

Timescape 841

Chapter 841: Be Wary of Scams

After Tuo Shishan's short soliloquy, he took a big drink of alcohol.

The nine figures bowed, then stood aside motionless. All of them were completely willing to follow this young lord's lead. Whether it was his personality, or the way he handled himself, the things they had been through together ensured that he had earned their respect.

For instance, after learning that Xu Qing had more forbidden mountains than him, he could have called on the power of his clan to get a few more mountains for himself. In fact, even without calling on the powers of his clan, he could have relied on his reputation alone to have forbidden mountains literally handed over to him by others. If he had given the order, his nine subordinates could have used all sorts of methods to intercept Xu Qing and cause trouble for him. But they knew that their young lord disdained behavior like that. He was obviously interested in this human named Xu Qing, and was waiting for him here. He wanted to win the title of champion in an honest and above-board manner.

The nine of them weren't worried about Tuo Shishan losing. As far as they were concerned, their young lord could crush someone like Crown Prince Brightsouth with hardly any effort. The Darkheaven bloodline was extraordinary to say the least.

Thus, time passed. Around the time Tuo Shishan finished his seventh jug of alcohol, bright beams of light appeared off in the distance.

Three people became visible.

Tuo Shishan looked up and burped. Eyes glittering with strange light, he smiled.

"They're finally here," he said.

Xu Qing spotted Tuo Shishan on the mountain top.

The Captain's expression turned serious. "Little Junior Brother, this person... is no simpleton. Given the fluctuations of his energy and blood, it's clear his fleshly body has reached the great circle of Void-Returning. Looks like his cultivation base is the same.

"He's only half a step away from being a Smoldering God! Based on my understanding of Firemoon Darkheaven techniques, cultivators like this prefer to use the blood of godly entities to open up the path to becoming a god!"

Xu Qing had also noticed that this young Firemoon cultivator with his jug of alcohol was an extraordinary individual. His gaze was piercing, and his aura was like a scorching volcano. Xu Qing could already guess the rough level of his battle prowess. He had clearly placed himself in Xu Qing's path on purpose, as if to wait for him. Beyond that, he had more than 900 forbidden mountains. His goal was self-evident.

"That's Tuo Shishan!" said Master Gravesparrow, stifling a gasp.

After accomplishing the mission Xu Qing had given him before the fight with Crown Prince Brightsouth, he had met back up and continued along with Xu Qing. As a result, he knew full well how terrifying this human cultivator was. The death of Crown Prince Brightsouth had been quite a

shock to him. At first, he had been worried about the potential ramifications, but at this point, he'd stopped caring. That said, his calm heart was now more than a little disturbed.

"He's one of the top five chosen among the Firemoon Darkheaven people. Specifically, he ranks fourth! He's from the Darkheaven Clan. He was gifted even as a child, and was born with godly power. He was blessed on five occasions by the Moonfire Temple, and High God Moonfire even promised to make him a dharma protector after he becomes a Smoldering God. He... is one of the shining stars of this generation among us Firemoon Darkheavens!"

Although Xu Qing was taking the situation seriously, his facial expression didn't change at all in response to Master Gravesparrow's explanation. Not slowing down at all, he headed right toward the mountain atop which Tuo Shishan waited.

Tuo Shishan had fewer forbidden mountains than him, and God Mountain was so close that it was conceivable he could simply rush there and reach the finish line first. But there was no point in doing that.

The mountain trembled as Xu Qing landed right in front of Tuo Shishan.

The Captain and Master Gravesparrow landed right behind Xu Qing.

The Captain then projected a message to Xu Qing using a special divine will method. *"His nine attendants are no simpletons either. When you start fighting, just buy me some time and I'll capture them. Then, after you win your forbidden mountains, you can head straight toward God Mountain."*

Xu Qing scanned the area visually, then focused on Tuo Shishan, who was still sitting on the boulder.

Tuo Shishan smiled and tossed him a jug of alcohol. Somewhat surprised, Xu Qing sent out some soul threads to catch the jug and keep it floating in the air in front of him. The fragrance of alcohol emerged from it. Given Xu Qing's skill in the dao of plants and vegetation, he was able to identify the key ingredients. It had obviously been brewed with the goal of bolstering the flesh and blood. Drinking it would provide both recovery and blessing to the fleshly body.

"I never liked Crown Prince Brightsouth," Tuo Shishan said. "The fact that you killed him shows that you're strong and daring. I'd like to offer this jug of alcohol to you as a gift."

Tuo Shishan raised his own jug respectfully to Xu Qing, then took a drink.

Xu Qing stood there quietly for a moment. This Firemoon chosen was different from the others he had encountered on his journey. However, that didn't mean he would casually drink the alcohol.

Tuo Shishan didn't seem offended. After finishing his drink, he slowly stood. Eyes gleaming, he unleashed his aura, causing wild colors to flash in heaven and earth. Winds swept around him, forming a tempest like a tornado that swept in all directions. The canopy of heaven trembled as a huge vortex formed, filled with shocking bolts of lightning.

Because of the close proximity to God Mountain, the supernatural phenomena immediately attracted the attention of the cultivators there. Numerous figures flew out from there, and streams of divine will settled on the area as they waited to see what would happen.

Xu Qing's eyes shone with mysterious light as soul threads spread to form a god state around him. His energy also shook the area.

Tuo Shishan's eyes glittered with excitement as he studied Xu Qing's god state. After muttering to himself briefly, he said, "Let's first set the rules and the stakes. Whoever loses the fight between the two of us gets to keep one forbidden mountain. All the others are up for grabs."

Xu Qing was even more surprised. It was now very clear that this Firemoon cultivator was definitely different from the others he had encountered.

"Furthermore, I think an ordinary fight wouldn't be very interesting. I heard you have an extraordinary sealing magic. I also have a sealing method. What if we both use our sealing methods to trap each other? I'll let you seal me, and you let me seal you. Then we'll see which of us can break free first. The person who succeeds is the winner."

Tuo Shishan looked at Xu Qing with bright eyes. After sensing Xu Qing's aura, he got the sense that a fight between the two of them wouldn't be easily resolved. Most importantly, he didn't want to end up injured. After all, this was only the first round of the Great Hunt. He wanted to stay at his peak until the third round, which was when he should be able to get some very powerful godly blood.

As Xu Qing considered what to do, the Captain rubbed his chin and projected another message.

"Be wary of scams, little Ah Qing."

As Xu Qing thought about it further, he came to the conclusion that the Captain's idea from earlier was too unsafe. As for sealing magics....

"Let's do it," he said calmly. He pointed up into the sky, which rumbled as a majestic aura spread out. Then a huge cell block appeared. It started illusory, but rapidly turned corporeal, with energy that poured down like a waterfall, rapidly forming godly might. It was none other than D-132.

After it appeared, the entrance opened quietly. Strange cries and screams drifted out from inside. Its arrival attracted a lot of attention from the divine will of the observing cultivators.

Tuo Shishan studied it closely for a time before taking out a three-colored pearl. The pearl glittered as it floated out into the air, rapidly growing larger until it was 300 meters across. It pulsed with sealing power, and was covered with glittering godly inscriptions. It seemed to contain intersecting darkness and light that expanded into a golden glow. Then a rift opened on the surface of the pearl, which expanded into a gateway.

"In that case, let's begin." Even as he spoke, Tuo Shishan shot toward the entrance of D-132.

Xu Qing also moved toward the opening in the three-colored pearl.

Though Tuo Shishan seemed to be acting rashly, the reality was that he moved in concert with Xu Qing. And thus, they both reached the sealed areas at the same time. An instant later, the entrance of D-132 closed, and the gateway into the three-colored pearl disappeared. They were now both confined in the sealing area created by the other.

Inside the three-colored pearl, Xu Qing found himself in a bizarre dimension. At first, everything around him was pitch black, as if it were the middle of the night. That darkness was actually a sealing mark. After breaking through it, a second color would appear. Black. White. Red. Each color represented a sealing mark. Upon breaking through all the colors, a three-colored hex would appear, which formed an even more terrifying sealing mark. Every intersection of the three colors would make the sealing even more powerful. The overall combination was astonishing.

Meanwhile, Tuo Shishan was facing misfortune and amnesia, plus the inmates and the god's finger. From his perspective, it was both fantastic and extraordinary. After enough time had passed for an incense stick to burn, neither of them had broken free. Rumbling booms echoed out from inside both of the sealed areas.

An hour passed.... Two hours....

Tuo Shishan's servants looked surprised. So did the Captain. He knew Xu Qing well, and thus came to the conclusion that for him to remain sealed for so long meant that he was up to something.

When the sixth hour arrived, the Captain's expression flickered, and Tuo Shishan's servants looked very serious. Although it was impossible to see what was happening inside the sealed areas, given how much time had gone by, it was obvious that breaking free was difficult.

Inside of D-132, Tuo Shishan could no longer remain calm and collected. His hair was disheveled, and he was completely broken-down. What was broken-down wasn't his body, though, but rather, his mind. He had to work constantly to keep the misfortune at bay. But at the same time, he had to deal with the amnesia, which kept making him forget his main purpose. A feeling of nausea and embarrassment was becoming increasingly stronger within him.

The inmates were in good condition. He had suppressed and killed them numerous times already. As for the god's finger, he hadn't paid much attention to it. As far as he was concerned, a god as weak as that wasn't very noteworthy.

I might be having a tough time, but so is Xu Qing. Furthermore, there's no way he can break free from my sealing. After the three-colored intersection reaches a certain point, he'll find that the final obstacle is something that not even Smoldering Gods can break through. That's my big gift to him.

Such thoughts were what kept Tuo Shishan stable despite the torment he was suffering. Breathing irregularly, eyes bloodshot, he kept the slaughter going. After ultimately suppressing the god's finger, he gasped for breath as he strode toward the entrance that had just become visible. Walking out would constitute breaking free of the sealing. Tuo Shishan started laughing.

Meanwhile, Xu Qing was having just as difficult a time in the three-colored dimension. He had used just about every method he could think of, but there seemed no end to the three colors. Worse, they just seemed to get stronger and stronger. Although he was able to break through, the intersection of the three colors happened over and over again. After succeeding about three hundred times, he spotted a figure seated cross-legged up ahead.

Xu Qing stopped in place.

“Smoldering God!”

Astonishingly, the final obstacle in this three-colored dimension was the soul of a Smoldering God. He looked like an old man, and he was guarding this place. Without his approval, no one weaker than a Smoldering God would be able to leave.

“With me here, you won’t be going anywhere,” he said coolly, opening his eyes and looking at Xu Qing.

Xu Qing didn’t say anything.

Meanwhile, back in D-132, Tuo Shishan stood in front of the entrance. Above the doorway in front of him was a sphere. It was... an ancient sun connected to the door. If the door was opened, the power of a Dawning Sun would explode out.

Upon recognizing what he was looking at, Tuo Shishan stared blankly for a moment, then gritted his teeth and cursed, “How freaking vicious!!”

Chapter 842: Don’t Be Impulsive, Young Friend! If You Have Something To Say, Say It

A lot of cultivators were observing the two sealed areas not too far away from God Mountain. In fact, the streams of divine will only continued to increase. Most were various species associated with the Firemoon Darkheavens, although members of the main species were also represented. The fluctuations had attracted them, after which they were able to read the clues to see what was happening. The presence of the nine servants on the mountain peak ensured that everyone realized Tuo Shishan was involved. As a result, everyone felt fairly calm.

They all knew that Tuo Shishan was from the Darkheaven Clan. He had been extraordinary since childhood, and was considered one of the top five chosen among the Firemoon Darkheaven people. Once he took action, there was no chance he would lose.

It was true that Xu Qing had a spirit that could conquer mountains and rivers, and had methods that no one could afford to underestimate. But *there are always people more important than you, and there is always a heaven beyond heaven*. There was no gifted person among humankind, not even one of their chosen, who could compare to the Firemoon Darkheavens. The disparity was just too immense. However, as time continued to pass, their confidence began to waver. After four hours went by in which Tuo Shishan had not escaped, surprise began to build in their hearts, and speculation ran wild.

“Something strange is going on here!”

“This Xu Qing’s sealing methods... are not simple!”

