Grandpa Ninth had lived before the time of Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity, he obviously had a much better understanding of historical matters like this.

What was most interesting was that strange aura from Grandpa Ninth that didn't seem to conform to Revered Ancient. In the past, Xu Qing wouldn't have had any idea what to make of it. But considering that his right eye contained the authority of erasure, he was now able to see karma. Because of that, he could tell that this aura coming off Grandpa Ninth was karma from beyond the heavens.

Eldest Brother once said that Senior Li Zihua was on the way back here.... Considering that, I bet Grandpa Ninth's aura is guiding him here.

Meanwhile, Grandpa Ninth continued speaking. "Although the Ancient Spirits were strong, their period of rule was like a flash in the pan. It was only a short time after reaching the highest of heights that their emperor went crazy. He converged the power of his species, and their destiny aura, to conspire against the heavenly daos.

"He tried to possess the heavenly daos. To combine them all into one body and make himself the most powerful, and only, heavenly dao in Revered Ancient.

"Had he succeeded, then his will would have been the will of Revered Ancient. His dao would have been the dao of Revered Ancient. He would also have surpassed the founders of Revered Ancient, those who originally created the heavenly daos. The Summer Immortals. And then, the fate of Revered Ancient would have been centered on one single person.

"The Ancient Spirits would have ruled Revered Ancient forever, and would have suppressed all other species for all eternity. And the emperor would have been able to break through that bottleneck of the Summer Immortal and walk his own path of immortals."

There was a gleam of admiration in Grandpa Ninth's eyes, although it wasn't because he looked up to Emperor Ancient Spirit personally, but rather, because he appreciated the ambitions and choices of a powerful expert.

"Someone like that—" Grandpa Ninth suddenly stopped in place and looked out into the void, his eyes flashing with the desire to do battle. Lifting his right hand, he clenched his hand into a fist in the direction of the canopy of heaven.

Meanwhile, Erniu yanked a zombie out of the ground and shoved it into his bag of holding. When he noticed how seriously Xu Qing was taking everything, he cleared his throat and tried to look as much as possible like an erudite Eldest Brother.

Imitating Grandpa Ninth as best he could, he coolly said, "It was essentially treasonous! That's why the chances of success were so remote. In the end, Emperor Ancient Spirit failed, and suffered a backlash from all of Revered Ancients' heavenly daos. The blood of his entire species was cursed.

"At the most critical moment, Emperor Ancient Spirit used his terrifying cultivation base to bring the majority of his people into his major world in the hopes of protecting them from the catastrophe. But all that did was make it even more difficult for them to avoid the curse.

“Then the emperor perished, and his major world withered. It became a world of death. All of the Ancient Spirits inside of it died. Of course, the end result of the curse was more terrifying than people just being killed.

“All in all, that curse came from all of the heavenly daos of Revered Ancient. Because of it, the dead Ancient Spirits turned into deceased souls that wailed in agony both day and night. The withered and dead world became the Deceased Kingdom of Ancient Spirits, which ended up buried forever in the subterranean depths of the Revered Ancient mainland, and where the torment of the curse was never-ending.

“At the same time—”

Before Erniu could show off any more of his dazzling knowledge, Grandpa Ninth reached up toward the dome of heaven. As he did, the sky trembled, and thunder boomed. Thousands upon thousands of lightning bolts shot toward Grandpa Ninth, illuminating the entire world. They converged within his palm to form a huge sword made of lightning. The arrival of that sword caused wild colors to flash in heaven and earth. A powerful aura and terrifying fluctuations erupted from Grandpa Ninth. And then... he slashed the sword toward the sky.

Boundless sword energy raged. An angry howl ripped through the air as the sword slashed through the sky, opening up a massive rift. Wind poured out of the rift, blowing in all directions. On the other side of the rift, Xu Qing saw something familiar.

It was an imperial palace. In the depths of the imperial palace was a mountain made of flesh, above the summit of which was a huge eye. The eye was open, and it shone with golden light as it looked angrily out of the rift.

Hē was looking at Xu Qing, whom hē had not seen in a long time. However, what hē was most interested in seemed to be that heaven-sundering, earth-ripping sword, and the baleful figure who wielded it. Hē recognized that person! Back in the fight with Crimson Mother, hē had noticed Li Zihua’s ninth son. And during that fight, the ninth son’s astonishing sword moves had been moving even to hīm.

Before Xu Qing was able to say anything, Grandpa Ninth stepped through the rift and appeared right above Emperor Ancient Spirit’s huge eye.

“What incredible gall!” Emperor Ancient Spirit shouted angrily, hīs voice thrumming with the natural laws of the dead world.

All of a sudden, the world’s dark sky grew darker, and the lands quaked even more violently. Countless deceased souls and countless zombies began to gather. The Yellow Springs river appeared. This was the will of this entire world! And it was being guided by Emperor Ancient Spirit.

But there was more. There was something akin to cultivator authority and godly authority, flickering within Emperor Ancient Spirit’s eye. It was an ability unique to hīm. Because of it, an enemy hē looked at would have light injuries turn into serious ones. And serious injuries would become fatal and deadly. What was more, within the Ancient Spirit world, there were eyes above ninety-eight other imperial palaces. All of them opened, looked at Grandpa Ninth, and unleashed their power.

Grandpa Ninth's expression didn't change at all. His gaze remained cold. However, his fighting spirit seemed to increase, as if he were getting ready for battle. Things were really heating up, and it seemed like fighting really might break out at any moment.

That was when Xu Qing stepped out of the rift. Flanking Ninth Sib, he respectfully said, "Grandpa Ninth, allow me to mediate here. His Majesty Ancient Spirit isn't a stranger. There's no need for conflict."

Grandpa Ninth glanced at Xu Qing and frowned. But in the end, he grudgingly agreed.

Having placated Grandpa Ninth, Xu Qing turned to Emperor Ancient Spirit and bowed. "Well met, Your Majesty!"

Emperor Ancient Spirit's heart was pounding, and countless curses were building up within him. He wanted to let loose an enraged roar. But after looking at Xu Qing, that rage turned into pure astonishment.

His fleshly body....

All of Emperor Ancient Spirit's pupils constricted. Previously, his attention had been focused on Ninth Sib. But after looking at Xu Qing, he noticed his terrifying fleshly body.

"Senior," Xu Qing continued, "I happened upon a destined opportunity a while back, and transformed my fleshly body. I can explain all the details to Your Majesty later. Today, I came for those streams of imperial energy."

Xu Qing was already eyeing the thirteen dragons made from the destiny aura of the Ancient Spirits.

"*You can't have them!*" Emperor Ancient Spirit said, glaring.

Xu Qing's expression didn't change. Actually, he wasn't surprised at all that Emperor Ancient Spirit had reacted in this way. After all, he had negotiated with him on occasions before, and on the way here, he had come up with a plan along with Erniu and Grandpa Ninth.

Smiling, he softly said, "Your Majesty, I came here on a mission for the Empress Summer Departure of humankind. Although Your Majesty is in seclusion here, you must have sensed the fluctuations of our empress becoming an Altar God."

As he spoke, he released some of the destiny aura of humankind, causing that power to surround him. He also waved his hand, causing his clothing to change to that of the official garment of the imperial tutor.

Then, Erniu played his appointed role as he loudly said, "The person you're speaking to is King Skycrusher, who is also the tutor of the crown prince, officially appointed by the empress of humankind! He's also the Grand Darkheaven, duly ordained by the three gods of the Firemoon Darkheaven people!"

All of a sudden, ragged breathing echoed through the dead world, all while Emperor Ancient Spirit's eye trembled imperceptibly. Although he hadn't personally witnessed the empress reach godly ascension, he had felt it happen. It would be impossible for him to claim that the

development didn't frighten him. That said, he still felt defiance in his heart. And the feeling of having his dignity challenged prompted him to say something in response.

Xu Qing glanced at Erniu.

Erniu smiled, looked at Emperor Ancient Spirit's eye, and loudly continued, "Little Junior Brother, I know you and Emperor Ancient Spirit are old friends. That's why you don't want to act like a bully. Obviously, you could always call on help from our venerable Master. With his Summer Immortal personhood, he was easily able to reshape your fleshly body, so it only makes sense that he could crush this entire world with a single palm strike!"

Emperor Ancient Spirit was stricken to the core with shock.

Around this time, Grandpa Ninth, who hadn't said anything for a while, impatiently said, "This is a waste of breath. My father is almost back. If you don't give us the imperial energy, I'll take it with force. You'll end up wounded, and then, on the day my father returns, he'll kill you so thoroughly you'll never be resurrected or reincarnated."

Grandpa Ninth released a burst of the aura from beyond the heavens, and it was very strong. In fact, it formed the vague image of a blood-red planet speeding through a starry sky. The sense of pressure it emanated caused Emperor Ancient Spirit to reel even more dramatically.

However, the dignity he had once possessed made it impossible for him to accept being blackmailed. He started to breathe even more heavily.

Xu Qing could see that the crucial moment had arrived. Taking a few steps forward, he clasped hands and bowed to the huge eye.

"Your Majesty, I wasn't able to finish what I was going to say earlier. I'm not just asking you to give me thirteen streams of imperial energy. I want to offer something as a trade."

With that, Xu Qing waved his hand and produced the marionette from the Spiritsound forbidden ground. He offered it to Emperor Ancient Spirit.

"This spirit was the lord of a forbidden ground. I hope Your Majesty enjoys it."

He placed it on the stairs leading up to Emperor Ancient Spirit.

