Part 1: After the Tribulation

After Li Qing successfully escaped the three cities, the three Immortals still remained unaware of this fact. Believing he was hiding within, they sealed off the cities, ordering their forces to dig up every inch of land in search of him.

At the same time, the three Rule-tier items extracted from the destroyed Ninth-Tier Beasts were handed over to the Destiny-Bearers of each Immortal's Dao lineage:

Namgong Haoran: Destiny-Bearer of the Confucian School from the Hundred Schools of Thought.

Tang Wanshan: Destiny-Bearer of the Wu Ji Dao Sect.

Huang Wanchao: Destiny-Bearer of the True Treasure Dao Sect.

Through his intricate intelligence network, Li Qing swiftly learned of this event—dubbed the “Immortals’ Bestowal of Treasures”—a clear sign that the battle among Destiny-Bearers was about to begin.

At this moment, Li Qing had already stepped into Level 5—a realm of cultivation marked by two critical characteristics:

The Three Calamities: Wind, Fire, and Thunder—each must be overcome by the cultivator in succession.

Fated Tribulation: Known as Heaven’s Tribulation, but with a deeper twist—this time, the threat lies in the form of a “Heaven-Designated Nemesis”, meaning an individual chosen by fate itself to oppose the cultivator undergoing the trial.

Once the three cities had been thoroughly searched and it was confirmed that Li Qing had transcended the Tribulation and was still cultivating somewhere, the Eight Immortals began to suspect that he had long since fled—and was now peacefully training in some hidden sanctuary.

Thus, a new plan was born—one targeting his Three Calamities.

The stronger a cultivator's potential, the more ferocious the Three Calamities would become. Though the elements of Wind, Fire, and Thunder might appear to occur at random, they could still be monitored.

To advance to Level 6, Li Qing would need something extremely vital: the Primordial Dharma Aspect—a manifestation representing the core cultivation technique of Level 6.

Previously, Li Qing had already obtained three out of the eight Primordial Dharma Aspects. Only those from five major forces remained.

To acquire the remaining five, it was highly likely that Li Qing would attempt to infiltrate the inner circles of each Dao lineage to steal their Dharma Aspects. However, he wouldn't do so himself—he might instead rely on planted spies.

For example, a Level 5 cultivator loyal to Li Qing, on the cusp of ascending to Level 6, might request access to the Primordial Dharma Aspect as part of their advancement.

Within the Dao lineages of the Destiny-Bearers, there was no shortage of Level 5 cultivators. And due to the concealing power of Destiny, using Heaven's Secrets to discern who had contact with Li Qing was impossible.

Therefore, the Eight Immortals could only tighten internal security, with special attention paid to this group of Level 5 cultivators.

Moreover, they would increase protection for all Level 6 cultivators, just in case Li Qing, when cornered, resorted to extreme measures—such as kidnapping a Level 6 cultivator from a Dao lineage and extracting their memory of the Primordial Dharma Aspect.

Finally, efforts were made to identify Li Qing's Heaven-Designated Nemesis. But this task proved nearly impossible, as only the one undergoing the Tribulation would know the identity of their nemesis. Even the nemesis themselves might be unaware of their destined role.

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Aside from Li Qing, the Eight Immortals also had their own follow-up plans—this time, aimed at the remaining beasts.

Currently, only five Ninth-Tier Beasts remained. Their numbers diminished, their power waning, they were at an absolute disadvantage. Now was the perfect time for the Immortals to begin their hunt.

Five of the Immortals would take on the responsibility of hunting down the beasts, both in the Dark Side and the Bright Realm, while the remaining three would hold their ground at the Four Domains of Jiuzhou, in case the beasts had any other schemes—and to provide support if needed.

Right now, the beasts were in a precarious position. If they wished to overturn the situation, their only path forward was to seek out the Seal of Heaven. To do so, the cultic factions under their command would need to become increasingly active.

The Eight Immortals, seeing this, chose not to stop them. Instead, they would let the beasts do the work—and follow them to the seal.

As for Li Qing—should he wish to ascend to an even higher cultivation realm, he would likely continue to set traps for the beasts. This, too, could be turned to advantage.

After all, if Li Qing can lay traps for the beasts, then so can the Eight Immortals.

The Beasts' Emergency Assembly

On the other side, the surviving beasts convened an emergency assembly.

They did not know the full details of the Six Paths Ascension Plan, only that it would allow the Eight Immortals to rule the world in absolute dominion, forging a new Celestial Court and Netherworld. In this system, even cultivators of Level 8 and 7 would receive Divine Thrones, granting them immortality and eternal youth.

Their top priority now was survival.

The Immortals would be actively hunting them down, and so, for the foreseeable future, they must hide. At the same time, they would mobilize lesser beasts to continually attack the Four Domains of Jiuzhou, forcing the Immortals to hold back a portion of their power for defense—and preventing them from going all-out in the hunt.

Next came the search for the Seal of Heaven.

The downfall of the three beasts before them had come because they were deceived into stepping into traps. All the information they had received had been fed to them by others.

This time, if they were to act, it must be based on information uncovered by themselves, and not from unknown sources—only then could it be trusted.

While the Eight Immortals and the Beasts Continued Their Game of Cat and Mouse...

Li Qing finally discovered the identity of his Destined Calamity Nemesis (Mìngzhōng Dà Dí)—none other than the Nameless One, Xuan Yuan Changlong.

Li Qing pondered the many ways of transcending this tribulation. Killing Xuan Yuan Changlong outright would indeed end the ordeal, but the benefits would be meager. Since this foe was a bearer of Heaven’s Mandate, and even a participant in the Six Paths Ascension, then why not let him and another Mandate-bearer live until the final moment—then defeat him at the height of his power?

The sheer scale of this tribulation tied to the Six Paths Ascension was enough for Li Qing to attain the Supreme Origin Soul—stepping into the Sixth Realm.

A New Level of Surveillance

This time, however, the Eight Immortals were far more cautious. Their scrutiny and supervision within the sects of Mandate-bearers had become exceedingly strict. Countless cultivators at Levels 6, 7, and 8 had been deployed solely for surveillance.

To overcome this, Li Qing began crafting his grand strategy.

Northern Alliance and Hidden Control

In the northern region, Li Qing had already selected three Mandate-bearers:

Wang Tiānchū

Zhu Yībā

Nan Gong Haoran

Within each of their respective factions, Li Qing had long since embedded his agents—those who now held high ranks and wielded real power.

Fan Chengfeng's faction was already under control thanks to his ally, Sun Qiankun. Meanwhile, Li Qinglian, under the arrangements made by the Kūn Tài Emperor, had become the dominant force in the north.

As for Xuan Yuan Changlong, he was still in the phase of expansion and preparation.

In the other three directions—east, south, and west—each major orthodox sect would be pitted against a corresponding heretical faction:

Demonic Path in the north had already been destroyed, so it posed no threat.

The Six-Step Grand Strategy

Step One:

Quickly unite the three heretical sects—Demonic Beasts (Yao Dao), Ghost Cultivators (Gui Dao), and Buddhist Heretics (Fo Dao). Their unified front would place immediate pressure on the three orthodox Daoist sects, tying down their forces.

Step Two:
Deploy the Six Mandate-bearers of the Hundred Schools of Thought (Chuzǐ Bǎijiā) to invade Longzhou, the central region. Use it as a springboard to launch pincer offensives on the three Daoist sects from both the eastern and western flanks.
However, the goal was not full conquest—only to secure positions, then negotiate ceasefires with the Daoist sects. The advance must not be too aggressive, lest the three sects ally with the heretics and crush the Hundred Schools.

Step Three:
Once peace talks succeeded, shift to collaborating with the three Daoist sects to eradicate the three heretical factions—Yao, Fo, and Gui.

Step Four:
While the three heretical factions were being destroyed, turn on the Daoist sects, launching an all-out war.

Step Five:
After the three Daoist sects were defeated, trigger a civil war within the Hundred Schools of Thought itself.

Step Six:
Ensure that Xuan Yuan Changlong controls half the world, while another Mandate-bearer holds the other half.
At the climax, defeat Xuan Yuan Changlong at the peak of his power—thus concluding the tribulation and bringing about the ultimate breakthrough.

Seizing the Primal Dharma Idols

On the surface, the plan was to control Level-5 cultivators embedded within various Daoist factions—especially those currently aligned with Mandate-bearers.

Through these embedded agents, Li Qing would orchestrate strategies and manipulate the flow of war from the shadows.
Every contribution made by these Level-5 cultivators would count as merit, granting them access to the Primal Dharma Idols.

Once they achieved enough merit and justification, they would be granted audience with the Original Law Idols of each faction—providing Li Qing the window he needed to seize the remaining five Primal Dharma Idols for himself.

● Part 2: The Six Paths Ascension Begins

Li Qing's first target was Qingzhou and Dongzhou, the territory of Wuji Dao Sect, where three bearers of Heaven's Mandate resided: Duong Wanshan, Guo Wushuang, and Chen Shanhe.

He selected three Level-5 cultivators beneath these three to act as undercover agents: Daoist Baiyun, Daoist Yehuo, and Daoist Xuanzhen.

☆ Military Unit Structure:

Five men form a group.

Five groups form a squad.

Five squads form a company.

A division holds 1,000 troops.

A corps comprises 10,000 troops.

Daoist Xuanzhen was the commanding officer of a full 100,000-man corps, holding vast authority. Moreover, the entire military camp was under strict surveillance—every minute, a Level-7 cultivator would perform a sweep to scan for abnormalities.

Li Qing knew he could not simply break in and control Daoist Xuanzhen directly—he would have to borrow another's hand.

The Three Borrowed Power Talismans

First, Li Qing used three Borrowed Power Talismans—a type of talisman allowing him to store spells within. He sealed into them three charges of the spell "Human Dao Brainwash".

He then controlled a rat, attaching the three talismans to its body, and sent it stealthily into the military camp.

Under Li Qing's precise direction, the rat entered the tent of a Level-2 officer, one of the rare middle-ranking officials who was already a covert agent of Li Qing.

The moment the Level-7 cultivator completed his routine scan, the officer took possession of the three talismans. All that remained was to bring them into contact with Daoist Xuanzhen.

To accomplish this, Li Qing manipulated the officer to visit his direct superior. The officer presented a ledger—claiming discrepancies in the military grain supply and reporting that resources had been embezzled.

Recognizing the gravity of the issue, the superior immediately reviewed the ledger. Hidden within its pages, the first talisman activated—brainwashing the superior into Li Qing's thrall.

This superior, acting perfectly normal, then brought the ledger to his own superior, reporting the grain embezzlement. The second talisman activated—subverting yet another link in the chain of command.

Above that superior was none other than Daoist Xuanzhen himself. But at this point, Li Qing halted the operation.

Three direct meetings—especially involving a closely watched category like Level-5 cultivators—might trigger the suspicions of the Level-7 supervisor. Two encounters could be passed off as routine chain-of-command communication, but a third would risk exposing the entire plan.

A Few Days of Patience

Over the next few days, the second superior pretended to investigate the grain embezzlement, following Li Qing's orders. Once the ruse was complete, he formally submitted the matter to Daoist Xuanzhen.

At that moment, the third talisman activated—Daoist Xuanzhen fell under Li Qing's control.

Using the same method, Li Qing placed an undercover Level-5 cultivator within each major sect.

At present, the world stood at a critical turning point. Aside from the highest-ranking members—the Eight Immortals and Level-8 cultivators—the Level-7 cultivators stationed across various military camps had already stood on opposing sides of the upcoming war, each one seeking merit and distinction in order to earn a Divine Title once the Six Paths Ascension concluded.

Thus, the likelihood of these cultivators revealing their camp's secrets to others was extremely low.

Before advancing the unification of the Demonic, Buddhist, and Spirit Sects, Li Qing made contact with Sun Qiankun, assigning him a crucial task: to create disturbances within both the Hundred Schools of Philosophy and the Three Dao Sects, preventing these orthodox forces from interfering with the affairs of the unorthodox paths.

In the armies of Duong Wanshan, Chen Shanhe, and Guo Wushuang, Li Qing's undercover agents initiated a skirmish along the borders where the three factions converged. After several casualties, both sides retreated.

When news reached the respective headquarters, the tension along the border escalated. Duong Wanshan, receiving the reports, was led to believe the others were plotting against him.

After all, it was Duong Wanshan who had received a Rule Artifact from the Immortals—a symbol that carried heavy implications. Chen Shanhe and Guo Wushuang likely saw him as the greater threat and were conspiring to eliminate him first.

Duong Wanshan immediately summoned a war council.

During the meeting, Daoist Baiyun—Li Qing's agent—spoke under Li Qing's subtle manipulation. He suggested that this may have been a probing maneuver, a test before an actual military campaign.

Daoist Baiyun stated that while receiving a reward from the Immortals may not confer real power or authority, it symbolized the Immortals' favor. That in itself was enough to make other Mandated bearers see Duong Wanshan as a thorn in their side.

Thus, this probing action was likely a deliberate provocation—designed to force Duong Wanshan into panic, making poor strategic decisions such as moving his forces to the front lines, leaving the rear vulnerable.

Behind his rear lay the Hundred Schools of Philosophy.

If Chen Shanhe and Guo Wushuang were secretly allied with the Hundred Schools, they could use the tactic of "luring the tiger from the mountain" to draw all of Wanshan's troops forward, then strike his rear in a surprise attack. Duong Wanshan would be doomed.

This scenario was entirely plausible. The Demonic Sect in the North had already been annihilated, leaving the Hundred Schools free to act, unafraid of being flanked themselves.

To counter this, Daoist Baiyun proposed a strategy of turning the scheme upon its maker—to ally with the Hundred Schools and use their strength against Chen Shanhe and Guo Wushuang.

The Hundred Schools were a chaotic web of interests, with six bearers of Heaven's Mandate cramped within Beizhou and Yangzhou, densely populated and starved for territory.

Therefore, Duong Wanshan need only offer a promise: once the two rival forces were defeated, he would divide their lands evenly with the Hundred Schools. The reward would far surpass what they could gain from fighting Wanshan alone.

He could even go further—ceding a portion of his own land to ensure that the newly conquered territory would link seamlessly with Beizhou and Yangzhou, forming a contiguous domain.

Such a gesture would greatly increase the likelihood of an alliance.

As for deceiving Chen Shanhe and Guo Wushuang, Duong Wanshan could stage a feint: mobilizing part of his army to the border and deliberately creating the illusion of a large-scale campaign—drums beating, banners flying—enough to mislead both factions into believing a major offensive was imminent.

At the same time, the five remaining Grade Nine Beasts were also plotting a counteroffensive against the Eight Immortals.

They deployed their avatars into the Nine Provinces and Four Territories to personally oversee the scheme, while their true bodies stirred the heavenly mechanisms, disrupting fate itself to prevent the Immortals from foreseeing their plans.

The bait would be none other than the Seal of Heaven. For the trap to function, the beasts considered cooperating with Li Qing, for they were convinced that he, too, desired the fall of the Eight Immortals.

Indeed, from Li Qing's standpoint, the situation had become too unbalanced—the Immortals held overwhelming dominance. Such imbalance could not be allowed. In his eyes, the Eight Immortals needed an opposing force to keep them in check.

According to the beasts' plan, their avatars would descend and carry out five seemingly random massacres throughout the mortal realm—each act imbued with encoded clues. They understood that the artifact in Li Qing's possession would reveal their true intentions to him.

As expected, Li Qing recognized the message hidden within the chaos. He saw this as an opportunity. In return, he simply sent back a message: he would only deliver the "goods" when the time was right.

With Li Qing's tacit support secured, the five Grade Nine Beasts began to lay the trap.

The chosen site: an ancient tomb beneath Bai Meng City, a place that had existed for over one hundred thousand years.

The target: the Ten-Thousand Calamities Demon Lord, the Immortal of the Demonic Path—the most covetous among the Eight Immortals.

The plan was straightforward. They would have a Demonic Path cultivator "accidentally" come into contact with the aura of Heaven and release him back into the northern territories. It would only take a Nascent Soul cultivator or higher to detect the aura—word would then swiftly reach the Demon Lord.

As for the ancient tomb, it had already been reforged into a sealed dimension by the combined efforts of the five beasts. Inside, they carefully constructed a deadly formation.

Li Qing, fully aware of the plan, soon delivered a sealed box to them—inside was a trace of Heavenly Qi. That aura was placed at the center of the tomb.

Because Heavenly influence grew in layers, intensifying over time, the trap needed several months to ferment before it could truly ensnare its prey.

● Part 3: The Unification of the Outer Paths

● Part 3.1: The Demonic Path of Beasts (Yao Dao)

Temporarily setting aside the scheme of the Five Beasts, Li Qing turned his attention to the Southern Region—territory of the Yao Dao (Beast Path)—as the first target in accelerating the pace of unification.

There, three bearers of Heavenly Mandate stood in a tripartite stalemate:
— Great Ape King,
— Qilin Crown Prince,
— True Dragon Young Lord.

At present, none of the three dared to act recklessly, each wary that the other two might join forces should one overstep.

Li Qing’s objective was to shatter this triangular balance, but the only pieces capable of truly influencing the tide of battle were the Grade Five operatives he had buried deep within each faction.

Naturally, had he planted more pieces, it would have made toppling the balance even easier. However, doing so would increase the risk of discovery by the Grade Seven cultivators stationed as battlefield overseers. Once exposed, the entire spy network would be purged, and the intricate web of infiltration he had constructed would collapse entirely.

Hence, Li Qing chose to support the Great Ape King, for among the three, his agents had penetrated deepest into that faction’s ranks.

☆ Terrain Layout:

The territories controlled by the Great Ape King, the Qilin Crown Prince, and the True Dragon Young Lord formed a rough triangle.

— The Great Ape King’s domain lay nearest to that of the True Dragon Young Lord.
— The True Dragon Young Lord was closest to the Qilin Crown Prince.
— However, the distance between the Great Ape King and the Qilin Crown Prince was three times greater than the other two.

If Li Qing wanted the Great Ape King to triumph, then the first thorn to pluck was the True Dragon Young Lord.

According to initial intelligence, each faction was limited to a standing army of 30,000. To maintain such a force required immense expenditures. Meanwhile, the larger organizations backing each Heavenly Mandate holder were prohibited from providing aid, lest the unification war of Yao Dao be dragged out unnecessarily. Thus, all costs had to be borne personally by each Heavenly Mandate bearer.

With limited time, funds, and soldiers, victory would require courage, foresight, and cunning.

Currently, the financial lifeblood of the True Dragon Young Lord came from three sources:
— Ore mines,
— Ancient cultivator caves,
— And minor business holdings in Earth Dragon City.

Among these, the ore mines were by far the most lucrative.

Li Qing dug deeper and discovered that the one in charge of the ore mines was Hundred-Eyed Beast King, a Grade Five cultivator. This individual had originally come from a small, weak clan within Earth Dragon City and had clawed his way up to his current post. Yet even after joining the True Dragon Young Lord’s faction, he remained undervalued—cast aside to oversee the mines.

Recognizing this as a lever ripe for pulling, Li Qing swiftly moved his agent embedded in the Great Ape King's court to present a strategic proposal during the king’s war council with his generals.

At this moment, the True Dragon Young Lord and the Qilin Crown Prince were locked in battle at Black Dragon Pass. Meanwhile, the forces of the Great Ape King were being held at bay by a defensive line established by one of the True Dragon Young Lord’s top generals—General Divine Eagle.

This defensive line was stationed in rugged terrain, easy to defend and hard to attack, reinforced with ten thousand troops. To break through, one would need at least triple that number—exactly thirty thousand soldiers. However, if all thirty thousand troops were deployed, it would leave the rear completely undefended, exposing them to ambush and near-certain defeat.

Worse yet, if one waited until the battle between the True Dragon Young Lord and the Qilin Crown Prince reached a conclusion, the victor would absorb the loser's forces, and the balance of power would tilt irreversibly—leaving the Great Ape King with slim chances of survival.

The Great Ape King had tried dividing his troops before, but every time he did so, General Divine Eagle would launch raids into the Great Ape King's territory, putting him in a constant bind.

To resolve this deadlock, Centipede Demon King—Li Qing's spy—offered a plan under his subtle manipulation.

After months of observation, Centipede Demon King had identified a critical weakness in the True Dragon Young Lord's faction—a vulnerability that all three factions shared, but which was most pronounced in this one: their financial lifeline was a distant ore mine, far removed from the main stronghold.

If that resource stream were cut off, chaos would ensue.

That was precisely why General Divine Eagle was stationed at the outer perimeter, and why the mine itself was heavily fortified. An assault on the mine by force was unfeasible.

A stealth force small enough to slip past General Divine Eagle's line wouldn't be enough to conquer the mine. Worse, it might end up caught in a pincer attack between the mine's defenders and Divine Eagle's troops. Sending a large force would certainly trigger alarms. The situation was deadlocked.

Thus, Centipede Demon King's plan was not to attack the mine directly—but to use the mine to set a trap for the True Dragon Young Lord.

His deployments were meticulous, save for one flaw: the man assigned to oversee the mine—Hundred-Eyed Beast King—was a Grade Five cultivator who came from a weak clan in Earth Dragon City. Though he had fought his way up to his current position, he was never truly trusted by the faction, relegated to a rear logistics post. His soldiers were barely more than glorified miners.

Such resentment could be turned into leverage.

By blood, Centipede Demon King was distantly related to Hundred-Eyed Beast King. He would approach him under this pretext and offer him status, reward, and real power—the

kind he could never achieve under the True Dragon Young Lord. The chance of swaying him to the side of the Great Ape King was exceedingly high.

Once Hundred-Eyed Beast King had agreed to switch allegiance, the next step was to feed false information to the True Dragon Young Lord—that traces of True Dragon blood had been discovered deep within the mine.

For someone like the True Dragon Young Lord, True Dragon blood was an artifact of immense symbolic and practical value. There was a high chance he would come in person to collect it. If so, then a joint strike by Hundred-Eyed Beast King's internal troops and a detachment sent by the Great Ape King would be enough to slay him on the spot.

If he didn't come personally but sent trusted subordinates, fake True Dragon blood would be prepared to deceive them. After all, who could truly recognize what True Dragon blood looked like? As long as greed was stirred in the Young Lord's heart, the bait had served its purpose.

If the True Dragon Young Lord remained cautious and refused to take the bait, the plan would shift. Ten thousand troops would be left to hold off General Divine Eagle, while the remaining forces would march silently toward the mine.

Even if the Young Lord wasn't a fool, he would surely realize the Great Ape King intended to seize the blood. He would grow anxious, perhaps believing the blood was genuine. The army led by Divine Eagle would then deliberately slow their pursuit, making it appear as if the Young Lord's forces would arrive at the mine just in time.

But in reality, ambushers would be lying in wait, and once the Young Lord's troops took the bait, they would be hit from within by the traitorous soldiers of Hundred-Eyed Beast King, and from without by the Great Ape King's main force.

At best, it would result in the death of the True Dragon Young Lord. At worst, he would be pinned down long enough for a double-pincer attack to decimate his forces completely.

The Great Ape King accepted the strategy. Immediately, Centipede Demon King set off to persuade Hundred-Eyed Beast King.

Under the conditions of receiving command over his own forces, high military merits, permission for his entire clan to relocate to Divine Ape City, and preferential treatment ten times greater than what he had under the True Dragon Young Lord—with no more oppression or marginalization—Hundred-Eyed Beast King quickly agreed to cooperate.

Soon after, the Great Ape King led five thousand troops on a silent detour around General Divine Eagle's defensive lines. Despite deploying powerful treasures to conceal their presence, they were nearly discovered thirty times by the aerial surveillance birds under Divine Eagle's control. Thankfully, Li Qing personally moved ahead, eliminating these scouting threats one by one, ensuring the army passed through without a trace.

Upon arrival at the mine, the Great Ape King was introduced by Hundred-Eyed Beast King to the defensive formation protecting the area. This formation was not only capable of repelling intruders, but could also be reversed into a prison, trapping any enemies within. It was the perfect mechanism to enact the previously designed ambush.

Thus, the Great Ape King formulated a simple plan: hide the troops within the mine, and the moment the True Dragon Young Lord entered, activate the formation to seal him in and unleash a killing strike.

As planned, the True Dragon Young Lord received word from Hundred-Eyed Beast King. The Beast King did not directly mention True Dragon blood, instead describing a strange pool of blood that made his bloodline tremble whenever he approached—as if standing before an ancestor. Though he couldn't confirm what the blood was, he was certain it wasn't ordinary.

Though still uncertain about the blood's origin, the True Dragon Young Lord immediately noticed the inconsistency in the report. He knew the terrain of the mine intimately, and such a substance shouldn't have existed there.

It was at this moment that Green-Eyed Serpent King—Li Qing's Grade Five spy—entered the scene.

When the True Dragon Young Lord expressed his doubts, Green-Eyed Serpent King stated that everything described by Hundred-Eyed Beast King closely matched legends of True Dragon blood. He further explained that he had once read a document claiming that a True Dragon had fallen in the Southern Region, though its blood and bones were never found.

Then, Green-Eyed Serpent King hinted that this might be destiny's gift. After all, the True Dragon Young Lord bore the Mandate of Heaven—it was only natural that such fortune would descend upon him. He warned that since Hundred-Eyed Beast King had only reported it out of ignorance, the moment he realized what it truly was, this opportunity might slip away.

These words gradually eroded the True Dragon Young Lord's suspicions, replacing them with greed and urgency. However, as one bearing the Heavenly Mandate, he remained cautious—hesitant and conflicted.

Seeing this, Green-Eyed Serpent King volunteered to scout the mine first. The True Dragon Young Lord agreed, bestowing upon him a seal talisman—if anything went wrong, he was to crush it at once and the Young Lord would know.

After receiving his orders, Green-Eyed Serpent King vanished from the main camp, slipping away in secret toward the mine.

☆The reason Li Qing orchestrated such an elaborate scheme was because this battle was being observed by many high-level cultivators within the Demon Path, and every event was

subject to rigorous investigation. To avoid scrutiny and prevent his chess pieces from being exposed, Li Qing had to construct a thoroughly logical narrative with layers of misdirection.

Here is the English translation in consistent xianxia novel style:

After Green-Eyed Serpent King returned from his reconnaissance and reported that the blood was very likely genuine True Dragon blood, the True Dragon Young Lord finally mobilized, personally leading three thousand troops toward the mine.

On the journey, a sudden spring rain poured down upon them. This was the obscured omen of the Heavenly Mandate, a cryptic warning from the heavens themselves, and it gave the True Dragon Young Lord a vague sense of foreboding.

Yet at his side, Green-Eyed Serpent King calmly remarked:

> “It is the first month of the year—this is but a spring rain. Spring rain signifies the stirring of life, a sign of great vitality. It is a propitious omen. When the spring rain falls without end, it is the season of dragon and serpent rising. Since Your Lordship bears the title of ‘Dragon,’ such a celestial phenomenon naturally follows you. It is a hidden sign—a metaphor for your destiny to reshape the world.”

These words subtly shifted the unease in the True Dragon Young Lord’s heart into something else entirely. The heavens were not warning him—they were celebrating him. In his mind, the rain no longer heralded disaster, but rather marked the moment he would rise to unify the Heavenly Mandates of the Demon Path.

After the True Dragon Young Lord fell, the Qilin Prince quickly sensed the shift—the disappearance of a Heavenly Mandate. This was dire news. For once the victor absorbed all the defeated army's forces, the Qilin Prince’s faction would be pushed into a grave disadvantage.

It didn’t matter whether the winner was Great Ape King or the True Dragon Young Lord—what mattered now was to immediately launch an assault on Black Dragon Pass.

If the True Dragon Young Lord was dead, then Black Dragon Pass was headless, its command structure shattered. If, by chance, the Great Ape King had fallen instead, then the

True Dragon Young Lord was still not stationed at the pass, and thus—still headless. Either way, the moment to strike was now.

The plan was clear—after seizing Black Dragon Pass, they would march straight to Earth Dragon City and consolidate the remaining forces.