Tuo Shishan’s nine servants were really starting to get worried.

As far as they could tell, there was only one reason things could be playing out this way. And that was for something unimaginable to exist within Xu Qing’s sealing area. There seemed no other explanation for why their young lord would have such trouble breaking free.

Master Gravesparrow was also feeling a bit hesitant, and was thinking something similar to the nine servants.

Only the Captain seemed more relaxed than ever. However, inside was a different story.

That Tuo Shishan is definitely pulling some sort of scam. He seems heroic and honorable, but he could still be full of crap. Otherwise, why else would he have the crappy name ‘Tuo Shishan?’ [1]

That said, the Captain still wasn't truly worried. Considering how long little Ah Qing had been following him around, he had long since transformed from a naive youngster into the type of person that even the Captain had a hard time scamming. Considering all the hard training the Captain had put him through, it seemed unlikely that a simplistic situation like this would be very troublesome for him.

I worked really hard to bring up little Ah Qing, and by now, he's got a broad depth of knowledge. He can suffer through just about anything. But there's one thing he won't suffer, and that's a loss. I bet that crappy Tuo Shishan is really starting to get worried.

The Captain's speculation was absolutely correct.

Inside of D-132, Tuo Shishan stood in front of the main entrance of the cell block, grinding his teeth and cursing constantly.

“Dammit!”

The more he looked at the door, the more helpless he felt. He had already tried numerous ways of skirting the Dawning Sun to open the door. But every single one of his attempts had failed. No matter what ideas he came up with, there was no way to open the door without detonating the Dawning Sun. There were even a few times in which the Dawning Sun had started to pulse with the energy of self-detonation. Tuo Shishan couldn't be sure if it was a bluff, but it was completely frightening and left him fearing for his life. At this point, he was starting to go slightly mad.

How shameless! I can't believe he put a domain treasure like that in here.... What kind of honorable person goes around with a domain treasure? How am I supposed to get past that thingy to escape? Xu Qing, oh, Xu Qing. I really underestimated you. I can't believe you're so sinister!

That said, no matter how crafty you are, you're not on my level. I have the soul of a Smoldering God in my sealed area. There's no way you'll be able to get past that obstacle. Maybe I'm trapped, but you can keep dreaming if you think you'll get free! Worst case scenario, we have a stalemate!

Tuo Shishan chuckled coldly.

The same Xu Qing who had him grinding his teeth constantly was inside the three-colored sealing area, frowning as he looked at the three-colored glow ahead of him.

Within that glow was a hale and hearty old man. He sat down cross-legged in the light, his expression indifferent, his gaze calm as he looked at Xu Qing.

“Don't waste your energy, human child. With me here, you can't leave this place.”

Xu Qing stood there silently. He had employed a number of methods in his attempts to escape, but they were *as good as throwing a stone ox into the ocean* in dealing with this Smoldering God's soul. Whatever divine abilities he used, the old man could negate them with the wave of a hand. What was more, the pressure from the sealing grew stronger and stronger, almost as if it was connected to the old man. He wouldn't back down, and the seal wouldn't open.

From all of this, Xu Qing could only come to the conclusion that this wasn't the soul of an ordinary Smoldering God. That was especially true considering how closely tied he was to the sealed area.

I bet this place is one of that Smoldering God's major worlds!

As Xu Qing thought such things, the old man smiled faintly. Sounding very casual, he said, "You most likely already guessed that this place was made from one of my major worlds. Outside of here, I was a Smoldering God. Therefore, inside of this major world, I am a god.

"That said, I won't go hard on you. Just be obedient and stay put. But if you don't pipe down...." The old man licked his lips, and suddenly, his gaze became malevolent. "I'll eat you!"

Xu Qing looked up and studied the Smoldering God soul for a time. His eyes began to glitter.

Although he was confident that Tuo Shishan wouldn't be able to escape confinement, he also didn't want things to end in a tie, which was where things seemed to be heading. Furthermore, he didn't like having his life threatened. Eyes narrowing, he made a decision.

There was one other thing he was prepared to try, and he felt reasonably confident it would work. With his decision made, he tapped his bag of holding to produce an object.

Seeing that Xu Qing wasn't giving up, the old Smoldering God's face flickered with displeasure, and his eyes gleamed with cold light.

In his opinion, humans were just too stubborn. Just as he was about to snort coldly and crush the human, he sensed what was coming out of Xu Qing's bag of holding, and it caused his eyes to narrow. Then, both his gaze and his divine will locked onto the object.

It was a command medallion.

"Is that...?" The old man's heart started pounding. "Emperor Ancient Spirit's netherworld medallion??"

The tempest within him caused the light surrounding him to start rippling dramatically.

Xu Qing was actually somewhat surprised, as he hadn't expected the old man to recognize the medallion. It was indeed the very same teleportation medallion Emperor Ancient Spirit had given him to deliver food. The fact that the old man recognized it was going to make this entire situation easier.

Xu Qing held the command medallion aloft, looked straight at the old Smoldering God, and calmly said, "This is a teleportation medallion that leads right to Emperor Ancient Spirit. The venerable Emperor Ancient Spirit has been starving for quite a while now. For the past few years, I've been responsible for feeding him.

"Truth be told, Senior, you would make the perfect snack for Emperor Ancient Spirit. Because you have no fleshly body, he won't get any food stuck between his teeth. Your soul is clearly plump and full of flavor.

"That said, I'd rather not cause any trouble for you. All you have to do is be obedient and let me pass. But if you don't pipe down...." His gaze hardened as he looked at the old man. "I'll teleport you to Emperor Ancient Spirit to be the next meal!"

The old man's heart raced as he realized Xu Qing was saying almost the exact same thing that he had just said earlier. He looked at Xu Qing. He looked at the command medallion. He hesitated.

Xu Qing's expression was the same as ever. Without giving the old man any time to think the situation over, he pushed down on the medallion, which instantly resulted in bright light shining out. A stream of netherworld energy rushed out, quickly turning into a black vortex. Rumbling sounds echoed out, along with something eerie and corrosive. It was death energy. There was also a sigh that sounded both incredibly hungry and profoundly ancient.

"So hungry..."

When the old man heard those words, he shivered dramatically.

Xu Qing's eyes gleamed as he prepared to finish the teleportation.

All of a sudden, a look of decisiveness appeared on the old man's face. Shooting to his feet, he blurted, "Hey now, young friend, we can negotiate! Let's be friends."

Xu Qing looked at him coldly.

After a brief bit of negotiating, the old man stepped back, smiled, and let Xu Qing pass.

"Many thanks, Senior." Xu Qing was as polite as ever, so it was no surprise that he would bow thankfully before leaving.

The old man's face hardened, but he kept smiling.

The next instant, Xu Qing's view of the three-colored dimension blurred, and then he was outside. The moment he was out, numerous gazes locked onto him. Incredulous gasps rang out everywhere.

Tuo Shishan's nine servants reacted with visible astonishment.

Master Gravesparrow looked excited, and the Captain grinned.

Xu Qing ignored all of that. As he hovered in midair, he looked at D-132. As the guard of the place, all it took was a thought for him to check everything that was happening inside. Then he waved his hand. D-132 vibrated, then blurred. A moment later, Tuo Shishan appeared.

"You lose," Xu Qing said quietly.

Tuo Shishan looked at him, all while cursing inwardly. He was also a bit hesitant, as he wasn't sure how Xu Qing had freed himself. Based on his understanding, that should have been impossible.

Did the old man actually let him go?

Tuo Shishan was somewhat at a loss. However, he had spoken some very grand words earlier, and with so many people watching, he would lose all face if he went back on his own agreement. Face darkening, he waved his hand, sending over 900 mountains over to Xu Qing. He kept only one.

Xu Qing waved his hand to collect them. Now he had over 1,800 forbidden mountains orbiting overhead in a truly shocking display. Seeing that Tuo Shishan had kept his word, Xu Qing turned and flew off in the direction of God Mountain.

The Captain chuckled and followed. Master Gravesparrow excitedly did the same.

The shocked onlookers made way for them.

After they were off in the distance, the depressed and suspicious Tuo Shishan took back his three-colored sealing pearl. Once it was in his hand, he sent a message inside.

“Old grandpa, why did you let him go?” [2]

Furious, the Smoldering God replied, *“Damn it all! That human brat had a command medallion from Emperor Ancient Spirit! He used it to threaten me! I had no choice! That codger Emperor Ancient Spirit has been starving for years. If I got sent to hīm, I’d be nothing but a snack. You think this is my fault? What took you so long to get free?”*

Tuo Shishan only felt more depressed now. *“He had the door sealed with a Dawning Sun! What was I supposed to do?”*

The old grandpa inhaled sharply, but said nothing further.

Tuo Shishan likewise said nothing further.

Chapter 843: The Fourth Statue. The God-Defiler

Above the sprawling lands rose towering mountains. It looked like someone had casually scattered ink on rice paper, creating a beautiful landscape painting.

Among all of the mountains was one specific mountain that rose higher than all the others. This was a holy peak to the Firemoon Darkheavens. It was called God Mountain. It looked almost like an ink brush pointing up into the dome of heaven. Countless clouds drifted past the base of the mountain, making it seem like a paradisiac island of immortals floating in the air. The sun shone down on the boulders and lush vegetation on the mountain, making it unusually dazzling and glorious.

The mountain created a clear contrast to the sky behind it, ensuring that whether it was viewed from near or far, it was shocking to behold. Any who got close to it would sense a mountain-toppling, sea-draining energy pulsing off it. It was clearly just one mountain, but its mere existence seemed to make the dome of heaven become dim in comparison, to the point where it seemed capable of suppressing the sky itself.

Xu Qing could be considered well-traveled, but even he had never seen anything like it. Its towering summit rose arrogantly high into the sky. It emanated golden light that, whether inherently or by the bolstering of the sun, spread out to fill the sky and cover the surrounding lands.

Sensing the light caused Xu Qing’s eyes to fill with a profound look. He could feel the power of gods in that golden light! It was a power that contained a certain level of mutagen. Although the mutagen was under control, it was free enough that it could be absorbed normally. He inhaled deeply, converting it into cultivation base power for himself.

The Captain stood next to Xu Qing taking everything in, his eyes shining with reminiscence the entire time. He sighed.

“Back again...” he murmured in a low voice that only Xu Qing could hear. “Let’s go, little Junior Brother. You really need to see this place.”

The Captain patted Xu Qing’s shoulder.

Xu Qing suppressed his astonishment and glanced up at the over 1,800 forbidden mountains orbiting over him. The closer he got to God Mountain, the smaller they shrank down, until they

were little more than black dots circling overhead. Though they were small, the vast number of them still made him very eye-catching.

With this many, I should take first place, right?

Xu Qing accelerated, becoming a beam of prismatic light that shot toward the mountain range ahead.

God Mountain grew larger and larger from Xu Qing's perspective, until he couldn't even see the summit. It made him feel minute and powerless.

Near the bottom of the mountain was a floating city made up of three smaller sub-cities. Each sub-city was grand and magnificent. They were connected by golden chains, and the immense amount of vegetation growing off of them made them seem very ancient.

The cities were all roughly circular, conforming to the architectural style common among the species of Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity's time. Nowadays, such architecture was rare, even among humankind.

Sounding very excited, Master Gravesparrow said, "This is the holy city of the Firemoon Darkheaven people. It's called Heavenfire City! It's normally opened up to the public only during the Great Hunt and certain other important occasions. I had the great honor of being able to come here three times in the past. This is my fourth time here.

"Flying is prohibited in Heavenfire City, and all who come here are supposed to treat their visit like a holy pilgrimage." [1]

Master Gravesparrow continued to explain some of the other rules of the city as he led Xu Qing and the Captain toward one of the three small cities.

Even from a distance, it looked like a bustling place filled with plenty of cultivators. According to Master Gravesparrow, the majority of the people present were visitors. For the most part, the permanent residents were members of the temples.

Their arrival attracted a lot of attention. Truth be told... humans were very rare here. And there was little need to mention that Xu Qing was already famous. Then there was his clash with Tuo Shishan. As a result, his arrival was noticed immediately. The fact that he had over a thousand forbidden mountains made him even more eye-catching.