Emperor Ancient Spirit didn't say anything. Inside, he was cursing up a storm. It was obvious to him that these three people had planned this entire performance. However... whether it was Empress Summer Departure, Xu Qing's Master, or Li Zihua, he knew he couldn't afford to provoke any of them. What was more, he had his own secret plan underway, and if an Altar God showed up, it could all be revealed and ruined. Emperor Ancient Spirit struggled to suppress his irritation. Glaring at Xu Qing, he sent out a gravitational force that sucked the marionette over to him.

Crunching sounds rang out as he vented all of his frustration into the chewing. After a dozen or so breaths of time passed, the thirteen streams of destiny aura roared and shot toward Xu Qing, Erniu, and Grandpa Ninth.

Along with them came an irritated growl from Emperor Ancient Spirit.

“Get out of here! And never come back!”

Chapter 1015: A Summons from the Empress

Chapter 1015: A Summons from the Empress

Although Emperor Ancient Spirit had been hungry in recent years, it was also for some unknown reason that hē found himself being somewhat picky about food. Years ago, hīs eyes would have widened for any type of godliness. After all, that sensation of hunger had been overwhelming, and hē wouldn’t have been picky about anything offered to hīm to devour. It didn’t matter if other people would consider something tasty or not; hē had viewed just about anything and everything as a delicacy. That was why hīs table manners had been so atrocious.

But nowadays... hē wasn’t very impressed with this marionette. After all, hīs last meal had consisted of Crimson Mother’s flesh. Compared to Crimson Mother, this marionette was about as fleshy as a mosquito.

And thus, Emperor Ancient Spirit had mixed feelings about Xu Qing. It was true hē had angrily told him not to come back, and was howling furiously inside. But at the same time, if Xu Qing really didn’t come back, hē would actually miss him.

Such complex feelings were a source of irritation to Emperor Ancient Spirit. But hē had already spoken. As the Ancient Spirit world trembled, the emperor summoned a huge vortex right above Xu Qing, Erniu, and Grandpa Ninth. It immediately exerted a huge gravitational force, which tugged them toward the outside world.

Grandpa Ninth didn’t bicker about being unceremoniously kicked out. He took the thirteen streams of imperial energy and wordlessly entered the vortex. Erniu also didn’t mind being ejected. He was actually used to that sort of thing.... Licking his lips, he shot into the vortex.

Xu Qing acted as courteously as always and made sure to bow to Emperor Ancient Spirit before leaving.

“In that case, I won’t bother you any further, Your Majesty. I wish you all the luck in emerging from seclusion as soon as possible.”

It didn’t matter whether Xu Qing was being sincere or not. When Emperor Ancient Spirit heard his words, hē felt a bit irritated, but at the same time, had to admit that Xu Qing had been very polite from beginning to end. It was a clear contrast to the hotheaded Grandpa Ninth, who had drawn his sword hardly a moment after arriving, or that shifty idiot who would make anyone clutch instinctively at their wallet.

“Your Majesty,” Xu Qing added, “the command medallion you gave me stopped working. Senior, if I happen to run into any good gifts in the future, I sadly won’t have any way to send them to you....”

Considering how useful Emperor Ancient Spirit could be in a fight, Xu Qing was loath to lose him as an asset.

After a moment of silence, Emperor Ancient Spirit snorted coldly. The gravitational force from the vortex surged, and the force of expulsion from the surrounding world grew more intense.

Xu Qing was a bit disappointed, but didn't force the issue, and just shot toward the vortex. However, just before he disappeared inside, a command medallion flew over to him. Rumbling sounds echoed out, and the vortex vanished.

The entire world became peaceful and quiet.

The huge eye closed.

Emperor Ancient Spirit had ultimately delivered a command medallion. However, what he hadn't noticed was that among all the countless skeletal zombies stuck in the muck of the world, there was one whose eyes glittered with blue light. And the bones within that skeletal zombie contained a blue worm.

The worm pulsed with the invisibility power of the Wordless words, which completely covered its aura.

Naturally, it had been left behind by Erniu. In the coming days, that little zombie would slowly start exploring the world and finding whatever treasures it could sniff out...

About half a day later, in the sky above the Wood Spirit ancestral land, Grandpa Ninth appeared with Ling'er. After sending the thirteen streams of imperial energy into her, the bloodline curse inside of her was completely suppressed. For the time being, she wouldn't suffer any ill effects. Her cultivation base also received a boost, and she began the transition into Spirit Trove.

Because of her special Ancient Spirit constitution, there was no bottleneck for her to deal with for this cultivation base upgrade. However, she needed to go through a period of deep sleep.

Considering that smoke from the flames of war was spreading over Revered Ancient, the Moonrite Region was the safest place for her now. By now, all the major species in Revered Ancient knew that Li Zihua was on the way, which was why none of the holy lands had caused trouble for Moonrite. Therefore, Ling'er would go back to the Moonrite Region to go into seclusion.

Xu Qing had considered going along. But an imperial edict had come from the capital, and that changed his mind.

"Imperial Tutor Xu Qing is hereby summoned to the imperial capital; furthermore, he will muster the armies of Sea-Sealing County, divide them into three divisions, and dispatch them to the capital one after the other."

Whether because of the past history of humankind, or because of the empress's actions when Xu Qing went missing, the advent of the holy lands had brought small-scale war to locations through Firemoon and human territory.

Therefore, Xu Qing had no reason to refuse this summons. After sending Grandpa Ninth off, he turned to his Eldest Brother.

Erniu didn't care about what Grandpa Ninth did, nor was he particularly concerned about the imperial edict. All of his attention was focused on the worm he had left behind in the Ancient Spirit world. In fact, his eyes were currently shining.

"I can sense it!" he said excitedly. "Hahaha!"

It didn't take a lot of pondering for Xu Qing to realize what his Eldest Brother had done in Emperor Ancient Spirit's world. Therefore, he offered a bit of advice. "Eldest Brother, I've been to Emperor Ancient Spirit's dead world quite a few times."

Erniu looked at him.

"Before, I never sensed anything unusual. But this time... perhaps it's because of the changes to my cultivation base, or maybe it's my fleshly body. But either way, something felt strange." Xu Qing thought about it for a moment. "It felt like the place we visited now... wasn't the same place I visited in the past! Actually, now that I think about it, I feel like I had the same sensation each time I went there."

"In other words... I think there isn't just one Ancient Spirit world! And maybe there isn't just one of those huge snakes. What's more, in the fog above the Spirit Abyss, my god perception picked up a very ancient aura and gaze. Something deeply malevolent."

Xu Qing didn't usually talk so much. But he was worried that, considering his Eldest Brother didn't have any good intelligence reports, his crazy behavior would get him in trouble. And if he got into trouble, he could go from 'being crazy' to 'acting suicidal.'

Erniu looked thoughtful. "That actually makes sense. If I was Emperor Ancient Spirit, I wouldn't just have one world. I would have a lot of them, with fake ones and real ones mixed together to confuse people. Alright. I'll definitely be careful with that worm I left behind."

"But don't worry, little Ah Qing. There's definitely treasure back there. Although I don't know exactly what it is, I can sense it.... And that treasure is absolutely going to be useful for the two of us! I just need to find it...."

Erniu instinctively licked his lips.

Xu Qing nodded. He knew that, though his Eldest Brother was crazy, he wasn't stupid. Therefore, he didn't say anything else. Instead, he turned his gaze in the direction of Sea-Sealing County.

Using the Sageheaven Pagoda to get back to the imperial capital of humankind wouldn't be as fast as using teleportation portals. After all, it would involve crossing multiple regions. But there was something he needed to take care of in Sea-Sealing County before going back to the capital.

He didn't stay in Wood Spirit territory. After saying his farewells, he sent the pagoda speeding toward Sea-Sealing County.

His return was a monumental affair there. Obviously, he had quite a few old friends to catch up with. There was Marquis Yao, Qingqin, his friends in the Swordsage Palace, and also Yao Yunhui....

He could use a teleportation portal there for the journey to the capital, but it would require time to prepare, and would also need to be thoroughly inspected. Sea-Sealing County wouldn't tolerate even the slightest slip-up when it came to Xu Qing teleporting somewhere.

Therefore, he and Erniu planned to stay the night in Sea-Sealing County. For the first half of the night, a host of county representatives made various reports to Xu Qing. After seeing everyone out, Xu Qing left the county palace.

When he reappeared, he was in the spot where the Corrections Division had once existed. Entering the chasm made Xu Qing feel like he was going back in time to when he was a jailer. He kept envisioning those times, and the person he found himself thinking about the most was Palace Lord Kong Liangxiu.

Eventually, he reached the bottom, where Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity had once kept his palace of operations. That was also where the fish bone god had lived before perishing. Sea-Sealing County now controlled all of it, and had renovated the entire place into a periphery palace.

Some places had been cleaned out, for example, the locations with immortal skills. Those immortal skills were now part of Sea-Sealing County's reserve powers.

There were other areas that were now taboo locations, for instance, that phoenix palace. As it happened, that was where Xu Qing was going. Eventually, he found himself in front of that very palace. It had once been an extremely mysterious place. Back when he first discovered it, he lost some of his memories. Later, he came to find out that it was where the daughter of Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity had fallen. It was also where the Plumdark Evergreen Lamp was.

Most important... it was where Plumdark was currently accepting her legacy.

As Xu Qing stood outside the palace, he realized he could sense Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior's aura.

An instant later, the patriarch sent his iron skewer flying out of the roof tiles. Once in the open, Master Freespirit appeared as a projection. He kowtowed to Xu Qing.

"Greetings, Milord!" he said excitedly.

Beneath Xu Qing's feet, Little Shadow pulsed, and a host of eyes opened as it looked at its old enemy.

"How is Plumdark doing?" Xu Qing said calmly.