This was a war of speed. Regardless of who emerged victorious on the other side, what the Qilin Prince needed to do was devour as much territory and manpower as possible before the other party could react, laying the groundwork for future confrontations.

Meanwhile, on the other side, the Green-Eyed Serpent King—now having surrendered and pledged loyalty to the Great Ape King—presented his analysis of the situation.

The news of the True Dragon Young Lord's fall would inevitably spread. And once the Qilin Prince caught wind of it, unless he was a fool, he would surely march on Black Dragon Pass, where seven thousand troops remained. Should he successfully absorb that force, the Qilin Prince's strength would surge, allowing him to expand rapidly. In such a case, even though it was the Great Ape King who had slain the True Dragon Young Lord, the actual benefits gained might tilt in favor of the Qilin Prince.

Thus, the Green-Eyed Serpent King proposed an urgent countermeasure—mobilize all eight thousand troops currently under command and rush directly to Black Dragon Pass, preventing the Qilin Prince from taking it. They must form a deadlock and delay the enemy, buying time to consolidate their full strength.

Just as Li Qing had orchestrated behind the scenes, the Qilin Prince's attempt to seize the remaining forces of the True Dragon Young Lord ended in failure—his troops unable to breach Black Dragon Pass before the army of the Great Ape King arrived. With no choice, the Qilin Prince withdrew.

As time passed, the Great Ape King successfully absorbed the entirety of the True Dragon Young Lord's army, tipping the balance completely. Now facing a foe twice as large, the Qilin Prince had no choice but to fight a war of attrition, biding his time and awaiting a new opportunity.

At this moment, the White Tiger Demon King — Li Qing's fifth-rank spy — stepped forward to offer a strategy. A plan that could raise Prince Qilin's odds of victory to fifty percent. However, it was a perilous gamble: success meant revival, but failure spelled utter collapse.

The plan was deceptively simple, known as "King versus King."

The Great Ape King had just slain Prince Zhenlong. His momentum soared to its peak, and deep within, he must have already assumed absolute victory was within grasp.

Therefore, while morale still surged like wildfire, it was certain that the Great Ape King would soon unleash his overwhelming army for a full assault.

Prince Qilin's faction had but one choice: marshal all forces and withstand three consecutive attacks. As the old saying goes, "Strike while the iron is hot"—but the second strike loses vigor, and by the third, all strength wanes. If they could repel all three assaults, it would thoroughly extinguish the fervor blazing within the Great Ape King's camp, shattering the confidence born from his previous sweeping triumph.

Yet that was merely the prelude.

Once the enemy's morale had been depleted, Prince Qilin would cast down the war challenge — a duel between kings, one-on-one.

The Great Ape King would accept.

Why? Because failing three times would have already forced him to recognize that victory would not come as easily as before. Moreover, every bearer of Heaven's Mandate carried with them the arrogance of fate, believing themselves incapable of defeat. The probability of him taking the duel would rise sharply.

And if — by some chance — he refused the challenge, it would be tantamount to admitting fear. The morale of his already-exhausted army, having suffered three failed assaults, would plunge into the abyss.

That alone would raise Prince Qilin's odds dramatically.

In the end, Prince Qilin lost by half a move. The Heavenly Mandate of the Demon Path was unified under the Great Ape King.

The six hundred thousand troops that the Demon Path had prepared in advance for the final victor had already gathered at the southern frontier — now directly threatening the factions of the True Treasure Dao Sect in the south.

Hoang Wanchao — bearer of the Heavenly Mandate of the True Treasure Dao Sect — urgently convened a war council to devise a strategy against the approaching storm that was the Demon Path.

Seizing the moment, Daoist Bailin — Li Qing's fifth-rank spy — stepped forward to offer a plan.

The pressure from the south was immense. To hold the border passes against the six hundred thousand-strong Demon Path army would require at least three hundred thousand troops.

Hoang Wanchao currently commanded four hundred thousand. The other two Mandate bearers — Bai Wuxue and Li Fengtian — each controlled around three hundred thousand.

If each side were to contribute one hundred thousand soldiers to defend the frontier, Hoang Wanchao's side would gain a decisive advantage. Where once he held only a 4:3 edge in strength, this new arrangement would give him a ratio exceeding 3:2.

Naturally, the other two factions might recognize this imbalance and refuse to deploy troops.

To force their hand, Hoang Wanchao must take a hardline stance: declare that if the others would not commit their forces, he would abandon the entire Southern Province and allow the Demon Path to march unopposed into their territories. With his four hundred thousand troops and his stronghold safely entrenched in Sha Province, the loss of Southern Province would mean little to him.

In that case, the brunt of the invasion would fall directly on Bai Wuxue and Li Fengtian. For Bai Wuxue, this would be catastrophic — halfhisterritory lay within Southern Province. To withdraw would be to suffer enormous losses; to stay would be to face obliteration.

Thus, for the sake of the greater good, Bai Wuxue would have no choice but to agree to Hoang Wanchao's proposal. As for Li Fengtian, both Hoang Wanchao and Bai Wuxue would pressurehistogether. If she refused to mobilize, the two could join forces to eliminatehisoutright. Faced with such coercion, Li Fengtian, too, would yield.

And if — by some chance — both refused? Then Hoang Wanchao need only retreat to Sha Province and fortify. Once the Demon Path finished crushing Bai Wuxue, it would not turn on Hoang Wanchao next — but on the weaker Li Fengtian.

After enduring two major campaigns, the Demon Path would inevitably be worn down, while Hoang Wanchao remained untouched. In the shadows, he would gather up the scattered remnants of Bai Wuxue's and Li Fengtian's defeated armies, swelling his ranks.

By then, the final victor would no longer be clear.

In fact, should his forces grow strong enough — and the enemy weak enough — Hoang Wanchao could even launch a sudden ambush the moment the Demon Path was on the verge of crushing Li Fengtian.

Ending the entire war in a single, decisive strike.

However, someone soon pointed out a glaring flaw in this strategy: it failed to take into account the presence of the Hundred Schools of Philosophy along the borderlands.

To this concern, Daoist Bailin offered a simple resolution.

First scenario: Both Bai Wuxue and Li Fengtian agree to dispatch their armies. In this case, the entire Southern Front would form a solid, unified block. The Hundred Schools would be far less inclined to intervene, for the south would present itself as a tough bone to gnaw.

Second scenario: Bai Wuxue and Li Fengtian refuse to send troops. In that case, the battlefield would descend into chaos. Should the Hundred Schools choose to march

southward amid the confusion, Hoang Wanchao could immediately seize Long Province — the central hub — and establish a new stronghold there, relinquishing both Sha Province and Southern Province.

All Hoang Wanchao needed was a temporary bastion. So long as he retained command over his 400,000 troops, he still held the means to retake lost territory. This was the very essence of the principle:

> “If land is kept but people are lost, the nation perishes;
if people are kept but land is lost, the nation endures.”

These words finally swayed Hoang Wanchao, who had still been hesitating on whether to abandon territory.

Meanwhile, no matter who stepped foot into Sha or Southern Province — be it the Hundred Schools or the rival sects — they would have no choice but to face the full brunt of the Demon Path’s army.

All Hoang Wanchao needed to do was wait for the opportune moment. Then, he could strike back — crushing his competitors while simultaneously diminishing the threats from beyond.

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Part 3.2: The GhostPath

After the unification of the Demon Path, the entire process was meticulously investigated by high-ranking cultivators. Though nothing overtly problematic was found, there was a subtle but undeniable unease: regardless of whether it was strategy, recruitment, betrayal, or manipulation—nearly every pivotal move on the battlefield had been directed by Fifth-Stage cultivators. Not a single Fourth-Stage cultivator had left a significant mark.

This wasn’t entirely unreasonable. After all, they were currently participants in the Sixfold Path of Deification, each seeking to demonstrate their worth in hopes of securing a favorable place in the order to come. However, what stirred concern was the fact that all these standout performers came from a demographic that was already under special scrutiny. It was hard not to be wary.

The high-ranking cultivators conducted covert investigations. Yet no matter how thoroughly they examined the bodies, minds, or even souls of these Fifth-Stage cultivators, they found nothing amiss. In the end, they could only attribute it to coincidence—though they tightened their surveillance on the group. Still, they remained confident: even if some unseen force was manipulating them from the shadows, everything remained within their control. Their power, they believed, was sufficient to suppress any threat.

Little did they know, Li Qing had foreseen everything—every suspicion, every countermeasure. And no one could begin to fathom his true objective.

At this moment, Li Qing had already arrived in the Eastern Region—the domain of the Ghost Path. This was a chaotic land, home to over eight hundred minor nations. Among them, three wielders of Heaven's Mandate had each seized control of a small kingdom, maintaining a precarious stalemate in a triangular balance of power.

These three were:

Duli, Lord of the Tiger Nation

Deman, Lord of the Dragon Nation

Shitian, Lord of the Blade Nation

Each faction commanded roughly fifteen thousand troops. They were positioned equidistant from one another, about two hundred li apart, forming a perfect triangle.

This delicate tripartite balance was exceedingly difficult to upset. Whenever one lord attempted to launch an offensive against another, the third would either try to reap the benefits as a fisherman watching two clams fight, or act as the mantis stalking the cicada—only to be stalked by the oriole. Yet none among them were fools; every side remained vigilant, with spies evenly distributed across the triangle.

And so, the result was always the same: no victory, no defeat—only endless deadlock.

Li Qing manipulated the earth, shaping it into a triangular sand table to simulate the geopolitical configuration of the three nations. Although they were evenly matched in terms of military strength and distance, their terrains were markedly different.

The Dragon Nation (Long Guo) was situated on flat plains, unimpeded by natural obstacles.

The Tiger Nation (Hu Guo) lay hidden within dense forests, backed by vast lakes and rivers.

The Blade Nation (Dao Guo) occupied a chain of treacherous mountain ranges.

Upon close analysis, Li Qing noted that the open terrain of the Dragon Nation made it visible from all directions. Any action—whether offensive or defensive—would be quickly noticed. Normally, this would be a strategic weakness. But in the hands of a master, a weakness could be turned into a weapon.

Thus, through King Tan Guang—Li Qing's Fifth-Stage agent—he waited for Lord Deman of the Dragon Nation to hold his next war council. When the time came, Tan Guang stepped forth to offer a plan.

To prevent espionage leaks, only the three vassal kings directly under Lord Deman were permitted to hear the proposal.

The plan was deceptively simple.

Due to its geography, the Dragon Nation could never mount a surprise attack—every move was exposed to prying eyes. However, that same visibility could be weaponized. The Blade Nation's mountains made it near-impossible to breach, so the Dragon Nation had long favored the Tiger Nation as its military target. But whenever the Dragon Nation launched an assault, the Blade Nation would stir with suspicious movements, forcing the Dragon Nation to divide its forces—a divided force could never breach the Tiger Nation's defenses.

This time, things would be different.

The Dragon Nation would pretend to commit only ten thousand troops, leaving behind five thousand to "guard" the capital. In truth, all fifteen thousand would mobilize. The five thousand left behind would be mere civilians dressed as soldiers to fake a defensive posture. The gates would be sealed; the city would appear fortified for a long campaign. Spies from the other two nations would report this deception—exactly as planned.

Meanwhile, in Dao Guo territory, Tan Guang spoke of a mist-shrouded canyon he had discovered—seemingly by accident. Within the canyon was a tunnel that led beyond the mountains.

Before the troops entered, the canyon's flora would be soaked in oil, then magically camouflaged. This was the smokescreen, but the real trap lay in the bombs buried along both cliffs of the gorge.

As the Dragon Nation's army marched in, they expected either the Tiger or Blade Nation—or both—to tail them. Regardless of which army followed first, once they entered the canyon, the Dragon Nation would ignite the oil. Hidden troops stationed on both sides would emerge to block their retreat, while forward forces would cut off their advance.

In that instant—while the first pursuing army was trapped—the Dragon Nation would secretly contact the remaining third nation and propose an alliance: Join us, and we'll wipe out this common enemy together.

Presented with a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, the second nation would undoubtedly accept. But as soon as they moved, they too would be lured into the canyon.

At that point, the Dragon Nation would transfer the task of sealing the rear to the second army, while it retained control of the forward blockade.

Then came the final act.

Pretending weakness, the Dragon Nation would feign retreat—drawing the first enemy deeper into the canyon, and by extension, the second army would follow suit. Amidst the confusion, the Dragon Nation would begin a silent withdrawal through the hidden tunnel. The battlefield would be chaotic, making their departure almost impossible to detect.

Once the last unit had withdrawn, the trap would spring: the buried bombs along both mountain slopes would detonate, unleashing an avalanche of stone and death.

The cultivators might survive, but the common soldiers would be decimated. Without their armies, both nations would lose 80% of their strength. The Dragon Nation would suffer some losses as well, but nothing compared to the devastation of the others.

The core of the plan remained unchanged: lure both enemy armies into the canyon, then bury them beneath it.

This was a strategy born from ancient wisdom—
“Wait beneath the tree for the rabbit,”
“Drive the wolf to chase the tiger,”
“While the clam and the snipe struggle, the fisherman profits.”

After hearing King Tan Guang’s presentation, Lord Deman nodded in approval. However, he still raised a few concerns. First, how could they be certain that both rival factions would take the bait? Second, since the canyon lay within the borders of the Blade Nation, was there a chance that Lord Duli, the ruler of the Tiger Nation, might discover the trap or the hidden tunnel?

To these concerns, Tan Guang responded with calm confidence.

First, he explained that if the entire army of the Dragon Nation were to march into the canyon, it would arouse strong temptation in the other two factions. The moment even one side tried to seize the opportunity, the other would follow without hesitation. The bait would simply be too enticing to resist.

He then added a deeper strategic layer. Historically, the Dragon Nation had always attacked the Tiger Nation—given the difficulty of mounting an assault on the mountainous Blade Nation. If this time, however, the Dragon Nation suddenly chose to invade the Blade Nation instead, it would raise suspicions in both rival factions.

Surely, they would think: “Why would Long Guo suddenly go after the most difficult target? Could this be a ruse?”

They might suspect that the Dragon Nation was executing a “lure the tiger from the mountain” strategy—pretending to leave their capital undefended to draw enemies in, only to circle back and trap them in a pincer maneuver. As a result, neither Lord Duli nor Lord Shitian would dare launch a frontal assault on the Dragon capital. Their only option? Shadow the Dragon forces—and fall right into the trap.

As for the second concern, Tan Guang emphasized that the canyon was discovered entirely by chance. Blanketed in thick mist all year round, it was almost impossible to scout without deliberate, methodical searching. The hidden tunnel lay behind a natural boulder, untouched by human or beast. There were no signs of prior use, and it was almost certain that the Blade Nation remained unaware of its existence.

Finally, Tan Guang gave a gentle reminder:
“This is the best way to break the current deadlock.
Seven parts lie in human action; three in the heavens.
No plan in the world is flawless. What matters… is bold execution.”

Lord Deman was visibly impressed by the logic of the plan. Yet, he did not give his answer immediately. Instead, he dismissed the council and wandered alone into the imperial gardens to clear his thoughts. Though the plan was brilliant, he still hesitated—uncertain whether to commit.

Watching from a distant shadow was Li Qing, who understood that now was the time to intervene.

He silently invoked a minor technique: Wishcraft (Nguyện Vọng Thuật).

The wish was simple—to cause two ant colonies, from entirely different nests, to encounter each other near Lord Deman. The moment the two swarms met, a war broke out between them. Though equally matched, the more fearful side quickly collapsed, torn apart by the bolder swarm.

Lord Deman, while admiring the garden, caught sight of this tiny battle. The defeat of the cowardly swarm planted a single thought in his heart:

“When paths cross, it is the bold who triumph.”
“The timid perish first. Only the decisive survive.”

Struck by this sudden revelation, Lord Deman came to a realization: this was no time for hesitation. Without delay, he returned to the palace and summoned his generals. The wheels of war had begun to turn.

Once the trap had been fully set, Lord Deman began his mobilization. He even utilized a treasured artifact to sever all information flow to the outside, and assigned a trusted general whose sole responsibility was to monitor the ranks for any signs of unusual behavior. Combined with powerful concealment magic, it became nearly impossible for external forces to gauge the actual troop count. Thus, the two rival factions were forced to rely on prior intelligence—intelligence Lord Deman had deliberately allowed to be “leaked” through planted spies, indicating a force of merely ten thousand.

In the face of this mobilization, both the Tiger Nation and the Blade Nation initially remained still. Once it became clear that the Dragon Nation’s target was the Blade Nation, things unfolded precisely as planned. Neither of the rival rulers dared to assault the Dragon capital. Instead, they sent forces to tail the Dragon army, lying in wait for the opportunity to exploit any weaknesses.

In the end, the Tiger Nation was utterly annihilated, and Lord Shitian managed to escape by a stroke of luck. As for the Blade Nation, it suffered a devastating blow—losing seven thousand troops, nearly half its entire army. Their best remaining option was to rely on the treacherous terrain and fortify their defense lines.

While it was true that the Blade Nation's mountains were easy to defend and hard to conquer, doing so now—after suffering such losses—meant having to stretch their already thin forces across multiple strongholds. This, in turn, left the capital dangerously vulnerable.

Two days later, the Tiger Nation perished completely, and Lord Shitian was slain.

King Tan Guang once again stepped forward with a plan.

First, he pointed out that the Blade Nation, in an effort to withstand an assault, would undoubtedly deploy the majority of their remaining forces to the front lines, relying on geography to delay or repel the Dragon army. However, this move would leave the capital exposed—a fatal weakness.

To exploit this flaw and bring the war to a swift conclusion, Tan Guang proposed two key steps:

Step One:
From the 13,000 troops remaining in the Dragon Nation, deploy 10,000 to openly attack the Blade Nation's defense lines, creating a visible standoff.

Step Two:
Use the remaining 3,000 elite soldiers, supported by the established spy network, to secretly infiltrate the Blade Nation. Of course, 3,000 troops alone could not breach the heavily guarded capital in a short time. Therefore, they would rely on the spy network once more—to establish covert contact with the noble retainers stationed at the Blade Nation's capital.

These retainers would be offered generous terms:
—A full pardon
—Retention of their ranks and honors
—Lavish wealth and status under the new regime

All they had to do was sabotage the inner defenses of the capital at the right moment, allowing the infiltrating Dragon forces to breach the city walls.

As planned, the Blade Nation fell into disarray—attacked from both without and within. Betrayal struck the heart of the nation.
And so, the Blade Nation was destroyed.

The Mandate of the GhostPath was unified under Lord Deman. The true army of the GhostPath quickly regrouped and advanced toward the borders—immediately placing enormous pressure on the territories of Wu Ji Dao Sect.

Duong Wanshan—one of the three bearers of the Heavenly Mandate within the Wu Ji Dao Sect—called for an emergency council in response to the advancing threat of the GhostPath (Quỷ Đạo).

This time, Li Qing did not employ any fifth-rank spy. Instead, he sent forth a fourth-rank agent: Daoist Yunyu, to offer counsel.

The unification of the Eastern Region and the pressure of the GhostPath posed a grave crisis—but also a rare opportunity.

Although Duong Wanshan commanded 400,000 troops, more than either Chen Shanha or Guo Wusong, who each controlled only 300,000, two-thirds of the entire Dongzhou territory belonged to him. Once the GhostPath attacked, the heaviest burden would fall squarely on Duong Wanshan's shoulders.

Thus, it became imperative to borrow strength from others.

Daoist Yunyu's proposal was this:
—Offer a portion of the borderlands to both Chen Shanha and Guo Wusong, in exchange for their commitment to station troops at the frontier alongside Duong Wanshan's forces. This was the first "chasing wolves to drive out tigers" strategy.

Next, request reinforcements from the Hundred Schools Alliance (Chư Tử Bách Gia). Use a second round of land concessions to lure them into quickly suppressing Chen Shanha and Guo Wusong, allowing Duong Wanshan to share in the spoils—territory and soldiers alike. A second "chasing wolves to drive out tigers" move.

Then, when the Hundred Schools had crushed one and moved to strike the other, Duong Wanshan would suddenly turn his blade upon them, removing a longstanding threat while unifying the East under his banner.

This was the classic "when the clam and the snipe fight, the fisherman profits" strategy.

At the heart of this strategy was the deliberate ceding of territory—not once, but twice. And this point troubled Duong Wanshan. Wouldn't such an act lead others—especially those at the higher echelons—to view him as weak and unworthy of trust?

To this, Daoist Yunyu offered a subtle smile.

"Lord, you are mistaking the true purpose of this war."

Duong Wanshan had been bestowed with a celestial treasure by an Immortal, gaining prestige and momentum over the other two. His threat level, accordingly, was far greater. On

the surface, he appeared powerful and untouchable—but in truth, his situation was dangerously precarious.

This tactic of ceding land to gain aid was, in essence, a strategy of ‘feigning weakness to confuse the enemy’ (kỳ địch dĩ nhược).

Let others see Duong Wanshan as lacking the pride of a true monarch—cowardly before a great enemy, willing to cede land rather than fight to the death. Then, Daoist Yunyu posed a question:

> “If you were Chen Shanha or Guo Wusong… what would you think?”

Duong Wanshan answered without hesitation:
“If a man can give away one city to curry favor today, he may offer five cities tomorrow. Such weakness invites predation. What sovereign would fear such a man?”

And that was precisely the point.

Even if he was gifted by the Immortals, if Duong Wanshan’s own capabilities appeared lacking, others would naturally lower their guard toward him—reducing the likelihood of coordinated attacks against him.

This was the core of the plan:
—Portray a strong foe as a weak, cautious ruler, afraid of battle.
—When Duong Wanshan goes to the Hundred Schools Alliance seeking reinforcements, they too will already know he’s been ceding land for aid.
—To them, he will seem petty and cowardly, undeserving of worry.

Daoist Yunyu concluded:

> “This strategy may ruin your reputation, Lord,
but it will also secure you the final victory.
Abandon vanity—and reap the real profit.”

After having resolved the matters of the Eastern Region and the Ghost Dao, Li Qing began to pursue the second objective in his grand design.

He had discovered that ever since the arrival of the Six Paths Ascension Trial into the world, the high-ranking cultivators of the Ghost Dao had become peculiarly silent — even to the extent of not observing the final battles of the Heaven’s Mandate bearers. The Jade Fragment was also unable to provide assistance, lacking any foundational information. Thus, Li Qing dispatched a divine incarnation to the Ghost Dao’s central stronghold — Mount Diyu — to investigate.

Strangely enough, though the array formations and restriction seals protecting the mountain remained active, Mount Diyu was completely devoid of any cultivators on guard. This forced Li Qing to stealthily infiltrate and descend deep into the heart of the mountain. There, he discovered that all of the Ghost Dao's rank-seven and rank-eight cultivators were gathered, performing some kind of ritual.

He was swiftly detected. Without hesitation, Li Qing detonated his divine incarnation, leaving the Ghost Dao grasping at air.

Having obtained sufficient foundational data, the Jade Fragment was finally able to deliver its analysis:

The Ghost Dao was in secret communion with a great being from beyond this world — an Existence of Conceptual Grade.

This being sought to descend into the world, but due to the presence of Heaven and the Heaven's Adversary, it could not force its way in directly.

Now, while the bearers of the Heaven's Mandate were embroiled in battle and the Eight Immortals distracted, this being had struck a pact with the Ghost Dao — to descend a single strand of its will through sacrificial rites.

Its aim was to understand the situation of Heaven and Heaven's Adversary… and from that, determine its course of action.

This information was of utmost importance.

Li Qing intended to find an opportunity to transmit it to the Eight Immortals, sowing distrust between them and the Minghe Yamazi — the Celestial Immortal of the Ghost Dao — thereby laying the groundwork for what was to come.

Part 3.3: The Buddhist Dao

Li Qing had arrived in the Western Region — the final heterodox domain yet to be unified.

Unlike the other lands, the Western Region was dominated by desert terrain. The inhabitants survived primarily by relying on scattered oases. The three Heaven's Mandate bearers in this region were no different; each held dominion over a single oasis, forming a fragile triangle of power.

This time, there was no need for elaborate stratagems or intricate manipulation — for Li Qing had already seized upon their fatal weakness, the single most critical resource in this land: water.

One may go half a month without food and still survive, but without water for three days, even the strongest will perish. If Li Qing could sever the water supply to each of the factions, they would no longer have the luxury of prolonged skirmishes or cautious maneuvers. They would be forced into desperate conflict, tearing at each other like starving beasts — and in the end, only one would remain. As for Li Qing, he cared not who the victor was — only that there was one.

To contaminate the water sources, Li Qing did not resort to poison — for in a world steeped in mystical arts and cultivation, toxins could be swiftly neutralized.

Instead, he employed a far humbler yet deadlier weapon: feces — more precisely, the viruses and bacteria contained within it. Such filth would be of no threat to cultivators, but for ordinary soldiers, it would be devastating.

As for the source of the filth, Li Qing simply pilfered it from each faction's own waste disposal sites. Because water was a strategic resource, the Western Region had long imposed strict controls to ensure that sewage did not seep into underground aquifers — ironically making Li Qing's infiltration all the more convenient.

Certainly. Here is the faithful English translation of Part 4: The Calamity of the Three Disasters in proper xianxia novel style, with names consistently rendered into Pinyin:

Part 4: The Calamity of the Three Disasters

The season of thunder was approaching — the most opportune time to transcend the Lightning Tribulation, one of the Three Disasters. However, Li Qing was well aware that the Eight Immortals (Ba Xian) and others would investigate such a tribulation intensely. Thus, careful planning was essential.

A standard "lure the tiger from the mountain" strategy — such as sealing off Heaven — would likely fail this time. That tactic had already been used too often, and it had long since drawn suspicion. More importantly, such a seal always seemed to appear right at the onset of thunder season — the exact moment ideal for overcoming the Lightning Tribulation. Anyone with a shred of sense would see something was amiss.

Therefore, Li Qing still planned to lure the enemy away — but with a twist.

This time, he only needed one minute to complete the tribulation. As long as he could delay those who were hunting him for at least sixty seconds, that would suffice.

Li Qing laid out his plan.

First, he could not undergo the tribulation during thunder season — that would be far too obvious. If he chose not to face it during that time, then there was only one alternative to accumulate enough lightning: drawing it down himself.

However, drawing lightning would also attract attention. Therefore, the location had to be somewhere capable of concealing the disturbance caused by such an act.

With the assistance of the Jade Piece, Li Qing identified three ideal locations:

Wanlei Gorge: located in the desolate Sa Prefecture, this canyon was perpetually engulfed in thunder and lightning, ravaged year-round by natural destruction.

Stormwind Plains: situated in Eastern Zhou, a vast prairie spanning thousands of li, where howling winds and unrelenting storms roared without cease throughout the year.

Geopulse Abyss: in the Northern Region, a massive subterranean rift riddled with magnetic anomalies, giving rise to arcs of lightning spontaneously forming in the void beneath the abyss.

Lightning Tribulation could not be overcome merely by summoning thunder. The concentration of thunder and lightning had to reach a certain threshold. Among the three locations, only Geopulse Abyss (Di Tu Abyss) failed to meet the standard, as the lightning there arose from the void — far weaker than the natural thunderbolts in the other two places.

However, Geopulse Abyss was the ideal place to conceal oneself, with terrain plunging straight into the depths of the earth. Moreover, its apparent unsuitability for tribulation made it a perfect blind spot — no one would expect Li Qing to be there.

To overcome the Lightning Tribulation, Li Qing needed to forge the tribulation himself. He planned to construct a “Void Lightning-Conducting Feng Shui Array”. But he could not set it up directly at Geopulse Abyss — that would be far too conspicuous. Instead, he would construct another feng shui array elsewhere, which would function as a conduit, channeling lightning from a distant location into the Abyss to concentrate the thunder force required for the tribulation.

Once the Lightning Tribulation was completed, Li Qing would immediately escape through a prearranged teleportation array.