Xu Qing was used to such things already. As he landed in front of the city gates, his eyes shone. Taking a deep breath, he walked forward.

The city gates obviously weren't designed with humans in mind. They were some 300 meters tall. Everything else in the city was similar. It was like a city made for giants.

As Xu Qing looked around, he saw cultivators from hundreds of different species, many of them very bizarre and exotic. Firemoon Darkheavens, who were rare outside, were actually the most common cultivators here. The majority of them wore white robes, and wherever they went, they were shown a great deal of respect. They didn't need to make any effort to seem lofty and aloof. It came naturally.

"Even back in the day, I hated their attitude," the Captain muttered.

Xu Qing didn't say anything. Nor did he pay attention to any of the numerous gazes cast in his direction, many of which were hostile. He had something more important on his mind. And that was... to turn in his mountains! By going to God Mountain and handing over his forbidden mountains, he could solidify his ranking. And thus, he looked at Master Gravesparrow.

Master Gravesparrow had been paying close attention to Xu Qing while leading him on his journey. As a result, he knew exactly what Xu Qing meant by that look. Hurrying forward, he led the way.

As countless people looked on, Xu Qing, the Captain, and Master Gravesparrow proceeded through the city. Gossip immediately began to spread, and right about when they reached the halfway point, some Firemoon Darkheaven cultivators stepped out in front of them and issued a challenge. Clearly there were members of their species who weren't very happy that a human had acquired so many forbidden mountains in the first round.

Xu Qing glanced at them. Seeing that they had no mountains orbiting over them, he ignored them.

A few hours later, as the sun was beginning to set... Xu Qing arrived in front of God Mountain.

Nine huge chains connected Heavenfire City to the mountain. By following the chains with one's gaze, it was possible to see a huge plaza complex high up on the mountain, where three massive divine likenesses of green stone existed. They represented the gods of sun, moon, and star. Behind the divine likenesses was a staircase that disappeared higher up on the mountain.

"There are three paths leading up God Mountain," Master Gravesparrow explained. "They begin at Heavenfire City and lead to the three god plazas."

Xu Qing nodded, looking away from God Mountain to the chains. Beneath them was a bottomless chasm. The wind caused the chains to slowly swing back and forth. Without any hesitation, Xu Qing walked forward and hopped onto one of the chains. After some thought, the Captain chose to follow Xu Qing on the same chain. Master Gravesparrow was initially surprised, but then he picked one of the chains and hurried after them.

Nothing unexpected happened. Eventually, Xu Qing reached the plaza complex where the three statues were.

The first depicted High God Sunfire. It was hard to determine if High God Sunfire was male or female. The body seemed female, but the facial features were male. A sun rose behind the statue, and a host of evil ghosts were beneath its feet. The statue's eyes were closed.

The second statue was in no way unfamiliar to Xu Qing. It depicted High God Moonfire. Shē was breathtaking, with an expression as cold as an iceberg. Shē was actually quite different from what Xu Qing remembered from the fight with Crimson Mother. There was a moon behind the statue, which cast cold moonlight that made the statue seem holy.

Xu Qing was very familiar with the third statue.... It was the clay fox, with stars behind the statue. The statue seemed extremely flirtatious, making it hard to look away from.

However, what attracted Xu Qing's attention was not the three divine likenesses. Rather... it was the fourth statue. That statue was bowing to High God Moonfire. It was skinless and covered with whip marks and countless other wounds. There were even some blades stuck into the statue.... From the look of things, High God Moonfire hated this statue with a deep passion, and as a punishment, forced it to endure humiliation and torment.

Upon looking at the statue, the Captain blinked a few times.

Master Gravesparrow noticed that Xu Qing was looking at the fourth statue, so he quietly explained, “That statue has a mysterious origin. It’s been there for a very long time. My people call that statue the God Defiler. Legend has it that he defiled High God Moonfire and committed a heinous crime, making him wicked beyond redemption. High God Sunfire personally executed him, then chopped his fleshly body into pieces and turned them into this kneeling statue. [2]

“It’s supposed to be a warning against others. What’s even more noteworthy is that the official teachings of the Moonfire Temple mention the event. There’s even a special holiday in the Moonfire Temple dedicated to cursing the God Defiler.”

Xu Qing looked at the Captain.

The Captain’s facial expression remained the same, and in fact, he seemed very intent on just listening to Master Gravesparrow. When he noticed Xu Qing looking at him, he turned with great curiosity to look at the fourth statue.

Master Gravesparrow naturally had no way to know what Xu Qing and the Captain were thinking about, so he decided to add something to his previous description.

“By the way, there’s a rule when it comes to Heavenfire City and God Mountain. And that rule is that it’s prohibited to bring an ox here. It’s completely taboo. I have no idea why that rule exists. But I do know that if anyone brings an ox here, it will get killed immediately. In fact, any species even related to oxen in any way have mostly been exterminated by the Moonfire Temple over the years.”

Xu Qing looked at the Captain again. Without a scrap of shame, the Captain continued to look very curious.

Therefore, Master Gravesparrow continued, “Another thing. There’s a taboo against having the character ‘ox’ in your name. If you have that character in your name, you definitely shouldn’t let anyone know about it. Say, Fellow Daoists, do either of you have the character ‘ox’ in your name?”

During their travels, he had obviously come to learn Xu Qing’s name. However, he hadn’t heard the name Chen Erniu at all. He just knew that Xu Qing called him Eldest Brother. [3]

Xu Qing shook his head and looked yet again at the Captain.

The Captain cleared his throat and quickly shook his head. Master Gravesparrow didn’t think much of the situation and prepared to give some more information.

“Also—”

At long last, the Captain couldn’t continue his act. Glaring at Master Gravesparrow, he interrupted, “Alright, we get the picture. Keep leading the way. Why are you jabbering so much?”

Chapter 844: Flags of Species on God Mountain

Master Gravesparrow was both surprised and a little embarrassed at the Captain’s angry outburst. *What’s wrong with this guy? I wasn’t talking about him!*

All he had done was explain the rules of God Mountain, and therefore, couldn't figure out why Xu Qing's Eldest Brother would get so emotional. Then the speculations started.... Of course, no matter what fanciful things he imagined, he couldn't possibly understand what was going on inside of Chen Erniu. However, it was obvious to him that the Captain was irritated in some way, so Master Gravesparrow simply put such thoughts aside and led them past the kneeling fourth statue and to the staircase beyond it.

As Xu Qing walked past the statue of the God Defiler, he couldn't help but look over a bit more closely.

The Captain was right next to him. He rubbed his nose, looked at Xu Qing, cleared his throat, then projected a message via divine will.

"Don't stare, little Ah Qing. How could I have guessed that after all these years, that not-man, not-woman, heaven-damned old fart Sunfire would do something as infuriating as this? Completely preposterous!"

The Captain snorted.

Xu Qing looked away from the statue as they neared the stairs. But then he couldn't suppress his curiosity and replied to the Captain with divine will. *"Eldest Brother, if Moonfire or Sunfire realize you're here, is it possible they might slap you to death...?"*

The Captain's eyebrows shot up. *"Why else do you think I got those Wordless words before coming here? Don't worry. I have a foolproof plan at work. Sunfire is always asleep, and Moonfire is still digesting Crimson Mother's flesh. As for the slutty fox, it doesn't matter if her statue wakes up, as her true form is asleep. Besides, she likes a good show, so she won't interfere randomly. We're completely safe here."*

The Captain thumped himself on the chest.

Xu Qing sighed and started preparing mentally for things to go awry. Taking a deep breath, he stepped onto the stairs.

The moment his foot touched the first stair, one of his over 1,800 forbidden mountains disappeared. It turned into a bright beam of light that merged into God Mountain.

As that happened, something fantastic happened to God Mountain. A host of flags appeared on it. It was a visual ranking system that stretched the entire length of the staircase. The flags were different colors and had different designs embroidered on them. They were also different sizes. The higher up the flag, the bigger it was, and the easier it was to see. In fact, even people in the city were able to see the larger flags.

Most of the flags were toward the bottom. There were tens of thousands of them. It seemed that 100 stairs was a major dividing point, as there were only about 2,000 flags after that point. Looking higher, it seemed that 500 stairs was a second dividing point, as there were only about 300 flags after that. Beyond that, the biggest flag was at about the 800th stair. It was huge and very eye-catching.

With a bit of observation, it was possible to determine that once you passed stair number 300, about eighty percent of the flags belonged to Firemoon Darkheavens. Below that point were flags from all sorts of species.

And now that Xu Qing had stepped onto the stairs, there was another flag there. It was a red flag, ordinary-sized and embroidered with mountains and rivers. However, the mountains and rivers seemed smashed and broken. That, combined with the blood-red color, made the flag seem somewhat depressing. It was the God Mountain flag that represented humankind! The moment it appeared, Xu Qing instinctively looked over at it.

At the same time, Master Gravesparrow quietly explained, “The last part of round one in the Great Hunt is to put your forbidden mountains into God Mountain. Every step you ascend will cause one of your forbidden mountains to disappear and become part of your flag of species.

“The flag of species will move with the cultivator as they ascend the stairs. When the last forbidden mountain disappears, the flag of species will be permanently located at that highest spot for that cultivator. The other flags of species are normally invisible. They only show up when someone comes to hand over their forbidden mountains.”

Master Gravesparrow’s forbidden mountain had also disappeared when he stepped onto the first stair, and another Firemoon Darkheaven flag of species had appeared on God Mountain.

“Normally speaking, one forbidden mountain is enough to pass the first round and get you into the second. Only cultivators who are trying to take first place in round one will bother to collect a lot of mountains.

“The flags of species are automatically formed by God Mountain, and conform to the characteristics of the specific species.”

Xu Qing nodded. Looking away from the human flag of species, he rose to the second stair. As he did, another mountain disappeared from over his head.

The red flag with the mountains and rivers came with him and got slightly bigger. And thus, he walked all the way to stair number 100.

At that point, the red flag with the mountains and rivers was much larger. It actually stood out compared to many of the other flags. The larger the flag got, the more obvious it was that the mountains and rivers were broken. In fact, it was also possible to see corpses littering them.

Xu Qing wasn’t paying attention to that, though. Looking up the stairs at the other flags of species, he continued climbing.

200. 300. 400....

When he reached stair number 500, there were tens of thousands of flags below him, and not many above.

Because of how quickly he was ascending the stairs, all of the flags were clearly visible to everyone. And the fact that the bright red flag was getting bigger and bigger ensured that everyone was looking at it. Although many Firemoon Darkheaven cultivators had prepared themselves mentally for this, seeing it happen with their own eyes was still a shock.

“It’s Xu Qing!”

“I saw him earlier and could tell he was walking toward God Mountain....”

“What hubris! I can’t believe a human is hoisting their flag of species so high in our Great Hunt!”

“It’s all the fault of our species’ chosen cultivators! None of them even tried to stop him. Well, there was Tuo Shishan, but all he did was compete in sealing magic. If one of them had just stepped in, then this human wouldn’t look so cocky!”

The Firemoon Darkheaven cultivators were obviously not very happy, and their antagonism was only growing stronger. Around that time, Xu Qing reached stair number 500. As he stood there with clouds drifting past, he looked up at the handful of flags higher up the stairs.

More than 1,300 stairs to go!

He started climbing again as fast as he could. Soon he reached stair number 600. Then 700. Eventually, he reached what was previously the highest stair with a flag on it. He didn’t stop. The red flag had now surpassed all of the Firemoon Darkheavens’ flags of species, and was the most prominent flag on the mountain. And Xu Qing still had more stairs to climb!

900 stairs. 1,000 stairs.

He moved quickly, and the red flag moved with him.

More and more Firemoon Darkheaven cultivators were watching. As the red flag with the mountains and rivers got higher and higher, their hearts burned with increasing humiliation. As a superior species, it was only natural that the Firemoon Darkheaven cultivators were a proud lot. But in a moment like this, that sense of solidarity and pride as a species would only lead to increased shame.

What was more, the humans’ flag of species wasn’t just visible to ordinary cultivators. The Firemoon leadership in Heavenfire City were all able to look up and see that flag with the mountains and rivers. Many an odd facial expression could be seen.