"Milord," he answered smoothly, "after going into the palace, the lady of the house has not emerged. Your humble servant has been standing guard the entire time. I haven't let anyone even come close. Furthermore, before going inside, the lady said that if you arrived, Milord, you

shouldn't go inside. Give her some time. Whatever troubles she's dealing with, she'll handle them on her own. When she succeeds, she'll come to find you.”[1]

Xu Qing looked at the palace. He couldn't send his god perception very far inside, but he could sense that the fluctuations were stable. Retracting his god perception, he sat down, closed his eyes, and began to meditate.

The night passed.

Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior solemnly stood watch the entire night. Little Shadow was also completely on guard. Both of them were coming up with numerous ideas about ways to deal with the other in the coming days. That said, when they looked at each other, each had a different facial expression. Little Shadow seemed antagonistic, while Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior was smiling.

Eventually, night faded from the sky over Sea-Sealing County. The sun rose. Xu Qing opened his eyes and looked at the phoenix palace for a short time. Then he left.

About an hour later, various representatives from Sea-Sealing County saw him off. The teleportation portal rumbled to life, and Xu Qing and Erniu disappeared.

1. The form of address Master Freespirit uses for Xu Qing and Plumdark indicates that he views them as being his “lord and lady.” Another more lengthy definition of the address for Plumdark is: “form of address used by the servants when speaking to the principal wife.” ㄟ

Chapter 1016: Do I Look the Same as Before?

Chapter 1016: Do I Look the Same as Before?

There had been developments since the arrival of the celestial-level holy lands.... Large-scale war had broken out in the south, west, and north of Revered Ancient. There had been great victories and defeats on both sides, and casualties were high. At any given moment, lives were being lost, and new fighting was breaking out. Revered Ancient was in a state of major upheaval.

In the east, the alliance of species led by the Firemoon Darkheavens and humankind created a consummate spell formation that separated heaven and earth. What lay outside of the formation was the dome of heaven, where four celestial-level holy lands were. Inside of the spell formation were the living beings native to Revered Ancient.

Though the four holy lands in question all had Grand Emperors, after the initial clash with the empress and the three Firemoon gods, they didn't show their faces again. That said, the three gods also stayed out of the public eye. No one knew exactly how that peak battle had played out.

There was only one certainty: Empress Summer Departure was fine, and was the one leading the war effort.

Fighting continued in the east, with both Firemoons and humans willing to fight fiercely. There were no major battles, as both the eastern forces and the holy lands both tried to keep things under control. That said, there were small battles that occurred on a daily basis.

At the moment, one of those small battles was playing out atop the consummate spell formation. A lot of people were involved in the fighting, and they looked like a host of black spots buzzing around atop the spell formation.

It was around that time that Xu Qing and Erniu arrived in the imperial capital, having taken several teleportation portals from Sea-Sealing County. Things had gone smoothly on their journey. They didn't waste any time, although Erniu made sure to snatch some teleportation hairs from that living teleportation portal.[1]

The moment they appeared on the teleportation portal, they heard the sounds of booms and screams from above. The countless sounds mixed together into a rumble like that of thunder. The colorful light of magical techniques flared everywhere, creating dazzling glows interspersed with periods of darkness.

When looking up, it was possible to see the ranks of eastern cultivators, some of them on the front lines fighting, others in the back resting. Those who came back into the spell formation were all in bad condition.

However, the situation was the same with the holy lands. Corpses dropped down constantly, to be destroyed by the spell formation.

"War..." Xu Qing murmured, his expression grave.

Because the teleportation portal was located in the middle of an army encampment, it was under constant watch of the divine sense of numerous cultivators. The moment he and Erniu arrived, streams of deadly energy locked onto them. Upon realizing who Xu Qing was, though, the divine sense and streams of energy vanished.

Then, a group flew over to Xu Qing and bowed in greeting. Leading them was an old man.

Xu Qing had seen this person before. He was a human heavenly marquis surnamed Chen.

"Greetings, Imperial Tutor!" Heavenly Marquis Chen said. "Some of the heavenly kings are trapped on the battlefield outside the formation. As a result, your humble servant is currently in charge here. What's more, Her Majesty issued orders for you to go to the grand hall as soon as you returned."

Xu Qing nodded. Looking up at the fighting and scanning the field of battle with god perception, he could see that the forces from this encampment were made of a variety of species, and there were many of them who were wounded. In the other parts of the east that he had traveled through, the fighting wasn't nearly as severe as this. It seemed most of the action was taking place here. This was the core of the east, and it could also be considered the front line of fighting.

"How goes the battle?" Xu Qing asked.

“We’re holding strong for now,” Heavenly Marquis Chen replied with a grin. However, his aura wasn’t very stable, and he had obviously sustained some injuries. He was about to continue speaking when, all of a sudden, a huge boom echoed out beyond the spell formation.

In the swarm of black dots above that made up the forces of both sides, a dazzling eruption of light could be seen. It was a burly, middle-aged man from the holy lands who had a pair of wings on his back. He pulsed with a fiendish, bloody aura, and had a cultivation base in the five-world Smoldering God level. It was a cultivation base that surpassed many of the human heavenly kings.

In a small-scale battle like this, some of the species had fielded Smoldering Gods, but most of those were pinned down and couldn’t disengage to move to other parts of the battlefield. Therefore, this newcomer was able to unleash slaughter as soon as he arrived.

From the look of it, he was carving out a path through the battlefield. Flanking him was a group of over a thousand Devilbird cultivators, who were acting like bodyguards. Together, they crushed everything in their path. And their target was the spell formation.

When Heavenly Marquis Chen saw what was happening, his pupils constricted. However, he didn’t panic. Obviously, there were measures in place to deal with situations like this. Light flowed across the spell formation as it reacted to stop the assault.

However, that was when Xu Qing vanished. Astonishingly, when he reappeared, he was outside of the spell formation.

A sound far more intense than anything from before rang out clearly for both sides to hear. As that deafening sound erupted, Xu Qing appeared right in front of the path of the charging Devilbird. The burly man saw him, snorted coldly, and continued forward. All of this takes a bit of time to describe, but actually happened in the time it takes a spark to fly off a piece of flint.

Inside the spell formation, Heavenly Marquis Chen was shocked. He knew that Xu Qing was a very important person, but had the impression that his battle prowess was just barely able to meet the standard for heavenly kings. And this was a five-world Smoldering God.... He immediately got nervous.

Next to him was Erniu, who cleared his throat. “What are you getting worried about? Calm down.”

Of course, it didn’t matter what Erniu said, there was no way Heavenly Marquis Chen *couldn’t* be nervous.

And he wasn’t the only one. There were heavenly kings from numerous species on the battlefield who saw what was happening and recognized Xu Qing. All of them were stunned, and some of them even started cursing and swearing. Clearly, none of them believed that Xu Qing could stand up to this five-world Devilbird cultivator. Some were inclined to interfere, but none were able to break free from the fighting to do so. All they could do was watch as the burly Devilbird closed in on Xu Qing.

“Foolishness! Why’d Xu Qing show up here of all places?”

“Activate the spell formation! Send it out to protect Xu Qing!”

“Hurry!”

The spell formation emitted rumbling sounds and bright light as it prepared to extend protection to Xu Qing.

But that only served to emphasize to the Devilbird that Xu Qing was important. Upon seeing what was happening, his eyes lit up. He had recognized Xu Qing!

It was only natural that the Devilbird holy land would have information about all the important humans. And that was especially true of Xu Qing. After all, he had brought an entire holy land to ruin. After all, he was why all the terrestrial-level holy lands had been driven out of the east. That said, their information was limited to the fact that Xu Qing had been captured by Floating Fiend and then subsequently freed. They didn't know all the details. For example, they didn't know that Floating Fiend ultimately died at Xu Qing's hands, nor did they have any clue what Xu Qing's battle prowess was.

Therefore, this burly Devilbird's eyes lit up. Cackling, he accelerated in Xu Qing's direction. But then... just as he was about to reach Xu Qing....

Xu Qing's facial expression didn't change a bit as he lifted his hand. Reaching toward the burly Devilbird, he clenched his hand into a fist. That gesture caused all of the sound surrounding Xu Qing on the massive battlefield to cease! Sound had been seized!

The silence only lasted for a moment. Then, all of that sound converged on the burly Devilbird. It was like an unrivaled wave that turned into a massive sphere surrounding the Devilbird and his thousand bodyguards.

The sound waves assailed them endlessly with deadly force. Screams began to ring out from the mouths of the burly Devilbird and his guards. But that only added to the deadly sound authority. Thirty percent of the bodyguards exploded, whereupon the burly Devilbird's face fell. He had just heard chanting.

The chanting grew clear and intense, repeating endlessly. It was an ancient power, something mad and voracious that penetrated his heart and mind, overtaking his perceptions. And it took away the very concept of sound from them. Their bodies, souls, and even their sense of self was being taken. And then... the burly Devilbird and all the remaining guards shattered into a blood mist!

The sphere collapsed, turning back into countless sounds. Xu Qing remained in the middle of it all as the sounds spread in all directions. Wherever they passed, and wherever sound existed on the battlefield, deadly attacks were unleashed.

Although this incident only took place on one small corner of the battlefield, its effects spread instantly. In fact, the heavenly kings from the various species as well as the Smoldering Gods from the holy lands were all visibly taken aback!

There was no doubt... that Xu Qing's attack was simply too fast and deadly. The eastern cultivators were stunned. The holy lands cultivators were astonished.

“Godly authority!”

“Something’s off about this human!”

Though the forces from the holy lands were shaken, the reality was that... the actions of one person couldn’t affect an entire war. At least, not unless that person was strong enough to crush anything and everything.

Next, a terrifying stream of divine will shot out from one of the holy lands hovering above. It indicated the arrival of an Imperial Sovereign!