Using the Map of the Four Regions of Jiuzhou, Li Qing carefully selected 108 positions to serve as lightning rods. These rods were scattered as widely as possible, ensuring they didn’t cluster in any one area, which might otherwise draw attention to the true tribulation site. He placed the greatest number of these rods in Beizhou and Yangzhou, creating a convincing false zone to mislead enemy investigators.

These 108 lightning rods formed the first smokescreen Li Qing set up — a diversion to scatter and confuse anyone seeking his true location.

But a single smokescreen was far from enough.

The second smokescreen was even more formidable: the two previously identified ideal tribulation sites — Wanlei Gorge and Stormwind Plains. At these two locations, Li Qing arranged thunderburst arrays to trigger massive storms and thunderclaps. The arrays were timed, designed to go off simultaneously, creating maximum disturbance across the land.

While Li Qing was in the midst of deploying this second smokescreen, Yuan Zhihui — the "Origin of Wisdom" — was already traveling across the Four Regions of Jiuzhou, searching for traces of Li Qing. Suddenly, he sensed a shift in the moisture and thunder-force of the heavens. Only then did it strike him: Li Qing had already reached the cultivation realm where he had to face the Three Disasters, and the prime opportunity for transcending the Lightning Tribulation was fast approaching.

Yuan Zhihui acted at once. He contacted the other cultivators of the Eighth Level — forty-nine in total.

Yuan proposed that they combine their forces to set up a Heaven-Earth Net, sealing off every corner of the Jiuzhou world. If any anomaly was detected, it would be crushed immediately. Not only that, but the power of Seventh Level cultivators would also be fully mobilized.

Yuan Zhihui’s tactical plan was as follows:

Li Qing knew they were hunting him, so he would undoubtedly plant a multitude of smokescreens. This time, Yuan Zhihui himself would lead the command, dismantling each illusion, one by one.

The entire Four Regions of Jiuzhou would be divided into over a hundred zones, each one monitored by a Seventh Level cultivator. These would form a wide-reaching surveillance net. In addition, the land would be divided again into 49 greater zones, each under the watch of an Eighth Level cultivator, forming two interlocking layers of defense and pursuit.

Though Yuan Zhihui’s deployment was complete, Li Qing’s arrangements were far from over.

He secretly contacted the Dragon King of Bo River, offering one hundred years of lifespan in exchange for the method to construct a Calamity-Avoiding Pocket Realm (Ti Jie Dong Tian) — a haven capable of surviving both tribulations and the destruction of the world itself.

Having successfully made the exchange, Li Qing now essentially held the equivalent of one hundred eighth-level ghost generals in his grasp. However, he dared not summon them all at once. If he did so, the Eight Immortals would never let him be — such an act would shatter the balance of the world.

Thus, Li Qing only summoned a limited number of ghost generals — just enough not to cross the line.

The world trembled thirteen times — each tremor representing the descent of one eighth-level ghost general. The moment they appeared, Li Qing sealed them all into Borrowed Power Talismans, ready to be unleashed when needed.

Then, thirteen phantom clones, each carrying a talisman sealed with one ghost general, split off in thirteen directions, each heading toward a different area based on Li Qing's command. Each chosen location was a perilous terrain — dangerous enough that even seventh-level cultivators would have to spend time and effort to enter.

This was Li Qing's third layer of smokescreen.

Unlike the previous two layers, Li Qing knew that his enemies would recognize this as a smokescreen — and that was precisely the point. He was taking advantage of the psychology of pursuit, hiding himself within a trap so obvious that no one would believe he'd truly be there.

Yuan Zhihui, having received reports of thirteen eighth-level ghost generals appearing, immediately began his analysis.

He concluded: Li Qing was well aware they were hunting him, and these ghost generals were prepared as his countermeasure.

Therefore, if a seventh-level cultivator discovered what appeared to be Li Qing's tribulation site, they must never approach alone. They were to immediately report to an eighth-level cultivator — otherwise, they would surely perish.

Li Qing had summoned thirteen ghost generals to correspond with the Nine Provinces and Four Domains — one general for each. Though all of them were false targets, Yuan Zhihui could not afford to ignore a single one. If Li Qing was truly hiding "beneath the lamp," and they overlooked him because they believed it was just another smokescreen — they would fall right into his trap.

To neglect this would be to fall into Li Qing's scheme.

But to take it seriously meant splitting their forces to contend with all thirteen ghost generals — and to send scouts to investigate each region.

Yuan Zhihui also deduced that Li Qing only required one minute to complete his tribulation. That meant they had only one minute to discover his true location.

Each site where a ghost general appeared had to be assaulted immediately by at least one eighth-level cultivator. They were to suppress and eliminate the ghost general, then sweep the area thoroughly in the shortest possible time.

If even one ghost general succeeded in delaying them, buying Li Qing enough time to complete his tribulation — their entire operation would be a failure.

Knowing Li Qing's nature, Yuan Zhihui was certain that this was not the end — Li Qing would create yet more layers of smokescreen, each requiring vast manpower to unravel.

This was no longer merely a pursuit — it was a race against time.

They had to dispel all of Li Qing's illusions in the shortest time possible — and only then could they even hope to find his true location.

Just as Li Qing was about to undergo his Tribulation, he suddenly released news that the Ghost Dao was collaborating with an external existence. This immediately fractured the united front of the eighth-level cultivators, who began questioning the eighth-level cultivators from the Demonic Dao. Simultaneously, the other seven of the Eight Immortals confronted Minghe Yanmatzu, the immortal of the Demonic Dao.

Naturally, the Demonic Dao swore vehemently that this was nothing but a false rumor — a deliberate attempt at sowing discord. They warned everyone not to be fooled by such an obvious ruse.

On the day of the Lightning Tribulation, the skies were filled with thunder. The moment Li Qing began his Tribulation, all three layers of smokescreens — the 108 lightning rods, the 13 ghost generals, and the two false Tribulation sites — were fully activated. At the same time, Yuan Zhihui officially entered the fray.

Yuan Zhihui reminded everyone that over a hundred points of lightning strikes had appeared across the world, with Northern Province and Yang Province having the densest clusters. It was highly likely that Li Qing was hiding somewhere in or near these two regions. All seventh- and eighth-level cultivators assigned to Yang Province and Northern Province were ordered to extinguish the lightning points as quickly as possible. If Li Qing was not found, they were to immediately proceed to the next strike point.

Next, the Ten-Thousand Thunder Gorge and the Storm Plain were also erupting with lightning. These could be the sites of Li Qing's Tribulation, but were more likely lures he had thrown out. Because these regions were vast, each one required four eighth-level cultivators to scour thoroughly.

All across the Nine Provinces and Four Domains, every treacherous location had become riddled with lightning. Li Qing's intent was clear: to use danger zones + eighth-level ghost

generals to delay their search. Each such place required a pair of eighth-level cultivators to proceed together.

From the moment the lightning began striking to the time these orders were issued — only ten seconds had passed.

The 13 ghost generals were swiftly eliminated, confirming they were just another layer of Li Qing's deception. However, investigating the two massive zones and the 108 lightning strike points was not so simple. Yuan Zhihui quietly calculated and realized that at least one full minute was required to complete the sweep.

Meanwhile, undergoing his Tribulation, Li Qing was also observing the changing state of the lightning rod network. Although many lightning rods had been destroyed, 45 seconds had already passed.

Yuan Zhihui, commanding the entire operation, frantically connected all available information in a race against the final seconds. Among the 108 strike points, he began to notice a pattern. Combining this with the layout of the earth veins across the Nine Provinces and Four Domains, he realized — every lightning strike aligned perfectly with an earth vein node.

He immediately deduced: Why earth veins?

Those most skilled in utilizing earth veins were the ancient civilizations — in other words, geomantic formations. Li Qing must have grasped such an ancient art.

These lightning points weren't random — they were meant to transport thunder energy. All the energy would converge in one location.

Not Northern Province. Not Yang Province. But — the Northern Domain.

Without hesitation, Yuan Zhihui issued a new command: abandon all operations eliminating lightning points, and all nearby cultivators were to immediately converge on the Northern Domain, where Li Qing was truly hiding.

At the same time, he investigated the earth vein network of the Northern Domain — and saw that it all flowed into one place:

The Abyss of Magnetic Earth.

But — the one-minute mark had already passed.

Li Qing had vanished, escaping just before the cultivators arrived en masse.

He reviewed the lightning rod network and realized only just over half had been destroyed — yet the cultivators had almost completely locked onto his position.

Li Qing pondered silently:

> “The geomantic formation... it might have been exposed.”

During the Tribulation, many eighth- and seventh-level cultivators had stopped destroying rods halfway through — and then suddenly charged toward the Northern Domain for a sweep.

And in mere moments, they nearly pinpointed his exact location.

It could only mean someone had deciphered the geomantic structure, and used that to trace his whereabouts.

Once he had gathered enough contextual data, the Jade Fragment transmitted a key message to Li Qing:

> “Yuan Zhihui was the one who led this hunt.”

Through deduction of the lightning strike patterns, alignment with earth veins, and a vast store of knowledge, Yuan Zhihui had correctly guessed that Li Qing was employing ancient geomantic arrays. Following the trail, he had traced it back to the source — and nearly locked onto the true location of the Tribulation.

Li Qing could not help but sigh.

> “Another of my hidden cards... has been spent.”

From this point forward, using geomantic formations to mask his presence would become far more difficult.

The Lightning Tribulation had come to a close. Though Li Qing once again slipped through their fingers, the Eight Immortals were not entirely disheartened. For this time, they had unearthed yet another trump card hidden up Li Qing's sleeve.

Their summary of the intelligence gathered on Li Qing was as follows:

He is Fate-less — one without a Heavenly Mandate.

Possesses a Supreme Treasure capable of accessing information, allowing him to monitor the movements across the entire world.

Commands an intelligence network spread wide and deep — highly probable that it is embedded under the very noses of those bearing the Heavenly Mandate.

Possesses knowledge of the Sealing of Heaven.

Holds the Command of General Summoning, capable of calling forth eighth-level entities. There is suspicion that, given the right conditions, he may even summon ninth-level beings or true immortals.

Has successfully transcended the Lightning Tribulation of the Three Calamities. The Wind and Fire Tribulations are too vast in scope and difficult to predict, thus set aside for now. All focus is now on the upcoming Destiny Tribulation.

Holds mastery over geomantic formations.

From now on, any strategic consideration involving Li Qing must account for all the above.

During the discussion, Nirvana Buddha brought up an intriguing matter — all three heterodox sects had been unified within a short span of time. The unification events of the Ghost Dao and Beast Dao were relatively plausible, though notably led by fifth-level cultivators in both cases. However, the unification of the Buddhist Dao was clearly influenced by external manipulation — the deliberate destruction of water supplies of all three factions, thereby forcing them into a bloody internal war.

Looking at the broader picture, it became clear that all three events may have been orchestrated single-handedly by Li Qing.

The plan had been crude — even brazen, as if intentionally performed for the Eight Immortals to witness.

Thus, the Eight Immortals speculated that this was part of Li Qing’s preparations for his Destiny Tribulation. This was his way of forging a path for himself into the great war of the Heavenly Mandates.

If that were the case, then Li Qing would inevitably step onto the battlefield under a public identity, openly entering the Mandate War.

As for what identity Li Qing would adopt, the Eight Immortals initially suspected Zhu Yibat, Wang Tiānqiu, and Nangong Haoran — for the cities where these three Heavenly Mandate bearers first appeared had also been the early known locations of Li Qing's own movements. While the three Mandate-bearers themselves were clean, the problem might lie within their subordinate forces — Li Qing could potentially be hiding under one of these banners.

However, what the Eight Immortals could think of — Li Qing could surely deduce as well. Therefore, there was also a possibility that he would intentionally avoid associating with any of the three.

Even so, vigilance was paramount. They could not afford to let Li Qing employ the tactic of "darkness under the lamp".

The responsibility of monitoring the three Mandate bearers was entrusted to the Saint of the Firmament — Hao Tian Shengren.

During this period, the monster's fishing scheme was progressing smoothly — the information about the Sealing of Heaven had successfully reached the hands of Lord of Ten Thousand Tribulations (Wan Jie Mo Zhu).

In fact, the Lord of Ten Thousand Tribulations had even dispatched an incarnation to personally investigate. However, the incarnation was not powerful enough to unravel the seal formation — a formation jointly established by five ninth-level monsters — and was ultimately forced to withdraw.

This failure only served to reinforce the Lord of Ten Thousand Tribulations' belief that this was indeed the Sealing of Heaven. And if one truly wished to infiltrate the Sealing of Heaven, nothing less than full power would suffice.

Yet, the Lord of Ten Thousand Tribulations dared not descend in his true form.

For the moment his true form manifested in the Nine Provinces and Four Domains, the others would surely sense it. By then, it would no longer be "the Sealing of Heaven belonging to the Lord of Ten Thousand Tribulations," but rather "the Sealing of Heaven belonging to the Eight Immortals."

And among the immortals, the Lord of Ten Thousand Tribulations was known as the greediest of all — there was no way he would tolerate such an outcome.

That was precisely why the monsters had targeted him first.

Returning to Li Qing, the Lightning Tribulation had already been overcome. Of the Three Great Calamities, only Wind and Fire remained.

Though these two calamities could be transcended through numerous methods—making it much harder to pinpoint their location—Li Qing still laid out his plans with extreme caution, wary of the Eight Immortals continuing their relentless pursuit.

First was the Wind Tribulation.

Utilizing the Jade Fragment, Li Qing searched for suitable locations to undergo this trial:

Stormwind Plain

Black Gale Prairie in the Dark Side

Desiring Wind Gorge in the Bright Side

Profound Ice Mountain in Northern Province

The Temporal Storm within the Interspatial Twin Barrier

With these five locations identified, Li Qing began his analysis.

He eliminated the sites in both the Bright Side and Dark Side, as the Ninth-Level Monsters and the Eight Immortals were currently locked in a deadly game of cat and mouse in those realms. Entering either side would be akin to offering his life on a silver platter.

The fixed locations within the Nine Provinces and Four Domains were also struck off his list. If these places were predictable, then cultivators of the seventh and eighth level would likely already be lying in wait—prepared to "guard the tree, waiting for the hare."

Since Wind Tribulation did not require a fixed time, Li Qing deduced that those enemies were likely prepared for a long-term ambush.

Therefore, Li Qing ultimately chose the Temporal Storm within the Interspatial Twin Barrier — a wind phenomenon that existed between the Nine Provinces and Four Domains and the Bright/Dark Side. In other words, he could undergo his tribulation from anywhere, as long as he opened a rift in space and channeled the wind through it.

Next came the Fire Tribulation.

For this, Li Qing planned to accumulate Heavenly Fire—that is, sunlight.

He would construct an array capable of slowly absorbing and converting Heavenly Fire, ensuring it operated at a low enough frequency that it would not disrupt the distribution of sunlight, and thereby avoid drawing attention to its location.

Once sufficient Heavenly Fire had been gathered—

the Fire Tribulation would begin.

Part 5: Gathering the Dharma Avatars – The Fall of an Immortal

After Li Qing had overcome the Three Calamities, the War of Heavenly Mandates was rapidly approaching its climax.

At the main stronghold of the Heavenly Mandate bearer Phan Chengfeng, Sun Qiankun activated a grand scheme—one that Li Qing had laid out long in advance.

The Hundred Schools of Thought split into three great divisions, each targeting the strongest cultivator among the Three Great Orthodox Sects.

Yet the other Heavenly Mandate bearers of the Orthodox Sects did not intervene. On the contrary, many covertly aided the assault, ambushing their own faction's leader from the shadows.

Why? Because once the strongest fell, they would swallow his troops and territory whole.

The fall of the top experts from the three Orthodox sects would also signal to the three Outer Paths that the Nine Provinces were ripe for conquest.

During this time, the Mandate bearers of the Hundred Schools began secretly communicating with the Outer Paths. On the surface, it looked like they were battling each other in bloody, brutal combat. The Outer Paths, observing this infighting, began to harbor illusions of seizing the prize once both sides were weakened.

But the trap had already been laid.

The moment the Outer Paths tried to swoop in like sparrows eyeing the aftermath, they would find themselves ensnared.

Each battlefield had four different Heavenly Mandate holders lying in ambush. Once the Outer Paths acted, it would be four-on-one, overwhelming and eliminating them cleanly.

However, after the Outer Paths were removed, the true conflict would inevitably ignite between the Hundred Schools of Thought and the Three Orthodox Sects. By that point, all pretenses would vanish, and a full-scale war would erupt. What happened next would depend entirely on each faction's strength and finesse.

Still, regardless of the chaos that followed, this phase of the grand game would reach a temporary conclusion when three victors—one from each front—emerged, forming a new balance of power: a tripartite stalemate.

This outcome would serve as the foundation for the next strategic evolution.

This was the true result of Li Qing's design—"the world split three ways."

But for this grand strategy to work, the crucial step was persuading the remaining five Heavenly Mandate bearers of the Hundred Schools.

Compared to the Orthodox Sects and Outer Paths, the Hundred Schools' Mandate bearers were weaker, plagued by limited land and overcrowded power struggles.

Thus, they had to act before the dust settled, while the opposing factions were still uncoordinated and wary of each other. This was the last chance to seize the initiative—to guide the entire war in a direction that would serve their own will.

Very swiftly, a secret conference was convened among the Heavenly Mandate bearers of the Hundred Schools of Thought, prompted by the urging of senior cultivators across various factions. Once again, Sun Qiankun took on the role of presenter, explaining the grand strategy to the Mandate bearers and offering a clearer vision of the "Tripartite Division of the World."

The Three Outer Paths had unified, placing immense pressure on the Three Great Daoist Sects—but this situation wouldn't last long. It had to be exploited swiftly.

In truth, the northern factions were weaker than both the Daoist sects and the Outer Paths. Thus, they had to strike now while opportunity remained, to undermine the stronger forces.

The six factions of the Hundred Schools would split into three task forces, each aimed at attacking the strongest Heavenly Mandate bearer in the western, eastern, and southern regions respectively.

Nan Gong Haoran and Xuan Yuan Changlong would strike at Tang Wanshan of the Wu Ji Dao Sect.

Zhu Yibai and Wang Tiānchū would assault Ximen Yongsheng of the Eternal Night Dao Sect.

Li Qinglian and Phan Chengfeng would move against Huang Wanchao of the True Treasure Dao Sect.

The strongest Mandate bearer in any given region posed the greatest threat to all the other forces in that region. Targeting them would only benefit the weaker factions nearby—after all, compared to the top contender, these others were far easier to deal with. This was a war of interests, devoid of emotion.

So long as the top three were eliminated, their power would naturally be redistributed, and the victors would open negotiations with the other Mandate bearers of the Daoist sects. They would then stage a performance—a false drama—to lure the Outer Paths into invading, only to suddenly turn the tables and destroy them with overwhelming numbers.

In the end, after the dust settled and the playing field was leveled, the remaining factions would compete freely. When only three major powers were left standing, the war would shift into a prolonged stalemate—a tripartite balance that might last ten years, or even a hundred.

The core principle of this strategy lay in their weakness. Because they were weaker, they had to leverage human nature.

The Three Daoist Sects held the advantage of land and abundant resources; they couldn't be defeated head-on. The Three Outer Paths, meanwhile, held the timing advantage—always ready to move, seizing every shift in momentum.

Thus, the only thing the Hundred Schools could exploit was the hearts of men.

Truthfully, this plan was neither especially secretive nor especially clever. The Daoist sects would likely see through it. But even so, they would still fall into the trap, for the bait was simply too tempting.

As relatively weaker Heavenly Mandate holders within their sects, many of them were caught between two blades—suppressed by their own sect's strongest from within, and watched like prey by the Outer Paths from without.

This was a stage for the strong to rule and the weak to submit.

But the intervention of the Hundred Schools of Thought changed everything. This was the weak joining forces to slay the strong, and only afterward would they settle internal rivalries. In this scenario, the weak held the initiative.

The Heavenly Mandate bearers of the Daoist sects had already caught wind of this six-way summit among the Hundred Schools. While they had yet to decipher the "Tripartite Division" plan, they clearly recognized a new alliance had formed—an obvious move given the inferior strength of the Hundred Schools.

Thus, they chose to remain still for now. Some even sought to secretly collaborate with the Hundred Schools and other Mandate holders in their regions, intending to put on their own performance—a ploy to lure the Outer Paths and annihilate them, only to turn against the Hundred Schools afterward.

What none of them realized, however, was that Li Qing already held the entire battlefield in his palm.

Once the Daoist sects and the Outer Paths made their moves, the only thing awaiting them would be the road to death.

During this period, cultivators of the Eighth Stage continued their relentless surveillance and scrutiny of the factions under the Heavenly Mandate bearers—especially focusing on the Fifth Stage cultivators. The reason was clear: they firmly believed that Li Qing, in order to obtain the Primordial Dharma Forms, would have to act through these Fifth Stage cultivators, allowing them to shine on the battlefield and thus gain the opportunity to witness the Primordial Dharma Forms firsthand. Every event thus far seemed to point in that direction.

After all, all Primordial Dharma Forms had long since been sealed within the headquarters of the major sects, guarded by numerous Fourth Stage cultivators and layers of restrictive formations and grand arrays.

However, precisely because everyone believed this to be true, they had already stepped into the cognitive trap that Li Qing had meticulously constructed since the very beginning of the Six Paths of Deification.

Li Qing had long understood—this path was a pathless one. The higher one climbed, the more treacherous it became. The surface was too shallow; even the slightest ripple would stir waves. It was akin to modern society, where ordinary people could still strive and work hard to ascend into the middle class. But to rise from middle class to the upper class was a different story entirely—countless middle-class aspirants would compete, yet only a handful would ever succeed.

The reason? Resource lockdown.

The ecosystem of the upper class was long since closed. Anyone attempting to break into it would inevitably cause disruption across three aspects—economics, material access, and power dynamics.

Translating this logic into the current cultivation world: any unusual movement among the Fifth Stage cultivators would immediately stand out and become subject to intense monitoring.

Which was why, from the very beginning—Li Qing had never intended to walk this path at all.

Li Qing activated the Commander's Summoning Order, calling forth four Eighth-Stage Yin Generals.
This action did not escape the notice of the high-ranking cultivators—Yuan Zhihui among them.

Yuan Zhihui immediately began deducing the implications. Four Eighth-Stage Yin Generals—this force alone could rival the upper-echelon combat power of an entire Dao Lineage.

Connecting this to the fact that Li Qing was currently attempting to collect the Primordial Dharma Forms, a thought emerged in Yuan Zhihui's mind:

> Was Li Qing planning to assault the headquarters of a Dao Lineage and forcibly seize the Primordial Dharma Forms?

But almost as soon as the thought formed, Yuan Zhihui dismissed it based on accumulated intelligence.

First, such an act was tantamount to suicide. The sect headquarters were not only guarded by Eighth-Stage cultivators, but also fortified with layers of restrictive formations, some even left behind by Immortals themselves.
Anyone who thought that having equivalent fighting power would be enough to break through a sect's headquarters was nothing but a fool.
The fact that these Eight Dao Lineages had survived until today without being overthrown was no coincidence.

Second, judging from all available information, Li Qing was someone who would never resort to brute force. He would never confront power head-on. Instead, he always maneuvered through schemes—both overt and covert—to achieve his ends.

And yet—this time Yuan Zhihui was wrong.

Part of the reason was that Yuan Zhihui placed too much faith in the power of Immortals.
But the greater cause was this: he understood Li Qing too well.
And precisely because of that deep understanding, his thinking fell into a rut—a cage shaped by logic and precedent.
Everything Li Qing had done before became the perfect misdirection, leading Yuan Zhihui to eliminate the truth from his list of possibilities with his own hands.

Here is the continuation of the translation in xianxia novel style, with faithful and consistent rendering of names and tone:

Li Qing, accompanied by his four Eighth-Stage Yin Generals, fully armed—his arsenal including the Immortal-Slaying Flying Dagger—returned to the Eastern Region.

After arranging a teleportation formation as a route of retreat, only then did he begin infiltrating the Hell Mountain—the headquarters of the Ghost Dao.

The outer formation was airtight and heavily guarded.
But for someone like Li Qing, who already possessed detailed knowledge of the formation's structure, and who was fully equipped with the Helm of Forgetfulness, the Armor of Devouring Heaven, and a vast array of spells, bypassing it was effortless.

Once through, he was met with ten statues of infernal deities arranged atop the summit of Hell Mountain, encircling the sole entrance.
These statues not only served as surveillance and alarm systems, but also held lethal might—each roughly equivalent to a Sixth-Stage cultivator.
However, their monitoring abilities were no match for the concealment of the Armor of Devouring Heaven and Helm of Forgetfulness.

Deep within the mountain, Li Qing entered the Imperial Hall of the Yama Heir, where the Primordial Dharma Form of the Ghost Dao was enshrined.
This Dharma Form was protected by law-bound restraints—only by using the proper method could one claim it.
Any attempt at direct force would trigger immediate alarms.
This was the inviolable line of defense, the point where stealth was no longer possible.

But Li Qing had anticipated this.

As soon as he reached the Dharma Form, he unleashed all four Yin Generals, initiating a direct assault.
The defense was broken.
He succeeded in seizing the Primordial Dharma Form.

This upheaval instantly alerted the four Eighth-Stage cultivators of the Demonic Dao, who were conducting sacrificial rites beneath the mountain.
They charged forth furiously—only to be met with devastation.

The four Yin Generals, alongside the Immortal-Slaying Flying Dagger, threw them into chaos.
The battle was intense.
Though Li Qing lost all four Yin Generals in the process, he succeeded in destroying the resurrection cards of all four Ghost Dao cultivators.

He made no attempt to pursue and finish them off.
Having achieved his objective, he swiftly retreated.

The four Eighth-Stage cultivators were on the brink of madness.
Not only had they failed to protect the Dharma Form, but they had also lost their resurrection trump cards.
In the coming phases of the Six Paths Ascension, they would be at an irreparable disadvantage.

Every cultivator at that level possessed resurrection methods.
Even the strong dared not push the weak too far—after all, everyone had a second life.
But now, for these four, death would be final.

In theory, the wisest course of action was to publicly disclose that Li Qing had developed the means to infiltrate Dao headquarters and bypass formation barriers.
That way, other sects would be on alert, laying out vast nets of divine surveillance to ensnare Li Qing should he come.

But no.

Driven by self-interest, the Ghost Dao chose to keep everything a secret.
Their plan: let the next sect Li Qing targeted fall into the same pit—pulling them down into mutual weakness within the larger Ascension War.

What they did not know was that Li Qing had long foreseen this.
This exact reaction was part of an even deeper arrangement.

The four cultivators reported everything to the Yama Son of the Nether River, who—gritting his teeth—could only accept the bitter fruit and erase all traces, ensuring no one could discover that Li Qing had assaulted Hell Mountain.

Yet even so, Yuan Zhihui vaguely sensed something amiss.
When he drew near, he was politely turned away by one of the Eighth-Stage cultivators under the excuse of being seen off as a guest.

After returning from the raid on the headquarters of the Ghost Dao, Li Qing contacted Sun Qiankun, preparing to initiate a full-scale war.

At the same time, he silently monitored the progress of the trap set for the Ten-Thousand Calamity Demon Lord by the monsters.
Li Qing's next move would be to infiltrate the headquarters of the Demon Dao the moment the Demon Lord fell into the trap.
Simultaneously, Sun Qiankun would ignite the flames of the Heaven's Mandate War, drawing the eyes of all under heaven.

Of course, the Ghost Dao wouldn't be fooled.
But even their belief that they were one step ahead was, in truth, a hidden trap.

Next, Li Qing went on to summon another four Eighth-Stage Yin Generals.
Yuan Zhihui soon caught wind of this.

Unaware that the previous four Yin Generals had already perished, Yuan Zhihui mistakenly believed that Li Qing now commanded a total of eight.
Such a force would double the number of Eighth-Stage cultivators in a typical Dao lineage.
Still, it wasn't enough to forcefully breach a Dao Sect's headquarters.