In particular, there was the Firemoon noble from the palace in the forbidden region. When he looked at Xu Qing on God Mountain, and sensed the hostility from the cultivators of his species, he smiled broadly.

Time passed, and the flag of mountains and rivers got higher and higher. 1,200 stairs. 1,400 stairs. 1,600 stairs....

Finally, high above the clouds, on stair number 1,873, the red flag with mountains and rivers flapped in the wind. It was fully 3,000 meters wide, and was far beyond any of the other flags! Everyone could tell that countless heroic cultivators had been surpassed. And this seemed to be only a harbinger of what was to come! Nothing like this had ever happened in all of the Great Hunts that had occurred throughout the years. Never had a human taken first place in the first round.

As the humans’ flag of species flapped in the wind, Heavenfire City below was completely silent. Countless eyes were fixed on the red flag with mountains and rivers that was now clearly visible on God Mountain.

Xu Qing looked at the flag with a slightly dazed expression. He wasn't really sure how to describe his feelings. Eventually, he turned around and walked back down. As he descended, he could hear a commotion building in the city below. He didn't pay any attention to that. At the bottom of the staircase, he found the Captain waiting for him.

The Captain grinned. "What did it feel like to stand there?"

Xu Qing looked back at God Mountain. He shook his head. "Sadly, I couldn't make it all the way to the top."

The Captain laughed. "You did well enough. You've already pissed off the Firemoon Darkheavens to the point where they hate you. After all, you just planted *your* flag on *their* mountain.

"But the Firemoon Darkheaven leaders have achieved their goal. The reason they permitted you to show up and slaughter people left and right is that they want to light a fire under the current generation of cultivators here.

"To make a pack of wild dogs more vicious, you need a wolf to come in and rile things up. That's what'll really set them off. You, my friend, are the wolf. Or, as I like to put it, the one who stirs crap up. As you can well imagine, there are going to be a lot of people watching you in the second and third rounds. Which is fine, right? That way you can have plenty of enemies to kill along the way!"

"You come up with some great analogies, Eldest Brother," Xu Qing said coolly.

The Captain blinked a few times. Truth be told, he felt very pleased with himself at his perfect analogies.

"Let's go," the Captain said. "Little Gravesparrow just told me that we'll have some downtime before the second round. We need to find a place to stay. Sadly, things here are really expensive.

"The upside is that all participants in the Great Hunt get a free mansion grotto. And of course, I can stay with you. We definitely can't let something like that go to waste. By the way, I also found out that the second round will be just as I expected.

"The Great Hunt will continue in the Mountain and Sea Region!" [1]

The Captain licked his lips. "Believe you me, little Ah Qing, there are a lot of very delicious beasts in the Mountains and Sea Region. Once you have a taste, you'll never forget it!"

Chapter 845: Stranger in a Strange Land

Xu Qing wasn't sure exactly how many delicious beasts there were in the Mountain and Sea Region. However, after arriving at the free mansion grotto the Captain had mentioned, he finally got a firsthand understanding of how supercilious the Firemoon Darkheaven people were.

During the Great Hunt, when Heavenfire City was opened up, everything was extremely expensive. After all, this location was the central core of Firemoon Darkheaven culture. The prices here were

not the type that ordinary cultivators could afford. That was why Great Hunt participants were given free accommodations in the city.

That said, residents in the city were housed based on strict requirements, and were actually categorized into first-class, second-class, and third-class.

Only Firemoon Darkheaven cultivators and some of the other superior species qualified to get first-class mansion grottoes. Such mansion grottoes had individualized spirit energy, a blessing from God Mountain, and had their own private courtyards. Whether in terms of the luxury of the surroundings or the suitability for cultivation, they were the highest quality possible.

The second-class mansion grottoes were set aside for the Firemoon Darkheavens' subsidiary species, and were much more utilitarian.

The third-class mansion grottoes were simple and crude, and were meant for inferior species from the outside who were participating in the Great Hunt. It didn't matter that Xu Qing had placed his flag of species at the highest spot on God Mountain, thus clinching first place. He still didn't qualify for a first- or even second-class mansion grotto. He had to pick from the third-class ones.

In some cases, the strength or weakness of a species would be reflected onto an individual member of that species. The only exception would be someone who was so incredibly strong they could rise above the reputation of their species. Unfortunately, Xu Qing was not yet at that level.

To the Firemoon Darkheaven people, any species who refused to be subsidiary to them was considered an inferior species. Not even Master Gravesparrow could do anything to change that. Nonetheless, he officially requested if he could transfer his first-class mansion grotto to Xu Qing.

The Firemoon Darkheaven cultivator in charge of the mansion grottoes was obviously not very pleased when Master Gravesparrow brought Xu Qing with him and asked to make an exception.

Frowning deeply, he said, "Absolutely not! He can stay in his assigned place or he can find somewhere else. Those are the rules here."

The Firemoon Darkheaven cultivator tossed a command medallion to Xu Qing, then closed his eyes and ignored him.

Master Gravesparrow sighed inwardly. Looking at Xu Qing, he lowered his voice and said, "Fellow Daoist Xu, it's getting late. Once the sun sets, the night curfew will start... and that's coming soon."

Xu Qing didn't really care what kind of accommodations he had. However, after hearing about the curfew, he scanned the surroundings with divine will. Though the sun was about to set, there were still a lot of people on the streets. It didn't seem very much like there was a curfew about to start.

"The curfew is for non-Firemoons, right?" the Captain said. He hefted the mansion grotto command medallion. "It's free, so you have to stay there. If you don't, it would be a big waste."

Xu Qing retracted his divine will and nodded to Master Gravesparrow. With the Captain leading the way using the command medallion, they left.

Master Gravesparrow clasped hands and bowed, all while sighing inwardly. Having followed Xu Qing for such a long time, he was fully aware of the shocking level of his battle prowess.

It seems to me he's only in the great circle of Spirit Trove, but he already has fourth-stage Void Returning battle prowess.... If a chosen like that was a Firemoon Darkheaven, he would be extremely popular and would be considered favored by the heavens. What a pity. It's really too bad.

Master Gravesparrow sighed as he watched Xu Qing and the Captain disappear down the street.

Eventually the sun set and the moon rose. Xu Qing and the Captain had already found the mansion grotto he'd been assigned. In reality, it wasn't actually a mansion grotto. It was more like a simple apartment. And it was in a remote location. That said, Xu Qing had never been one to worry much about where he stayed. Even if the apartment had been more crude, it was much better than the hovel where he had lived as a kid in the slums in South Phoenix.

Once inside, Xu Qing sat down cross-legged and closed his eyes to meditate.

The Captain also didn't seem to care much about their accommodations. He took out a jade slip and started sending messages to unknown recipients, and in that manner, the night passed.

The next morning at dawn, the Captain winked and said, "Good morning, little Ah Qing. I asked around and found out that the second round starts in a month. We've got plenty of time on our hands. You just rest up while I work on gathering intelligence. I also have some personal matters to attend to."

The Captain licked his lips and his eyes gleamed with anticipation and excitement. It reminded Xu Qing of when he was young and saw people in the scavenger basecamp walking toward the feathered tents.

"Just be careful," Xu Qing said.

"Don't worry, seriously," the Captain said, smacking his chest in the customary fashion. "Thanks to the Wordless Book of Stone, no one can possibly detect my aura."

Rubbing his hands together, he left.

Xu Qing shook his head and went back to meditating.

A few days passed.

Xu Qing never went out, and the Captain never came back. Thanks to the time spent resting and recovering, Xu Qing's exhaustion from all the slaughter had finally passed.

Might as well go for a walk. I wonder what kind of information I can buy about the Mountain and Sea Region.

With that, he left his residence.

During the days that had passed, more flags had appeared on God Mountain. Not one was as high as Xu Qing's. As a result, the Firemoon Darkheaven cultivators were becoming increasingly irritated. To look up and see that flag of mountains and rivers flapping high above all the other flags filled them with discontent regarding Xu Qing. That negative attitude was plainly visible in the eyes of the people who spotted Xu Qing as he strolled through the city.

Xu Qing didn't care. As he walked along, he heard bits and pieces of malicious conversation, but he chose to ignore them.

The first round was almost over, and there wasn't any point in getting into fights without the possibility of getting more forbidden mountains. Besides... there were just too many people saying malicious things. Maybe he could kill some of them, but he definitely couldn't kill all of them. Quite a few people stepped out to challenge him, but he didn't think that any of them were worth it.

"Hey, human! Xu Qing!" All of a sudden, a jade slip flew out of the crowd to hover in front of him. Behind it, a young member of one of the Firemoons' subsidiary species stepped out and stared coldly at Xu Qing. "How dare you walk around this holy city! I hereby challenge you to a fight to the death!"

Xu Qing looked at him, saw nothing of value, and kept walking.

The young man hadn't actually been interested in fighting to the death. He was just taking advantage of the moment to earn some notoriety. He chuckled coldly as he watched Xu Qing walk away.

Similar challenges occurred frequently, and it was starting to annoy Xu Qing. That feeling intensified when he realized that the shops in the city were also categorized into grades and ranks, and there were some who refused to do business with him. The revulsion and malice being shown to him, and all the challenges, caused his gaze to turn ice-cold. He knew full well that all he had to do was take out the identity medallion from the clay fox, and he could resolve any such situations instantly. That medallion would allow him to enter any shop and buy anything he wanted.

But after glancing at God Mountain, he decided not to use the medallion. Instead, he sent a voice message to Master Gravesparrow. Then he returned to his residence. He was only there for a short time before Master Gravesparrow arrived with a host of information about the Mountain and Sea Region.

They hadn't seen each other for a few days. After handing over the information, Master Gravesparrow bowed and left with a complicated look on his face. Xu Qing took note of that expression. It wasn't hard to put himself in Master Gravesparrow's shoes and understand the general reason for his disposition. He was a Firemoon Darkheaven, but he had spent a lot of time following around two humans that everyone seemed to hate. Presumably, he had dealt with the same type of sarcastic comments that Xu Qing had heard over the past few days.

As Xu Qing thought back to everything he had experienced so far in this city, he felt even more irritated. Finally, he started studying the jade slips Master Gravesparrow had brought with the information about the second round of the Great Hunt.

The second round would be held in the Mountain and Sea Region. It was a special location because it wasn't inhabited by cultivators from any species. Instead, it was full of innumerable mutant beasts. Some lived isolated lives, while others roved about in groups.

For countless years, the Firemoon Darkheavens had been relocating beasts into the region, where they bred and proliferated. All sorts of mutant variations existed, including gruish creatures and animals that couldn't be found anywhere else. For instance, the 'ghost chariot' Xu Qing and the Captain saw sometime before came from there.

The jade slip about the Mountain and Sea Region didn't contain any information about how the region came to be. There were only a few scattered passages that hinted at the origin, and they related to some of the oldest legends of the Firemoon Darkheaven people.

That said, Xu Qing wasn't particularly curious about such things. He mostly wanted to know about the most famous beasts from the place, as well as information about their habitats. After perusing the information, Xu Qing identified the top-ranked beast.

It was called a 'ninedawns.'

It had a special place in Firemoon Darkheaven culture. Throughout the entire history of their species, there had only been one instance in which someone tamed a ninedawns. Specifically, it was the very first ancestral chief of the Firemoon Darkheavens, who was also the grand steward who led them to prominence. His mount was a ninedawns. After that time period, no one had ever succeeded in taming one.

Because of that, Firemoon Darkheaven cultivators held the ninedawns in the highest regard. Some even said that whoever tamed a ninedawns would earn the respect of the entire species, and would be worshiped by all the subsidiary species. There were a lot of stories about the ninedawns. However, none of them contained very many details. In fact, it wasn't even clear if the ninedawns was a solitary species or if they lived in groups.

According to the jade slip, there were some old-timers among the Firemoon cultivators who knew how to tame a ninedawns. However, their gods had set forth very specific rules regarding the Mountain and Sea Region.

Specifically, it wasn't permitted to go into the region except on special occasions. In fact, it was only during the Great Hunt that their gods would open the place. That was when the Great Hunt participants could go in and find mutant beasts to tame as mounts. Because of that limitation, it had been many, many years since a ninedawns was even seen.