At the same time, the aura of a god shot out from the human region below. It was the zombie emperor Dark War!

Because of pressure from those two forces, Xu Qing vanished, returning back into the spell formation. Upon leaving, he released the power of sound authority onto the battlefield, mixing misfortune and curse power with it. The rumbling outside of the spell formation turned into a tempest of sound.

The cultivators of the east who were participating in the fighting were all enlivened. The heavenly kings issued decisive orders, and thus took advantage of the moment to launch a deadly counter attack. The small-scale battle was now becoming somewhat one-sided. Given that, it wasn’t long before the sound of bells rang out from the holy lands, calling for a retreat....

About two hours later, this particular battle was over, and the forces from the various species fell back, all of them discussing Xu Qing’s arrival.

Xu Qing and Erniu had already entered the imperial capital, and were now waiting outside of the grand hall.

Xu Qing had changed into his imperial tutor’s robe, while Erniu was wearing his special Grand Zodiacist Armor, which was an imitation of the Grand Darkheaven Armor. The suit of battle armor had been made according to his specifications, and he had personally overseen the process. He didn’t get many chances to wear it, but loved how it looked. As he stood proudly in front of the grand hall, his armor sparkled like the sun and made him look like he was made from pure light. From a distance, he really did look mighty and impressive.

They didn’t have to wait long before a voice called out from inside the hall.

“The imperial tutor and the Grand Zodiacist are hereby summoned for an audience with the empress!”[2]

Xu Qing and Erniu strode into the hall. Upon entering, they saw the assembled officials, as well as the empress seated above everyone else. Next to the empress was Ningyan, who looked very excited.

“My respects, Your Majesty!” Xu Qing said, bowing at the waist.

Erniu also bowed and said the same words.

The empress nodded slightly, then spoke in a cool voice. “It’s good you’re back. Have a seat.”

Xu Qing strode over to his spot among the thirty-three heavenly kings. Specifically, he was able to sit in the second-ranking spot. From that position, he could look down on all the other officials. There was only one person who could sit higher than him among the officials, and it was King Firecrusher, who wasn’t present. The other officials all had to incline their heads when Xu Qing looked at them.

As for Ningyan, he bowed to Xu Qing. Whether it was because of how Ningyan had previously relied so much on Xu Qing, or the fact that Xu Qing was now the imperial tutor, it was from deep in his heart that Ningyan offered him devotion. In fact, Ningyan was actually closer to Xu Qing than he was to his own mother.

When Erniu saw all of that happening, he felt a bit jealous. However, his attention was soon drawn to an old friend. At first he looked surprised, and then thoughtful. He even took out his sageheaven god vine and started fiddling with it.

As for Xu Qing, after he looked over at the officials, his gaze was also drawn to that same figure....

The Devilbird cultivator they had both noticed was filled with mixed emotions as he took a deep breath and bowed. “I, Feng Lintao, offer greetings to the imperial tutor!”

1. The living teleportation portal was introduced in [chapter 743](#), and Erniu took the hairs in [chapter 744](#). Back in roughly [904-907](#), when Xu Qing and Erniu went out to the broken face, they used these hairs as part of the plan. Unfortunately, the author got mixed up and started calling them feathers. Back then, I was confused about where the ‘teleportation feathers’ came from, but assumed I had just forgotten something. As it turns out, it was an author mistake. He also calls them feathers here in 1016. It was in the course of going back to search for the references that I realized what happened. Some of you (mostly Champions) read the [904-907](#) part with the ‘feather’ translation. I’ve since edited that mistake away, so for those who became Champions later, or who read them after their public release, you might have read them as ‘hairs.’ In any case, everything is now edited to maintain continuity. ￼

2. Erniu is being called the Grand Zodiacist because of his Grand Zodiacist Armor that he was given in [chapter 929](#). I originally translated that suit of armor in a different way, and some Champions might have read that version. I later decided to change the translation when I realized that it was supposed to be connected to a title. That wasn’t clear early on, but here in 1016 it’s much more obvious. ￼

Chapter 1017: The Incomparably Loyal Feng Lintao

Chapter 1017: The Incomparably Loyal Feng Lintao

Feng Lintao was sighing in his heart. Sometimes it was impossible to predict how things would turn out with certain people. Things could change dramatically. That said, Feng Lintao was an

extraordinary individual in his own right. After all, it was Lan Yao herself who had described him as selfish, cold, apathetic, brutal, and someone who could patiently endure all sorts of situations.

Therefore, after defecting to humankind, he had done just that: endure. And now, even though the sight of Xu Qing provoked some mixed emotions, he quickly set them aside. As he did, he didn't attempt to hide what he was feeling. In fact, he intentionally let those emotions flicker across his face. This was something he had become quite skilled at doing.

Even as a half-blooded Devilbird, he had made the difficult journey to Smoldering God. Given that, it was only natural that he was a survivor. He knew how to use every asset at his disposal, even his emotions, to his advantage. He had learned how to do that from a young age. And how, he was using that tactic in order to prove his sincerity.

After all... in the months since he had defected, he had mostly been ignored. The empress hadn't made any special arrangements for him. As a result, he was feeling a bit unsettled. He was well aware that it was all because the empress hadn't fully accepted his request for asylum. Shē was still watching him. Therefore, he needed to find the right opportunity to prove his loyalty.

It was with such thoughts in mind that he clasped hands and bowed to Xu Qing. He made sure that it came across as sincere.

Xu Qing looked at Feng Lintao calmly and without speaking. He looked neither happy nor angry, and in fact, there didn't seem to be any emotion at all within him.

Though Xu Qing didn't speak, Erniu did. Beaming, he toyed with his sageheaven god vine and said, "Hey, Little Fengy! Long time no see!" [1]

Feng Lintao turned to Erniu. Looking somewhat sorrowful, he clasped hands and bowed. "Greetings, Grand Zodiacist. I apologize for how I acted when we first met. I hope you and the imperial tutor can let bygones be bygones. I can't pretend that I had another choice other than surrendering to you humans, but at the same time, I hope you know that I'm being completely sincere."

Feng Lintao chose to bow his head as a show of both respect and weakness. At the same time, it was a way of proving that he really was acquainted with Xu Qing and Erniu.

Of course, all it took was a glance for Xu Qing to see what was going on. And considering how sharp Erniu's eyes were, how could he not realize as well?

Hefting the god vine, Erniu smiled happily. "Why wouldn't we let bygones be bygones? After all, you gave little Ah Qing and I some really nice stuff! In fact, I haven't had a chance to thank you for your generosity!"

Feng Lintao smiled wryly and forced himself to suppress his inner rage. In the final analysis, he didn't hate Xu Qing very much. But he definitely hated Erniu. Erniu was the one who had scammed him. Erniu was the one who had pretended to be gasping on the verge of death, and had caused Feng Lintao to slip up in rare fashion. What was more, it was Erniu who, at a most critical moment, had devoured the god vine and taken away his trump card. That was what had led to the prolonged pursuit by Lan Yao and Yue Dong. Were it not for Erniu, he could have turned defeat into victory. The source of all his problems was right in front of him.

That said, he couldn't openly show his hatred. Taking a deep breath, Feng Lintao suppressed the rage inside of him.

Unfortunately, that was when Erniu said something unusually shameful. "Come now, you cute little vine. Say hi to our benefactor!"

Looking very pleased with himself, Erniu lifted the vine up. The vine turned, and its leaves rustled....

Feng Lintao had to struggle to keep himself under control.

Standing not too far away was the chief minister. When he saw that Erniu was planning to keep talking, he quickly interrupted by speaking to Xu Qing.

"Imperial Tutor, the reason Her Majesty summoned you, beyond mundane military matters, is because we need to confirm something."

Xu Qing looked over at the chief minister. "I supposed it has to do with Feng Lintao's identity?"

The chief minister nodded. "Not just that, though. Imperial Tutor, would you please take a look at the contents of this jade slip?"

The chief minister took out the slip and sent it flying over to Xu Qing. Inside of it were the testimonies and entreaties of Feng Lintao.

Xu Qing took the jade slip and studied it for a few breaths of time. Then he said, "I first encountered this person on the way back to humankind from Firemoon Darkheaven territory. All the relevant details are within the jade slip I previously submitted.

"As for the conflict between this person and the women named Yue Dong and Lan Yao, based on what I saw, they really did want to kill each other. In fact, were it not for the assistance provided by my Eldest Brother and I, this person would have had a hard time escaping death that day.

"As for how my Eldest Brother and I got wrapped up in that whole affair, it seems to me it was just random chance. If the Devilbird holy land had sent this Feng Lintao here in advance as a spy, it seems unlikely to me that he would choose to surrender. In the end, Her Majesty will need to make the final decision about what to do."

Xu Qing said nothing further after that. The chief minister nodded. Xu Qing had essentially corroborated Feng Lintao's story about his surrender. As a result, Feng Lintao breathed a slight sigh of relief inwardly.

With that, the session of court went on. As various ministers brought their reports about the war effort, Xu Qing was able to get a general understanding of how things were going, and what losses had been sustained.

Overall, things weren't looking good. The atmosphere in the grand hall slowly grew more and more oppressive.

As Feng Lintao listened, he didn't dare to do anything to attract attention to himself. In fact, had he been given a choice, he would rather not listen to this information.

About two hours later, the session of court ended, and Feng Lintao respectfully left.

Xu Qing didn't move. The grand hall emptied until the only people left behind were Xu Qing, Erniu, Empress Summer Departure, and Ningyan.

Standing, Xu Qing bowed to the empress. "Your Majesty, is it correct to assume you asked me to stay behind because you have some orders?"

The empress glanced at Erniu. Erniu pretended to not notice.