Thus, Yuan Zhihui deduced that Li Qing's plan was to hunt down and eliminate isolated high-level cultivators.
The goal: to intimidate and deter those upper-realm cultivators who were searching for him, keeping him under constant pressure.

At present, many Eighth-Stage and Seventh-Stage cultivators had split up and were deployed across the Nine Provinces and Four Domains to keep watch.
If Li Qing launched an ambush, it would send a clear message—turning the entire elite echelon into frightened birds startled by a bowstring, wary of being alone.
The surveillance web cast over Li Qing would be severely disrupted, leaving only the Eight Immortals to restrain him—and they were occupied elsewhere.

This misinformation led to a misjudgment, causing Yuan Zhihui to lose the qualifications to even intervene in this game.

The root cause was the Ghost Dao's concealment of a critical piece of intelligence.
Li Qing knew exactly how Yuan Zhihui would interpret the summoning of the Yin Generals. Yuan Zhihui had been closely tracking him all along, but the moment his direction of thought veered off course, all calculations collapsed.

Everything—every step, every thread—remained within Li Qing's grasp.

As time passed, the trap set by the monsters for the Ten-Thousand Calamity Demon Lord had finally reached the moment to draw the net.

On the night of May 17th, the avatar of the Demon Lord stood before an ancient stone stele. The Demon Lord had studied this stele for a long time, yet had never found a way to open it. The stele's power was far too overwhelming—his avatar alone was not enough. At the very least, his true body would have to descend to stand a chance.

However, his true body was currently moving together with four other Immortals, tracking and pressing the ninth-stage monsters. Any fluctuation in his presence would be immediately noticed. Furthermore, descending to the lower realm risked being catapulted back to the Yang Side or the Dark Side—so the maximum time he could afford was but one minute.

While deep in thought, the stele suddenly opened.

The Demon Lord was stunned at first, then overjoyed, thinking that he had encountered some unique time frame during which the stele would naturally unlock.
Without hesitation, he stepped inside—only for the avatar to be immediately slain by the residual power left behind by the five monsters.

However, just before perishing, the avatar was able to catch a faint trace of Heavenly aura inside the stele—and relayed that message back to the true body.

This was the trap the monsters had laid all along. Only by letting the Demon Lord discover it on his own, and sense the aura of Heaven personally, could they make him believe without doubt.
Then they swiftly destroyed the avatar, leaving no time for further investigation—creating the illusion that anyone who entered would be annihilated by the overwhelming power guarding the place.
Since the defense was built upon the combined might of five ninth-stage monsters, its strength indeed rivaled that of an Immortal—perfectly in line with the perception of a Heaven-sealing formation.

The bait was set. Now came the part where the Demon Lord would walk into it.

Currently, the Demon Lord was among a team of five Immortals scouring the world for traces of the monsters. Thus, the five monsters each split into different directions, releasing their aura in distinct regions to be sensed by the Immortals—luring them apart.

Simultaneously, they unleashed every monster under their command, launching the fiercest attack yet upon the Nine Provinces and Four Domains. This forced three of the Immortals, who were in charge of defense, to remain in place and unable to assist elsewhere.

When that moment came, the Demon Lord would find himself alone, and secretly descend into the Nine Provinces and Four Domains, entering the “Heaven-sealing formation.”
That formation would transport him to a sealed realm hidden within the spatial barrier, where the true bodies of the five monsters were already lying in wait—ready to encircle and slay the Demon Lord.

Just as planned, the five Immortals did sense something amiss.
But they were overconfident—believing that even if surrounded by five ninth-stage monsters, they would not die immediately.
As long as they held on, reinforcements could arrive in time.

And so, they each went their separate ways.

Seeing such a ripe opportunity, the Ten-Thousand Calamity Demon Lord did not hesitate.
He took the bait—and the moment he was trapped, he immediately cried out for aid from the other four Immortals.

At that very moment, the Heaven’s Mandate War erupted suddenly.
And Li Qing quietly infiltrated the headquarters of the Demon Dao.

Minghe Yamazi also had a plan of his own: he ordered the four eighth-stage cultivators of Ghost Dao to secretly trail the remaining Dao orthodoxies that had yet to be robbed of their Primordial Dharma Forms by Li Qing.

At that time, Li Qing launched his assault on the headquarters of Demon Dao, accompanied by four Yin Generals and the murderous Demon-Slaying Flying Blade.

Demon Dao, thinking this was a chance to reap all the rewards alone, refrained from alerting others. Instead, they aimed to seize Li Qing and monopolize the benefits.
But instead, they were utterly crushed.

Li Qing swiftly seized both the Primordial Dharma Form and the entire treasure vault of Demon Dao.
He then summoned an additional Yin General, bringing his force to five.

Demon Dao made a desperate attempt to resist, even activating Immortal-level formations left behind by their forebears.

Unfortunately for them, the Ten-Thousand Calamity Demon Lord was now at the brink of death, fully entangled by the ambush of five ninth-stage monsters—he had no strength left to worry about his own sect.

As a result, Demon Dao's trump cards collapsed completely:
One eighth-stage cultivator was killed outright, and the other three lost their resurrection artifacts.

At that very moment, Yuan Zhihui received a lightning-fast distress signal from the three surviving Demon Dao cultivators.
Connecting the dots with the fact that the Demon Lord was currently being besieged by five monstrous beasts, Yuan Zhihui instantly realized he had made a grave miscalculation.

He immediately issued a call for all nearby eighth-stage cultivators to rush to the headquarters of Demon Dao.

Meanwhile, Li Qing, having retrieved several Rule-based treasures from the vault, activated the Great Brahma Heavenly Chant—with the intention of enslaving the three remaining eighth-stage cultivators of Demon Dao.

At the same time, he released a targeted spiritual fluctuation, acting as a lure to attract the Ghost Dao cultivators who had been lurking nearby hoping to scavenge the spoils.

Li Qing knew full well that since the last incident, Minghe Yamazi had developed deep hostility toward him.
He expected Minghe would want to capture him personally, as the four eighth-stage Ghost Dao cultivators would never suffice.
Thus, Li Qing had prepared a surprise especially for Minghe Yamazi.

The eighth-stage cultivator from Ghost Dao, sensing the strangeness of the situation, immediately reported back to Minghe Yamazi.
Minghe contemplated for a brief moment—and instantly perceived that Li Qing's aim was to lure him into a trap.

He became hesitant.

Minghe recalled that Li Qing had once controlled three ninth-stage monsters using some strange power borrowed from a supreme existence.
If such power was used again, even an Immortal like himself might fall—not just die, but face something far worse: being enslaved by Li Qing.

However—though Minghe Yamazi appeared to have avoided the trap, in truth, he had already stepped into it.

The Great Brahma Heavenly Chant had harsh and restrictive conditions for control.
At most, Li Qing could only temporarily bind the three Demon Dao cultivators.
Moreover, this control was only intermediary—the true manipulator behind the scenes was a higher being from the Proto-Conceptual Realm that lay beyond the chant.

Thus, Li Qing had no desire to rely on this power permanently.

In the end, Minghe Yamazi had unknowingly passed up the closest opportunity he would ever have to seize Li Qing's tail.

After successfully enslaving the three remaining eighth-stage cultivators of Demon Dao, Li Qing issued immediate orders.

He instructed them to accuse Ghost Dao, stabilize the internal situation of Demon Dao following the fall of the Ten-Thousand Calamity Demon Lord, and then collaborate with the faction backing Xuan Yuan Changlong.
Having arranged all this, Li Qing vanished without a trace—his retreat flawless.

Soon after, when Yuan Zhihui and other eighth-stage cultivators arrived at the scene, they were greeted by a fiery confrontation.

The cultivators of Demon Dao were furiously questioning those of Ghost Dao:

> "Why did you let Li Qing go at the crucial moment? Why didn't you join the battle?"

> "How did you even know Li Qing would be here? You showed up almost instantly after the skirmish began. If you knew, why didn't you notify the rest of us?"

Suspicion immediately turned toward Ghost Dao.

Indeed, it was highly unusual. Ghost Dao's domain lay in the far-off Eastern Region, so if anyone were to arrive first, it should've been the Hundred Schools Coalition, not them.

Ghost Dao cultivators could only offer weak defenses: that they had made early arrangements, and that they had the surveillance support of an Immortal.
Dropping an Immortal's name instantly silenced further interrogation—but the seed of doubt had already been planted.

Thanks to rumors about Ghost Dao's "secret dealings" with outside powers, coupled with this incident, everyone began suspecting Ghost Dao of betrayal.

And then, the curtain fell:

The Ten-Thousand Calamity Demon Lord had fallen.

An Immortal had perished.
Even the heavens wept—a rain of blood fell from the skies, marking the demise of one of the Eight Immortals.

During the high-level assembly that followed, Yuan Zhihui voiced his deductions:

> “The root of this calamity lies with Ghost Dao.”

He revealed that Ghost Dao had concealed the fact that Li Qing had once infiltrated and plundered their own headquarters—and because of that, Demon Dao’s stronghold was left vulnerable.

It was Ghost Dao’s self-serving silence that allowed Li Qing to join forces with the monsters and slay the Demon Lord.
The War of Destiny that broke out was also instigated by Li Qing to cloud everyone’s vision.

> “Ghost Dao owes us a full explanation,” Yuan Zhihui declared.

At this point, all animosity had converged on Ghost Dao.

Ghost Dao cultivators argued that any faction, placed in their position, would’ve made the same decision.
They claimed others had the luxury to criticize only because they weren’t the ones who suffered.

Some of them even went so far as to taunt Demon Dao, saying,

> “If you're unhappy, come take revenge.”

These provocations only further strained Ghost Dao’s relations with the other sects.

What Ghost Dao didn’t know was this:

> From the moment Li Qing discovered that they had been conducting rituals to an entity from beyond the world, their fate had already been sealed.

This too was part of Li Qing’s deeper trap—a trap designed to ignite civil war among the Eight Immortals.

Why are there Eight Immortals?

Because eight is a structurally stable configuration.
Whether split as 4 versus 4, or four pairs of 2, the balance holds.

But when one Immortal falls, only seven remain.
Any division now becomes uneven, and imbalance is born.
This odd number becomes a destabilizing factor, one that must be eliminated—lest it becomes the fisherman benefiting from the clam-and-snipe fight.

Thus, the remaining Six Immortals are highly likely to choose one target—the “odd one out”—to purge, thereby restoring balance to a stable Six Immortals structure.

And based on Li Qing’s full web of manipulation,
that target…
was almost certainly going to be Minghe Yamazi.

After all, six Immortals still hold the numerical advantage, along with five ninth-stage monsters in their favor.

That’s why they would take action.

This—was the greatest trap in all of Li Qing’s designs:

> A chain of layered schemes leading to the slaughter of Immortals.

The “Threefold Division of the World” plan was not merely meant to accelerate the unification of the Destiny Mandate,
but Li Qing also used it as a cover to seize three Rule Artifacts once belonging to ninth-tier monsters—
now held by two of the three most powerful figures in each region: Duong Wanshan and Huang Wanchao.
As for the one in the hands of Nangong Haoran, that would be the easiest to handle.

The reason was simple.

Though the three artifacts had already been made slaves of Li Qing through the Great Brahma Heaven Incantation,
their true ownership still resided with a being of Conceptual Level.

Li Qing wished to eliminate this hidden calamity once and for all.

Thus, while the Eight Immortals and high-ranking cultivators were still reeling from the death of Wan Jie Demon Lord,
and as the Destiny War raged on across the lands,
Li Qing silently infiltrated the allied forces.

He bided his time, waiting until the army broke through the strongholds of Duong Wanshan and Huang Wanchao,
then swiftly retrieved and switched the Rule Artifacts.

After that, he took the artifacts to the Heavenly Seal—
the only place capable of evading the gaze of the Conceptual-Level Entity—
in order to carry out the purification of the Great Brahma Heaven Incantation.

—

At the same time, the remaining seven Immortals had received word of recent events.
Among them, the group of four—Wanbao Daojun, Yongye Daojun, Yin Yang Daojun, and Niangluan Demon Emperor—who were previously tasked with hunting down Wan Jie Demon Lord, began to exchange serious words.

The situation was becoming increasingly troublesome.
One among them had clearly become a traitor, showing no regard for the greater good.

Yongye Daojun proposed:
"If Minghe Yama Zi no longer prioritizes collective interest, and worse, has shown signs of betrayal not once but twice,
then perhaps it is time to remove him and establish a new balance among Six Immortals.
Six Immortals are still enough to suppress the five ninth-tier monsters.
Minghe Yama Zi has fallen—burning his own comrades on the pyre of selfishness.
If we let someone like that remain within the ranks of the Immortals, there's no telling when he might be used by Li Qing to betray us again."

The three Immortals of the Daoist Factions sang in harmony—each one supporting the plan to purge Minghe Yama Zi.
But the Niangluan Demon Emperor thought differently.

He knew: if these three could propose eliminating Minghe Yama Zi today,
then what's to stop them from proposing the execution of Niangluan Demon Emperor or another outsider Immortal tomorrow?

He grew wary.
These three Daoist Immortals were birds of a feather—forming a private faction within the public alliance.
Together with Haotian Sage, they had long maintained a balance of power with the four non-Daoist Immortals.

Now, with the Immortal of the Demonic Dao dead, if another—this time from Ghost Dao—were to fall,
then the Immortals of Beast Dao and Buddhist Dao would find themselves at a stark disadvantage.
Unless, of course, they could pull Haotian Sage to their side.

Therefore, Niangluan Demon Emperor had no choice but to sidestep the topic,
buying time—at least until he and Nirvana Buddha could form an alliance with Haotian Sage.

As for the three Daoist Immortals, they indeed harbored their own ambitions.

In truth, throughout history, the Three Daoist Sects had always yearned to become supreme rulers of Jiuzhou and the Four Realms.
But with five Immortals outside the Daoist factions and nine ninth-tier monsters watching hungrily from the shadows,
they had been forced to shelve their ambitions—at least for a time.

However, the Fengshen Ritual of the Six Paths, and more importantly the appearance of Li Qing,
had brought them hope—
hope that Immortals could fall in the chaos of war.
The death of Wan Jie Demon Lord was solid proof of this possibility.

Their suggestion to eliminate Minghe Yama Zi was not just about removal,
but also a calculated probe—
to see whether Niangluan Demon Emperor had begun to sense the deeper storm brewing beneath.

After the wave of monstrous assaults had been dealt with, the seven remaining Immortals convened once more.

The root of all the chaos was now clear—it stemmed from the actions of the five peak ninth-tier monsters,
who, after losing four of their own, had begun to sense imminent danger. In response, they secretly plotted a scheme against the Immortals,
and the target they chose was none other than Wan Jie Demon Lord.

Why Wan Jie?

Because the Demonic Dao had already been eliminated from the struggle for the Ninth Immortal's seat in the Fengshen Ritual of the Six Paths.
Those of the Demonic Dao no longer held any real stake in the coming outcome.
Wan Jie Demon Lord, naturally, sought to regain an advantage for his Dao—and in doing so, the monsters had spotted his vulnerability.

Whether the monsters approached Li Qing, or Li Qing himself had noticed their intent, the result was the same—
a secret alliance was formed.

The monsters gained a wisp of Heaven's aura and used it to lay the perfect trap.

While Wan Jie Demon Lord was lured to his doom, Li Qing used the opportunity to assault the Demonic Dao headquarters,
with the intent to seize their Primordial Dao Aspect.

All of this could have been avoided—
had Minghe Yama Zi not acted selfishly, making decisions that served his own interests.
Because Ghost Dao deliberately concealed vital information, everyone's judgment had been skewed from the start.
None had even considered that Li Qing possessed enough strength to strike at the headquarters of an entire Dao lineage.
And Li Qing, knowing the monsters were preparing a trap for Wan Jie Demon Lord, simply waited for the weakest moment to act—
and succeeded flawlessly.

There had been signs—such as Li Qing's summoning of eight Yin Generals—
but lacking a key piece of information, no one could deduce Li Qing's true goal.

Ghost Dao's initial miscalculation might've been forgivable—
but the true blunder was this:
even after uncovering Li Qing's motives, they still failed to capture him.
Worse—he managed to annihilate the Demonic Dao in their entirety.

Now, aside from the Immortals themselves, any wandering cultivator risked being ambushed—
their Primordial Dao Aspect forcibly extracted from memory.

It was a complete and utter loss.

The six Immortals turned on Minghe Yama Zi, questioning him harshly.
He could only defend himself with the tired excuse:
"Put yourselves in my position—any of you would've done the same."
In the end, they were all gathered under one banner for mutual gain.
Clashes of interest were bound to happen.

Perhaps sensing the danger looming ever closer, Minghe Yama Zi reminded them that they were now being watched by seven enemies:
the five ninth-tier monsters, Li Qing, and Xuanyuan Changlong.
If they turned on each other now, they would be doing nothing but handing victory to their foes.

In other words—Minghe Yama Zi had no intention of admitting fault.

And truthfully, he wasn't entirely wrong.
In a normal situation, everyone would have chosen to swallow their pride for the greater good,

at least until the Fengshen Ritual ended.

But this wasn't just about concealing information—
this was the spark that ignited the long-festering tensions between Minghe Yama Zi and the rest of the Immortals,
especially after rumors surfaced about the Demonic Dao colluding with otherworldly forces.

Now, Minghe Yama Zi had become the classic thorn in the side:
a destabilizing factor, a turncoat, a traitor carrying a viper to strike his own kin.
No group—no matter how tolerant—would willingly tolerate such an element.

Thus, to eradicate Minghe Yama Zi
was now proclaimed to be for the sake of the greater good.

Just as Li Qing predicted and arranged

—
Temporarily setting aside the internal strife, the Immortals began to reexamine the peculiar aspects of the recent events—
and more importantly, what they should do moving forward.

First and foremost, the timing of the Heavenly Mandate War had been… suspicious.
It erupted exactly at the same time the five ninth-tier monsters ambushed Wan Jie Demon Lord,
and Li Qing struck the Demonic Dao headquarters.

It was almost as if the three parties were coordinating with one another.

This coincidence was far too convenient.
Hence, their next step must be to investigate the origins of this war,
and uncover why it happened at that specific time.

Second, the five ninth-tier monsters had now tasted success through traps and schemes—
there was no reason to believe they would stop.
Future traps were likely, especially those involving the Heavenly Seal.
And since that touched upon personal interests, it would be all too easy for someone to fall prey to greed.

Thus, moving forward, any news related to the Heavenly Seal must be treated as a trap—
either set by the monsters or by Li Qing.

Best not let anyone be blinded by desire.
If the Heavenly Seal were so easily found, it would have been discovered long ago during the hundred-thousand-year reign of the Immortals.

Next came the issue of the three remaining Primordial Dao Aspects that Li Qing had yet to obtain—

those belonging to the Beast Dao, the True Treasure Dao Sect, and the Eternal Night Dao Sect.

From this point on, every cultivator who had ever seen those Aspects was to be gathered and kept under direct watch by the Avatars of the Immortals,
to prevent Li Qing from extracting the Aspects via memory or other means.

All strategies using Primordial Aspects as bait were to be abandoned.
If schemes could no longer outplay Li Qing,
then they would no longer play at all.

Instead, they would use the most direct and brutal methods to lock Li Qing's cultivation at the fifth tier,
cutting off any path to ascend beyond.

Once the meeting adjourned, the Immortals once again split off to pursue individual duties.

Haoran Saint, charged with investigating the origins of the Heavenly Mandate War, headed toward the Northern Regions.

In doing so, he completely concealed his trail—
so that Li Qing's intelligence network would be unable to detect him.

With no trace, no karmic connection would arise.
And with no karma, there would be no information leak,
rendering Li Qing's Jade Talisman useless.

However, Li Qing had already predicted this exact countermeasure.

In preparation, he had extracted and altered the memories of Sun Qiankun,
replacing them with a fully constructed false memory.

In this false recollection, the entire Heavenly Mandate War had been Sun Qiankun's own doing—
his own stratagems, his own spies, his own web of plans.
Everything aligned perfectly with reality—except for one thing:

Li Qing's presence was erased from every detail.

Even if Haoran Saint combed through the memories of every participant,
he would find no flaws,
no inconsistencies, and no trace of Li Qing's hand behind it all.

—

Rebellious Demon Sovereign and Peerless Buddha were holding a secret conversation.

The balance of the Eight Immortals had already been broken.

And those who stood to gain the most from this rupture were the three Immortals of the Daoist Sects,
as they had always been a private alliance hidden within the greater collective.

If Haoran Saint were to side with the Daoist trio,
then the non-Daoist Immortals would be forced into a weak position—
and very likely become the next targets of eradication.

After weighing the gains and losses,
the two reached a decision:
eliminate Ming He Yama Zi,
to remove a volatile element and reduce future variables.
Simultaneously, they would seek an alliance with Haoran Saint,
creating a 3-on-3 balance against the Daoist Immortals.

And if Haoran Saint refused their proposal,
then they would instead ally with Ming He Yama Zi,
offering him a pact:
“If you want to survive, stand with us. Together, we will kill Haoran Saint,”
thus forcibly dragging both Daoist and non-Daoist factions into an even split.

At that very moment, the three Immortals of the Daoist Sects were also conducting a secret discussion.

The disruption of balance was both an opportunity and a threat.
After all, the three of them had always faintly stood above the other Immortals.

The opportunity lay in their ability to eliminate several non-Daoist Immortals,
but the threat was that the other Immortals might grow wary of their ambition—
and form a counter-alliance against them.

This was not without precedent.
Earlier, when they sounded out Rebellious Demon Sovereign,
he had shown strong sensitivity to such signs of ambition.

Therefore, their current proposal was clear:
"Strike first to gain the upper hand."
Form an alliance with Haoran Saint,
and strike quickly—four against one—
to eliminate Ming He Yama Zi before the remaining Immortals could react.

Regardless of each faction’s private agendas,
all roads led to the same conclusion:
one Immortal had to be removed from the board.

And at the top of everyone’s kill list stood Ming He Yama Zi,
with Haoran Saint following second—
not truly of the Daoist Sects,

yet not counted among the non-Daoists either.

When Haoran Saint received Rebellious Demon Sovereign's proposal,
he immediately discerned the current state of the game.
At the same time, True Treasure Dao Lord, representing the Daoist faction, arrived at the scene.
The three factions stood face to face—
and in a moment of silent understanding,
all six Immortals came to a mutual agreement:

Ming He Yama Zi must be eliminated,
in order to restore balance once more.

—
While the Immortal factions were thrown into chaos,
what was Li Qing doing?

In truth,
the web of schemes he had set was only just beginning to take shape.
The framework had been completed,
but the true culmination was yet to come.

At that moment,
Li Qing sent a letter to the monsters—
a simple message,
clear in its intent and execution.

The letter read:

> "The Seven Immortals have splintered.
They seek to eliminate Ming He Yama Zi,
to restore balance to their ranks.

However, as Immortals,
they still care about appearances.
They need a proper justification.

Therefore, I offer this assistance—
create the illusion that Ming He Yama Zi has betrayed the Immortal alliance for the third time,
by secretly colluding with your faction.

With such a betrayal,
the Immortals will have the perfect excuse to strike him down."

The message was deceptively straightforward:
a clear goal, a direct path, no flourish or trap in sight.

But hidden within,
was a trap more cunning than any before.

A trap known as:
"Granting the enemy the illusion of control."

At first,
the five monsters were skeptical.
Why would they help Li Qing push Ming He Yama Zi to death?
Wouldn't it be better to form an alliance with him instead—
create a 6-on-6 standoff, and perhaps even extract from him
the true secrets behind the Six Paths Deification?

After all,
Ming He Yama Zi alive held far more value than dead.

But their thoughts quickly shifted.

Because standing just beyond the veil of their plans
was a man nearly omniscient—
Li Qing.

They knew:
If Li Qing even sensed that they were moving contrary to his script,
he could just as easily leak their intentions to the Immortals,
and orchestrate an ambush to wipe them out.
A failed scheme was one thing—
but the fall of one of their own? That was a price too steep.

Frustrated but wary,
they bit down their indignation.
After all, they had just slain one Immortal—
their momentum was strong,
and they were eager to ride that wave a little longer.

But the moment they stepped onto the board,
they had already entered the next trap of Li Qing—
another move in the infinite cycle of his grand plan.

—

In truth, even long before this—
when Li Qing infiltrated the headquarters of the Bing Clan, one of the Hundred Schools of Thought—
he had already unearthed a terrifying secret.

Deep beneath their main hall,
he discovered a graveyard, vast and suffused with lingering hatred.

There stood tens of thousands of tombstones—
each engraved with names belonging to the fallen of the Eighth Human Dao Dynasty.
By rough count, the number of graves exceeded one hundred thousand.

Because he had already accumulated enough background knowledge,
the Jade Shard immediately supplied Li Qing with further insight.

The founder of the Bing Clan—Sun Zimò—
was once a prince of the Eighth Dynasty.
Witnessing the rise of cultivators and foreseeing the inevitable downfall of the mortal empire,
he betrayed the royal court and defected to a Dao lineage.

To gain fame and status,he lured and slaughtered the empire's elite military corps of three million, a force personally trained and promoted by Sun Zimò himself.
Each and every general among them had once called him mentor and commander.

Their deaths birthed a hatred that burrowed deep into the bones.
Their corpses were interred in this secret tomb—
and with his mastery of Military Formation Arts,
Sun Zimò transformed the graveyard into a dark sanctuary,
nurturing and tempering them for over a hundred thousand years
into high-grade Yin soldiers.

One hundred thousand Yin soldiers, bound to his will—
this was Sun Zimò's trump card,
his hidden blade against the Eight Immortals.

Immediately, Li Qing reached a chilling conclusion:
Sun Zimò had not sacrificed so much simply to defect for glory.
No—his actions were part of a far longer game.
A game that pointed to resistance,
a long-brewing intent to someday strike back at the Eight Immortals.

And if that were true—
then perhaps, just perhaps— the two of them…
had the basis for an alliance.

For that reason, Li Qing secretly reached out to Sun Zimò.

The very moment they met,
Li Qing praised Sun Zimò as a truly formidable figure—
a prince of the old dynasty bold enough to offer up his entire legion as a living sacrifice,
just to win the trust of the Dao Lineages;
and not only did he succeed in joining them,
he even went on to found his own sect.
In terms of endurance, patience, and hidden ambition,
there was hardly another that could compare.

Sun Zimò understood at once—Li Qing was proposing an alliance.

Li Qing already knew that Sun Zimò could erupt with Immortal-level power in battle—
though it was unstable and time-limited.
Even so, he intended to leverage that power to strike down one of the Immortal-rank beings—
not an Immortal cultivator,
but one of the Abyssal Beasts.

Soon, the number of Immortals would be reduced to a level nearly equal to that of the Beasts.
On the surface, that might seem to restore balance.
But in truth, it would only make the Beasts more cautious.
Once the threat of being overwhelmed disappeared,
they'd gain the luxury of patience—
and become far more difficult to manipulate.

What Li Qing needed was for the Beasts to remain in a constant state of alarm,
so he could continue to pull the strings unseen.

When Sun Zimò asked how Li Qing planned to kill a Ninth-Rank Beast,
Li Qing replied calmly:

> "I possess a slaughter formation that can suppress and annihilate even Immortal-rank entities."

However, in order to use the formation,
he would need a bait—
someone to lure the target inside.

And that bait…
was to be Sun Zimò.

To prove he was serious,
when Sun Zimò demanded to see the formation blueprint,
Li Qing handed it over without hesitation.

The formation was genuine.
Its ability to kill Immortals was real.
Sun Zimò was astonished—
not just at the formation's power,
but at how readily Li Qing had given it away.

Yet the more he pondered it, the more he understood:
Li Qing hadn't lost anything at all.
Even if others saw the blueprint or constructed the formation,

only the Eight Immortals would suffer the consequences.
Li Qing stood to gain regardless.

However, the formation required astronomical resources to construct—
an estimated one trillion spirit stones.
Even if the Bing Clan emptied its coffers,
it still wouldn't be enough.