The ninedawns were known to live in a location that had come to be called the Ninedawns Forbidden Lands. According to the jade slip, it was an extremely dangerous location that few people made it out alive.[1]

Ninedawns?

After going through all the information about the ninedawns, Xu Qing had the lingering feeling that some of the information was contradictory.

There's definitely more to this story. But what...?

Xu Qing thought about it for a moment.

What kind of beasts are these ninedawns? Do they really have something to do with nine lanterns? [2]

Chapter 846: Professional

Xu Qing was very interested in this ninedawns. After all, taming a special and significant beast as a mount was the way to take first place in the second round. And Xu Qing's goal wasn't just to become a darkheaven general, but to become the Grand Darkheaven. The only way to become the exceedingly rare Grand Darkheaven was to take first place in every round of the Great Hunt.

Sadly... I don't see how I could tame a ninedawns.

Xu Qing couldn't help but feel some regret. He tended to act decisively, and was even willing to be a bit crazy. But in most cases, he liked to weigh all the factors before acting, which made him a bit different from the Captain. Simply put, Xu Qing was a rational person.

It was obvious that since this ninedawns beast hadn't even been seen for years, much less tamed, there was obviously some secret about it that no outsiders were aware of. It was also easy to imagine how dangerous it would be to go after one.

Xu Qing retracted his divine will from the jade slip about the ninedawns, and went on to study information about other beasts, hoping to find a suitable target for the next round. Around then, his expression flickered, and he looked up.

It was currently night outside, and it was already past the curfew time. The night was so dark it was almost like physical ink, seeping in through the door. Then the darkness converged and formed the Captain. It was definitely a special way of making an entrance. In fact, if the Captain hadn't made his presence known via divine will, Xu Qing might not have noticed him.

Xu Qing even did a double take, which left the Captain feeling very pleased.

"What do you think, little Ah Qing? Did your Eldest Brother make a stealthy return, or what?"

Xu Qing nodded.

"Like I said, you don't need to worry. Those Wordless words are inimitably profound. It definitely wasn't a waste of time for me to spend so much time in the Star Emperor Preeminence Sect." In the end, it was a casual message from Xu Qing that got the words from the Wordless Book of Stone, but apparently the Captain was leaving that part of the story out. Looking very haughty, the Captain sat down in front of Xu Qing. Upon noticing the jade slips, he scanned them with divine will, then smiled mysteriously. "Ninedawns? Those little darlings are very hard to tame, little Ah Qing."

Xu Qing looked closely at the Captain. "Have you seen a ninedawns, Eldest Brother?"

The Captain stuck his jaw out and was about to speak, when all of a sudden he looked in the direction of God Mountain and cleared his throat.

"Some things are best left unsaid in this city. They're too sensitive of a subject. If you had been born a few tens of thousands of years earlier, you might have been able to tame a 'ninedawns.' But right now... don't even think about it. In terms of information about them...."

Pursing his lips, the Captain rummaged through his bag of holding for a bit before pulling out a shrimp. He pulled the shrimp apart into two pieces, then blinked a few times at Xu Qing.[1]

Xu Qing thought about it for a moment.

The Captain waved his hand to push aside the jade slip about the ninedawns, as well as all the other jade slips. Then he produced a black bamboo slip that seemed incredibly ancient. "Little Ah Qing, I

didn't help you at all during the first round. To make up for that, I spent the past few days gathering some information. I also looked for some things I left lying around a while back. Trust me, I made out *quite* well!"

The Captain's eyebrows danced up and down happily. "My thorough investigation has left me one hundred percent confident that you can take first place in the second round. In fact, you don't have to worry about anything. I'll take care of it all!

"Next month when the second round starts, I need to go handle something alone. You can just go ahead to the Mountain and Sea Region on your own. Forget about me. Just wait until the second round is about to end and go to hillworm lands. I guarantee that you'll get a juvenile hillworm there!

"Hillworms are one of the top five beasts from the Mountain and Sea Region! They're superior to ghost chariots, so if you tame one of them, you'll definitely have the top beast in the round. Your Eldest Brother has you covered this time!"

The Captain looked extremely proud of himself.

Xu Qing smiled. It didn't matter to him if his Eldest Brother followed through on his promise or not. The mere fact that someone was watching out for him left Xu Qing with a warm feeling.

"Thank you, Eldest Brother."

The Captain looked to be in a great mood as he hummed a little tune and took out a small knife, which he used to start carving the black bamboo slip. Occasionally he would blow the wood chips off his hands. It looked like he was trying to craft some sort of ancient-looking object.

Xu Qing looked closely but had no idea what the Captain was making. All he could see was something roughly crescent-moon shaped, with a lot of mysterious magical symbols on it.

"What's that?" Xu Qing asked.

The Captain flashed an enigmatic smile. "It's a beast-tamer's medallion for the Mountain and Sea Region! Years ago, back when that old shrew Moonfire and I were on better terms, she had me make a lot of things for her.

"This medallion is a very useful thing. I might not have succeeded with it years ago, but that doesn't matter. I'm going to make a total of a hundred and eighty of them. I refuse to believe that if you toss them all out at once, you can't knock out one of those hillworms!

"You see, I'm actually very good at making these thingies. Years ago, I secretly sold quite a few of them.... I even gave them an extremely badass name."

At that point, the Captain cleared his throat and focused on his carving work.

Xu Qing looked on with a curious expression as the Captain did his carving. He was about to ask another question when his transmission jade slip vibrated. Taking it out, he checked it with divine will.

The Captain looked up.

"It's Grand Prince," Xu Qing said. "He just arrived here and asked where we are. He wants to pay a visit."

Xu Qing looked at the bamboo slip in the Captain's hands.

"It's fine," the Captain said. "He won't have any idea what this is. After all, it's from ancient times. Besides, even if he does recognize it, it'll be fine. I can just make a few extra for him."

Looking very relaxed, the Captain continued with his work.

After a bit of thought, Xu Qing told Grand Prince where they were.

It didn't take long before Xu Qing and the Captain sensed that Grand Prince had arrived outside.

"Guyue Zhonghui is here to seek an audience with Region Lord Xu," he said, bowing at the waist. His tone was respectful and polite.

Before Xu Qing killed Crown Prince Brightsouth, there was no way Grand Prince would have treated him like this. Even though the emperor wasn't very fond of him, he was still an imperial prince. But after what he had gone through, his opinion of Xu Qing had improved significantly. As such, he was more than willing to act respectfully.

The door opened quietly. Grand Prince took a deep breath, quickly adjusted his clothing, then hurried inside. Upon catching sight of Xu Qing, he clasped hands and bowed.

"Congratulations, Region Lord Xu. You're the champion of the first round of the Great Hunt!"

Xu Qing looked at Grand Prince and thought back to when they had last seen each other. Grand Prince had been severely injured by Crown Prince Brightsouth. Since then, he had matured significantly. That, coupled with the fact that he looked so similar to the emperor, he now seemed *as vigorous as a soaring dragon or leaping tiger*.

Xu Qing nodded and indicated for him to sit.

Grand Prince sat down cross-legged and took out three jade slips, which he placed down in front of Xu Qing.

"Region Lord Xu," he said quietly, "after we parted, my subordinates and I scoured the lands for information about the second round. We also looked for reports about the various chosen participating in the Great Hunt. I hope the information can be useful to you, Region Lord Xu. Furthermore, there's also news in there regarding the general situation in Firemoon Darkheaven territory.

"The first jade slip has an introduction to quite a few beasts, plus details about their habitats. There's a lot of information there that isn't available publicly. I got it from my mother's clan.

“The second jade slip contains the information about the various Firemoon chosen. I heard about your fight with Tuo Shishan, who is one of the top five chosen. There’s information there about the other four, plus details about seventeen outstanding figures from subsidiary species.

“Given your battle prowess, Region Lord Xu, you probably don’t need to do more than take a quick look at the subsidiary species. But the handful of Firemoon cultivators are worth paying attention to.... To them, status isn’t really important at this point, as they’re considered the top prospects of this generation.

“Sir Heavenink is in the third stage of Void Returning, but he has battle prowess equivalent to the great circle. He’s officially ranked fourth in the Firemoon echelon, and is a member of the stewarded nation of High God Starfire. He has outstanding talent, and actually defeated Tuo Shishan in combat once.

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

“Master Stillwinter is in third-stage Void Returning and ranks second in the echelon. He’s a member of the stewarded nation of High God Sunfire. Known to be vicious and merciless, he fights to kill. He’s cut down dozens of cultivators from other species, and refined them into blood clones that accompany him wherever he goes. He’s mastered many techniques. In fact, he even successfully fought a Smoldering God prisoner. Granted, the prisoner was on his last legs, but in the end, he was still a Smoldering God....

“Finally there’s Sir Firedark. That’s not his real name, of course; he inherited the daoist name Firedark. He’s considered the number one chosen among the Firemoon Darkheaven people! He’s crushed all other members of his generation in the entire species! He’s only in first-stage Void Returning, but his battle prowess surpasses the Void Returning level. He actually has the power of the one-world Smoldering God level!”

Grand Prince paused to take a deep breath.

Xu Qing, meanwhile, was visibly moved. Although he hadn’t actually fought Tuo Shishan, he had felt a lot of pressure when facing him. In fact, he had often wondered if he could actually beat him in a fight. And if it was a battle to the death, Xu Qing knew he would have to pay a heavy price to win. Xu Qing felt the same sense of pressure when hearing about these other four chosen, especially the last one....

My cultivation base is fundamentally not sufficient, Xu Qing thought.

“These four aren’t like Tuo Shishan. They don’t care about becoming a darkheaven general. They just want to get into the god domain to acquire the blood of godly entities, which will help them form the foundation of their major worlds earlier than usual.”

Grand Prince was about to go into further details about the content of the jade slips, but before he did, he glanced at the Captain. At first, he had just planned to look at him briefly. But then he swallowed the words he had been about to speak as his heart started racing and his eyes went wide. Upon looking at the bamboo slip the Captain was carving, his expression became one of complete and utter disbelief.

“Is that...? A godly law medallion??”

Grand Prince’s mind reeled as he shot to his feet. He had seen medallions like this in his mother’s clan, although they only had one of them. It was an ancient thing, and also considered godly, to the point where his people would consecrate them in shrines to the gods.

Chapter 847: The Spirit Trove Path

Grand Prince sounded completely incredulous as he looked at the bamboo slip in the Captain’s hands. He had to look twice just to make sure he wasn’t seeing things. Although he didn’t go back to visit his mother’s clan very often, he was familiar enough with the special items enshrined there. And he was fully aware that the clan elders and other old-timers were very respectful of such things. And their godly law medallion came from the founder of their clan, and had a history going back some ten thousand years. It had been awarded by High God Moonfire thanks to services rendered.

It was a godly item, and in some respects, it represented a god. It was also considered a reserve power of the clan, and was something outsiders weren’t even permitted to look at. Therefore, even though Grand Prince was convinced he knew what he was looking at, he also didn’t dare to believe it was true.

It was really too monumental. To see something so amazing being hacked at by Chen Erniu....

And yet... the aura was unmistakable, and it felt like something truly ancient. It even emitted special fluctuations that indicated... this couldn’t be anything other than a godly law medallion. Grand Prince was so shocked that he completely forgot to continue explaining the jade slips to Xu Qing. And then he was suddenly overwhelmed with the sensation that something extremely precious was being wasted.

“Stop! Fellow Daoist Erniu, that object... you can’t just carve it up!”

The Captain looked calm and even somewhat apathetic as he slowly looked up. Sticking his chin out slightly and lowering his eyelids a bit, he looked at Grand Prince.

“You do know a thing or two. You actually recognized this thing.” He suddenly made another cut with the knife, and a cracking sound rang out. A massive wave of shock slammed into Grand Prince’s heart as he realized that... the knife stroke hadn’t actually damaged the godly law medallion. Instead, it caused its aura and fluctuations to grow stronger.

“This....” Grand Prince stood there, stunned.

Looking even calmer than before, the Captain continued, “The fact you recognized it indicates you’ve seen one before. Not many holy objects like this are around anymore.”

Grand Prince suppressed the confusion in his heart and clasped hands to the Captain. “I saw one in my mother’s clan. The clan founder was given one as a gift for service.”