A moment later, the empress said, "Xu Qing, I need you to help me do something."

Xu Qing didn't react to the words. He just waited to hear what would come next.

"I need you to think of a way to capture Lan Yao. And if you can't capture her, I want you to bring her corpse back here."

A look of curiosity appeared in Xu Qing's eyes. "Lan Yao?"

Based on the words exchanged between Lan Yao and Feng Lintao in the Fardark Cistern incident, he was under the impression that Lan Yao was backed by powerful people in the Devilbird holy land. But even still, that didn't seem enough to make the empress herself take an interest in the woman.

Ningyan looked surprised, and clearly had no idea what his mother was up to.

"There is more to Lan Yao than meets the eye," the empress said. When both Xu Qing and Ningyan looked confused, she expressionlessly continued, "The Devilbird holy land apparently has two Grand Emperors. One of them is suspected to have perished, and Lan Yao is a descendant of that perished Grand Emperor. Based on the intelligence reports I've received, she has the most pure bloodline in her clan. If you can bring her back, I can use her blood to ascertain whether or not the Grand Emperor is actually dead. And I can use her blood for other purposes as well."

The empress took out a white jade slip. It was made from a special material that made it seem real, but at the same time, illusory. It almost looked like a construction of pure light.

"If you encounter any obstacle you can't overcome, Xu Qing, just crush that light-jade, and I will go in person to help." With the wave of a hand, the empress sent the light-jade flying over to Xu Qing.

He accepted it, and could immediately sense the immense pressure coming from it. Xu Qing established a mental connection to it, then put it away. "Your Majesty, capturing Lan Yao will require the use of Feng Lintao. Putting him out there as bait will definitely draw her out. That said, he's crafty, and can't be relied upon in life-or-death situations. He definitely has backup plans in place. If we conceal the truth from him, only for him to find out we're using him as bait, it's hard to say what will happen."

"What suggestions do you have?" the empress asked.

Before Xu Qing could respond, Erniu's eyes lit up and he interrupted, "I have an idea!"

With that, his lips moved slightly as he transmitted a message to Xu Qing and the empress. An odd expression appeared on Xu Qing's face, all while Erniu looked incomparably pleased.

The empress' eyes glittered. "Permission granted."

Xu Qing got to his feet, took his leave from the empress, and left the grand hall with the eager Erniu.

Inside the hall, Ningyan watched them go and wished he could go with them. He also wondered what the three of them had just talked about secretly. Of course, he didn't dare to take any action without his mother's permission. Even as he thought about the outside world, the empress spoke to him in a calm voice.

"Ning'er, I need you to pen an imperial edict for me."

"Yes, ma'am," Ningyan said solemnly.

Five days went by.

Xu Qing and Erniu tracked down Wu Jianwu, who had been living in the imperial capital for all this time. Wu Jianwu handed over to them two baby rats, golden in color, that had hatched from the eggs they gave him....

Around then, an imperial edict was circulated in the east of Revered Ancient.

Feng Lintao was appointed as Heavenly Marquis Birdslayer, and his accomplishments were publicly announced.

"He renounced the darkness and sought the light, providing top-secret information about the holy lands to humankind, thus preventing major losses in the war! He is brave and ferocious, and has irreconcilable animosity with the holy lands. He hates all Devilbirds to the core of his being, and has killed over a hundred infiltrators from the Devilbird holy land!"

The imperial edict was a shock to everyone in the east.

Feng Lintao immediately became the focus of a lot of attention, and many species began running investigations into his background. Sadly, none of that was what Feng Lintao wanted.... Being the center of so much attention made him nervous and uneasy. But what made him even more uneasy was the shocking development that occurred a month later.

Humankind began achieving many victories in the small-scale battles with the Devilbird holy land. In fact, it almost seemed like the humans were privy to all of the Devilbirds' war plans.

And every single time, the empress would reward Feng Lintao. In fact, a special guard contingent was assigned to him, which made it clear how important he was. There was no way that the Devilbird holy land would be unaware of the developments.

And yet, Feng Lintao was fully aware that whatever intelligence reports the humans were using to figure out the Devilbird battle plans had nothing to do with him.... More time passed, and then something truly shocking happened to Feng Lintao. He was appointed as a heavenly king!

The ceremony was to be carried out under the glow of the grand spell formation, right where the holy lands could see what was happening....

In the wilderness outside of the imperial capital were all of the prisoners of war the humans had captured from the holy lands. There were no less than 10,000 of them. Feng Lintao stood in front of the prisoners, clad in the garment of a heavenly marquis.

The empress' voice rang out into heaven and earth. "My dear official Feng, you might not be human, but you are completely and utterly loyal to humankind. You have a steadfast heart and have earned awe-inspiring battle credit. Therefore, it is on this day that I appoint you as a heavenly king. You are now Heavenly King Birdslayer!

"I am aware, my dear official, that you hate the Devilbirds to the core of your being. Therefore, I shall celebrate your appointment to the rank of heavenly king with the blood of these Devilbirds. You may slaughter them now!"

Everyone looked on intently.

The holy lands. The humans. Xu Qing. All the other species. Everyone was watching.

As for Erniu, his eyes glittered with anticipation and excitement.

Feng Lintao's heart was racing, but he didn't let any negative emotions show on his face. Instead, he seemed very excited as he clasped hands in the direction of the imperial palace. "Thank you for making my wish come true, Your Majesty!"

1. There's some funny wordplay in the nickname Erniu uses for Feng Lintao. Basically, the nickname is based on Feng Lintao's surname (Feng), which means wind. If directly translated, it could be rendered as something like 'Little Wind.' But the pronunciation of the nickname, including the tones, are the exact same as the word for 'crazy person, madman.' Something similar in English that I thought of would be if someone was a psychologist, so you called them by the nickname "Little Psycho." 🐼

Chapter 1018: Self-Control while Fishing

Feng Lintao had been appointed as one of humankind's heavenly kings!

The matter caused quite a stir. The reality was that there had been quite a few battles between humans and the Devilbirds, and when it came to the total victory count, humans had the edge. What was more, humans had won some victories that could only have been possible if they had access to leaked information. In fact, humans seemed to be intimately familiar with all the details about the Devilbirds' top experts, and even the complexities of their relationship networks.

The result was that the Devilbirds were starting to feel a lot of pressure. When it came to war strategy, the humans had the initiative. What was causing the biggest headaches for the Devilbird holy land were the spies!

Ever since the war broke out, the Devilbirds had been focused on trying to take down the humans' unique spell formation. In order to make that happen, they sent out a lot of spies. Some spies went to remote locations, some immediately took action. Some of them went into hiding.

Regardless, all of them were focused on the goal of destroying the formation. It was a very important matter, and thus, they had a very detailed plan to follow in that regard. Unfortunately, over the time that had passed, their spies just kept being exposed one after another. And all of it started getting really bad... after Feng Lintao received his appointment to heavenly marquis. And after he became a heavenly king, it got even worse.

If that were all there were to it, it wouldn't have been possible to prove Feng Lintao's usefulness and value. After all, there were some things that Feng Lintao couldn't possibly have known about given his status and identity, and the Devilbird holy land knew that.

However... when Feng Lintao was appointed as a heavenly king, he was offered the chance to slaughter 10,000 prisoners of war in a blood sacrifice. That was a monumental matter as far as the Devilbird holy land was concerned. After all, those prisoners of war had relatives, daoist partners, fellow disciples, and friends in the holy lands. As a result, the extended ramifications were dozens of times if not a hundred times more dramatic than the deaths alone. If those people had died on the battlefield, the people of the Devilbird holy land would have mourned, but wouldn't have been infuriated. But for those people to be sacrificed... would instantly provoked intense hatred by everyone in the Devilbird holy land!

Thanks to the spell formation, the Devilbirds didn't have very many human prisoners of war, and thus, trying to retaliate in kind was as effective as punching a cotton pillow. The public nature of the blood sacrifice was just another thing that made the Devilbirds so incredibly angry.

Feng Lintao was the one carrying out the execution, and he was also receiving an amazing reward for his action. Thus, he became the focus of every ounce of hatred for everyone in the Devilbird holy land.

As soon as the empress' words rang out, and Feng Lintao offered excited thanks, the holy lands outside of the spell formation rumbled as numerous streams of divine will locked onto that specific area. The rage and killing intent in them was unprecedented. Whether or not it was a smart move to do something like this didn't matter. What had happened... couldn't be accepted! Their reaction was required as the response to an open plot that everyone could see! It was like a raging inferno that could ignite all heaven and earth.

Meanwhile, Feng Lintao was left reeling mentally. He was a crafty person, and was no fool. He had long since started to get nervous with how things were playing out. And now... although he seemed

excited on the outside, the reality was that his heart was in complete chaos. It was not some sort of secret conspiracy. It was very obvious to him what was going on.

They're forcing me down a path of no retreat! They're ensuring that I'm utterly and thoroughly tied to humankind.... But that's just the first part of their plan. The empress has a second goal.... Shē wants to make me so valuable that I'm priceless. The more shē packs it on thick, the better for hēr. Shē wants the vast majority of people in the Devilbird holy land to hate my guts.

When that happens, even the top leaders in the Devilbird holy land will realize that I'm being set up. There's no way it'll be lost on them that I couldn't possibly be privy to so many intelligence reports!!

However... if everyone there hates me down to the core of their being, then it won't really matter if I'm being set up or not. They're painting a big target on my back.... The holy lands will be able to shift the blame for any losses onto me. At the same time, they can whip up their forces' battle spirit into a frenzy. That will be beneficial to the holy lands' interests.