Sun Zimò asked how Li Qing intended to fund such a venture.

Li Qing merely smiled.

> "That's not your concern. For now, all I need you to do is take up the role of hunting me and seeking the Heavenly Seal across the Four Realms of Jiuzhou. When the time comes… you'll receive your instructions."

And just as he said—
in the near future,
Li Qing would sweep through the headquarters of the Demonic Dao,
plundering their treasures,
and gathering enough resources to build the Slaughter Formation.

—
The Abyssal Beasts secretly made contact with Minghe Yama Zi, extending an olive branch and arranging a clandestine meeting through their incarnations in a remote region of Longzhou. Minghe Yama Zi, having vaguely sensed the precariousness of his own situation, did not hesitate to accept the branch offered by the Beasts.

However, thanks to his intelligence network and the Jade Shard, Li Qing had already obtained the time and location of this meeting. And this… was the perfect moment to put the piece named Sun Zimò onto the board.

Li Qing's plan was meticulously laid out as follows:

First, while the five Ninth-Rank Beasts were meeting with Minghe Yama Zi, Sun Zimò would "coincidentally" pass by and witness the meeting. He would then report it to the Immortals, giving them the final pretext they needed to eliminate Minghe Yama Zi.
(This event would appear all the more plausible because Sun Zimò had been roaming throughout the Four Realms of Jiuzhou, under Li Qing's direction—making it seem like pure coincidence.)

During this phase, it was crucial that the Beasts notice they had been discovered by Sun Zimò.
Though this would earn Sun Zimò their hatred,
it would also give him a reason to retreat to his fortress and claim he was defending against retaliation from the furious Beasts.

In doing so, he created both an alibi (being locked away) and a psychological smokescreen (no one would believe a mere Stage Eight cultivator, terrified and hiding, would dare mount an ambush on Ninth-Rank Beasts).

The plan went forward precisely as designed.

As the five Abyssal Beasts conversed with Minghe Yama Zi, Sun Zimò appeared and played his role to perfection.
The encounter cornered Minghe Yama Zi, leaving him no choice but to fully betray the Immortals.

The six Immortals quickly divided their forces:
two would station themselves beyond the Four Realms to watch for Beast activity,
while the remaining four would move to eliminate Minghe Yama Zi as swiftly as possible.

It was at this point that the true ambition of the Beasts finally came to light.

Minghe Yama Zi alone was not enough.
What the Beasts wanted was more—
to fully restore the numerical balance between the two sides.

Their true targets were the two Immortals standing guard beyond the Four Realms.
If they could slay even one, and with Minghe Yama Zi now a traitor who had to be killed regardless,
the Immortal side would be reduced to only five members—
equal to the number of Abyssal Beasts.

A perfect equilibrium…
or so it seemed.

—

As for Li Qing, he had already foreseen that the Abyssal Beasts would seek to press their advantage, and had anticipated the Immortals splitting their forces into a 2-4 formation.

Two Immortals jointly guarding the outer realms would not be easy prey—unlike the lone Wan Jie Demon Lord, who had previously fallen under a concentrated ambush. Even when facing all five Ninth-Rank Beasts at once, the two Immortals could still hold their own.

Meanwhile, the four Immortals cooperating would ensure Minghe Yama Zi could be eliminated as swiftly as possible.

In short, both sides had made careful calculations, with the odds of success or failure balanced evenly between them.
However, neither side accounted for a wild variable—Minghe Yama Zi overturning the board entirely.

It turned out that Minghe Yama Zi had long prepared a contingency, summoning an avatar of a Concept-Level Entity—a being venerated by the Demon Dao for countless ages. This entity's interference caused the suppression effort against Minghe Yama Zi to drag out far longer than expected.

This delay benefited the Abyssal Beasts' plan. With the four Immortals entangled, the Beasts no longer felt the need for caution. They poured all their power into besieging the two Immortals who had been assigned to the outer defense.

At this critical moment, Li Qing knew the time was ripe—
and played his next move: unleashing Sun Zimò once again.

Li Qing's strategy was clear:

Sun Zimò, now fully disguised, would infiltrate the battlefield between the two Immortals and five Beasts—
and suddenly launch a surprise attack on one of the Beasts.

Utilizing his Immortal-rank strength, Sun Zimò would injure the Beast with a single strike, then immediately retreat.

The targeted Beast, caught off guard, would be both enraged and bewildered,
prompting it to give chase in order to uncover Sun Zimò's identity.

The key was to make the Beast believe Sun Zimò could only unleash one blow of that level.
To reinforce this illusion, Sun Zimò would maintain his Immortal aura while fleeing,
leading the Beast to reason: "If he has such power, why run?"

The inevitable conclusion:
Sun Zimò could only maintain Immortal-level power for a brief time.

Furthermore, when two Immortals clash, the battles typically stretch on—
even when one side has the upper hand.
Immortal-level beings are notoriously difficult to slay.
(This was the precise logic that gave the Beasts confidence to split up and pursue.)

To add further weight, the sudden intrusion of a mysterious Immortal-tier attacker in the midst of a carefully orchestrated plan would jolt the Beasts into realizing they had overlooked something crucial.
Panic would set in as they scrambled to identify the source of this unexpected power.

Thus, the Beast in question—
driven by fury, caution, and curiosity—
would pursue Sun Zimò relentlessly, aiming to weaken him, capture him, and unravel the secret behind his Immortal-tier strength.

And Li Qing's chosen target?

None other than the King of Annihilation—
the Beast with the strongest offensive Law,
but lacking in defensive versatility or adaptive tactics—
making it the optimal prey for a tactical assassination.

The plan unfolded precisely as intended.

While the battle between the two Immortals and the five Abyssal Beasts raged beyond the Four Regions of the Nine Provinces, Sun Zimò, following Li Qing's instructions, launched a surprise assault on the King of Annihilation—then immediately fled.

Even the escape route had been pre-arranged by Li Qing:
a path well-known to the Abyssal Beasts,
leading straight back into the territory of the Nine Provinces.

This only served to further provoke the King of Annihilation,
who, filled with wrath and suspicion, gave hot pursuit—
and stepped directly into Li Qing's trap.

—

The All-Beings' Resentment Time-Space Destruction Grand Formation
was activated.

And so began the slaughter.

Li Qing unleashed his full might against the isolated Beast,
and despite its fierce power, the King of Annihilation—cut off from its kin—
was swiftly eliminated.

Even as the battle dragged on, the remaining four Abyssal Beasts began to grow uneasy.
The King of Annihilation had been gone too long.
Sensing something amiss, they abandoned their fight against the two Immortals
and rushed to provide aid—
but they were one step too late.

By the time they arrived,
Li Qing had already slain the King of Annihilation,
and even taken possession of its Rule-bound Relic.

—

As for Minghe Yama Zi, though he survived,
he was ultimately forced to flee into another world,
effectively removing him from the game.

At last, the intricate web of stratagems woven by Li Qing
—this grand interconnected scheme—had reached its conclusion.

And in this masterstroke, two Immortal-tier entities were removed from the board.
Not merely Immortal cultivators—
but beings of true Immortal Rank.

—

Part 6: The Context

As Li Qing's grand stratagem approached its final act,
his cultivation had also quietly reached completion,
allowing him to step into the peak of Tier Five.

And in that very moment,
from the depths of fate and the distant threads of destiny,
his Fated Nemesis — Xuanyuan Changlong —
sensed the call of his destined calamity.

However,
Xuanyuan Changlong could not discern who exactly it was.
This only occurred in two possibilities:
either the other party was a bearer of Heaven's Mandate,
or one who walked the path of the Unfated.

Xuanyuan Changlong began to speculate.
The most likely candidate… was Li Qing.

After all, not only did the two harbor a deep and bitter enmity,
but Li Qing had also just broken through Tier Five,
and would soon face his Heavenly Tribulation.

Following this reasoning,
if Li Qing sought to reap the greatest benefit,
he would surely set his tribulation within a grand backdrop.

And now—there was only one such stage:
the Six Paths Apotheosis.

Hence, the most viable plan:
assist a Chosen One of the Mandate,
and during the final battle,
strike down Xuanyuan Changlong—
thus fulfilling the tribulation.

Xuanyuan Changlong pondered further.

If he himself were Li Qing,
he would ensure that Changlong survived until the very end.
And during that time,
he would embed countless spies and agents within his forces—
silent, invisible—
until the final confrontation.

And when that moment came,
those seeds of betrayal would suddenly bloom,
shattering Changlong's forces from within,
and securing the final victory.

Thus, the Heavenly Tribulation would be overcome—
not by brute force,
but by strategic inevitability.

—

After the conclusion of the grand stratagem,
Li Qing activated the Jade Fragment to grasp all that had transpired
at the battlefield where the Four Immortals faced off against Minghe Yama Zi and the projection of a Concept-level Entity.

At the Hell Mountain,
as the four Immortals besieged Minghe Yama Zi,
they were suddenly halted by the arrival of a Concept-level Entity—
the Netherworld Demon Sovereign,
lord of an entire realm—though what appeared here
was but a mere projection of its true form.

This entity,
realizing it could not stand against four Immortals while still weakened and bound by the laws of another world,
chose to detonate its own power,
rending apart space-time itself in a violent eruption,
and escaped,
leaving behind only a single strand of its essence—
now hidden away in the folds of the world.

Even a trace of a Concept-level being
was an immense source of danger for Immortal-level cultivators—
yet at the same time,
an unimaginable opportunity.

To capture even a thread of that essence
meant a chance to glimpse the path beyond the Immortal realm.

Li Qing, upon careful analysis, made the following deduction:
A being of such magnitude,
once stripped of all its power,
would certainly seek to parasitize a host
to slowly recover its strength.

However—
considering that any being parasitized by a Concept-level entity
would cause a massive upheaval in the Heavenly Mandates around them,
they would become highly noticeable.

Thus,
the most optimal hosts would be individuals whose destinies were already in chaos—
in other words,
those whose Heavenly Fates were distorted,
those already enveloped in the storm of destiny.

Or more precisely—
anyone under the banner of a Heaven's Chosen
would be the ideal vessels
for the Netherworld Demon Sovereign
to quietly merge with.

—

After the failed pursuit of the Netherworld Demon Sovereign, the Six Immortals reconvened for a secret council.
The recent chain of events revealed far too many suspicious elements to ignore.

The initial trigger of the entire incident had been the interrupted meeting between the five ninth-rank monsters and Minghe Yama Zi—a disruption that directly led the Immortals to launch a coordinated assault on Minghe Yama Zi.

In response, Minghe Yama Zi unleashed his trump card, summoning the projection of the Netherworld Demon Sovereign.
Up to that point, there was nothing amiss.

However—what followed raised grave concerns.

A mysterious figure suddenly appeared amidst the battle outside the Four Regions of the Nine Provinces, wielding Immortal-level power, and launched a surprise attack to assist the two Immortals under siege.
Immediately after, one of the ninth-rank monsters, Destruction King, fell in battle, and his Rule-bound Artifact vanished without a trace.

It became clear that someone had deliberately set the stage to play the mantis stalking the cicada, unaware of the oriole behind—
intending to weaken both factions, Immortals and monsters alike.

The only one capable of such a move—was Li Qing.

The first ninth-rank monster had died at Li Qing's hand, and shortly thereafter, the Rule-bound Artifact resurfaced elsewhere.
Though it bore no overt signs of tampering, the Immortals had to consider the likelihood that it had passed through Li Qing's grasp—
and thus might be compromised.

At the same time, doubts began to rise:
Had Li Qing uncovered the truth behind the Six Paths of Apotheosis?

Although their operation had been conducted in the utmost secrecy—
and certain protections were in place to thwart Li Qing's all-knowing artifacts—
the Rule-bound Artifact was simply too important.
If it had truly fallen into Li Qing's hands,
then it was entirely possible he could have reverse-engineered its secrets and uncovered their grand design.

Thus, they were forced to admit:
this entire trap-laced chessboard had been orchestrated by Li Qing—
using the five monsters' urgency to balance power as the hammer to strike one Immortal down,
then turning around to borrow the hands of the remaining six Immortals to eliminate another.

Finally, seizing that moment of chaos,
Li Qing, along with a mysterious ally possessing Immortal-tier combat power,
struck down Destruction King—one of the most brutal of the ninth-rank monsters.

The Six Immortals could no longer deny it—
the Six Paths of Apotheosis, their supreme creation, was also their chain.

Were it not for this burden,
they could have razed the world clean,
and Li Qing would have had nowhere to hide.

Yet they dared not destroy it.
Aside from the vast amounts of blood, effort, and divinity poured into its construction—
there was a far more pressing reason:

An external threat loomed ever closer.

Should they fail to preserve this foundation,
the entire world could fall into slavery,
and even Immortals—exalted as they were—
would become cattle.

Thus, in this very moment,
the Six Immortals began to seriously consider an accord with Li Qing.

Such a contingency served two purposes:

The ultimate goal: unite against the coming invaders from beyond.

The secondary aim: continue seeking a chance to destroy Li Qing—
for despite all his schemes and brilliance,
he still harbored one fatal weakness:
he was far too fragile in a direct confrontation.

—

At the very same moment, the remaining four ninth-rank monsters were holding an emergency council of their own.

Once again—
they had fallen into Li Qing's trap,
despite their precautions.

Their original plan had been ambitious but calculated:
to eliminate one more Immortal, thus achieving balance in overall strength.
But now, the Immortals still outnumbered them by two,
and they retained their ultimate trump card—the World-Origin Construct.
Whatever slim chance the monsters once had of victory was now slimmer still.

To regain the upper hand—
or at least to restore parity—
a new strategy was imperative.

But herein lay the true problem:

Any plan they devised would inevitably be seen through by Li Qing.
This was the greatest obstacle they faced.

The proof?
The mysterious figure with Immortal-level power who had intervened—
an individual neither they nor the Immortals had detected.
Yet Li Qing knew.

There was no denying it now:
Destruction King—the one among them with the most straightforward and inflexible combat rules—
had been deliberately targeted.
Li Qing's choice had not been random.

The goal had always been to weaken both factions,
and Destruction King had simply been the optimal sacrifice.

From this point onward,
the monsters resolved never to attempt direct cooperation with Li Qing.
He was too dangerous—
too perceptive—
too uncontrollable.

They could, however, consider manipulating him indirectly.
Only when a plan was entirely under their control
would they allow him any involvement.

Furthermore,
they would henceforth never split their forces again.
No more gaps to exploit.
No more lone targets to be ambushed.

Even more drastically,
they would consider leaking select intelligence about Li Qing to the Six Immortals—
not out of goodwill,
but to prevent him from playing both sides ever again.

If both factions now refused to act as his pawns,
Li Qing would be forced to step forward himself to implement his schemes.

And when that day came—
when he had no buffer, no smoke and mirrors, no proxies—
that would be their chance.

—

The information soon reached the Six Immortals:
the one who attacked and lured Destruction King into a trap had worn a Human-Dynasty Battle Armor—
a supreme artifact once exclusive to the now-fallen Human Dao Dynasty.

This immediately drew the attention of the Six Immortals to a familiar figure—
Tu Zimo, the ancestral patriarch of the Military Clan,
the Eighth Prince of the Human Dynasty,
and the infamous traitor who had defected to join the Immortal Dao.

As a result, Tu Zimo's direct superior—the Saint of Vast Radiance—was compelled to step forward in his defense.

Though it was Sun Zimowho had "coincidentally" discovered the secret meeting between Minghe Yama Zi and the monsters,
and though the mysterious Immortal-tier fighter wore armor of the Human Dynasty,
the coincidence was too unnatural to ignore.

First,
Tu Zimo, immediately after passing on the intelligence, had retreated into his fortress,
claiming fear of retaliation from the monsters—
and had not emerged since.

Second,
the gap between stage eight and stage nine cultivators was immense.
Moreover, a traitor like Sun Zimowould never gain the approval of the sacred
Human-Dynasty Battle Armor,
whose loyalty ran deeper than blood.

Third,
it was plausible that Li Qing merely manipulated Tu Zimo's appearance,
using him as a convenient scapegoat to obscure the identity of his true ally.

Fourth,
Li Qing must have already anticipated that the monsters, furious after losing one of their own,
would leak the incident to the Six Immortals—
especially since both factions had been played by him in the end.
Thus, it was highly likely this was a calculated move:
a diversion,
an intentional misdirection.

Li Qing had always been one to operate from the shadows—
and this had all the marks of his schemes.

Fifth,
even though such intricate misdirection was well within Li Qing's capabilities,
a ploy like this still required a foundation of believability.
And up to this point,
Sun Zimohad shown no signs of betrayal toward the Immortals.

He had once betrayed his own kingdom to survive,
but that was precisely the point:
now, as long as he stayed loyal to the Immortals and waited for the completion of the Six Paths Apotheosis,
he would earn eternal life.
He had no reason to risk everything now
just to join forces with someone as dangerous and unstable as Li Qing.

In conclusion,
while every thread of suspicion pointed to Tu Zimo,
each one could also be interpreted as a part of Li Qing's greater plan—
a masterstroke of smoke and mirrors
that left both the Immortals and the monsters uncertain
and unwilling to act hastily.

The Immortals had pondered the matter with the utmost care—
yet they had no idea that Li Qing had already accounted for every single layer.

The First Layer:
Li Qing crafted a flawless alibi for Tu Zimo—
having him retreat to his headquarters and remain in seclusion,
backed by a convincing psychological motive: fear of monster retaliation.
Thus, Sun Zimoappears innocent.

The Second Layer:
At the same time, Li Qing deliberately directed all suspicion toward Tu Zimo—
from the "coincidental" discovery of the secret meeting,
to the fact that the Human-Dynasty Battle Armor would inevitably be seen by the monsters and reported back to the Six Immortals.

The overwhelming trail of evidence pointed to Tu Zimo.
But therein lay the brilliance—
because it was too perfect,
the Immortals began to think:

> “Surely Li Qing would have considered all of this.
He must have wanted us to suspect Tu Zimo—
and so Sun Zimomust be a scapegoat.
Which means... Sun Zimois innocent.”

The Third Layer:
Yet even that—
was Li Qing’s trap.

He anticipated that the Immortals would see through both the surface alibi
and the redirected suspicion.
He used their own logical deductions against them,
making them believe that Sun Zimowas innocent—
precisely so they would overlook the possibility that Sun Zimowas truly guilty.

This was the classic strategy of “darkness beneath the lamp.”
By hiding the truth in plain sight,
Li Qing turned deduction itself into misdirection.

Tu Zimo, then, must be the true culprit.

But...

When the Immortals drilled even deeper—
to the core nature of Tu Zimo's motives—
they found nothing.

Sun Zimohad no reason to betray the Immortals.
He had already betrayed his old kingdom for a chance at eternal life.
All he needed to do now was wait for the completion of the Six Paths Apotheosis
and he would ascend.
He had no motive to risk everything by siding with someone as chaotic and dangerous as Li Qing.

And so... once again—Sun Zimois innocent.

Li Qing had constructed a maze of logic,
each layer cancelling out the last,
ensuring that no matter how far one reasoned,
Sun Zimowould always return to the status of "innocent."

And that—
was precisely why he could never be trusted.

—

At this point, everything became clear. Though both the beasts and the Immortals had unanimously agreed to oppose Li Qing, the Haoran Saint unexpectedly conceived the idea of forming an alliance with him—because the Saint himself had long harbored a scheme of his own.

The Haoran Saint sent a clone to visit the Master at the Takxia Academy, immediately alarming the surveillance arrays Li Qing had placed there. Even without the Jade Fragment, Li Qing could instantly deduce that the Saint was attempting to contact him. The method of locating Li Qing through the Master had long proven ineffective, and with the Master being merely a Stage Seven cultivator, his influence on the current war was negligible. There was no need for such a formal approach unless he was merely a bridge.

Having realized this, Li Qing became intrigued as to the extent of the Saint's willingness to cooperate—how far this alliance could penetrate the iron fortress of the Immortal faction.

Thus, Li Qing dispatched a clone to the Takxia Academy to meet the Haoran Saint in person.

Upon meeting, the Saint immediately exposed several truths merely by observing the clone, such as the nature of Li Qing's magic having already reached the same level as an Immortal—explaining why Li Qing had repeatedly escaped their pursuit unscathed. Li Qing paid no mind to this attempt at intimidation. Instead, he directly asked for the true reason the Saint had come today.

The Saint revealed his purpose clearly: he wished to form a secret alliance with Li Qing. He would act as a mole within the Immortals, aiding Li Qing's plans to eliminate them, until the day only the two of them remained—monopolizing the fruits of the Sixfold Apotheosis.

Putting aside all else for the moment, Li Qing and the Haoran Saint agreed to a transaction.

Li Qing needed resources to advance the Five Grand Divine Repositories—a necessary requirement to eventually ascend to Immortality. In exchange, Li Qing would help plant the Saint's Dao into another world. Though the Immortals here could utilize their Origin Worlds, doing so bound their fates with those worlds; if the world perished, they would perish as well. However, if the Saint's Dao took root in another world, he would retain a chance to survive even if this realm was destroyed.

Though Li Qing had already gathered several materials for the Divine Repositories beforehand, he did not disclose this and instead allowed the Saint to gather them in full. His goal was to compare and determine whether the Saint had laid any traps within the resources. If so, their cooperation could only remain superficial.

As the negotiation continued, the Saint gave his solemn guarantee: should Li Qing devise any plan, he would serve as an insider to ensure the plan's success. This, in turn, would significantly raise the success rate of Li Qing's future stratagems.

—

The mysterious entity behind the Longevity Borrowing Art was on the verge of descending into its vessel, an event that immediately alarmed Li Qing—for he had long placed this existence under secret surveillance, precisely to make use of it when the time was right.

★ Longevity Borrowing Art: a demonic spell that allowed Li Qing to borrow the lifespan of others, then use that borrowed time to power the Commander's Summon Token, which summoned ghostly generals. Behind this token stood yet another hidden existence.

Judging by the spell's caliber, Li Qing estimated that the being was at least Proto-Concept level (Level 10). That made it an ideal bait—enticing not just to Immortals but also to the Beasts. Furthermore, the entity was currently in a weakened state.

Li Qing thus contacted the three Demon Kings he had previously subdued using the Great Brahma Incantation, ordering them to quietly encircle the hidden sanctuary where the entity resided. The entity was taken aback—its concealment was extremely intricate, undetectable to anyone below its tier. Seeing that the three Demon Kings arrived fully prepared, it realized that it had long since been locked down.

It chose not to flee—because if someone had managed to find it here, then escape was meaningless. Thus, it surrendered, but made one request: that the Demon Kings relay a message to their master—it wished for a meeting.

That had been Li Qing's goal all along, and so the two began negotiations.

Li Qing sought to borrow this being's power as a lure, to bait and slaughter both Immortals and Beasts, thereby weakening the world's highest combat forces. Conveniently, this aligned perfectly with the being's own objective—to devour the world itself. The weaker the world, the easier the devouring. Otherwise, even as a Level 10 existence, it would face ruin if the Origin Worlds united to suppress it.

Li Qing had long deduced this key vulnerability from prior intelligence, and aimed his strategy with uncanny precision. The entity thus agreed to cooperate. Though it was aware that anyone capable of killing Immortals surely possessed the means to ward off its own invasion, Li Qing's intentionally low-displayed cultivation (Level 5) was far less threatening than a host of Level 9 cultivators wielding Origin Worlds. Thus, from its perspective, Li Qing remained the more manageable pawn.

—

The next stage of Li Qing's grand design was about to be set in motion—and this time, the catalyst came from the beast faction.

After slaying one Immortal, the beasts, driven by greed, sought to eliminate another in hopes of balancing the scales of power. Unfortunately for them, they were once again outmaneuvered by Li Qing, and the disparity between the two sides now widened further—by two full Immortals.

Desperate to restore the equilibrium, or even shatter the Six Paths of Apotheosis, the beasts began laying plans anew. Should that divine system reach completion, the entire world would fall under Immortal control, and the beasts would be left with nowhere to flee—literally. All of this they had learned during their ill-fated meeting with Minhe Yama Zi, a meeting orchestrated by none other than Li Qing.

Thus, they began devising a scheme using the limited intel they had.

It was important to note: the Immortals could always choose to "counter movement with stillness." With five Rule Artifacts already harvested from fallen Level 9 beasts, only four more remained to complete the system. If the beasts concealed themselves too well, the Immortals could fall back on a chilling alternative—sacrificing themselves to fill in the missing components of the Six Paths. This would irrevocably bind them to the world's fate, but the plan would succeed regardless—and the beasts would be doomed.

Thus, the only path left for the beasts was a preemptive strike, an attempt to overturn the board.

Their scheme would revolve around the chaos of the ongoing Heaven's Mandate War.

Thanks to Li Qing's previous machinations, both the eastern heretics and northern factions (the Demon Cult and Ghost Sect)—through the Capital Campaign and the betrayal of Ghost-path Immortals—had been eradicated. This left the eastern and northern battlefields unusually quiet, with all sides in a cautious stalemate. The beasts therefore had only two viable arenas: the west and the south, where war still raged furiously.

Also due to Li Qing's previous designs, the Daoist sects had become primary targets in the war, due to their overwhelming advantages. Thus, the beasts chose the Daoists as one side of the conflict. As for the other, they selected the southern regions, where the Beast-path cultivators—quick-tempered and easily provoked—would serve as suitable bait. With that, the rough outline of the trap was set.

The beast faction's plan was to select a location and fabricate a false Heavenly Seal. Once the two opposing sides clashed at that site, they would "accidentally" trigger the seal.

Naturally, the Immortals would descend to investigate. To prevent the use of remote projections or avatars, the beasts would ensure the seal could only be entered by true bodies, meaning only Immortal-level beings could pass through.

Once an Immortal entered, the beasts would hurriedly charge in first—baiting the Immortals into pursuit.

The Immortals might realize it was a trap, but greed would blind them. "What if it's real?" they would wonder. And the price of allowing the beasts to seize a true Heavenly Seal would be far too great.

The Immortals would have little time to verify the truth—forced to make a snap decision.

To avoid another isolated slaughter like the death of the Demon Lord, two outcomes were expected:

1. Formation Split 2-4: Four Immortals enter the seal (matching the number of beasts), while two remain outside as backup. In this case, the beasts would spring the trap—using the seal as a cage to temporarily trap the four Immortals inside, then have all four beasts emerge to hunt the remaining two.

2. All Six Enter: If all six Immortals entered the seal, the beasts would abandon the ambush and instead move to destroy the world itself, sabotaging the Six Paths of Apotheosis and rendering the Immortals' long-term plans void.

A 3–3 split had not been considered viable. If such a case arose, the beasts would improvise: three would restrain the Immortals, and the fourth would attempt to sabotage the Six Paths. However, they feared the solo beast might fall prey to Li Qing, and thus, should a 3–3 division occur, they would immediately abandon the plan, no matter the cost.

Though the plan was rough around the edges, it wasn't due to incompetence. Rather, the beasts hoped to exploit Li Qing into completing the unpolished portions. After all, they knew—Li Qing would find out.

As for bait, they still retained half of the Heavenly Aura that Li Qing had once gifted them to lure the Demon Lord. Naturally, only fools would exhaust such a precious resource in one go.

Regarding the seal itself, the beasts used a formation art from beyond this world—another lure seeded long ago by some unknown Level 10 existence. Of course, using such a technique was akin to drinking poison to quench thirst, as it would attract attention from the alien being behind it. Yet they had no better method to simulate the aura of a Heavenly Seal.

They selected the Bai Cao Plains as the battlefield—vast, flat grasslands connecting the territories of all major factions, making it the perfect site for a large-scale clash.

To add another layer to the trap, beyond the elements mentioned above, they set a Killing Formation.

This formation would activate through bloodshed and death, aiming to decimate the armies. But its true purpose was to provoke the opposing factions into resisting, thereby generating enough pressure to "accidentally" activate the false Heavenly Seal.

That way, even if the Immortals saw through the scheme as orchestrated, they would assume it was merely a ploy to eliminate the bearers of Heaven's Mandate and sabotage the Six Paths—not a double-layered trap aimed at the Immortals themselves.