The Captain’s eyebrows shot up. “What’s the surname of your mother’s clan?”

“Qingfeng,” Grand Prince said after a brief hesitation. “We’re subservient to the Moonfire Temple....”

The Captain thought back for a moment, then smiled enigmatically and said, “Qingfeng? You mean one of the three great clans of Moonfire? Your clan’s founder was named Qingfeng Lingkong, right?”

Grand Prince was more than a little surprised. However, when he thought about how Chen Erniu had followed Xu Qing through Firemoon territory, and that they had been accompanied by Master Gravesparrow, he realized it made sense that they might know some top-secret things.

The Captain didn’t say anything further, and just kept carving.

As for Xu Qing, he had an odd look on his face as he thought back to what the Captain had said just before Grand Prince showed up. He’d said... that in the past, he’d sold ‘hundreds of copies.’ Xu Qing looked at Grand Prince and couldn’t help but wonder where exactly the founder of his mother’s clan had acquired their bamboo slip.

Considering how the conversation had just been derailed, Grand Prince was having a hard time regaining his composure. That was especially true considering... that the Captain, whether intentionally or not, seemed to be making more noise with his carving than he had moments before.

As the *scrape, scrape, scrape* sound echoed out, Grand Prince quickly finished his explanation about the jade slips. Then, still feeling unsettled, he stood and bid farewell.

Before leaving, he gave a command medallion to Xu Qing and explained that there was a shop in the city run by his mother’s clan. All he had to do was go there, and he could acquire some necessary supplies for the second round. Although Grand Prince had refused to give his loyalty to the Firemoons, and had thus been forsaken by his mother’s clan, he obviously still had a lot of connections. That much was evident from the fact that a forbidden mountain had been set aside for him.

When the Captain noted how circumspect Grand Prince was, he nodded. Then he tossed the bamboo slip to him.

Grand Prince instinctively caught it. His expression flickered; obviously he knew the significance of a godly law medallion, and was thus unsure of what the Captain meant by his action.

“Take it,” the Captain said proudly. “Just remember not to tell anyone about it. With that, you shouldn’t have any problem in the second round.”

Grand Prince felt like his mind was about to explode. All of a sudden, his impression of the Captain changed. Now the Captain seemed incredibly mysterious to him.

After a moment of hesitation, he said, "It's too valuable.... You should give it to Region Lord Xu instead. That way—"

"It is valuable!" the Captain interrupted. "But you're worth it!" Standing, he walked over to Grand Prince and clasped his shoulder. "Never forget that you're human. Maybe this thing is invaluable. But as long as you're human, then it's worth it to give it to you!"

"As for Xu Qing, well, he doesn't need it. He's a military man, and this whole thing counts as training for him. Therefore, when it comes to the future of humankind, I'm more interested in you."

Normally speaking, words like that wouldn't have much effect on Grand Prince. But now, things had changed. A tremor passed through him. Taking a deep breath, he nodded seriously, backed up three steps, and then bowed deeply at the waist to the Captain.

The Captain clasped his hands behind his back and nodded. Smiling, he watched as Grand Prince left. Only when he was gone did the Captain turn to Xu Qing and blink a few times.

"Back in the day, that Lingkong fellow from his clan reacted the same way."

Xu Qing didn't respond. Looking down at the three jade slips, he picked up the second, all while mentally reviewing what Grand Prince had said about the four chosen. Upon sending his divine will into the jade slip, he was able to get a lot more information about them, including images.

Browsing all the information helped Xu Qing calm down. The fact that his journey up to this point had been very smooth didn't cause him to take things casually, even if he was on a higher level than his contemporaries.

That was especially true considering that, with the exception of the Captain, no one throughout the years had been able to keep up with his progress. In the end, he still wasn't satisfied.

Back when he had lived in the slums, his dream had been to just find his parents and somehow stay alive. Maybe improve his life a bit. But then the Crown Prince of Violet and Cyan came along and upended his world. That had changed Xu Qing in the depths of his being. Now he wanted to become stronger!

Only by dealing with a major species that surpasses humankind can you really understand how insufficient you are! Only by going toe to toe with nonhuman chosen can you push yourself to the ultimate limit!

Taking a deep breath, Xu Qing closed his eyes and went back to meditation. He was now focused on his secret troves. At the moment he had four of them.

He had three connected to his god states, plus one connected to The Emperor's Sword. The fifth, which wasn't complete, was based on his sundials. Xu Qing thought about his path of cultivation.

I need to figure out a way to complete my fifth secret trove. That will give me a big boost to battle prowess.

There were some options to consider. One was to use soul threads to create an imitation of Crimson Mother. By fusing with that, he could become the true lord of the violet moon, and would be able to

have a complete fourth-level god state. However, there were side-effects to consider, for instance, the unbreakable connection to the red moon.

At the moment, it was hard to tell if Li Zihua was a friend or an enemy, and that meant there was always the possibility of a future deadly conflict. Another option would be to start a new fifth secret trove. However, that would require some additional items with godly personhood.

After some thought, he started to lean in one specific direction.

Another problem I have is with heavenly daos.... Right now, I have my bluegreen dragon, but that's it. Thanks to my god states, my battle prowess isn't affected now. But if I don't have enough heavenly daos, then it will pose an obstacle to reaching Void Returning.

Xu Qing knew that the only way to actually reach Void Returning was to have a heavenly dao for each of his secret troves. It was very difficult for Spirit Trove cultivators to form heavenly daos on their own. That was why most of them tried to acquire minor worlds and then tame the heavenly daos within them.

Unfortunately, ordinary heavenly daos are going to have a hard time sustaining my god troves. The bluegreen dragon is connected to me, so it has a preheaven advantage in that regard. In that case, what kind of heavenly daos can I use to support my god troves...?

Xu Qing rubbed the bridge of his nose as he thought about his heavenly dao son. That didn't seem like a viable option, though. Opening his eyes, he looked at the Captain, who had taken out another bamboo slip and was carving it up.

After Xu Qing explained what he had been thinking about, he asked for some input.

The Captain thought for a moment and then smiled. "Heavenly daos associated with god troves naturally need to have something to do with gods. Aren't you planning to participate in the third round of the Great Hunt after you finish the second?

"Whatever god domain ends up being opened, it'll still be a god domain. God domains all have godly entities inside. All you have to do is capture some godly entities and put them into your god troves. Their god souls can serve as your heavenly daos, right?"

Xu Qing thought about it and realized it was definitely a possibility.

Days passed. There was now only half a month left until the second round began.

The Captain was about half done with his counterfeit work.

After Xu Qing combined his own realizations with the Captain's suggestions, he had come up with a good direction.

On one particular afternoon, Xu Qing left his residence and headed to the shop run by the clan of Grand Prince's mother. It was time to restock his medicinal pills and poisonous plants.

The medallion Grand Prince had given him turned out to be very useful. Xu Qing found what he wanted and bought it with no trouble. He purchased some useful medicinal pills as well as some poisonous plants that weren't easy to find in human lands.

On the way back, he heard more challenges from Firemoon cultivators. There were also a lot of dirty looks. Xu Qing ignored all that. Sometimes, ignoring people will make them think you're weak, and will only prolong the antagonism.

Therefore, at one point on his way back, he suddenly stopped in place. He had sensed some familiar fluctuations.

Looking over, he saw an outdoor slave market. There were all sorts of species being sold, and every one of them was a cultivator. They were all weak, wounded, and in chains. They almost looked like animals. What was more... because of the wartime conditions, many of the slaves were human. Somehow, they had ended up being sent through back channels to become property to be sold here. All of them were soldiers, and were clearly in bad shape. Most had numb looks on their faces.

Grand Prince was present, grimly interacting with the lead slaver in the hopes of purchasing the humans' freedom. Things clearly weren't going very well.

Chapter 848: A Red Sky

The lead slaver that Grand Prince was talking to was also a Firemoon Darkheaven. He wore expensive clothes and had a profound cultivation base, as well as a derisive sneer. He looked at Xu Qing standing some distance away, and then back at Grand Prince.

"It's not that I *can't* sell them to you. But I have to ask, are you human or Firemoon Darkheaven? In a place like this, there's a big difference between the two. If you're human, then you don't qualify to buy slave cultivators. But if you're a Firemoon, I can do a bit of business with you."

The lead slaver grabbed the nearest human slave, a prisoner of war, and forced his mouth open.

"See? Nice teeth, right? Definitely a good value."

The human prisoner of war's expression went from being numb to humiliated. Finally, he just closed his eyes. That is, until the lead slaver jostled him so hard he had to open them.

The lead slaver laughed, then looked over at Xu Qing in a taunting manner. Considering that this slaver had brought human prisoners from the Nightshade Region here to sell as slaves, it was obvious that he had a spectacular background. As a result, he didn't care at all what the human Grand Prince thought. After all, everyone knew that Grand Prince had been forsaken by his mother's clan. What the slaver did care about was Xu Qing, the human who had taken first place in round one of the Great Hunt and become the champion.

Grand Prince's expression was one of grim fury. Unfortunately, he was dealing with a Firemoon Darkheaven, so he didn't have many options at hand. Taking a deep breath, he took out a jade slip and sent a message. He was prepared to use his own methods to buy the human slaves' freedom.

Things played out as expected. Grand Prince had friends in these lands, and they might not be able to do anything incredibly dramatic for him, but in the trivial matter of buying some human slaves, they proved useful. Before long, some Firemoon Darkheaven cultivators strode up and bought the human prisoners.

Xu Qing watched the event play out. In the end, he slowly turned around and walked away with the lead slaver looking on with a taunting scowl. He made sure to walk very slowly.

The setting sun cast a red glow into the sky. As the light shone down onto the path he walked, everything looked like the color of blood.

Within that red glow, two voices spoke inside of Xu Qing's heart.

One voice was telling him that he didn't have some sort of deep connection to humankind. When he was young, he even saw humans eat other humans. The world was an evil place, and in most cases, people were evil toward members of their own species. The imperial capital wasn't his home. His home was Sea-Sealing County. Family and friends would always be a soft spot. In this time and place, the most important thing was to make sure those you loved stayed alive.

But there was another voice speaking so softly that he couldn't hear all the words. Of those he made out clearly, there were two names: Palace Lord Kong and Grand Emperor Swordsage.

Xu Qing walked back beneath that red glow. It was around the time the color left the sky that he arrived back at his residence.

There were a host of jade slips piled up outside the door. They were fighting challenges from Firemoon Darkheaven cultivators, as well as cultivators from subsidiary species. During the half month that passed, Xu Qing hadn't accepted any challenges, and thus, now people didn't just stop him on the street, they also sent jade slips to his residence. There were actually fewer today than usual.

Upon seeing the jade slips, Xu Qing stopped in place. He thought back to everything he had seen in this holy Firemoon city. The glares. The hostility. Master Gravesparrow's loneliness. The taunting of the slaver. He thought of the numb looks he had seen on the faces of the humans, or how the slaver forced the prisoner's mouth open to assess his teeth.

He closed his eyes.

From a young age, he had always unleashed slaughter because of killing intent. When someone threatened him, he would kill them to save his own life. That was why he hadn't been paying much attention in this place. He didn't want to complicate matters.

Before he had clinched the spot of round one champion, he'd had a clear goal, and had killed his way to this spot. And now that he was here, he just wanted to rest until the second round started. He didn't want any complications during that time.

Although some of the challenges were surely sent by individuals, it was also clear that many of them came with more complicated strings attached. There were obviously people who wanted him out of the city. Because this place was a holy city, fighting wasn't allowed. To accept a challenge to a fight, one needed to leave the city.

It doesn't matter. I just need to bide my time.

Xu Qing looked away from the pile of jade slips and continued on his way into the residence. However, he walked very slowly and quietly.

Inside, the Captain sensed him and was about to rise to his feet to go and see what was going on.

Except, that was when the sound of footsteps could be heard behind Xu Qing. Along with the footsteps appeared five or six Firemoon Darkheaven youths who had stopped him on the street in recent days to issue challenges.

They were all in Spirit Trove, and all of them had issued multiple challenges. As a result, they had earned a bit of a reputation among Firemoon Darkheavens of their generation. And they had come here together as a group to continue that trend by issuing challenges formally by jade slip.