The same goes for humankind. If the holy lands hate me that much, then I'll become the perfect bargaining chip for the humans. If humankind starts to lose the war, they can offer to turn me over in exchange for some big advantage. After all, humans have been setting things up perfectly so that the holy lands hate me more than they hate the humans.

The leaders in the Devilbird holy land must surely realize this. And maybe they're not happy about it. But in the end, they'll go along with it because it serves their own interests. How ruthless! Whether it's the humans or the holy lands, they're full of rigorous schemes and deep foresight from bottom to top!

Despite such thoughts running through his head, Feng Lintao kept an excited expression on his face. He looked at the holy lands beyond the spell formation, and then looked at the imperial palace. Finally, he turned to the Devilbird prisoners of war. Stretching his hand out... he unleashed the full power of his cultivation base!

Heaven and earth filled with rumbling sounds as one-tenth of the group of Devilbird cultivators exploded. They were killed in body and soul!

Outside of the spell formation, the Devilbirds observed, and their rage burned.

Feng Lintao's eyes were bright red, making him look completely and utterly bloodthirsty. As all the humans watched, he walked forward... and continued the slaughter. As the prisoners of war died, and as the reek of gore grew more intense, Feng Lintao seemed to be enjoying himself. And the holy lands cultivators on the other side of the spell formation were overwhelmed with grief and terror. ҂ANöbEŠ

All they could do was watch their fellow people die. There were members of the older generation, fellow disciples, offspring... and none of them died decent deaths. They died in the most brutal fashion.

But this was war, in which there was no such thing as right and wrong. From the moment the holy lands had come and launched their invasion, it was a given that things like this would happen.

Either you die, or I die.

The humans looked on coldly. It was the same with the other species present. Xu Qing did nothing to stop the events from unfolding. Erniu licked his lips.

Feng Lintao seemed to devolve into madness as he unleashed slaughter. At the moment, all he was thinking about was his own interests. All he cared about was what this massacre would lead to, not the process itself. It was after an incense stick's worth of time that Feng Lintao killed the last of the prisoners. After that palm strike was complete, he stood there soaked in blood, his facial expression ferocious as he looked up at the holy land and laughed coldly.

After that, he turned to the imperial palace of humankind and bowed at the waist. "Thank you, Your Majesty!"

Both his ruthless actions and the words he spoke made clear his attitude. From the human perspective, there was nothing to find fault with. He had cooperated fully, and had turned himself into a target for the Devilbirds to hate.

When Xu Qing saw it all play out, his eyes glittered.

As for Erniu, he grinned. "The little lunatic really is ambitious and ruthless. We didn't even have to force him. I have the feeling that he had everything planned out even before he defected. It was all to make sure that his fishing expedition works out the way he wants. In the coming days, little Ah Qing, I need to figure out a way to get five chunks of his flesh. That way I'll be able to use my Grand Five Ox Essence-Tracing Grand Merciless Dao on him!"

Xu Qing nodded in agreement.

With that, the two of them melted into the crowd and disappeared.

Time slipped by slowly but surely. Half a month.

During that time, the clashes between humans and Devilbirds grew more frequent. And the holy land was sending in more and more spies. However, the spies now had a new mission in addition to dealing with the spell formation. They were also assigned to kill Feng Lintao!

As it turned out, there was another mass slaughter of prisoners in the half month that passed. What was more, many of the successes that humans achieved in battle were attributed to Feng Lintao.

As a result, Feng Lintao was now extremely famous in the east of Revered Ancient. What was more, he was considered public enemy number one in the Devilbird holy land. Innumerable Devilbirds hated him so much they wanted to eat him alive.

Given that, it was only natural that there were assassination attempts. In order to protect this most important government official, the humans assigned a personal bodyguard contingent to Feng Lintao.

As for Feng Lintao, he seemed to be on the side of humankind in body and soul. On multiple occasions, he even submitted requests to personally go out and kill enemies. It was as if he hated

the Devilbird holy land even more than the humans did. However, the empress, in hēr benevolence and magnanimity, did not approve his requests to go out of the spell formation. Instead, he was asked to stay in the Imperial Region and hunt down spies. Feng Lintao seemed disappointed, but he fully complied with the empress' imperial decrees. And thus, he hunted down spies and killed them in the most brutal and ruthless fashion. In the process, he ended up with some injuries, but nothing very serious.

And thus... another seven days went by.

At that point, the Devilbird Grand Emperor finally made an appearance, and the conflict went beyond small-scale battles and into full-scale war. Several Imperial Sovereigns took to the field, and numerous Smoldering Gods joined them. On the human side, Empress Summer Departure showed up on the battlefield, joined by the zombie emperors. Heavenly kings from various species unleashed their mightiness to bolster the war effort.

As a critical moment in the war arrived, and the Imperial Region was almost completely emptied of its most powerful forces, an assassination attempt was being carried out in the suburbs of the imperial capital!

There were two assassins, and they were both seven-world Smoldering Gods from the Devilbird holy land! They had been in deep cover for a long time, waiting for the right moment to strike. And when they struck, their attack was like a bolt of lightning.

Their target was none other than Feng Lintao, who was with his personal guard, on his way back from arresting some spies!

The assassination was perfectly timed and ruthlessly carried out.

Feng Lintao's bodyguards all died. Feng Lintao himself was unable to flee. His fleshly body exploded, and his soul was shredded to pieces. His head was taken away as a trophy.

King Firecrusher desperately rushed over to help, but he arrived too late. Though he managed to take one of the Devilbird assassins captive, he wasn't able to stop the other one from getting away with Feng Lintao's head. In the end, all he could do was take away the corpses of the bodyguards who had pledged to protect Feng Lintao with their own lives.

When word got out, the forces of the Devilbird holy land rejoiced. The empress looked grim, but clearly wasn't going to take the time to sit around thinking about the matter. The war... had to go on.

What no one noticed was what happened to the corpses that King Firecrusher took away. After they were locked up in a certain mansion in the imperial capital, the corpses suddenly turned illusory. Then they became scintillating motes of light that converged onto each other and became Emperor Eastglory. Those 'bodyguards' weren't really bodyguards after all.

King Firecrusher wasn't surprised by this. After bowing, he turned to look off into the distance, a meaningful smile on his face.

Beyond the Imperial Region and on the border of the Gray Sea Region, there was a remote mountain with a cave underneath it. The cave was overgrown and almost impossible to spot when passing by.[1]

A figure was seated cross-legged in the cave, cloaked in so much shadow it was hard to make out any distinct features.

A short time passed, whereupon the figure's eyes opened, and they glittered with aggressive light. The figure then began to glow, causing light to seep out into the surrounding cave. Thanks to the light, it was possible to tell that this figure was a young man. He looked very similar to a human, except that he had a red mark on his forehead, made of a host of minute magical symbols. It was the mark of the Fardark people, although it quickly disappeared.

Neither the human empress nor the Devilbird holy land can possibly hold a candle to me! I never planned to stay among the humans for long. Although the empress' scheme put me in a passive position, the reality is... that everything went according to plan! I finally managed to fake my own death! Now that everyone thinks I'm dead, I can use my Fardark body to finally break free of all this karma!

This person was none other than Feng Lintao!

1. The Gray Sea Region was previously mentioned in chapters 744, , and . ❷❸

Deathblade's Thoughts

*Many thanks to **Jimbo**, **Appledapple**, and **KazuyaAkihito** for the reviews!*

Chapter 1019: Oh How Tragic!

The Gray Sea Region was located right next to the Imperial Region of humankind. In the cave underneath the remote mountain there, Feng Lintao opened his eyes and cast his senses out in all directions. After confirming that everything in the cave was as expected, he breathed a sigh of relief. Then his eyes narrowed, all the while gleaming with a sinister light.

From the moment he had chosen to start working with the humans to stay safe from Lan Yao and Yue Dong, he had been working toward a specific goal. He wanted to make a big splash while with the humans. The point was to attract the attention of Lan Yao and Yue Dong, and then to 'die' a very flashy death. At that point, everyone would think he had perished.

It would be a case of *slipping out of a predicament like a cicada sloughing its skin*. He could get rid of the Devilbird half of his bloodline, and use his Fardark doppelgänger as his new true body. He would truly be able to make a clean escape, and turn his whole situation around completely. To reach this goal, he had made full use of both humankind and the holy lands.

Although there were some unexpected twists and turns, and I ended up being used by the humans to a certain degree, I was able to mostly stick to my plan....

Feng Lintao chuckled coldly.

Abandoning my Devilbird bloodline caused my cultivation base to fall some. I'm only in Nascent Soul at this point.... But that's fine. It won't take long for me to catch back up. It's a price I'm more than willing to pay to earn freedom and my own life! That said, the people I'm dealing with are not fools.... My ultimate success is going to depend largely on how things develop in the world at large.

With such thoughts in mind, Feng Lintao maintained full vigilance as he flew out of the cave and sped along a pre-planned route to his next hiding spot.

Shortly after, two blurry figures appeared overhead. They were none other than Xu Qing and Erniu, who had used Erniu's special essence-tracing ability to find the spot where Feng Lintao had reappeared in clone form.

No one could possibly see them as they hovered there. In fact, even gods would have a hard time noticing them. The reason was they were relying on the invisibility powers of the Wordless words. That same concealment technique had allowed them to remain unnoticed by the three gods of the Firemoons. Given that, there was no possible way that Feng Lintao would ever notice them.

"You have to give it to Little Fengy. We didn't need to push him at all. He just went and turned into the best fish bait possible." Erniu looked so pleased with himself he was licking his lips in anticipation. "Little Ah Qing, it wasn't long ago that we were Yu Liuchen's bait when he went fishing. I have to admit, I was a bit jealous of him! Hahaha! Now we can satisfy our own craving for a fishing expedition! Come on, let's follow him."