In preparation, the beasts also planned to unleash indiscriminate attacks via heretical cults on both Heaven's Mandate cultivators and civilians, reinforcing the Immortals' expected interpretation of events.

Once they moved—Li Qing would know, and he would act accordingly.

But what they didn't realize was this: even if Li Qing had not foreseen the entire scheme from the beginning, he had already anticipated and laid groundwork for every small variable leading to this scenario.

He had, long ago, predicted which Immortal would fall in this battle.

It was none other than Zhenbao Daojun of the True Treasure Dao Sect.

—-

Li Qing, through the Jade Piece, came to learn of the following information.

The four Ninth-Level Beasts had devised an entirely new scheme.

They had set a trap in the southern region, at the Bai Cao Plains, intending to lure the Immortals with the residual Heavenly Aura that remained.

Anticipating that the Immortals would regard it as a trap—even with traces of Heavenly presence—the four beasts planned to enter first, using their actions to bait the Immortals and apply pressure, forcing them to follow.

Once the number of Immortals who entered the seal reached four or more, the beasts would seal off the formation, trapping the Immortals inside. From there, they would either ambush the Immortals left outside—if any—or move to destroy the Nine Provinces and Four Domains, thereby sabotaging the Six Paths of Apotheosis.

To ensure the plan's success, they had prepared a secondary Killing Formation, designed to activate through the bloodshed and death of the clashing factions. This would then create the illusion that the Heavenly Seal was accidentally exposed as a result of the conflict.

In order to make the entire trap seem plausible and natural, the beasts also unleashed heretical cults to spread chaos and slaughter across the Nine Provinces and Four Domains—further reinforcing the credibility of the setup.

—

Next, the Haoran Saint once again made contact with Li Qing, and the two proceeded to meet in person.

According to the Saint, the Immortals had begun to grow anxious about completing the Six Paths of Apotheosis—partly because of the beasts' sabotage, and partly because of Li Qing's constant disruption. Thus, they wished to accelerate the unification war for the Heaven's Mandate, a method that could complete the plan even without all nine Rule Artifacts previously mentioned.

Because of this, Haoran Saint proposed that Li Qing cooperate by leading the beasts into the trap instead of the Immortals—altering the original plan.

But Li Qing refused.

This was a matter concerning the Saint, not him. The Immortals being shackled to the Six Paths of Apotheosis was their problem—not his. And besides, he had nothing to gain.

The Saint continued trying to persuade Li Qing, urging him that if the trap was turned toward the beasts, the Rule Artifacts secretly under Li Qing's control could finally be put to proper use. It would allow him and the Immortals to jointly rule and continue to exist.

However, Li Qing knew well that Haoran Saint would rather see everyone else dead, so he could monopolize the outcome. What the Saint truly wanted was freedom—from any binding contract with the world, nothing more.

So, Li Qing made it clear: this proposal would put him at a disadvantage. After all, there were still six Immortals—too many. His words were a subtle way of implying that he could follow the plan, but the outcome would not favor him.

Thus, the Saint was forced to offer a deal.

Li Qing demanded two trillion spirit stones, to recharge the formation he had previously used to slay an Immortal.

Naturally, Haoran Saint refused. The most he could offer was one billion. Still, from such an absurdly high request, the Saint quickly deduced that Li Qing had employed a terrifyingly energy-consuming formation capable of killing even Immortals. And the resources Li Qing had used previously most likely came from raids on the headquarters of the Demonic Path and Ghost Path.

Li Qing had expected the Saint to figure that out. He never underestimated the intelligence of his enemies. In fact, he openly admitted to possessing a formation capable of killing Immortals—he wanted to see if Haoran Saint dared hand him the blade. This would reveal how deeply the Saint was willing to cooperate before the Six Paths of Apotheosis came to completion.

Haoran Saint understood the implication.

If he did not agree, their cooperation would forever remain shallow, and that could have severe consequences when the situation reached its most critical turning point.

So, the Saint immediately offered one trillion spirit stones, treating it as an early investment.

Li Qing then shared with him the details of the beasts' plan—and what his next move would be.

Li Qing planned to arrange a third layer of formation, designed to kill an isolated Immortal while the others remained trapped inside the seal. For this, he needed Haoran Saint to lure the three Immortals of the Daoist Faction into the trap, while the remaining three stayed outside to counter the beasts’ ploy.

Li Qing had already deduced why the beasts' plan never accounted for a 3-3 division. At the same time, he had also targeted the Immortal of the True Treasure Sect—Zhenbao Daojun, because that one’s Rule Artifact possessed the strongest defensive properties, which would be vital for the next major phase of his plan.

When Haoran Saint asked about the testing procedure for the trap, Li Qing offered his speculation: the beasts would likely design the formation so that only true Immortal-level beings could enter—nullifying any scouting attempt via avatars or clones. Thus, the Immortals would have no choice but to step in personally.

—

After negotiating with Haoran Saint, Li Qing made his way to the headquarters of the Military Clan to meet with Tu Zimo.

Li Qing began by stating that the Immortals were growing frantic, desperate to hasten the completion of the Six Paths of Apotheosis. Once that plan reached fruition, the Immortals would become invincible—and naturally, Tu Zimo's goals would fall to ruin.

The beasts, too, had recognized this looming threat—through the revelations of Minghe Yama's Child—and had therefore devised an intricate counter-strategy.

Thus, Sun Zimoasked Li Qing what his plan was.

Li Qing revealed that he had an inside agent among the Immortals. His plan was to slay one Immortal, thereby restoring the balance of power. However, he admitted that he didn't entirely trust this agent—the possibility of a trap was too high. That was why Li Qing had come to Tu Zimo: as a safeguard.

He offered Sun Zimothe Sword of the Annihilation King, and with Tu Zimo's power added, it would form a perfect Immortal-tier combat strength—for a limited time.

At the same time, Li Qing requested one trillion spirit stones to replenish his Immortal-slaying formation. But Tu Zimo, having already deduced from Li Qing's mention of an "inside agent" that the man had other sources of supply, only agreed to provide a maximum of three hundred billion.

The conversation then turned to the Rule Artifact of the Annihilation King. Though Li Qing was willing to hand it over temporarily, control of the artifact remained his. From this, Sun Zimoimmediately inferred that Li Qing had control over all the other Rule Artifacts as well.

Li Qing did not deny it—in fact, he acknowledged it openly.

After all, just knowing something didn't mean one could do anything about it. Even the Immortals, though fully aware that he had tampered with the artifacts, were forced to swallow their pride and accept it—because they had no alternatives. At the same time, Li Qing deliberately revealed this trump card to stir Tu Zimo's ambitions.

Sure enough, Sun Zimobegan harboring a larger ambition—to become the ninth Immortal.

But the title of "ninth Immortal" was not something given lightly. So Li Qing demanded a trade.

Sun Zimolaid everything on the table—his entire Military Clan, as well as the power of the Heaven's Mandate bearer Li Qinglian (secret son of Emperor Khun Tai, for those who may have forgotten). Currently, Li Qinglian's forces held the highest probability of victory, which meant Tu Zimo's own chances were also the highest.

But to Li Qing, that still wasn't enough.

What he truly wanted was ten years of Tu Zimo's lifespan. From that, Sun Zimoimmediately deduced that lifespan was the fuel Li Qing used to summon Yin Generals through the Commander's Decree.

Therefore, Sun Zimoagreed to give him only one year of lifespan for now—in exchange for Li Qing summoning an Immortal-level Yin General. Only after seeing results would he continue the deal.

Sun Zimofeared that if Li Qing acquired ten Immortal-tier combatants, he might just flip the entire board.

And Li Qing knew—his goal had already been achieved.

Though he commanded the three Demon Kings, each at the eighth cultivation level, they were all still under the control of another being through the Great Brahma Heavenly Mantra. If he were to extract lifespan from them, not only would it likely fail (since the forces behind both parties were at least tier-10), but it might also alert those very entities.

Therefore, the three Demon Kings were being reserved for another future move.

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Li Qing summoned a Celestial-ranked Yin General, then sealed it away in reserve. This act swiftly alarmed all factions.

The Immortals soon deduced that Li Qing had employed the Command of the Marshals to successfully summon a Yin General at the Immortal level. An emergency decree was issued across the realm—Immortals were forbidden from moving alone, and even cultivators of the seventh and eighth realms were ordered to gather under Immortal protection to avoid being hunted down by Li Qing. Every force entered a state of maximum alert. As a result, Li Qing's intention to capture high-level cultivators and extract their lifespans became completely void.

But Li Qing showed only mild regret and paid it little mind. The framework of this phase of his grand scheme was already largely in place.

Killing a single Immortal could open the door to slaying yet another level-nine beast.

Furthermore, because of Li Qing's summoning of a Celestial Yin General, all surveillance from high-ranking cultivators within the military was lifted, allowing his long-dormant web of informants to come alive once more—just in time to prepare for the southern theater of war.

And Li Qing had already made his moves.

The southern region belonged to the True Treasure Dao Sect.

The two Bearers of the Heavenly Mandate from the Hundred Schools were none other than Li Qinglian—now backed in full by Sun Zimoafter their recent negotiations—and Fan Chengfeng, whose strategist was Sun Qiankun.

Lastly, there was the Beast Dao. Five factions in total—and of these, Li Qing had essentially seized full control of two.

He would use these two factions to lure the Heavenly Mandate bearers of the True Treasure Dao Sect into the Hundred-Grass Plain. The Beast Dao, recognizing such a ripe opportunity, would certainly not let it slip by. But to ensure the Beast Dao would enter the fray “on schedule,” Li Qinglian, stationed at the border, would need to pullhisforces back and redirect them toward the Hundred-Grass Plain, thereby signaling an opening the Beast Dao could exploit.

This was the missing piece the beasts had wanted Li Qing to provide, for the heretical cults lacked the strength to initiate a war of this magnitude.

It was a plan so vast and intricate that no one besides Li Qing could connect the threads and grasp the whole—there were simply too many interlocking elements.

As Li Qing saw it, he did not fear movement—he feared inaction. The only real way to counter him was to remain as still as a mountain, hoarding one's strength in absolute patience. But none of them could resist—not the Immortals, not the beasts, not Tu Zimo, nor the Haoran Saint. Every one of them would be compelled forward by desire, ambition, and fear.

And that, precisely, was what Li Qing intended to exploit.

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Part 7: Many Fronts in Motion

Xuan Yuan Changlong—Li Qing’s destined rival—had sensed his summoning of a Celestial-rank Yin General, and from that, realized that Li Qing had begun to move.

Utilizing one of his treasured artifacts, Xuan Yuan Changlong gazed into the future and caught glimpses of the Hundred-Grass Plain: five great factions clashing, the rise of ominous phenomena, the appearance of Heaven's Seal, the descent of four Ninth-Rank Beasts… and finally, a rain of blood falling from the sky—foretelling the death of an Immortal.

Thus, Xuan Yuan Changlong understood that something was amiss in the battle to come at the Hundred-Grass Plain. But rather than pursue the truth, what drew his attention more was the potential benefit to himself. He realized that Li Qing had drawn all eyes toward the south, creating an opening for him to strike against the Confucian School—sweeping away the Heavenly Mandate bearer of the Wuji Dao Sect, and swiftly fulfilling the "Threefold Division of the Realm" plan that Li Qing had once laid out.

Xuan Yuan Changlong understood well—Li Qing’s true intent was to whittle down the world until only two great factions remained: one led by Xuan Yuan Changlong, and the other raised by Li Qing himself. The two would wage the final war, and when Li Qing’s chosen side triumphed over Xuan Yuan Changlong, the destined tribulation would be fulfilled.

But Xuan Yuan Changlong was likewise exploiting this so-called “support” from Li Qing to its fullest extent—to see, in the very end, whose strategy truly stood higher.

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At the same time, the four Ninth-Rank Beasts were holding an emergency meeting concerning the sudden variable: the Celestial-rank Yin General that Li Qing had just summoned.

It was now certain—Li Qing had discovered their plan. The only question that remained was: what role would Li Qing play in that plan?

And with the summoning of a Celestial-rank Yin General, they had their answer. Most likely, Li Qing would attempt to split the Immortals into a 3-3 formation—forcing one of them to become isolated, thereby opening the path for a targeted hunt. Simultaneously, he would also eliminate an Immortal.

From Li Qing’s perspective, a situation of -1 Immortal and -1 Beast was optimal. And with two Celestial-level battle strengths in his hand, he absolutely had the ability to pull it off.

Therefore, under no circumstances could they allow themselves to be separated. They must not fall for any interference or misdirection that might compel them to scatter—even the slightest temptation must be suppressed. Otherwise, Li Qing’s scheme would succeed.

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Li Qing restored the sealed memories of Sun Kankun in preparation for the grand stratagem to come.

After outlining the movements of the major factions, Li Qing tasked Sun Kankun with manipulating the forces under Phan Chengfeng’s command to enter the upcoming battle—only to be defeated at the hands of Li Qinglian, but not before managing to eliminate the Heavenly Mandate bearer of the True Treasure Dao Sect.

In doing so, Sun Kankun could conveniently defect to Li Qinglian’s side—Li Qinglian being the faction Li Qing had chosen to eventually face off against Xuan Yuan Changlong.

To ensure this defection proceeded smoothly, Sun Kankun had to display his full strategic prowess—drawing the attention of Li Qinglian and prompting a recruitment attempt. He would then reveal a staunchly loyal character, refusing to “serve two lords,” thereby winning Li Qinglian’s heartfelt admiration and trust for his perceived integrity.

At this stage, Sun Kankun would need to subtly shape the narrative—establishing his own image as an unparalleled military strategist, while casting the army’s ultimate defeat as the result of Phan Chengfeng’s authoritarian misjudgments.

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The Immortals gathered once more for a council.

Though they were well aware that Li Qing was preparing to act, they had no clue as to what his exact move would be—and that very uncertainty filled them with unease.

Taking this opportunity, Haoran Saint laid bare the lurking threats they faced. First were the two Immortal-tier battle forces under Li Qing's command. Then, the four Grade-9 Beasts.

Thus, Haoran Saint proposed that should any sudden development arise, they should split into two formations of three. Three Immortals forming a triad—bolstered further by the world's origin force—would be able to hold out long enough even if surrounded by six enemies of equal tier.

All the Immortals agreed, as Haoran Saint's analysis was impeccable.

And with that, yet another layer of Li Qing's grand plan had quietly fallen into place.

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The plan was set in motion.

Sun Kankun reported to his lord, Fan Chengfeng, about the proposed alliance from Li Qinglian.

The two sides would ostensibly form a coalition to fight against the two Bearers of Heaven's Mandate from the True Treasure Dao Sect. In truth, however, all four parties had reached a secret accord—to bait the Beast Dao into taking the field.

To deceive the Beast Dao, nearly all garrison forces along the border would be withdrawn, leaving behind only a token force to "mask" the movement—when in fact, this was done precisely so the Beast Dao could "see through" the ruse.

During the battle at the Hundred-Grass Plains, none of them would truly fight one another. Instead, they would slaughter the cannon fodder—non-elite troops meant to be consumed by war. The more they killed, the better. The sky would rain with blood, and the howls of vengeful spirits would fill the air, creating an illusion of a ferocious, no-holds-barred war.

If the withdrawal at the border raised any suspicion, this battlefield illusion would mislead the Beast Dao further, making them misjudge the scale and intensity of the battle—believing the four factions were truly tearing each other apart.

Once the Beast Dao was dealt with, they would then ride the momentum to turn against the True Treasure Dao Sect. As they gradually pulled back their core forces under the guise of exhaustion, they would wait until the three other factions were sufficiently weakened—then gather their strength and wage a final, world-shaking battle to decide the heavens.

Following this agreement, four great armies marched toward the Hundred-Grass Plains.

The Beast faction, upon sensing that Li Qing had begun to act, also took action of their own. Had they remained silent and only appeared later, it would have been far too suspicious.

And to lend further credence to their movements, they released their power across all Nine Provinces and Four Regions—without excluding the South. Had they deliberately left the South untouched, that too would have drawn suspicion.

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An unforeseen variable descended upon the chessboard—none other than the Netherworld Demon Lord.

Through the conduit of the Netherflame Hellspawn, the Demon Lord of the Netherworld had come to fully grasp the situation: from Li Qing's schemes to the Six Paths Ascension Plan. Thus, he too desired to join this game. Partly for the treasures in Li Qing's possession, partly due to Heaven and the Heavenly Nemesis, and partly for the Six Paths Ascension itself.

At that moment, a surviving avatar of the Netherworld Demon Lord, hidden within the Four Regions of the Nine Provinces, was empowered by the true body—sending shockwaves that reverberated across all major factions, including Li Qing.

Thanks to his vast network of spies, Li Qing quickly locked onto the Demon Lord's location—within the forces under Xuan Yuan Changlong.

Through his investigations, the Netherworld Demon Lord had also come to perceive the monsters' intentions. He now aimed to interfere—either to reduce the number of Immortals or to eliminate a monster or two. His ultimate goal was clear: to become the Ninth Immortal, or to destroy the Six Paths Ascension altogether. After all, the Six Paths Ascension held the potential to challenge the dominion of the Nine Great Lords—of which the Netherworld Demon Lord was one.

Li Qing began to deduce the Demon Lord's possible course of action.

If he were the Netherworld Demon Lord and had learned of the Six Paths Ascension, then there would be only two paths to take.

First: sabotage the Six Paths Ascension.

Second: play the role of the cuckoo stealing the nest.

The first path offered little reward and would likely provoke fierce resistance from all factions. But if the second succeeded—seizing control of the Six Paths Ascension—then the Demon Lord could use it as a conduit to bring forth his true form. Once that happened, no one would escape.

Thus, Li Qing concluded: the Demon Lord would most certainly choose the second path.

Acting on this insight, Li Qing tapped into the spies embedded within Xuan Yuan Changlong's forces. He soon discovered that the Netherworld Demon Lord had already vacated his prior location. From this, Li Qing deduced that the Demon Lord had moved toward the Hundred-Grass Plains—to investigate the truth, and more importantly, to exploit the situation to his own ends.

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The situation had grown increasingly dire, forcing Li Qing to seek out Tu Zimo.

In a certain sense, Sun Zimoand the Netherworld Demon Lord were alike—both desired to become the Ninth Immortal. Thus, Li Qing intended for Sun Zimoto deal with the Demon Lord, who currently possessed a limited Immortal-level combat power, just like Tu Zimo.

Li Qing laid out his analysis.

The original plan was simple: lure one of the Immortals guarding the outer seal and strike him down using the formation and the first Immortal-tier Yin General. Sun Zimoexisted as a safety measure to ensure the plan's success.

But now that the situation had changed—since the Netherworld Demon Lord had discovered the monsters' scheme—two possibilities emerged.

First, the Demon Lord might choose to ally with the monsters. Five against three, eliminating the Immortals left outside the seal.

Second, he might secretly cooperate with the Immortals. In that case, all four Immortals would enter the sealed domain, while the remaining two stayed outside to bait the monsters. Just as the monsters launched their assault, the Demon Lord would reveal himself—stalling for time until the four Immortals inside broke free from the seal, turning the tables and annihilating the enemy in one decisive blow.

The situation was perilous—so much so that even a Concept-level existence had begun paying attention, dispatching its avatar into the realm. Therefore, Li Qing resolved to "temporarily" sever the influence of this looming nail.

He asked Sun Zimofor another year of lifespan—to summon a second Immortal-tier Yin General.

Based on earlier tests with the formation, Li Qing had determined that any Immortal-tier being entering the formation must follow a strict order of sequence.

Thus, Li Qing would let the last of the monsters step in first. This would force the other three to retreat upon realizing the plan had failed. Then, together with Tu Zimo, the formation, and two Immortal-tier Yin Generals, Li Qing would swiftly kill that final monster.

Meanwhile, the Immortals outside—still unaware of the true situation—would continue with the original plan: four entering, two remaining to lure. But since the monsters wouldn't appear, the strategy would collapse.

When the fourth Immortal stepped into the seal, Li Qing would trigger the second round—pulling in and executing yet another.

In truth, this entire plan was only half genuine. Li Qing had crafted it with just enough plausibility—using the Netherworld Demon Lord as bait—to pressure Sun Zimointo offering a second year of lifespan.

By positioning the Demon Lord as Tu Zimo's direct adversary, Li Qing created tension and urgency. Then he presented a beautifully-structured counter-scheme to thwart the Demon Lord's imaginary plot—baiting Sun Zimointo agreement.

But Sun Zimoremained clear-headed. He rejected the request outright. Just one year of lifespan—no matter what scenario unfolded. Even if everything was lost, even if he had to walk away empty-handed. For if Li Qing truly did hold two Immortal-tier forces... who could say who the real victim of the trap would be?

Realizing Sun Zimowouldn't fall for the bait, Li Qing merely left him one final instruction: if either side was ever at risk of collapse, he must support the weaker side. The balance of forces must never be allowed to tip.

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While all attention was focused on the southern front, and the high-level cultivators had been withdrawn under Immortal protection to avoid being hunted down, Li Qing made his move toward the headquarters of the Eternal Night Dao Sect. His goal: to steal the Primal Dharma Statue and execute a critical step in his plan. Simultaneously, the Beast Dao and the True Treasure Dao Sect would each take action on their ends.

As he approached the central stronghold of the Eternal Night Dao Sect, Li Qing discovered that the killing formation there was absolutely indiscriminate—obliterating even an ant or speck of dust—and operated around the clock without pause.

Therefore, Li Qing took control of a fifth-rank spy embedded in the army of the one bearing the Mandate of Heaven from Eternal Night Dao. He instructed this individual to fabricate a plausible excuse for a disciple to return to the sect headquarters.

A disciple was dispatched. Using human-path mental manipulation, Li Qing brainwashed the target and led them deep into the sect. There, he successfully stole the Primal Dharma Statue and planted a strategic piece on the board.

Using a similar method, Li Qing infiltrated the True Treasure Dao Sect, where he planted yet another piece.

However, in both locations, the Dharma Statues had already been removed. It seemed someone had cleared them out in advance.

As for the Beast Dao, a seventh-level cultivator was currently overseeing the site. Li Qing would have to wait until the Battle of the Hundred-Grass Plains was underway and that cultivator had been drawn away—only then could he sneak in.

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At the Beast Dao main forces, King Dayuan convened a high-level war council with all military advisors and commanders to deliberate on their next course of action.

The upcoming clash at the Hundred-Grass Plains, where four factions were about to wage a grand war, was both a once-in-a-millennium opportunity and an immense pressure for the Beast Dao. Should a victor emerge from among the four, that faction would likely absorb the defeated ones' forces, greatly expanding its own strength—posing a grave threat to the Beast Dao.

At this moment, one of Li Qing's embedded spies began subtly offering his counsel.

The battle to come was of paramount importance. Thus, there was no further need for reserve forces to guard the border fortresses; they should be merged entirely with the main force. After all, if they lost this war, what use would reserves be? Better to stake everything in a single decisive strike.

He proposed that 1.5 million troops should be mobilized to assault the border before the main battle began.

His reasoning had two pillars: First, the Mandate Bearers currently preparing to fight likely wouldn't waste precious troops defending the borders. Instead, they'd concentrate all power at the central plains, trying to settle victory or defeat in one swift strike. So why not the Beast Dao do the same?

Second, the Beast Dao forces were stationed far from the battlefield. Factoring in marching time and the siege duration, the four factions might believe they could conclude the battle before the Beast Dao even arrived. That, perhaps, was why they struck first.

But this suggestion was quickly challenged by another general.

It reeked of a trap. The general argued that perhaps the four factions were deliberately baiting the Beast Dao into acting.

What if they had only pretended to pull back from the border fortresses? What if the gaps seen were part of an illusion—crafted to lure the Beast Dao into attacking, only to fall into an ambush?

Therefore, the general proposed a countermeasure: observe the density of wandering spirits, yin aura, and bloodlust lingering in the air—signs of real large-scale battle. If the four

factions were genuinely slaughtering each other, the spiritual residue would be overwhelming.

Such large-scale observation, however, would require a seventh-rank cultivator to execute. And this played perfectly into Li Qing's true plan—pulling the seventh-rank cultivator away from the Beast Dao's ancestral shrine so that he could sneak in and steal their Dharma Statue.

If the observations confirmed a deception, the Beast Dao could seize the border fortress and fortify it. Then, they could wait until the four factions were forced to truly fight. Only once true casualties emerged—weakening all sides—would the Beast Dao intervene.

None of them realized: the "wise plan" they debated over was orchestrated entirely by Li Qing.

He had led them into a trap—manipulating their decision to observe the spiritual battlefield while luring their guardian cultivator away from the ancestral shrine. All so that he could infiltrate it undetected.

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● Part 8: The Battle of Hundred-Grass Plains

The battle at the Hundred-Grass Plains unfolded precisely according to Li Qing's plan.

After successfully luring the Beast Dao into the trap, Fan Chengfeng ordered the purge of all spies amidst the chaos of war, ensuring no intelligence would leak. Following this, she began to withdrawhisarmy in secret. However, Sun Qiankun deliberately left behind a spy loyal to Li Qinglian, so that this agent could report back to her.

Li Qinglian, in turn, relayed the message to Tu Zimu to seek the counsel of the old patriarch of the Art of War. Tu Zimu immediately perceived that Li Qing intended to elevate Li Qinglian as the final victor. Therefore, he ordered a coordinated strike with the Zhenbao Dao Sect, using the Beast Dao's main army to wipe out Fan Chengfeng and absorbhisforces. Afterward, they would cooperate with Zhenbao Dao to turn their blades against the Beast Dao.

With all conditions met, the first layer of the beasts' killing formation was activated, targeting every cultivator present at the Hundred-Grass Plains. The cultivators began to resist the killing array, and the ensuing clash of forces revealed the "Seal of Heaven." Both Li Qing and the beasts had long awaited this very moment.

The Six Immortals also sensed the Heavenly aura leaking from the seal. Haoran Saint immediately declared it a trap, influencing the judgment of the remaining five Immortals.

Seeing Haoran Saint take the lead, the others nodded, agreeing that it must be a trap.

At the same moment, the four ninth-grade beasts attempted to descend into the Nine Provinces and Four Domains, seemingly in great haste to achieve something. They also commanded all beasts from the Dark Side to launch a simultaneous assault—creating the illusion for the Immortals that this was merely a ploy to stall for time.

They feared the Immortals might think too deeply—so the beasts had to move swiftly.

At this juncture, Haoran Saint quickly reevaluated:

The beasts' timing was too coincidental—as if they were headed directly for the very place where the Seal of Heaven had just been exposed. Could it be that the location was genuine?

The initial killing array clearly had been a hidden trap laid by the beasts, aimed at weakening the armies of the Destiny Bearers, and disrupting the formation of the Six Paths Ascension. But by accident, it led to the exposure of the Heavenly Seal—prompting the beasts to desperately force their way in. Meanwhile, the wave of attacks from the Dark Side was merely a means to buy time and delay the Immortals' response.

At this point, the Immortals began to panic. Thus, the arrangements of Li Qing and Haoran Saint finally bore fruit. To avoid stepping into a possible trap, they agreed to split into formations of three and three—just as planned. As long as they could delay the beasts long enough, all Immortal-level forces would eventually be expelled from the Nine Provinces and Four Domains. In the end, none would gain anything.

Haoran Saint then made a more masterful move.
He proposed that he himself would enter the seal alongside the Demon Emperor and the Buddha, while the three Dao Sect Immortals would remain outside to guard.

This immediately drew the attention of the Dao Sect Immortals. They realized that Haoran Saint's true intent was to enter the seal and reap its benefits. Only by guiding the group toward profit could he reshape the team structure to his advantage.

Previously, the three Dao Sect Immortals had held a subtle upper hand among the Six Immortals. Unlike the loosely bound alliance of the Buddha, Demon Emperor, and Saint, the Dao Immortals were essentially one united faction. This unity made the Dao Sect wary of the others—and vice versa.