Upon catching sight of Xu Qing, one of them laughed coldly and threw a jade slip that clattered onto the ground. Then he opened his mouth to speak. Before he could, Xu Qing stopped, glanced at the jade slip, and then looked over his shoulder at the youth who had thrown it. The young man shivered from head to toe. And then, Xu Qing's gaze caused him to swallow the words he had been about to speak. Xu Qing's gaze was filled with something very cold that swept over him and filled him with an explosive sense of deadly crisis. Every scrap of muscle and flesh on his body trembled with a sense of danger, resulting in the young man taking a few steps back as he struggled to breathe.

His companions, who had also thrown out jade slips of challenge, also shivered as Xu Qing looked at them one by one. All of them suddenly felt profoundly uneasy. It was as if everything around them had turned into winter.

Blood-red snowflakes manifested, drifting down to pick up all the jade slips and bring them to Xu Qing. He reached out and grabbed them.

Around that time, the door opened and the Captain appeared. Looking at Xu Qing standing there, he opened his mouth to speak, then seemed to change what he had been about to say.

"Do whatever strikes your fancy, little Junior Brother. Thinking clearly is the key."

Xu Qing's hand clamped down hard, causing all of the jade slips to shatter, which officially established the terms of the fight.

Then Xu Qing spoke in a voice so cold the surrounding temperature dropped.

"I accept."

As the words left his mouth, Xu Qing started to blur into nothing. The Firemoon cultivators who had issued the challenges also vanished.

Heavenfire City itself would take note of fighting challenges that had been accepted, and would teleport people out according to the details of the challenge.

After Xu Qing vanished from his residence, he materialized in the air above the city.

The dozens of Firemoon cultivators who had issued him challenges in recent days also materialized there. They were all breathing unsteadily. Some looked regretful, some astonished, and some alarmed. Some even tried to turn and run.

Most of them had issued their challenges to boost their own reputation. It didn't make sense at all that Xu Qing would accept the challenges, or at the very least, it hadn't occurred to any of them that he would accept. For the past half month, he had been completely ignoring any fighting challenges. However, today... something unexpected happened.

As their hearts raced, some of them opened their mouths to speak.

An instant later, the coldness in Xu Qing's eyes erupted, and he stepped forward, appearing right in front of the youth who had thrown his jade slip out last.

The difference in battle prowess between the two of them was like an impassable ravine. Before the young man could even react, Xu Qing's left hand stabbed into his throat. The young man's fleshly body withered into a husk as Xu Qing absorbed it. His soul flickered weakly before Xu Qing devoured it.

The young man deflated like a popped balloon. In only a short single breath of time, his life ended. An agonized shriek drifted out into heaven and earth.

Everyone looking on was stunned. In their eyes, Xu Qing was no longer some random human who anyone could challenge. He had turned into a fiendish devil.

In their astonishment, they immediately tried to flee. But it was too late.

Xu Qing vanished and reappeared behind another cultivator. A dagger sliced through the cultivator's neck. Everything seemed to get even colder as the head flew through the air in a geyser of blood.

From his perspective, the world was flipping end over end.

A boom rang out as the body collapsed and the head splattered onto the ground.

"Die!"

All of the inner frustration that had been building in Xu Qing was erupting. He took another step forward and appeared in front of a third Firemoon cultivator. Xu Qing didn't bother even looking at him. He walked past, whereupon an anguished shriek rang out and all the blood exploded out of the Firemoon's body.

That blood had been taken control of by another. It became a blood-colored flower that spun in the air as it descended toward Xu Qing and started rotating around him.

From a distance, it looked both monstrous and beautiful at the same time.

At the moment, Xu Qing wasn't doing any thinking or analysis. And the two voices that had been speaking in his heart had combined to say one thing.

"Die!"

Flowers of blood bloomed outside the city, accompanied by screams of terror. Blood from the cultivators flowed through the air and converged around Xu Qing. He didn't stop moving, and wherever he passed, death came.

Fleshly bodies exploded. Heads flew.

In that moment, the purpose of their lives was to be sacrificed to the blade. The dagger had a cloth made from a shroud, and it was now slick with blood. Its flashing edge became the last light in their lives.[1]

In the space of only about ten breaths of time, every single one of that group of dozens of cultivators... died!

And Xu Qing's slaughter was the fastidious type, so he didn't leave any corpses in the air above the city. As the blood swirled down, the crimson color in the dome of heaven shone down, making things even more red.

Xu Qing looked out at the city without saying a word. His actions. His gaze. His imposing manner. They said it all.

Anybody want to challenge me? I'm waiting for you.... Let's fight!

Chapter 849: Top Chosen from Humankind

There was quite an uproar in the city. Firemoon cultivators who had previously challenged Xu Qing looked on with glittering eyes. None of them did a thing. For most of them, issuing challenges was a way to earn some reputation. Nothing more. When you coupled the fact that Xu Qing hadn't accepted any challenges with the reality that someone was trying to stir things up from behind the scenes, it meant that... none of them had actually considered doing any fighting.

They had mostly been wanting to watch sparks fly. That said, there were some Firemoon cultivators who really did want to fight Xu Qing. They just couldn't accept having a human cultivator be superior to their species. It was a humiliation that became pure rage.

Cultivators like that always had various trump cards to call on, as well as a lot of self-confidence. They had heard about Xu Qing's achievements on the road to God Mountain, and even the story about him killing Crown Prince Brightsouth. But... to them, the purpose of life wasn't necessarily to live a long time, but rather, to shine brightly. They would rather go out in a huge blaze of glory than live quietly with their heads bowed. The Firemoon Darkheavens were an inherently valiant species, and weren't known for showing fear.

Thus, it didn't take long for dozens of Firemoon cultivators to shoot up into the air. First-stage Void Returning auras pulsed as they flew outside of the city.

Innate fleshly body abilities erupted, creating cyclones of energy and blood. Wild colors flashed in heaven and earth. Streaks of light shot through the air as the power of dozens of cultivators became like a huge hand crushing down toward Xu Qing.

This was giving a little glimpse into what reserve powers the Firemoons had on hand. In the remote territories occupied by humankind, Void Returning experts were considered the cream of the crop. But among the Firemoon Darkheaven people, they were considered talented, but not necessarily elite.

And thus, a host of first-stage Void Returning cultivators shot toward Xu Qing and unleashed destructive, crushing attacks.

When Firemoon Darkheavens issued challenges, they didn't limit themselves to one-on-one fighting. They were well aware that powerful experts... weren't always able to fight enemies one at a time.

A truly powerful expert would instill confidence by fighting one versus a hundred or even one versus a thousand. That was how they established dominance in their generation. Only cultivators like that were considered chosen among the Firemoon Darkheaven people. That was why none of these cultivators hesitated for an instant. They became streaks of light shooting through the air like metallic dragons.

Dozens of extraordinary magical treasures were unleashed, including a host of weapons. They also became blurred streaks heading toward Xu Qing. And of course, fleshly body power and divine

abilities raged. Magical laws collapsed and natural laws faded. Wind, rain, thunder, and lightning fell, while the chaotic vicissitudes of spring, summer, autumn, and winter played out.

Xu Qing looked up coldly. He could sense the magical and natural laws blurring, and he could feel pressure building up around him. He could sense himself being hemmed in. It was the feeling of his heavenly dao power being forcibly shoved away and replaced by the heavenly daos of his enemies.

However, he wasn't worried. Maybe the power of the four seasons was in chaos... but with enough strength, neither the wind nor the waves could shake him. Millions of soul threads shot out of Xu Qing, converging behind him in his first-level god state. Next came the second-level god state, followed by the third.

Xu Qing formed them so quickly that his enemies didn't have any chance to react. Instead, he unleashed crushing pressure on them. That was his custom.

As terrifying fluctuations rolled out from his third-level god state, taboo poison power erupted, combined with violet moon power and seething blood. The red glow from the sky mixed with the blood, staining everything.

At the moment, numerous gazes and countless streams of divine will from Heavenfire City were all focused on what was happening above. Although it wasn't possible to see clearly what was happening in the red light there, the fluctuations were clear to the senses.

There were some people who were holding back while others led the charge. All of them wanted to see Xu Qing's true battle prowess. That said, both inside and out, they were very calm and relaxed. Although they were paying attention to what was happening, they weren't exactly shocked.

They were Firemoon Darkheavens! They were one of the superpower species in the Revered Ancient mainland. They were backed by three gods, and in all of the many lands they ruled, they were superior to everyone. What was more, their Great Hunt always attracted ambitious members of other species. The dignity of their species led to them feeling arrogant. Therefore, they never got nervous when fighting members of other species.

Xu Qing was special because he was the champion of round one of the Great Hunt. He had accomplished a few minor things.

But... their calm, tranquil behavior only lasted for about ten breaths of time. That was when a blood-curdling scream rang out from the red glow. Then, things really started to change.

Two Firemoons shot out from the red light, their faces masks of shock as they tried to flee. One of them barely moved any distance at all before a screaming sound closed in on him from behind. A blood-colored hand of countless soul threads raced up to him, and before he could fight back, wrapped around him and then burrowed inside of him. It jerked back, and the Firemoon cultivator could only wait in despair as he was dragged into the red light.

The other cultivator fled toward Heavenfire City below, a look of terror on his face. If he could get into the city, he would be safe, as fighting wasn't permitted there. However, when he was only about 30 meters away, he lurched to a halt. Then, the terrified look on his face turned into a faint, gruish grin. His eyes, though, remained as terrified as before. Suddenly, his hands shot up to his own neck, and he jerked them to the side. A popping sound rang out, then he spun to the side as his cultivation base ignited and his entire body burst into flames.

Some more deafening booms rang out, and then the red light collapsed, revealing a host of mangled corpses. Hovering in the middle of them was a figure like a god, in the middle of a lake of blood, countless blood-red tentacles swaying around him. He was just looking calmly down at the city below, not saying a word.

The Firemoon cultivators in the city had very serious expressions on their faces. They were all in different parts of the city, but their hearts were all trembling at the sight of that one figure.

One reason was because of how dozens of their fellow Firemoons had just been killed. But also it was because of... how calm Xu Qing looked. From beginning to end, he hadn't spoken. And now he was just hovering there. A subtle pressure began to radiate off him that seemed capable of crushing an entire era.

At this point, some of the older Firemoon cultivators were really starting to feel shaken.

“A top chosen from humankind....”

Humankind had once been the most powerful species in the Revered Ancient mainland. Now they were in a period of decline in which each generation failed to surpass the previous. And yet, the afterglow of their former glory was something members of the older generation still remembered.

Some of the chosen cultivators described in the second jade slip from Grand Prince were in the city. However, none of them chose to take action at the moment.

Similar to Xu Qing, they wanted to get good mounts in the second round of the Great Hunt. With that boost to battle prowess, they would have a much better shot at succeeding in the third round.

Getting into a fight right now would be pointless. And they knew that if they got into a fight to the death with Xu Qing, even if they won, they would end up with injuries. That would affect things later on in the Great Hunt, and wasn't worth it. Therefore, after checking the outside situation from the safety of their mansion grottoes, they ultimately retracted their divine will.

That included all the top chosen that Xu Qing had learned about from Grand Prince.

In the sub-city devoted to Starfire, a young Firemoon with a cold expression and fine clothing sat cross-legged at the top of a tall tower. A heavy black sword rested on his knees that pulsed with the aroma of blood. The Firemoon wore a black robe and had long hair, as well as mysterious markings that covered his entire body, including his face. They pulsed with terrifying fluctuations. His fleshly body had *surpassed the mortal and entered the saintly*, and his cultivation base was too profound to read directly. But from the fluctuations coming off him, he was apparently in the great circle of Void Returning.

This person ranked fourth among Firemoon chosen. He was... Sir Heavenink. The mysterious markings and the heavy sword were his distinctive features.

He was also looking outside the city at Xu Qing. He had heard some of the stories about Xu Qing, and was aware of who had been manipulating things behind the scenes. He hadn't participated. Competing with other chosen wasn't the path he walked. He was just interested in blood from a god domain. Therefore, he simply looked at what was happening, and then looked away.