Xu Qing nodded. Together, he and Erniu zipped through the sky as they tailed Feng Lintao.

Seven days had passed.

During that time Xu Qing and Erniu didn't interfere with Feng Lintao in any way. They just followed. They knew how paranoid Feng Lintao was, and didn't want to do anything that could result in him noticing them.

Things went well for Feng Lintao. He did encounter a few dangers, including wild beasts, grues, and malicious cultivators. Sometimes he fled, sometimes he killed his enemies, and sometimes he hid. Regardless, he made it through all the dangerous situations.

Xu Qing and the Captain were right about Feng Lintao. He was naturally suspicious and paranoid. The fact that everything was going smoothly didn't cause him to reduce his level of vigilance. Quite the opposite.

On the seventh day, when Feng Lintao was just about to leave the wilderness, he stopped to hide in a crevice in a cliff. Various expressions flashed across his face.

Things are going too smoothly. Something's off! It's true that everything is playing out according to plan. And I even considered the possibility of everything going smoothly. After all, I put a lot of thought into this. And the war is still going on. And yet.... I need to think things through very carefully and figure out if there's something I missed.

After a lot of thought, Feng Lintao identified three concerning possibilities.

First, he wondered if it was possible that the humans had seen through his plan, and were now trying to catch him. Second, he wondered if the humans had let him go on purpose to use him as bait for a fishing expedition. Third, he wondered if Lan Yao and Yue Dong could possibly have figured out what he was up to.

If the humans realized that I came up with the plan to slip out of a predicament like a cicada sloughing its skin, then if they catch me, the worst that will happen is that I'll lose my freedom. They won't kill me, at least not for a while....

His eyes narrowed.

If they realized early on what I was doing, and let me go on purpose.... then they probably have some other goal besides just a fishing expedition. Could it be that they want to use me as bait to lure out all the spies? If so, then they wouldn't make a public announcement about me being dead. They would spread rumors that I had fled. That would probably tempt the spies to come out of hiding to track me down....

I guess that means I'll just have to pay attention to what happens going forward. That's the only way I'll be able to figure out if the third possibility is a reality.

Having reached this point in his train of thought, Feng Lintao took a deep breath, left the crevice, and headed into the heart of the Gray Sea Region. For the time being, he wouldn't be traveling in the wilderness. Instead, he would start looking for cultivator cities in the region. The first order of business was to gather information. RaNØBEs

Another seven days had passed.

Feng Lintao was in a simple tavern in a bustling cultivator city, listening thoughtfully to the chatter of the crowd. He had learned some things in the past week. In addition to some general updates about the Devilbird war, he also heard some news about himself.

The humans had announced his death!

The fact that the humans have spread news about my death indicates that there's not much of a chance they're using me as bait.

He took a drink from his cup of alcohol.

However, it doesn't completely eliminate that possibility.... There's one more step I need to take to determine whether or not I'm being used as bait. Furthermore, I need to determine whether or not the humans actually think I'm dead, and whether or not they've sent people to track me down. Furthermore... I need to figure out whether or not I've fooled Lan Yao and Yue Dong. I need conclusive proof.

Feng Lintao's eyes narrowed, this manner of thinking might be exhausting to some people, but it had become second nature to him. After drinking the rest of the alcohol, he crushed the cup, erased all traces of his presence, and then left the city.

From that point on, he stuck mostly to the wilderness. At no point did he experience anything that would indicate he was being followed by either the humans or the holy lands. It was really starting to seem like he had made a clean getaway.

However, Feng Lintao's paranoid nature ensured that he wanted repeated proof. Therefore, he went out of the way to put himself in some extremely dangerous situations. In some cases, it seemed like he was just about to die, before somehow surviving by the skin of his teeth. That was how far he went to try to figure out if he was being followed....

Only after doing that several times, to the point where he was gasping on death's door, did he finally believe that he was alone.

Finally, he breathed a sigh of relief and started moving a bit faster than before. It was hard to say whether it was bad luck or something else, but three days later, before he had fully recovered from the previous incidents... he ran into a wild beast with a cultivation base equivalent to Spirit Trove.

The beast viciously pursued him, putting him into a desperate situation that forced him to pull out all the tricks he could think of. Yet even then, he couldn't shake it. In the end, the beast caught him and ripped him apart bite by bite before eating him. Then the beast went on its way....

A few days later, as that beast raced through some mountainous jungle, its eyes glittered.

It seems that I'm really not being followed secretly....

The beast flew on.

High above in the sky, Xu Qing and Erniu looked at the beast that had been parasitized by Feng Lintao. Both were dumbfounded.

"Little Fengy really is paranoid!" Erniu said with a sigh of admiration. "Just what did he go through in the holy lands that made him like this? I've already learned a thing or two from him!"

Xu Qing looked thoughtful as he watched the 'beast' disappearing over the horizon. "Given how paranoid Feng Lintao is, I have the feeling that what's happened up to this point isn't going to be enough to convince him he's in the clear."

"Seriously?" Erniu said, looking stunned. "Even after all that, you think he's still worried about being followed?"

Erniu's question was answered only five days later.

When the beast Feng Lintao had parasitized was passing by a forbidden ground, a host of tentacles from a godly entity shot out from inside. Blood sprayed everywhere as the tentacles burrowed into him and dragged him back into the forbidden ground. Unexpectedly, he perished!

Outside the forbidden ground, Xu Qing's eyes glittered, all while Erniu looked on feeling a bit exhausted.

"I'm honestly not sure if the fellow died on purpose this time or not...."

Xu Qing looked at Erniu. “Eldest Brother, go ahead and use your essence-tracing ability again. According to my godly authority of sound, Feng Lintao’s life force fluctuations really were extinguished just now.

“But if he has another clone somewhere, then it’ll prove that he died on purpose just now. Since he can’t prove definitively whether or not he’s being followed, he might have chosen to die again just to play it safe.”

Erniu sighed. “Little Ah Qing, I’m suddenly starting to feel a bit bad for what Yu Liuchen went through back then....”

With that, Erniu yet again unleashed his Grand Five Ox Essence-Tracing Grand Merciless Dao. A moment later, he suddenly looked up and gritted his teeth. “That little punk! He really does have another clone! He just never activated it before, so it was essentially as dead as a corpse. That’s why it evaded my notice. But now I’ve locked onto it. It’s actually quite a distance away from here....”

In another part of the Gray Sea Region, a fleshly body was suspended in the depths of a swamp, surrounded by countless venomous insects. The power of life force surged within the fleshly body, all while a red mark appeared on its forehead. Its eyes... snapped open.

Rumbling sounds echoed out as a Void Returning aura rose up within the fleshly body. After that aura locked down the surroundings, the body shot out of the swamp and up into midair.

Now I’m completely and utterly safe! Even if Lan Yao and Yue Dong saw through my plan, and even if the humans figured out what was going on and either sent someone to follow me or use me as bait... it doesn’t matter! Either way, they’re powerless to do anything to me now!

Feng Lintao’s eyes glittered with cold light as he flew off. This time, he tapped into the full limits of his speed.

I’m leaving the east of Revered Ancient and going to the north! In the frigid north, in the 300,000 meter ice plains, I’ll start my cultivation again. And I’ll conform to the legacy requirements of Grand Emperor Fardark! When I come out of seclusion in the end....

Feng Lintao’s eyes narrowed and his expression became very sinister as he shot along at top speed.

Outside of the Imperial Region of humankind, in what had once been the Fardark ancestral land, there was another hidden cave. It wasn’t very far from where the golden rat had been holed up.

In that cave, two people sat cross-legged. One of them had a very withered fleshly body that lacked even a scrap of life force. In fact, it looked no different from a corpse. There was also a red Fardark mark on its forehead, which glowed with a faint red light that seemed to be getting darker and darker with each moment that passed. It would soon go out completely.

This was yet another clone that Feng Lintao had secretly prepared for use in his plan. Only he could possibly know how many such clones he had prepared. Of course, there were drawbacks to this method. There was a time limit involved. If the mark of the forehead went out, then the clone couldn't be used. At the moment, that light was just about to go out.

In front of the corpse was another person, a middle-aged man, who was staring at the corpse with boundless sorrow. "You're so heartless, Feng Lintao! You actually assimilated Miss Yue Dong's little sister to fully activate your Devilbird half! Thankfully, *the guilty can never escape justice from heaven!* As the exalted Yue Dong has ordered, all of the Fardark criminals in the holy lands were sacrificed, and their blood led me to this Fardark clone of yours.... And now, the moment you activate this clone, you'll be trapped with no way of escaping!"

The man gnashed his teeth in hatred of the clone in front of him. However, there was something about his emotions... that seemed off. He was acting similar to the way Lan Yao was acting. His thoughts had been altered, and his emotions tampered with. His karma had been confused. He had been turned into an emotional puppet that was in control of its own faculties!

If Xu Qing were around, he could use his authority of erasure and the power of those shears to see what was going on.... This middle-aged cultivator's karma threads were in complete chaos. They were clumped together in a strange way that made the outline of a face.

And that face belonged to... Yue Dong! This was Yue Dong's way of fishing!

Xu Qing and Erniu were using Feng Lintao as bait to try to hook Lan Yao. Meanwhile, Yue Dong was using Feng Lintao's clone as bait to try to hook Feng Lintao's true soul!

Chapter 1020: Turning a Strength Into a Weakness

Feng Lintao was a very clever person. He had manipulated humankind, manipulated the holy lands, had faked his own death, and had then made a clean escape. He was also very cautious. After faking his own death, he faked his death again in order to erase all tracks leading to him.

And yet... he was still quite a tragic figure. Xu Qing and Erniu were using him as bait, all while Yue Dong was trying to reel him in like a fish. There was no other way to explain it than by saying that Feng Lintao was fated to be both bait and fish at the same time.