When Haoran Saint suggested that all three non-Dao Immortals be the ones to enter the seal, it was clearly a veiled act of exclusion—something the Dao Sect could not tolerate.

Thus, Yin-Yang Dao Lord objected, saying such play was unfair: "If all three of them go in, who guarantees the interests of us three out here?" At the very least, he argued, one Immortal from the Dao Sect must enter the seal.

And since no specific individual was designated, Zhenbao Dao Lord volunteered himself without hesitation—not only because the southern territory belonged to Zhenbao Dao Sect, but also because among the Six Immortals, he possessed the strongest defensive powers and feared no unexpected threats.

This was exactly how Li Qing manipulated his target into stepping into the trap.
Through this maneuver, Haoran Saint came to realize just how terrifyingly dangerous Li Qing truly was—and resolved that should the opportunity arise, he must eliminate Li Qing without hesitation.

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After the four monstrous beasts had entered the seal, the Demon Emperor, the Buddha, and Zhenbao Dao Lord finally arrived. Seeing that the four beasts had already gone in ahead, the three Immortals hesitated slightly and decided to first send in their avatars to probe whether it was a trap. Unfortunately, the beasts had anticipated this move—thus, the avatars were unable to enter at all. Only true Immortal-level bodies could breach the threshold.

This, in turn, made the three Immortals even more convinced that this was indeed the genuine Heavenly Seal—only such a seal of supreme nature would require Immortal-level existence to even interact with.

Due to the underlying tension and caution toward the Dao Sect, the Demon Emperor and the Buddha seized the initiative and entered first, leaving Zhenbao Dao Lord to follow after them. The very moment Zhenbao Dao Lord stepped through, Li Qing activated the space-time formation, altering the entrance from that of the Heavenly Seal to one that led directly into his death trap.

By the time Zhenbao Dao Lord realized what had happened, it was already too late—he had fallen straight into Li Qing's killing formation.

And true to his title as the Immortal with the strongest defense, Zhenbao Dao Lord withstood far more than Li Qing had anticipated. This forced Li Qing to send an urgent message to Tu Zimou: if the killing formation expended all its power yet still failed to slay Zhenbao Dao Lord, then Tu Zimou must strike personally.

Li Qing knew well that Tu Zimou would never agree to step into a deathtrap entirely controlled by Li Qing. Therefore, it was only by making this request at the very moment the killing formation reached its limit—and the situation demanded immediate action—that Tu Zimou would agree to act.

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After the Buddha and the Demon Emperor entered the seal, they quickly realized that Zhenbao Dao Lord was nowhere to be seen, and the entrance had sealed behind them. At once, they arrived at two possible conclusions.

First, this was a trap orchestrated by the monstrous beasts—Zhenbao Dao Lord had likely been ambushed the moment he stepped through the seal, now besieged by the enemy.

Second, a hidden hand had interfered with the beasts' plan. Yet even in this case, Zhenbao Dao Lord would still be in extreme danger, caught within the design of an unknown factor.

Meanwhile, the true target of the beasts' plot could very well be the three Immortals still stationed outside, or even the entirety of the Nine Provinces and Four Realms.

They leaned more heavily toward the second option.

The monstrous beasts had used themselves as bait, hoping to lure at least four or more Immortals into the seal. However, the 3-3 formation had completely shattered their plan, leaving only Zhenbao Dao Lord vulnerable inside.

Now that the four monstrous beasts had exited the formation and sensed that three Immortals still remained outside, their scheme had effectively failed. As such, they had no choice but to recover what little they could by wreaking as much destruction as possible, attempting to delay the Heavenly Mandate War's progress and buy time for a new plan.

Just then, the Netherworld Demon Lord, who had been waiting patiently for the opportune moment, emerged and offered a proposal: join forces with the four beasts to slay the three Immortals outside.

The beasts, knowing they had no better option, agreed.

A fierce battle erupted. With the presence of all four beasts and the Netherworld Demon Lord, the two Immortals—apart from the Saint—finally realized that the so-called Heavenly Seal was nothing but an elaborate ruse.

With no time to hesitate, the three Immortals summoned forth the origin of their respective worlds, engaging the five Immortal-level entities in an all-out clash.

Amid this chaos—where every battlefield was engulfed in conflict and no one had the attention to spare—the three agents Li Qing had embedded within the headquarters of the Demon Sect, Eternal Night Dao Sect, and Zhenbao Dao Sect finally moved.

Each one began a wide-scale operation to search for remnants of the Primordial Dharma Image, hoping to reconstruct it through divination. At the same time, they targeted and destroyed the resurrection mechanisms prepared by Eternal Night Dao Lord and Zhenbao Dao Lord.

These acts both supported the campaign to slay Zhenbao Dao Lord and weakened Eternal Night Dao Lord, paving the way for Li Qing's ultimate conquest.

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Amidst the raging war, Tu Zimo, concealing his identity, stormed onto the battlefield of the Immortal level. The sole instruction Li Qing had given him was clear: ignore everything else—focus solely on restraining the Netherworld Demon Lord. The goal was to maintain equilibrium between the two opposing forces.

As for the battle between Li Qing and Zhenbao Dao Lord, when the grand formation was nearly depleted and Zhenbao Dao Lord still stood unfallen, Li Qing finally unleashed his last

trump card—an Immortal-level Yin General—to force out the Dao Lord's final reserves of strength. After a brutal, drawn-out confrontation, Zhenbao Dao Lord was at last slain, and the Zhenbao Pagoda, an artifact embodying the laws of reality, fell into Li Qing's hands.

The death of an Immortal stirred the very heavens—even the sky wept. The phenomenon alarmed every faction across the realms.

At this critical juncture, the Netherworld Demon Lord suddenly initiated secret communication with the three Immortals guarding the outside. He proposed an alliance: join forces to slay the four Ninth-Rank Beasts.

The Immortals immediately understood the move—just as one Immortal had perished, the Demon Lord now sought to balance the field by killing a beast. He was no different from Li Qing: a force aligned with neither side, aiming to gradually wear down both camps.

This was an overt, naked stratagem.

If the three Immortals refused, the beasts would continue their onslaught, possibly cutting down another Immortal. If they accepted, the Demon Lord would get exactly what he wanted—one beast dead, one Immortal dead, perfect balance.

Aside from Haoran Saint, the other two Immortals knew little of what was transpiring within the seal. Anxiety grew—they feared the two Immortals inside might fall into peril or emerge too late, in which case defeat would be inevitable. The Demon Lord was continuously feeding in strength from his true body; even with Sun Zimoactively suppressing him, he could not be held back forever.

Faced with this grim reality, the three Immortals agreed to the proposal.

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The Netherworld Demon Lord suspected that Li Qing had long anticipated the current state of affairs and had carefully laid out his stratagem—thus, he had sent Sun Zimoto intervene in battle. After all, Li Qing could not allow the Immortals to fall too swiftly before the Six Paths Ascension reached completion.

The Netherworld Demon Lord sought to leverage this insight to lure Li Qing into his own game. He had also grasped the flaw in the Jade Piece—that it could not verify information continuously in real time. Therefore, all of the Demon Lord's actions were "spur of the moment", guided purely by tactical advantage. Since nothing was preordained, not even the Jade Piece could perceive his plans, as it was incapable of foreseeing the future.

Meanwhile, Haoran Saint initiated a secret discussion with the other two Immortals. In his view, the Netherworld Demon Lord was far more dangerous than Li Qing. Therefore, after slaying one Ninth-Rank Beast, the Immortals would propose cooperation with the remaining beasts to eliminate the Demon Lord—removing this lurking threat. As for the price of this alliance, it would be the shared opportunity to seize control over the Six Paths Ascension, since the required number of fallen Ninth-Rank entities—nine in total—had just been met.

While overt conflict and covert schemes clashed on all sides, Li Qing was also calculating silently.

The Netherworld Demon Lord was, without a doubt, a true variable. Li Qing had attempted earlier to peer into the Demon Lord's intentions, but the only response he had gleaned was: "The Netherworld Demon Lord will act as he sees fit."

Thus, Li Qing chose to manipulate the entire board to the utmost extent, shaping the battlefield so precisely that the Demon Lord's "free choice" would ultimately fall within the parameters Li Qing had prearranged.

He knew all too well—the Demon Lord, like himself, sought to grind down both the Immortal and Beast factions, so that invasion would become easier later on. So, with one Immortal already dead, it was inevitable that the Demon Lord would try to slay a beast to rebalance the scales. On the surface, the battle now seemed like four Ninth-Rank Beasts plus the Demon Lord versus Sun Zimoand three Immortals. But in truth, the Demon Lord had formed a covert alliance with the three Immortals to eliminate the beasts—he merely hadn't contacted Sun Zimoso that Li Qing wouldn't notice.

But Li Qing had deduced all of this.

He secretly contacted Sun Zimoand told him to initiate contact with both the Demon Lord and the three Immortals, conveying that Li Qing already knew of their entire plan—and furthermore, he demanded to join the operation to slay the beasts.

Then, Li Qing covertly contacted the three Immortals again, stating that after one beast had fallen, he would convince the remaining three beasts to turn against the Demon Lord, thereby eliminating a mutual threat.

This proposal coincidentally aligned with the Immortals' own strategy, and so, they agreed.

At this moment, the Netherworld Demon Lord was also seizing control of the grand board—and swiftly drew his own conclusions.

From Tu Zimo's summons alone, the Demon Lord realized that Li Qing had already uncovered his scheme. Knowing Li Qing's nature, the Demon Lord judged that Tu Zimo's message was likely only half of the truth.

If he could form an alliance with the three Immortals to slay the beasts, then they too could form an alliance to slay him. From this, he immediately deduced Li Qing's stratagem:

Li Qing would use everyone's hands to bring down one Ninth-Rank Beast, then unite the three Immortals, the remaining three beasts, and Sun Zimoto turn and slay the Netherworld Demon Lord. If that occurred, his defeat was certain.

Thus, in this plan, the Demon Lord resolved to only execute the first half: slay one Ninth-Rank Beast—and immediately withdraw. He would not remain a moment longer, and certainly not become entangled in any deeper plot.

What the Netherworld Demon Lord did not know, however, was that Li Qing had fully anticipated that he would see through the plan.

After all, there was more than enough groundwork for deduction.

And that—was the true trap Li Qing had set for the Netherworld Demon Lord from the beginning.

His killing move was never the Immortals, nor the beasts, nor Tu Zimo.

The counteroffensive erupted in an instant—targeting the Beast faction's Sheng King.

At the very moment Sheng King was about to fall, Tu Zimo, under Li Qing's orders, secretly contacted the remaining three Ninth-Rank Beasts.

This, too, was part of the Netherworld Demon Lord's plan.

The stance of that being had always been clear: to wear down both sides—Immortals and Beasts alike.
Thus, from the moment one Immortal fell, their fate had already been sealed by Li Qing. The Demon Lord was bound to betray them.

Now, with contact made with the three Immortals, all forces would unite to eliminate the most dangerous variable—the Netherworld Demon Lord himself.

Sheng King's death was already determined, immutable.
If the beasts still chose to resist stubbornly, then Tu Zimo, the three Immortals, and the Netherworld Demon Lord would simply move on to slaughter the next beast.

At the same time, the fruits of the Six Paths Ascension Ritual could be shared.
With the fall of nine beings of the Immortal rank already fulfilled, there was no longer a need for more casualties.

Under the dual pressure of threats and promises of gain, and after weighing all the calculations,
the three remaining Ninth-Rank Beasts had no choice left—but to agree to cooperate.

The tides of war turned once more.

Just as the Netherworld Demon Lord was about to seize the Law-bound Relic of Sheng King and make his escape, all the remaining forces suddenly turned their blades toward him.

Under the crushing assault of seven Immortal-level entities, the Demon Lord was forced to abandon his prize and brace himself against an onslaught of unimaginable ferocity.

At this moment of peril, Li Qing's Yin General emerged, charging into the fray.

To any observer, it seemed like the final straw—one more blade to seal the Demon Lord's doom.
But in truth, it opened a path. For unlike the Immortals, the Yin General was merely a puppet, lacking true sentience or the ability to adapt on the fly.
The Netherworld Demon Lord chose it as the weak point to break through and escape the net of encirclement.

Yet—Li Qing had anticipated this.

The moment the Demon Lord lunged toward the Yin General, the Slay-Immortal Flying Dagger, hidden deep within its body, was fully unleashed, striking with unparalleled precision—catching even the Demon Lord off guard.

And in that instant of weakness, the combined siege of the seven Immortal-level beings closed in completely.

The Netherworld Demon Lord, too, fell.

At this moment, only one matter remained—the struggle for the Law-bound Relic of Sheng King.

Li Qing had already foreseen this endgame, analyzing that the current situation demanded Sun Zimoto collaborate with the monsters in order to seize the relic and forge a new balance of power.

Thus, the very instant the Netherworld Demon Lord was slain, Sun Zimostruck first, blocking one of the Immortals without warning.

This sudden move stunned the monsters briefly—but they swiftly grasped Tuo Zimo's true intent.
Without hesitation, two of the monsters intercepted the remaining two Immortals, allowing the last monster to successfully retrieve the Law-bound Relic.

Haoran Saint was visibly infuriated.

Because, in the most literal sense—Li Qing had calculated every step to the bitter end.

Once again, the forces of Heaven and Darkness fell into a state of perfect equilibrium.

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Part 8: Preparation

After the transaction was complete, the three monsters quickly withdrew from Jiuzhou and the Four Regions, wary of any possible betrayal. Sun Zimoalso departed immediately under Li Qing's orders. At this point, if Sun Zimowere to return directly to the location where his clone had been impersonating him, it would very likely be discovered by the three Immortals still stationed within the region.

Therefore, Li Qing had already prepared an escape route—Sun Zimowould charge straight into the Heavenly Seal, where a formation laid by Li Qing would teleport him away and then self-destruct, leaving behind not the slightest trace.

The three Immortals had no choice but to admit: in this game, aside from Li Qing, every side had suffered a bitter loss. Thus, they resolved—no more infighting. They had to complete the Sixfold Dao-Sealing as swiftly as possible before further variables emerged.

What they did not know was that Li Qing had long since abandoned the plan to exterminate both Immortals and monsters. He would cease killing—not because he was incapable of it, but because it no longer benefited the coming situation.

At present, Jiuzhou and the Four Regions were being watched hungrily by numerous foreign powers.
Hence, Li Qing needed to preserve just enough top-tier powerhouses in this world…
—to hold the line against what was yet to come.

—

This time, the role of the mysterious figure possessing Immortal-level combat strength under Li Qing's command became far more apparent than before, allowing the Immortals to analyze the situation with greater clarity.

The one sent by Li Qing, despite displaying power on par with an Immortal, was clearly not a true Immortal—but rather someone who had temporarily gained that strength through schemes and manipulation. After all, every genuine Immortal birth would shake the heavens; and the Eight Immortals had ruled this world for tens of thousands of celestial cycles. If this person were truly Immortal, there was no way they could have escaped the notice of the other Immortals.

This individual acted almost like a chess piece, plunging directly into life-or-death battlefields without hesitation. Furthermore, Li Qing had even entrusted him with the Sword of the Destruction King, proving that the two had formed a deep strategic alliance.

Li Qing himself lacked the cultivation to become the ninth Immortal, but if this mysterious person were in fact one of the hidden eighth-realm cultivators under their command, then it was likely that this person's true goal was to ascend as the ninth Immortal.

Moreover, the Immortals had already investigated the eighth-realm cultivators many times without discovering anything unusual, meaning the figure must also possess exceptional mastery over clone techniques.

The three Immortals no longer pursued Sun Zimoor the three monsters, as the battle itself had lost strategic value. However, just then, the seal imprisoning the Monster Emperor and the Buddha shattered, allowing the two to reappear in Jiuzhou and the Four Regions before the monsters could retreat into the Shadowed Depths. Seeing an opportunity, the three Immortals leapt forward, joining the two to surround the monsters and seek an opening.

Li Qing, however, paid no mind. After the previous exchange, the monsters still retained the rule artifact of the Life King. They might not be able to fight back effectively—but escape? That was guaranteed.

And what Li Qing truly desired was not their death, but to use this period—when the Immortals were distracted by infighting—to continue shaping the course of the Heavenly Mandate War, and to extract the original Dharma Aspect from someone's memory. (When the Immortals were unoccupied, this could not be done.)

Only one remained: the original Dharma Aspect of the Eternal Night Dao Sect.

After the previous series of orchestrated strikes, Phan Chengfeng and the Demonic Dao had been eliminated. Li Qinglian, who had devoured the greatest number of forces, had now begun a full-scale war with the True Treasure Dao Faction, namely Bai Wuxue and Li Fengtian. The two sides were relatively evenly matched.

Li Qing, hidden deep in the battlefield, began to secretly manipulate the tide. Every time he encountered a fourth- or fifth-realm cultivator, he would cast Human Dao Brainwashing, subtly ordering them to feign weakness and retreat from the front lines. This gradually led to the forces under the two Heavenly Mandate bearers of the True Treasure Dao Sect declining in strength.

Inevitably, Li Qinglian emerged as the sole ruler of the southern regions.

At the same time, Xuanyuan Changlong, leveraging the advantages he’d secured earlier, unified the eastern regions.

The two, perfectly in sync, moved without hesitation to launch an assault on the north, which was under the control of Zhou Yibat and Wang Tiantian. However, the latter two were entangled in a deadlock with the Eternal Night Dao and the Buddhist Faction in the west, rendering their resistance in the north far weaker. Their rear supply lines were cut off, forcing them to go all-in for a swift and decisive battle.

The three divisions of the world were now taking shape:

Li Qinglian in the South

Xuanyuan Changlong in the East

And the final victor in the Western campaign.

—

At this moment, both strategic resources and the greater power structure had been fully consolidated. Li Qing's grand plan was now entering its final phase—the most brutal and decisive stage of all.

Fated Tribulation—this tribulation of Li Qing was the most extraordinary among all karmic trials.

In a Fated Tribulation, one must defeat their lifelong nemesis and shatter the sole boulder obstructing their path to enlightenment. Only by slaying the opponent at the height of their power could one reap the greatest benefits from the ordeal.

To "defeat" here did not merely mean to kill—it meant utter, overwhelming victory on every front. The enemy's entire faction, at its peak, must be crushed to dust along with its master. Only then would the tribulation truly be complete.

Thus, Li Qing's plan was to use the decisive war between Li Qinglian and Xuan Yuan Changlong as his game board—setting up the battlefield so that the entirety of Xuan Yuan Changlong's forces would be annihilated in one fell swoop.

Yet therein lay a crucial condition: for the Fated Tribulation to manifest, the enemy must know of Li Qing's arrival. There could be no slaying in the dark, no silent assassination. It had to be a confrontation where both sides understood the stakes.

Hence, Li Qing would be facing a Xuan Yuan Changlong who was fully prepared—ready for war.

As the plan unfolded, two of Li Qing's true bodies infiltrated the army of Li Qinglian, replacing two existing fifth-rank cultivators—agents planted long ago. Another true body, using the same method, blended into the ranks of Xuan Yuan Changlong's forces.

Xuan Yuan Changlong, having already sensed the impending Fated Tribulation, knew that Li Qing was about to act personally. Thus, he began conducting a thorough purge to uncover spies within his army.

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He had obtained the True Treasure Pagoda, yet such a thing was not something that could simply be used upon acquisition. Like all Rule Artifacts, it came with harsh and intricate requirements for activation—far beyond that of any ordinary weapon.

The True Treasure Pagoda was a nine-tiered tower. Each level was constructed from 1,111 distinct components, totaling 9,999 unique artifacts. Their powers were interwoven, tightly

fused into one another, forming an impregnable defense—this was the reason the artifact possessed such monstrous protective strength.

Li Qing would need to refine each and every component—a process that consumed far more time than any of the Rule Artifacts he had seized from the monsters before. Simultaneously, he poured vast quantities of energy stones into the Pagoda to nourish and empower it, preparing for the ultimate war to come.

News of Li Qing refining the True Treasure Pagoda eventually reached the Five Immortals. They could feel it—the portion of world origin that once belonged to the True Treasure Dao Lord had changed hands. And they needed no one to spell out whose hands it had fallen into.

With that, the Immortals abandoned the last traces of hope in their hearts. They ceased their assault on the monsters and turned instead toward deep cooperation. All had now reached the same conclusion: Li Qing had become the supreme threat, and eliminating him was the only true objective that mattered.

Even so, each faction harbored their own schemes. No one dared to lower their guard. Any so-called "agreement" was merely words, liable to be torn apart at a moment's notice if one party saw opportunity. Just as the Immortals had promised to share the fruits of the Six Paths Apotheosis, only to turn hostile once reinforcements arrived—only to turn again when Li Qing emerged as the greater menace.

Li Qing, meanwhile, not only succeeded in refining the True Treasure Pagoda, but could now, in a short span, use the accumulated reserves within it to unleash a portion of Immortal-level combat strength. With its towering defense, even an Immortal would require time to break through.

He had already anticipated that the factions would become aware of his actions. Yet until now, he had never personally wielded any Rule Artifact. If they were used, it was always through Tu Mudan, whose cultivation was nearing Immortal level. And coupled with one more decisive factor—Li Qing was simply too weak.

As a result, all factions merely perceived:

> "Though Li Qing possesses Rule Artifacts, they will only realize their full potential once the Six Paths Apotheosis is complete. Until then, those cards remain dormant."

Even Hao Ran Sage had once urged Li Qing to hurry up and eliminate the remaining monsters, so as to complete the Six Paths Apotheosis and awaken the full power of his arsenal.

They all believed that Li Qing could only channel these Rule Artifacts through allies like Tu Mudan. Without Tu Mudan, he would be as good as useless.

This—was exactly what Li Qing wanted them to believe.

None of the factions could have imagined that Li Qing had already refined the True Treasure Pagoda, nor that he was capable of partially unleashing its true might on his own.

It might seem like a small detail. But in a war as grueling and unforgiving as this, Li Qing always seized every sliver of advantage, no matter how minute.

—

At this moment, Immortals and monsters alike were intently watching the Heaven's Mandate War unfold.

Long before this, the Immortals had analyzed Li Qing's methods. With his pattern of behavior, it was clear—he needed an enormous board, entangled with immense karmic cause and effect, upon which to transcend his Fated Tribulation, forging the Supreme Primordial Spirit, just as he always had. And this very war, the Heaven’s Mandate conflict, fulfilled all such conditions.

However, there remained a critical problem—they still couldn’t determine who Li Qing’s Fated Enemy was. Without that certainty, they couldn’t act precisely.

But as the Heaven's Mandate War neared its climax, the Immortals realized... they didn’t need to know.

Li Qing himself was turning the war into a direct confrontation with his Fated Enemy. Of course, that meant he would deliberately align himself on the opposing side.

The stronger the two sides grew, the higher they ascended, the greater his tribulation would become. Only when it reached its zenith could the tribulation provide Li Qing the qualification to forge the Supreme Primordial Spirit.

And this—was something he absolutely could not avoid.

To overcome his tribulation, Li Qing would have to appear in person, to fight with his own hands. The time of standing behind the curtain, manipulating from afar, would end. That battle would undoubtedly erupt when the two final powers collided in the last stage of the Heaven’s Mandate War.

At that moment, the Immortals only needed to lie in wait, like hunters beneath a still tree, weaving a net of heaven and earth, and strike as the final battle concluded.

Li Qing had no escape.

Before overwhelming force, even the most layered of schemes would prove as fragile as paper.

Naturally, Li Qing had seen the endgame from the very beginning. This was a path with no detours, just like that time he had been forced to enter the World's Will head-on, to seize the Celestial Soul—nearly being caught by the Bone Pale Bodhisattva.

And so, every trump card, every maneuver, every prediction, every scheme—everything had been for this one battle.

A battle that could only be described as:

> "A situation of certain defeat. A war of inevitable death."

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Even though, on the surface, they all stood united, Saint Haoran harbored his own ambitions.

His secret was this: once the Six Paths Ascension was completed, he would be elevated half a realm beyond the Immortal level, for his Dao happened to align perfectly with the Six Paths itself—both seeking to seize the world's order and bring it under dominion.

However, a major problem remained—though he would surpass Immortals by half a step, that gap still wasn't enough to allow him to suppress the other eight Immortal-level figures who also held authority over the Six Paths Ascension. And if he couldn't suppress them, there was no doubt they would target him in secret.

In terms of sentiment, Saint Haoran had clearly pulled a fast one—surpassing the rest by a half realm in secret. In terms of logic, he had become the strongest among equals, and in any alliance based on balance, such a person became a walking target.

Thus, Saint Haoran sought to borrow Li Qing's hand.

The two once again met via their avatars in secret.

Saint Haoran began by revealing the upcoming plans of the Immortals. This was his show of sincerity. Then, he bluntly stated that nine Immortal-level combatants were still too many—he wished to eliminate two more.

To secure Li Qing's agreement, he vowed to aid Li Qing in overcoming his Fated Tribulation, and promised to conceal the identity of Li Qing's ally, who was aiming to become the ninth Immortal.

Meanwhile, Li Qing's main body quietly invoked the Divine Jade, attempting to extract Saint Haoran's true motives during this conversation. But all he received was:

> "Undetermined."

Just like with the Demon Lord of the Nether Realm, every faction had become aware of the Divine Jade's limitations. It could only reveal truths, not foretell the future.

No matter how sincere Saint Haoran's words seemed—even if they registered as truth on the Divine Jade—it didn't prevent him from betraying those words later.

Thus, relying on the Divine Jade to unravel hidden intentions had become increasingly impractical. In some cases, it might even lead Li Qing into the traps of these old foxes.

Back to the negotiation—Li Qing rejected Saint Haoran's proposal.

The reason was simple: a fractured, multi-polar world (with three monsters, two rogue Immortals, two Immortals from the Daoist Sect, and more...) was exactly the situation Li Qing wanted.

Certainly not a world where Saint Haoran reigned supreme alone.

—

Due to the earlier arrangement between Li Qing and Sun Qiankun, Sun Qiankun successfully joined the ranks under Li Qinglian.

There, Li Qinglian sought Sun Qiankun's counsel on the next course of action.

Currently, Li Qinglian's forces held the Southern regions, half of the Northern territories, and a strategic pass at Longzhou.

The greatest problem lay in the rupture between North and South—for Li Qinglian dared not seize all of Longzhou outright. Though unifying North and South would grant him vast power, it would also expose him to multi-front assaults.

Therefore, Sun Qiankun, following their prearranged plan, proposed a strategy:

First, Li Qinglian would govern North and South separately. He would personally oversee the South, which formed the foundation of his power, while entrusting the North to a close confidant.

Second, he would form an alliance with Xuan Yuan Changlong, launching a joint assault on the Western regions, while ceding any conquered territory to Xuan Yuan Changlong.

At the same time, while Xuan Yuan Changlong diverted the bulk of his troops westward, Li Qinglian could secretly split off a detachment to strike directly at Changlong's stronghold.

Once Changlong discovered that his base had been seized, he would be like an ant crawling in a boiling pot—forced to hole up in his newly taken lands. But in those lands were multiple factions, and without a secure rear, Changlong would surely face encirclement from both front and rear.

Of course, Changlong might sense the trap. But the messy, multi-faction battlefield in the West would force him to weigh the risks—was it worth the gamble?

If so, Li Qinglian could take the opportunity to unify the South, North, and East in one stroke.

And if Changlong refused the alliance, Li Qinglian could then ally with Western factions instead, launch a joint assault on Changlong, and again cede all conquered land.

The aim, aside from crippling Changlong, was also to lure the main forces of the orthodox sects stationed in the Western front with promises of territory. Once their forces left their headquarters, Li Qinglian's army could slip in through the gaps, cut off their strongholds, and force them to battle Changlong for survival.

In short, no matter how things played out, Li Qinglian would always have the upper hand to achieve unification of the Three Regions.

This was the next step after "Three-Part World"—the "Seven-Part World" strategy.

The core of this scheme was exchanging benefits and capital, allying with one side to strike another—regardless of whom the ally was.