In the sub-city devoted to Moonfire, a young Firemoon cultivator sat in a restaurant, clad in a green scholar's robe that resembled the fashion of humankind. He seemed gentle and refined as he sat chatting with two Firemoon girls.

“Is that the human you’re talking about?” he asked, taking a sample of one of the dishes from the table. “I heard about him. He’s very interesting.”

The two girls at the table were pretty, and also resembled humans to a degree. However, there was something unusual about the luster of their skin. What was more, they were sitting there completely unmoving. There were other guests in the restaurant, so many that it seemed like the place should be loud and busy. Except not one of those guests was moving. Off in the corner, the restaurant’s host had his mouth open as if he were calling out something. There was even a waiter with his foot on the stairs as if about to run up them.

However, if you took a closer look, you would realize that none of these people were alive. They were all puppets made of jade.

In the entire restaurant, that young Firemoon was the only living being. There was one person among the Firemoon Darkheaven people who was known for his love of puppets. And that was the chosen who ranked number three... Fan Shishuang.

After speaking those words so casually, he nodded. “The two of you are right. His eyes really do remind me of your eyes. In that case, do you think we should have him join you?”

Chapter 850: Violet Lord Cometh

The setting sun was no longer visible. It had made its departure for this specific day. The red glow went with it.

And yet, the color of blood radiated off Xu Qing as the night took over. Crimson stained the sky. There was a vortex of fresh blood around Xu Qing, plus his soul threads, all of which emanated a sensation of slaughter. As he stood there, he seemed like a devilish god who represented blood and death, just waiting for a sacrificial offering to arrive. In the silence, the sacrificial offering didn’t fail to live up to the slaughter that had preceded it. It arrived just on time.

A middle-aged cultivator appeared. He wasn’t a Firemoon Darkheaven, but rather... was a Whitemarsh!

As he emerged from the city, his footfalls caused ripples to spread out around him like black lotuses. He pulsed with the fluctuations of fourth-stage Void Returning, and gave off a sensation of power that surpassed that of Crown Prince Brightsouth. Meanwhile, he pulsed with a very strong baleful aura. That baleful aura didn’t seem to come from pure slaughter. Rather, it was left behind after participation in many wars. It was very reminiscent of the veteran cultivators from back in Sea-Sealing County. The third eye on his head was only half-open, and it contained cold apathy and bright self-confidence.

This person was not a chosen cultivator. Instead, he had been recruited. He had been called from the Nightshade battlefield to come here and deal with Xu Qing! And his species had worked hard to make sure he had the qualifications to suddenly join the Great Hunt. This Whitemarsh was the result of the hands that had been manipulating things behind the scenes in recent days.

Normally speaking, a piddling Whitemarsh wouldn’t be enough to cause any sort of scene. But there was more to come. That much became clear when another figure emerged from the city. He was tall and skinny, and obviously wasn’t human considering he had six arms. The natural striations on his forehead, his bright red skin, and the gruish tattoos all over his body made him easy to

identify. He was... the very same species that humans were dealing with in their border regions. He was a Saia.

The Saia were one of the top three subsidiary species of the Firemoon Darkheavens. They had profound reserve powers, as well as very close connections to the Firemoons. In fact, they had people directly in the service of all three of the stewards. They were the sacrificial lords. And they were also among the people who had been manipulating things behind the scenes.

Xu Qing looked at the two cultivators without much surprise at all. In fact, based on his speculations, the Whitemarsh and the Saia were obviously just the public face.

The real masterminds were still out there, and were the same ones who had backed the cultivators Xu Qing had just killed. They were probably also the ones manipulating King Brightsouth. That was one reason why Xu Qing had refrained from accepting any challenges earlier.

Eldest Brother said that the Firemoon Darkheaven leadership view the Great Hunt as a way to raise venomous bugs in a jar. They use the most brutal methods to produce the strongest members of the new generation. Our role is simply to provoke the chosen.

That's why they're letting all of this happen. However, if someone pushes things too far, it'll ruin their plan. In that case... if I was a Firemoon leader, I would want the source of the provocation to stick around. It wouldn't make sense to lose it in the first round. I'd want it to stay until the last round, to bring out the most potential.

Xu Qing remained calm both externally and internally as he looked at the two cultivators.

The Saia cultivator stopped only about three meters out of the city, where he lifted his right hand and started an incantation gesture. The Whitemarsh cultivator with the baleful aura and killing intent accelerated as he closed in on Xu Qing.

Just as they took action, Xu Qing's third-level god state swept out. Millions of soul threads swirled, and a blood-colored vortex danced. Then it tightened around Xu Qing.

In the blink of an eye, it formed violet feathers, which grew more and more numerous. This was a body that differed visibly from his third-level god state. It was 300 meters tall and covered with the violet feathers of flesh. It had two huge wings behind it, and pulsed with a sound like faint chanting. That was the voice of a god. It was not something that could be looked at directly, and thus, different cultivators throughout the city perceived it in different ways.

At the same time, a violet moon appeared behind Xu Qing's strange god state, slowly rising. On its surface were innumerable figures, all of them bowing and chanting words of faith.

"The new moon, lord; from the Revered Ancient community; all living beings far and near; as Violet Lord do address thee.

"Souls offered, lord to me; pāramitā an actuality; sing with joy when you see; the return to our world ends happily."

As the sacrificial chant echoed out, the violet moonlight shone down, full of taboo poison.

The moon currently in the dome of heaven dimmed as it was replaced by Xu Qing's moon. And the world... filled with violet.

There was an enormous sundial in front of it, the gnomon spinning, and the power of time it exuded causing everything to ripple and distort. Beneath him appeared a lotus throne, each petal of which represented one of his abilities. The golden crow, the Ghost Emperor mountain, and daybreak light were all represented.[1]

The violet tentacles they formed swayed back and forth, making it seem like Xu Qing was atop a violet pāramitā lily.

This was Xu Qing's fourth-level god state! It was called Violet Lord! Because of the origin of this god state's godsource, it was impossible to say if it would lead to future conflict with Li Zihua. But it was a similar situation to when Xu Qing first started his path of cultivation, and had to absorb mutagen.

Now wasn't the time to worry about the possible danger in the future. Instead, it made more sense to focus on simply staying alive in the moment. Therefore, Xu Qing hadn't spent much time pondering the situation recently. He chose to simply use the Violet Lord as his fourth-level god state.

The arrival of this state was like the arrival of a god. Wild colors flashed in heaven and earth. Winds screamed everywhere. This was Xu Qing's most powerful form. Fourth-stage Void Returning fluctuations rolled off him, pushing his battle prowess to the absolute limit.

Every cultivator in Heavenfire City was shaken. Even the Firemoons from the older generation looked on with shining eyes. The older experts weren't so much interested in Xu Qing's battle prowess as they were his godly potential. This god body was like a concave lens that could amplify a cultivator's battle prowess significantly. That was what they found most noteworthy.

Yet Xu Qing still wasn't completely happy, as he could tell that this new state was still half a step away from being as strong as the great circle of Void Returning. It was due to foundational limitations. He was still missing a secret trove, and it would take time to complete it. Only then could he turn his Violet Lord state into a god trove, which would truly place him at the great circle of five troves.

Normally speaking, the god trove came before the god state. The reason Xu Qing could do it backwards was the Xeno-Immortal School techniques. He was also lacking a heavenly dao, which put limitations on the magical and natural laws of Void Returning. It was only because of his heavenly dao son that he could ignore the natural laws of enemies.

In the end, using god magics should be enough to deal with these two.

Xu Qing extended his hand, performed an incantation gesture, and pointed at the Saia cultivator.

All of a sudden, a projection of D-132 appeared over the Saia's head, shining brightly as it dropped down.

The Saia's eyes glittered coldly, and he sneered. He had plenty of back-channel information about Xu Qing, and knew about D-132. As a result, he didn't get flustered at all, and instead performing an incantation gesture and looked up.

The tattoos on him started shining brightly, and at the same time, flowing as if alive right into his mouth. After he swallowed them up, he spoke the following words.

"In this area, the air is sealed and everything destroyed!"

The air was suddenly sealed tight, and everything was locked down with destructive power. The words that had been spoken created a binding restriction. D-132 trembled, then stopped forming as if it had been completely sealed in place. Then it started cracking and crumbling.

Down in the city, Grand Prince looked on nervously.

In another part of the city, a cultivator sat on the eaves of a building, sipping alcohol and watching the fight playing out. There were nine other cultivators around him, also watching the fight. When D-132 appeared and the Saia cultivator sealed it, he laughed sarcastically.

“Even I fell for this tactic, and you think you’re going to seal the air? Do you really think Xu Qing has remained at the same level as before? What a joke.

“You know, I even suspect that Xu Qing’s sealing technique actually doesn’t drop down from above. That guy is devious, and I wouldn’t put it past him to intentionally reveal a flaw as part of his plan.”

As the words left his mouth, the air around the Saia cultivator rippled and distorted as a host of prison cells rose up everywhere. Even as the Saia looked around, the crumbling D-132 started forming anew! Where moonlight fell, something could come out of nothing!

The sealing of the air had failed.

Alcohol sprayed out of Tuo Shishan’s mouth. “Well, shoot! I was right!”

Meanwhile, Xu Qing turned to the incoming Whitemarsh cultivator, who was now only about 30 meters away. Xu Qing waved two fingers through the air.

Boundless violet light erupted from him and the violet moon, creating a sea of light that surrounded the Whitemarsh. A tremor passed through the Whitemarsh as his energy and blood seethed. He tried to fight back, but blood sprayed out of his mouth as his blood circulation went out of control. Then, he started to age at an extremely rapid rate. Patches of decay broke out all over him as a result of the taboo poison in the moonlight.

Most terrifying of all was that Xu Qing had closed his eyes. Then he opened his fingers to form a palm, which he gently pushed toward the Whitemarsh. Instantly, multiple versions of the Whitemarsh appeared superimposed over his body.

They were his past and his future, all visible at the same time. They included all of his possible future deaths. Within one of those images was one in which he died and his dao was dispelled. And that specific image began to get very clear as it was drawn out into the open.

The intense sensation of deadly crisis caused the Whitemarsh to shout at the top of his lungs. His cultivation base burned brightly, and his divine abilities raged. An illusory world appeared as well. As he fought back against Xu Qing, his eyes burned with killing intent, and his baleful aura surged. Then a magnificent army with thousands of men and horses surged out of his illusory world toward Xu Qing.

Xu Qing didn’t move in response. Instead, the figures prostrating to him on the violet moon began to pray with increasing fervor.

Very far away, in the vicinity of the Nightspirit Region, Sea-Sealing County, and the Holytide Region, numerous recently constructed temples... suddenly started to vibrate. The Nightshade high priests and all other violet moon believers could sense what was happening, and excitedly prostrated and began to pray.

“The violet moon, lord to me; Revered Ancient’s true trustee; the living hosts suffer; they have a blissful guarantee.”

“Offered freely, lord to me; no bitterness for me; from bitterness I’m free; undecayed for all to see.”

Countless voices offered blessings from the violet moon. They swept around Xu Qing and the Whitemarsh cultivator, turning into a great power that extracted that one image and pulled it out into the open.

The Whitemarsh lurched to a stop in front of Xu Qing. His eyes were wide and filled with both bitterness and confusion. Next... the fleshy wings of Xu Qing’s fourth-level god state spread out and wrapped around the Whitemarsh. They squeezed. Blood oozed out from between the feathers. Two breaths of time passed, and the wings slowly opened to reveal some clumps of mangled flesh that fell to the ground. It was the same as the image. He had died, and his dao had been dispelled.

Everything was very quiet. Xu Qing frowned, feeling a bit regretful as he looked at the city below.

A blurry figure appeared there, which rapidly turned into the dead Whitemarsh cultivator. The moment he appeared, blood sprayed out of his mouth and numerous wounds opened up on his body. His eyes glittered with astonishment.

He couldn’t control the decline of his aura, and as he staggered backward, blood sprayed from his mouth. His illusory major world vanished. His major world was what had died, and his dao had been severed. He would never make further cultivation progress, and in fact, going forward, his cultivation base would just decline. If it weren’t for the rules of the city, he would actually be dead.

Given that, I wonder if... Crown Prince Brightsouth is actually still alive.

Xu Qing thought about it for a moment.