With that dual identity, he sped across the Gray Sea Region toward the north of Revered Ancient. He wanted to take advantage of the war between Revered Ancient and the holy lands to slip unnoticed into the frozen north. There, in the frigid ice, he would cultivate the legacy of Grand Emperor Fardark. He was confident that, given his talent and the preparations he had made, he would have a high chance of success.

The only sad thing is that I didn't get much of that holy fardark nectar. With some more of it, my chances of success would have surpassed seventy percent!

Taking a deep breath, he accelerated, shooting off into the distance.

A few days later he passed over the border of the Gray Sea Region. Skirting the Imperial Region, he went through Firemoon territory as he left the east. Things were chaotic, and Feng Lintao was a bit jittery. He ran into various mutant beasts and grues. But being as careful as he was, he got through all of the situations safely. He was being very protective of his fleshly body. Add in the fact that he believed himself to be in a safe situation, he didn't do anything risky like before.

High above, Xu Qing and Erniu noticed the change, and were happy that things seemed to be going a lot more smoothly.

After the most recent instance of Feng Lintao faking his death, they had to lock onto his new position again and race to find him. Seeing that Feng Lintao was now taking good care of himself caused Erniu to flash a pleased smile.

"Little Fengy is finally putting our hearts at ease. Is it that bad to just be a nice little piece of bait? What's the point of all the silly rigamarole? Did he ever take the time to consider the feelings of the person we're fishing for? That's why I have no choice but to say that this Feng Lintao is a far cry from us! I mean, look at how obedient we were when we were acting as bait!"

Xu Qing glanced at Erniu and thought back to everything that happened in the outer sea. Considering what had played out when Erniu opened his mouth back then, Feng Lintao wasn't too bad at all. At the very least... he wasn't causing terrifying gods to pop up or getting them devoured by a gigantic beast.

That said, Xu Qing always took his Eldest Brother's feelings into consideration. Therefore, he didn't quibble. And thus, the two of them remained concealed in invisibility as they followed the bait and waited for the fish to get hooked.

Another five days passed.

That was when things changed for Feng Lintao.

Previously, the Devilbird holy land had canceled the death warrant they put out on Feng Lintao. After all, he had been assassinated. But now, they issued the death warrant again! Along with the issuance of the death warrant came a dharmic decree. It was a public announcement that King Birdslayer of humankind, a traitor to the holy lands, wasn't actually dead. He had faked his own death and escaped to parts unknown!

The news caused an immediate stir in the east. After all, thanks to all of the work the humans had done to put Feng Lintao's name on the forefront of the war effort, he was extremely famous. And his death had enraged the humans. But now... the holy lands were saying that Feng Lintao had faked his own death!

The entire thing seemed absolutely bizarre. Outsiders had no way of knowing what was true and what wasn't.

The death warrant came with a huge bounty that piqued the interest of countless cultivators. Anyone who earned the reward would get a chance to become an Imperial Sovereign! Species from both Revered Ancient and the holy lands could get the reward, as long as they killed Feng Lintao.

All of the holy lands spies that were under cover in Revered Ancient were now on the move, looking for Feng Lintao.

Different forces throughout Revered Ancient reacted differently. That said, most seemed angry and dispatched people to stop an actual assassination from happening. As for what their true goals were, only they knew. The humans seemed very angry, and they immediately started investigating the matter. As the war outside of the spell formation continued, forces within the spell formation scattered to look for Feng Lintao.

The ones who were suffering the most were the people involved.

The jumpy Feng Lintao didn't feel safe at all now, and had to be increasingly careful.

When Xu Qing and Erniu heard the news, they exchanged a glance.

"Come on, fish," Xu Qing said, "bite!"

Erniu licked his lips, and his eyes glowed with blue light. "Interesting. This announcement from the Devilbird holy land could mean different things.... Was it the doing of Lan Yao? Or did the holy land leaders make the decision? Do they really want to kill Feng Lintao? Or... is this a case of beating the grass to startle the snake?"

Xu Qing looked down into the mountainous region where Feng Lintao was fleeing. Eyes narrowing, he coolly said, "When I was a kid, I would catch snakes by *beating the grass*. When the snakes are hidden, they're hard to snatch. But when you *beat the grass and startle the snake*, they'll crawl out into the open. Then you can just pick them up."

Erniu frowned thoughtfully. "This whole thing still seems suspicious, though. The Devilbird holy land could have sent this news to its agents secretly. Why are they making such a big deal out of it...? We need to think long and hard about this situation, little Ah Qing. Something definitely seems off."

Xu Qing thought about it for a moment. "We need to put ourselves in his shoes, Eldest Brother. If I was Feng Lintao, and I was in this situation, what would I do...? For one thing, I would worry that something was going on behind the scenes. And if I was being hunted like this, I would find a good opportunity to fake my death again in front of everyone. I'd do it as many times as necessary, and I would give them time to be convinced of the results. And what that means is that my biggest need would be time."

Erniu's eyes lit up with understanding. "That makes sense. In that case, it would make sense that the Devilbirds actually want Feng Lintao to do that. Given Feng Lintao's paranoid personality, he would definitely act like the *startled snake*, and would react in kind. Therefore, the real question is what purpose the holy land has for pushing Feng Lintao into faking his own death again...."

As the words left Erniu's mouth, he looked at Xu Qing. Xu Qing looked back at him. Both of them came to the same answer at the same time.

"Feng Lintao has a third clone out there!" Xu Qing said. "And most likely, Yue Dong and Lan Yao know where it is. Either that, or the holy land itself knows."

“Exactly,” Erniu said. “And whether it’s the holy land or Lan Yao and Yue Dong, the goal is for Feng Lintao to die and then be resurrected in his third clone. When that happens, he’ll fall into their hands! They’re manipulating Feng Lintao with his own paranoid nature! The more paranoid he gets, the harder it will be for him to see how they’re setting him up!

“He’ll come up with all sorts of suspicions and theories that he’ll think are beyond his control. And in the end, he’ll want to gain the initiative again. To be in control. Given that, I bet he’s going to show his face soon. He’s definitely not going to stay in hiding.”

As everything clicked into place for them, they started making plans for what to do next.

Feng Lintao really was paranoid to the core of his being. A few days later, he was still moving in concealment, and he was moving a lot more slowly.

His paranoid nature was really starting to show. When he encountered anything even slightly suspicious, he would blow it out of proportion and create a whole series of contingencies to deal with it. And the more contingency plans he created, the more suspicious things he noticed. The interconnections only continued to grow more and more complex....

On the sixth day, Xu Qing and Erniu realized that it would be easy for Feng Lintao to stay out of sight. But even as the search for him widened, he decided to show himself!

He did it in a clever way that made it seem like he had been successfully plotted against.

The moment he revealed himself, he started fleeing like mad. Then he used a number of different methods to cover his tracks behind him. But clearly, that wasn’t enough. People almost immediately locked onto his position, and thus, a big chase began in Firemoon Darkheaven territory.

The chase lasted for eleven days.... At that point, just as Feng Lintao was about to make it across the border between Firemoon Darkheaven territory and the south of Revered Ancient, he was stopped. He seemed exhausted and overwhelmed with despair, to the point where he looked crazy. He fought bitterly, but the outcome was predetermined. Though he killed many of his enemies, in the very end, one of the holy land’s spies cut him down.

Feng Lintao had died again!

In the cave in Fardark County, the red mark on Feng Lintao’s third clone was just about to go completely dark. But then, it flared brightly. The clone’s eyes opened.

An instant later, his face fell, and he lunged backward. At the same time, a cold snort echoed out as the middle-aged cultivator who had been waiting there reached out with his hand. Rumbling filled the cave as spell formations and other measures activated to prevent Feng Lintao from escaping. In an instant, he was bound in place.

There was also a gravitational force that latched onto Feng Lintao's fleshly body and dragged him toward the middle-aged cultivator.

The middle-aged cultivator grabbed him by the neck and glared at him, his eyes burning with abhorrence.

"You finally showed up, Fellow Daoist Feng."

Feng Lintao's face drained of blood as he stared at the unfamiliar cultivator. He had never seen this person before, but he could sense something familiar about him. The abhorrence in his eyes matched the look and tone of voice that Yue Dong had used in the past.

Feng Lintao wanted to speak, but the man's hands were clamped onto his neck like iron pincers, to the point where he couldn't make a sound. His cultivation base was fully sealed, and the only thing he could do was wait to die. He suddenly realized what was happening. He knew why the Devilbird holy land had made that announcement about him, and he also realized where he had slipped up!

"Your paranoid nature is a strength," the middle-aged cultivator said coldly. "But it's also a weakness."

Keeping Feng Lintao in his grip, he turned and left the cave. Once outside, he sped off into the distance.

It was currently sunset, and the light of evening filled Fardark County with peace and calm. The only movement came from the middle-aged cultivator as he sped across the landscape. There was something that cultivator hadn't noticed. Specifically, there were a host of invisible threads coming off of Feng Lintao. They represented karma, essence, and fate. They led off into the distance until they reached Xu Qing and Erniu, who were following them at high speed.

Erniu was using his essence-tracing ability, and his eyes were shining. "The fish is finally hooked!"

The dao lineament in Xu Qing's right eye glittered as he looked at the thread and coolly said, "This fellow is also very cautious. And he's only a small fish."

"Yeah," Erniu said with a grin, "but follow the little fish, and you'll find its owner soon enough. Little Ah Qing, why do you think Lan Yao and Yue Dong have worked so hard to target Feng Lintao this way? Do you think he has some sort of treasure we don't know about?"

Erniu's eyes narrowed, and he licked his lips.