But in the end, it would still boil down to Li Qinglian's final clash with Xuan Yuan Changlong. For among all the factions, only Changlong's foundations were solid enough to let him endure until the last round.

This—was Li Qing's true stratagem: The Two-Part World.

Thanks to this plan, Sun Qiankun earned Li Qinglian's trust and was appointed Commander of the Northern Forces.

During this period, Li Qing, hiding under a false identity within the army, quietly worked his way up the ranks—seeking influence over the final campaign.

Due to the strict surveillance by the Immortals, he could not simply display outstanding skill and rise through merit—that would be too easily exposed.

Thus, Li Qing made use of spies he had painstakingly planted across the factions. These spies would engage in skirmishes against Li Qing's unit, only to be defeated by him, contributing to his military exploits, helping him climb the ladder unnoticed.

—

After his defeat at the hands of Li Qing, the Netherworld Demon Lord still had a contingency plan in place. That plan was to release Ming He Yan Mozi back into the Nine Provinces and Four Realms, and then kill him—seizing his corpse to forge a new avatar.

This was possible because Ming He Yan Mozi's "residency" (soul origin) was still anchored in this world—unlike the Netherworld Demon Lord himself, who could only manifest here

indirectly. Normally, it was near impossible to locate the Nine Provinces and Four Realms amidst the countless drifting worlds beyond.

Thus, the Netherworld Demon Lord let Ming He Yan Mozi go as planned, and upon his return, killed him to possess his body, allowing him to re-enter the game with a fresh incarnation.

Afterward, the Demon Lord also possessed a level-six cultivator under the command of Xuan Yuan Changlong, a man named Lü Changqiu, and went into deep hiding, awaiting the right moment to strike.

Almost immediately, Li Qing's spy within the army noticed something off—a fleeting pause in Lü Changqiu's formation, subtle but suspicious.

Li Qing swiftly used the Jade Tablet, and confirmed that the Netherworld Demon Lord had returned once more. He couldn't help but sigh—this entity was truly terrifying. He had just cut off one of its tentacles, only for another to emerge the very next moment.

At the same time, Li Qing also discovered that Ming He Yan Mozi hadn't truly died. In the final moment, he had abandoned his physical vessel, escaped with his soul, and utilized a secondary resurrection method. Currently, he was lurking somewhere within the Nine Provinces and Four Realms.

These two revelations sounded a sharp alarm in Li Qing's mind—unless perfectly prepared, beings at the Immortal tier or beyond were incredibly hard to kill.

They could lose countless times, but if they won even once, it would be enough to decide the game. In contrast, Li Qing could win countless times, but a single loss would mean losing everything.

Error was the ultimate taboo.

Still, Li Qing also intended to make use of this situation. At a critical juncture, he planned to employ the Netherworld Demon Lord as a chess piece—a hidden card to tip the balance toward victory.

—

Throughout this entire time, Yuan Zhi Hui had remained silent—but never once gave up on capturing Li Qing.

Just like the other Immortals, Yuan Zhi Hui had also deduced that Li Qing would use the War of Heaven's Mandate as his springboard. And the two final forces would inevitably be Xuan Yuan Changlong and Li Qinglian, for the western factions were nothing more than scattered bands destined to be devoured sooner or later.

Yuan Zhi Hui combed through old intelligence, and inferred with high certainty that Li Qing was most likely hiding within Li Qinglian's army. Back during the Capital Campaign, Li Qing had once struck a deal with Emperor Khun Tai. Although the relationship between Li Qinglian

and Emperor Khun Tai was shrouded in secrecy, Yuan Zhi Hui drew this conclusion from the notable presence of elite troops from the ancient imperial dynasty within Li Qinglian's forces—a factor that had enabled him to rise so steadily until now. Two such coincidences were hard to dismiss as unrelated.

From this foundation, Yuan Zhi Hui continued his line of reasoning.

According to prior information, the bloodline of the Great Tang had been annihilated, and with it, the only force capable of resisting cultivators through mortal means—the Power of Forbidden Law—had been lost to history.

But what if... the deal between Li Qing and Emperor Khun Tai was to preserve the bloodline of the emperor?

If that were the case, then the Power of Forbidden Law still existed.

By following these threads and recognizing the possibility that Emperor Khun Tai had deliberately built a faction for Li Qinglian, Yuan Zhi Hui theorized that Li Qing had brought a descendant bearing the Power of Forbidden Law into Li Qinglian's army.

And when the time was right, he would use this bloodline inheritor's Forbidden Law Power to deal a decisive blow to Xuan Yuan Changlong's faction.

That... was Yuan Zhi Hui's opportunity.

When Heaven's Mandate reached unity, and the moment of Divine Sealing arrived, the world would undergo a massive upheaval. Immortals would naturally seek to avoid becoming the focal point of this storm.

That would be Yuan Zhi Hui's moment to strike.

To prevent Li Qing from detecting or being alerted to this plan, Yuan Zhi Hui deliberately limited his interactions with any other agents, severed all karmic ties, and ensured that even Li Qing's Jade Tablet would detect nothing.

One could say, Yuan Zhi Hui was already standing right beside the truth.

Yuan Zhi Hui's Plan and Line of Thought

For the past several months, Yuan Zhi Hui had remained hidden—neither participating in strategic deployments nor involving himself in the warfare. This, paired with the fact that Li Qing had spent his efforts outwitting only Immortal-level figures, led Yuan Zhi Hui to one key assumption:

Li Qing had likely fallen into a state of arrogant complacency—believing that only those at the Immortal level or above could pose a threat to him, while this old foe of his was no longer relevant.

From there, Yuan Zhi Hui shifted his focus to analyzing Li Qing's ally—the one with Immortal-level combat strength.

Just like the other Immortals, he did not believe this person was a true Immortal, but rather a powerful Stage Eight cultivator who had used underhanded methods to artificially attain Immortal-level power.

This individual had even been given the Sword of the Annihilation King by Li Qing—a sign that their cooperation ran deep. That, in turn, meant that if Yuan Zhi Hui intended to ambush Li Qing, this person would pose a tremendous threat.

Next came the final sequence of the Six Paths Divine Sealing:

First, Heaven's Mandate must be unified—meaning the last contender bearing the Mandate must emerge victorious.

Then, a Stage Eight cultivator from the victorious side will gain direct qualification to challenge for the ninth Immortal seat.

After a decisive duel, the victor will be appointed to the Immortal realm by the Mandate-bearer, thus completing the Divine Sealing and initiating the creation of the Heavenly Cycle of Samsara.

This entire process would happen in one unbroken sweep, with no transitional buffer between stages.

That was the window Yuan Zhi Hui intended to exploit.

He would bait and lure the attention of Li Qing and others by targeting Li Qing's powerful ally, who was vying for the ninth Immortal seat.

And in that moment of chaos, he would strike without warning.

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At the same time, another of Li Qing's enemies—the Netherworld Demon Lord—had succeeded in abandoning the body of Lu Shangqiu and seizing the body of Lu Xunchu, a Stage Eight cultivator who was now preparing to use underhanded means to vie for the position of the Ninth Immortal. And Li Qing had already come to realize this in secret.

What followed was the framework of Li Qing's own deduction.

At this point, Li Qing could not grasp any concrete enemy plot—not because none existed, but because they had been concealed far too deeply.

Thus, he had no choice but to reexamine his own strategic layout, incorporating the emergence of new factors and deducing every potential deadlock that could render his plan a failure.

According to the original blueprint, Li Qing's three main bodies, hidden within the great army, would activate the Forbidden Law Power and deal a decisive blow to Xuan Yuan Changlong—just as Yuan Zhi Hui had previously deduced. Once this battle ended, he would escape, using the opportunity to expose the whereabouts of the Netherworld Demon Lord, thus neutralizing that threat for the second time and making the demon a target of public scrutiny.

However, there was one critical point that Li Qing could not evade: his true self would inevitably have to appear on the battlefield. Which meant the Immortals would definitely seal off the entire battleground. The Forbidden Law Power only covered a limited area, and once its energy was spent and the Six Paths Divine Sealing was completed, Li Qing would be like a fish trapped on land—with no route to escape.

This was the greatest trial Li Qing had ever faced. No matter how thoroughly he had prepared, it was difficult not to feel anxiety. For no matter how intricate his calculations, his forced appearance was already set in stone—and, worse yet, everyone knew it.

Thus, Li Qing began to rearrange every trap and contingency he could possibly leverage.

The first piece was the Netherworld Demon Lord. Now inhabiting Lu Xunchu, with designs on the Ninth Immortal seat, this demon could be threatened by Li Qing—forced to open a path through the sealed battlefield when the critical moment came.

Next was the matter of the three Demon Kings, and more importantly, the existence behind them—a shadowy entity known as the Sovereign of Radiance (Guangming Dijun). This being had long been lurking in silence, observing and investigating the state of the realm, likely with intentions similar to those of the Netherworld Demon Lord. Li Qing might be able to manipulate him as well.

Then came Tu Zimo, who, though the cooperation thus far had been smooth, had never truly trusted Li Qing, nor had Li Qing trusted him. In a moment of crisis, Li Qing could choose to reveal his true identity and threaten Sun Zimointo opening a path.

The only slight advantage to speak of was this: his enemies could not slaughter every cultivator on the battlefield to flush him out. The Six Paths Divine Sealing still required a foundational population. This only increased his odds of survival by a narrow margin. The Immortals still needed the rule-bound artifacts to forge the Heavenly Cycle of Samsara, and they feared that Li Qing's death might cause these items to be lost or go astray. Therefore, until every such item had been revealed, he would still have a brief window of safety.

—

Li Qing came to meet Tu Zimo.

He told him that the greatest threat in Tu Zimo's battle for the Ninth Immortal seat had finally emerged—Lu Xunchu, or more precisely, the Netherworld Demon Lord.

At present, the Netherworld Demon Lord was still unaware that his identity had been exposed. Therefore, Li Qing proposed that during the decisive battle for the Immortal quota, Sun Zimoshould be the one to reveal the Demon Lord's true identity.

At that moment, Sun Zimowould also unleash his own Immortal-level battle strength, coordinating with other Stage Eight cultivators to suppress the demon. In doing so, Sun Zimowould naturally and justifiably ascend to the Ninth Immortal seat. The three Demon Kings would side with him to maintain balance, and even the Immortals would have no choice but to accept it, for they would have no time left to formulate any effective countermeasures.

But before proposing this plan, Li Qing revealed a crucial truth to Tu Zimo—that Li Qinglian was a descendant of Khun Tai Di, and therefore possessed the Forbidden Law Power. This would be the key to defeating Xuan Yuan Changlong, who, in reality, was the second Vo Ming (Fate-less One). If Xuan Yuan Changlong were to win, he would immediately crown himself as the Ninth Immortal, since he was already a Stage Eight cultivator by birth. (Li Qing had previously seen a vision of the future where Xuan Yuan Changlong had ascended as the Ninth Immortal and had deduced everything backward from that point.)

He was Tu Zimo's second true enemy.

The third was the Sovereign of Radiance (Guangming Dijun), the hidden force behind the three Demon Kings.

Thus, after defeating Xuan Yuan Changlong, Sun Zimowould still have to face two powerful entities: the Netherworld Demon Lord and the Sovereign of Radiance. But the solution would remain the same—gathering the forces of the righteous and suppressing the outsiders, paving the way for Tu Zimo's ascension to Immortality.

And to ensure that all of this could come to pass, Li Qing even handed over the True Treasure Pagoda (Chân Bảo Tháp) to Tu Zimo—granting him peak-level power in a short span of time.

At this point, Li Qing's preparations were complete.

In truth, everything he had orchestrated above was a carefully crafted scheme to guide Sun Zimodown a single inevitable path—to forcibly become the Ninth Immortal. This strategy provided Li Qing with two possible escape routes.

When all five Immortals and the three Demon Kings moved to seal off the battlefield, the emergence of Sun Zimowould present them with two choices:

1. Suppress Tu Zimo, which would inevitably provoke his resistance. In doing so, the lockdown would be broken, and Li Qing would seize the opportunity to escape.

2. Compromise with Tu Zimo, allowing him to join their ranks and carry the True Treasure Pagoda out of the blockade zone.

But the truth was—within that very True Treasure Pagoda, Li Qing had already hidden a fragment of his soul.

He did not need to escape with his entire body—as long as the core of his being could slip away, the rest could be rebuilt later.

—

After his meeting with Li Qing, Sun Zimowent to meet with Li Qinglian to reveal the secret—and to urge him to formally establish an imperial dynasty, thereby gaining legitimate sovereignty. Only with the orthodox mandate of rulership could the Forbidden Law Power be fully awakened, a force that only a reigning emperor of this era could possess.

At the same time, the enthronement ceremony would be held at the former capital, the central hub of the Nine Provinces and Four Regions, in order to draw all key figures and forces toward that focal point. This would provide Li Qing the perfect opportunity to move freely and gather resources from elsewhere, taking advantage of the momentary loosening of the lockdown.

Those resources would then be secretly transported to the Calamity-Evading Cave Heaven, and from there, quietly funneled into the True Treasure Pagoda, thereby boosting its might and increasing the chances of survival.

Simultaneously, Li Qing deployed numerous incarnations outside the battlefield, prepared to act at a moment’s notice when the time came.

—-

The battle began.

The Immortals and monstrous beings activated a colossal formation, sealing off the entire battlefield with divine array techniques. The Immortals' plan was simple—yet devastatingly effective.

Seal the battlefield, and wait—wait until Li Qing had no choice but to reveal the remaining Rule Artifacts needed to forge the Heavenly Dao Reincarnation Cycle.

And if Li Qing refused to relinquish them, they would expose his location within the sealed formation to his own ally—the one currently contending for the Ninth Immortal seat. Upon realizing that his only path forward had been secretly cut off by Li Qing himself, that person would surely go berserk, tearing apart their so-called alliance. At that moment, the Immortals would only need to promise him the Immortal position, and he would become the blade in their hands—the executioner of Li Qing.

Even if this ploy failed, they still held one final, foolproof strategy: take control after the victor of the Heavenly Mandate War is decided.

No matter the outcome, Li Qing would have to be within the army of the victorious side, and moreover, he must hold a high strategic post—only then would the Mandate Tribulation recognize him.

Hence, narrowing down his whereabouts would not be difficult.
(Li Qing had already predicted this possibility, and so he disguised himself as a low-level cultivator in the ranks, while secretly commanding his subordinates to act as field commanders in his stead.)

—

Haoran, the Saint of Grand Clarity, met with Li Qing for the final time.

With a seemingly sincere smile, the Saint laid out all of his plans without reservation, then assured Li Qing that he would do his best to assist him—so long as Li Qing could stir a fluctuation within the formation at the right moment, the Saint would secretly open a crack in the grand sealing array to allow his escape.

Li Qing, outwardly polite and grateful, offered words of thanks.

Inwardly, however, he didn't believe a single word.

He had already broken down the entire situation into six critical points:

1. The battlefield was set at the former imperial capital—the very heart of the Nine Provinces and Four Regions.

2. Within the sealing grand array, even soul escape via self-destruction would be impossible. Escape required a true breach in the array.

3. After the Mandate War ends, the Immortals would immediately begin inspecting all cultivators, focusing first on those of Stage 5 cultivation—Li Qing's current disguised realm.

4. If that sweep failed, they would wait until the duel among Stage 8 cultivators vying for the Ninth Immortal seat began—particularly the moment Li Qinglian performed the Imperial Investiture.

5. Once all Rule Artifacts were gathered, the Immortals would seal them permanently with divine force, ensuring Li Qing couldn't embed any hidden tricks within them.

6. And finally, after the Investiture was complete and the Heavenly Dao Cycle established, they would slaughter every cultivator Stage 6 and below, as the Phong Shen was finished—no more taboos remained.

Yet even with this noose tightening from every angle, Li Qing had one last insurance policy:

> If all else failed—he would unseal the Heavenly Lock itself.

—

All of Li Qing's enemies were harboring their own calculations.

The Netherworld Demon Lord — Ming Jie Mo Jun.

Though he wasn't certain whether Li Qing had discovered his resurrection, he assumed the worst—that Li Qing already knew.

From that premise, the Demon Lord deduced:
Sun Zimowas the most viable option Li Qing had to break the formation.

Highly likely, Li Qing would orchestrate a scenario where that supposed ally exposed the Demon Lord's identity, triggering a clash at Immortal level, which would in turn tear open the seal.

Thus, even if he lost the battle, the Demon Lord himself could not afford to be the one to shatter the formation.
If defeat was inevitable, he would simply fake death again, retreating into deep hibernation to await another opportunity.

The Radiant Sovereign — Guangming Dìjūn.

If the Netherworld Demon Lord had truly returned, then logically, he must be hiding among the Stage 8 cultivators.
After all, beings of Conceptual Level did not die so easily—one of them falling so cleanly would always be suspicious.

Silently, the Radiant Sovereign laid his trap.

He believed Li Qing might eventually use the Three Demon Kings to forge a path of escape. And so—he simply waited by that path, ready to strike once the "rabbit" ran for the tree.

Yuan Zhihui — Origin Wisdom.

He remained in deep concealment, waiting.

Tu Zimo.

He would turn on Li Qing at the last moment.
He had already guessed the true trump card hidden within the True Treasure Pagoda, which was precisely why Li Qing had handed it to him so freely.

Sun Zimothought carefully.

If Li Qing only intended to escape during the chaos of an Immortal-level war, then his own victory or defeat was irrelevant.
That made the gift of the Pagoda far too deliberate, too suspicious.

All the pieces were in motion.

And now—

It was only a question of whose next move would prove to be the final stroke that settled the game.

—

At present, Li Qing sought to exploit yet another thread in the tangled web:
Who would claim the treasure of Xuan Yuan Changlong after his fall?

Through the Jade Shard, Li Qing had already learned that this artifact allowed Xuan Yuan Changlong to grasp glimpses of the future.
Now, Li Qing intended to use this final piece to carve out one more path of escape.

What he needed was:

– Someone who could slip past the Immortals' encirclement,
– Who possessed the means to evade pursuit,
– And most critically, who harbored ambition vast enough to seize the heavens.

There was only one person who fit all three conditions—
Yuan Zhihui (Origin Wisdom).

Thus, Li Qing approached Yuan Zhihui with a proposition—
a “transaction” concerning the true identity of Xuan Yuan Changlong and the treasure he carried.

Once Xuan Yuan Changlong fell, his artifact would become masterless.
However, in his current state, Li Qing could not retrieve it himself—not with the Immortals and the two Conceptual-level entities looming nearby.
What he needed… was someone else to take it far away from their reach.

And Yuan Zhihui was that candidate.

In return, Yuan Zhihui would need to open a path of retreat for Li Qing.

Yuan Zhihui agreed to cooperate.
Right now, Li Qing was the focal point of countless factions’ attention—the chances of taking anything directly from him were infinitesimal.
But to snatch a single artifact from Xuan Yuan Changlong’s corpse?
That was far more plausible.

So, Li Qing laid out the plan:

> “The moment Xuan Yuan Changlong falls,
you must immediately act—
seize his corpse before the treasure has a chance to reveal itself.
A body, no matter how extraordinary,
will not raise alarm in the split second before its secrets are known.
That heartbeat of hesitation—
will be your window.”

—

Part 9: The Tribulation of Primordial Spirit Establishment (END)

The Sealing Formation was officially activated.

The Heaven's Mandate War commenced.
Xuan Yuan Changlong was defeated.
Yuan Zhihui turned coat at the final moment—
but Li Qing had long anticipated this betrayal.
Thus, this act was merely the first veil of smoke.

Immediately afterward, Li Qing commanded his myriad avatars scattered across the Nine Provinces and Four Regions to begin pillaging the unmanned headquarters of the major sects.

This instantly triggered fluctuations from the Immortals.

At first glance, it seemed as if Li Qing wanted to draw the cultivators—and even the Immortals—away to protect their sects.
But in truth, it was merely yet another layer of bait.

He knew full well that the Immortals would see through this ruse and remain at their posts.
The cultivators, too, would hold their ground.
And precisely because of that—
his true purpose was fulfilled.

The Immortals began to speculate—
Just as in the past, when Li Qing slew both the Annihilation King and the Dao Sovereign of the True Treasure Sect,
he must have used a Slaughter Formation capable of killing Immortals, a method that consumes massive resources.

Here, while it might not be a Slaughter Formation per se—
for such a thing would be impossible to construct under their watchful eyes—
he might instead activate something comparable, using an alternative source:

Rule-bound Artifacts.

Everyone knew:
Li Qing had secretly amassed control over several artifacts of cosmic law,
and though he had yet to wield them openly,
none dared to assume he couldn't.

The Immortal-formed formation had already cut off all external supply lines.
Thus, the stolen energy couldn't possibly be funneled to tools such as the True Treasure Pagoda or the Annihilation King's Sword, which were trapped inside.

However—outside the formation—there were still other Rule-bound Artifacts.

Hence, the Immortals came to a conclusion:
Li Qing's true gambit must be to funnel that energy into those artifacts,
then unleash them to shatter the formation from the outside.

The Immortals felt they had now uncovered Li Qing's ultimate trump card—
and believed it was not the True Treasure Pagoda after all.

What they didn't realize—

was that this entire deduction…
was merely another snare within the trap.

—

The battle for the Ninth Immortal Position among Eighth-Stage Cultivators had begun.

In this grand confrontation, Li Qing quickly realized that the Radiant Sovereign (Guangming Dìjūn) had already abandoned the ambition for the Ninth Immortal Title—
what he sought instead…
was Li Qing's Jade Talisman.

Furthermore, the Radiant Sovereign had also uncovered the truth:
Lu Xunchu was none other than the Demon Lord of the Nether Realm in disguise.

At the same time, the Immortals themselves had begun to harbor suspicions.

Their attention turned to Sun Zimo—
presently the most promising candidate to ascend as the Ninth Immortal—
whose fighting style bore the greatest resemblance to that of Li Qing's mysterious ally.

Likewise, Lu Xunchu, with his overwhelming performance, had drawn attention—
whispers began to surface:
Could he be the Demon Lord reborn?

Thus, the Immortals hatched a plan.

Under the pretense of organizing a special battleground for their "seed contenders,"
they constructed a separate spatial domain,
dragging both Sun Zimo and Lu Xunchu inside.

They then commanded the other Eighth-Stage cultivators to provide support—
ensuring that Sun Zimowould slay the Demon Lord within this sealed space,
all without disturbing the greater formation that bound the battlefield.

A double-edged maneuver:
both severing one of Li Qing's potential escape routes
and eliminating a high-risk foreign element.

While the Immortals were meticulously arranging their stratagem,
Haoran Saint once again approached Li Qing in secret.

He revealed the Immortals' plan to Li Qing and added:

> "Once the battle begins, the formation suppressing the battlefield will temporarily weaken—
for much of its power will be diverted to restrain the Demon Lord.
That is your chance to break through.
I shall aid you."

Li Qing, ever composed, offered a polite nod of gratitude—

but did not believe a single word from Haoran Saint.

Instead, he tossed out two new pieces of intel in return:

First—
he suspected the Demon Lord of the Nether Realm had laid countermeasures within the very formation.
If the battle turned unfavorable,
the Demon Lord would feign death and escape using a hidden contingency.

Second—
another entity had long since infiltrated the grand game:
the Radiant Sovereign, silently lying in wait,
had left backdoors among the Three Great Demon Kings under his control.

Li Qing proposed:

> “Once the Demon Lord is dealt with,
we should strike swiftly against the Radiant Sovereign—
before he can act.
Removing both foreign threats benefits all sides.”

Haoran Saint, on the surface, readily agreed—
but deep inside, harbored no such intentions.

He believed Li Qing simply wanted to borrow his blade to rid himself of two unstable variables.

However, Haoran Saint intended to keep the Radiant Sovereign in reserve—
a pawn to throw under the knife when needed most.
After all, only he possessed exclusive intel on this particular threat.

What the saint did not know—
was that this was precisely what Li Qing had intended all along.

He had handed Haoran Saint a seeming advantage—
the illusion of “first opportunity.”

But in truth—

the saint had just stepped into the trap laid deep within the endgame.

—

The Immortals’ scheme now moved into full operation.
They made direct contact with Sun Zimo, laying bare his hidden identity—

and confirmed his allegiance.

Upon discovering that Sun Zimo also desired to eliminate Li Qing,
the Immortals no longer held back:
they quietly acknowledged him as the rightful successor to the Ninth Immortal Position.

And so, when the trap was sprung—

The Demon Lord of the Nether Realm stepped into the spatial domain, only to witness:
hovering above Sun Zimo's head—
the Precious Treasure Pagoda (Zhenbao Pagoda),
and clutched within his hand—
the Sword of the Destroyer King (Diè Wáng Jian).

In that instant, the Demon Lord understood:

> He had been outplayed.

Feigning resistance, he staged a valiant death—
but in truth, channeled a single strand of his essence,
slinking it away toward a hidden escape route long prepared.

Yet, just as this essence brushed the exit—
a clone of the Haoran Saint, already lying in wait,
silently shattered the escape gate,
and in the same motion,
sealed and captured the Demon Lord's fragment.

At the same time, Sun Zimo laid his betrayal bare.

Without hesitation, he voiced the very suspicion that had simmered beneath the Immortals' surface:

> Li Qing's plan was to use him to bring the Precious Treasure Pagoda out of the sealed domain.

He declared that he would not permit this—
the Pagoda must remain within the formation.

Of course, even this might only be another layer of Li Qing's misdirection.

Now, one by one—
Li Qing's four calculated escape contingencies had been severed:

1. Nguyen Zhihui (Nguyên Trí Tuệ) – his conditional cooperation, now broken.

2. Rule Artifacts placed outside the formation – no longer reachable.

3. Battle of Immortal-level combatants – became the site of heightened scrutiny.

4. Sun Zimo's betrayal, and with it, the hope of smuggling out the Precious Treasure Pagoda—gone.

But Li Qing had already weighed these possibilities.

Each path that succeeded—was a bonus.
Each path that failed—was a foundation for the next tier of the grand plan.

He was never gambling.
He was building scaffolds.

And scaffolds are meant to rise, no matter how many planks collapse.

—

Li Qinglian issued the imperial edict.

Sun Zimo was officially ascended—
the Ninth Immortal had been crowned.

Now, only one step remained:
Forging the Wheel of the Heavenly Dao (Tiāndào Lúnhuí) from the gathered Rule Artifacts—
and with it, the final purge of Li Qing would begin.

The Immortals moved at once.

They poured their strength into the Precious Treasure Pagoda (Zhenbao Pagoda),
seeking to drag out Li Qing’s final trump card.
After all, two of his true bodies had already appeared during the battle against Xuanlong of House Xuanyuan—
both of which had self-destructed after their purpose was served.

The last remaining possibility—
was that his true essence was hiding within the Pagoda.

Inside, Li Qing had also awakened the pagoda’s internal arrays,
fighting back against the pressure being poured down from above,

and trying to create an opening to escape the great sealing formation.

Believing this was the endgame,
the Immortals focused seventy percent of their collective power on suppressing the Pagoda.

Exactly as Li Qing had calculated.

Meanwhile—
a clone of Li Qing secretly contacted the Three Demon Kings.

He gave the order:

> “Open a rift in the formation. I’m escaping now.”

This message sent a tremor through the mind of the Radiant Emperor (Guangming Dìjūn).
Was the Li Qing inside the pagoda just another smokescreen?

Worse—did Li Qing already know his true identity?

The Radiant Emperor hesitated.

If Li Qing truly knew, then this entire request might have a dual purpose:

1. A decoy, designed to make the Radiant Emperor believe that the next "Li Qing" who tried to escape would be the real one.

2. A distraction, that would focus all attention—both the Immortals' and the Radiant Emperor’s—onto a false Li Qing.

> And while everyone focused on the fake—
the real Li Qing would seize that single moment to vanish.

So, the Radiant Emperor pretended to take the bait.
He played along—"went with the current" as the proverb said.

Feigning ignorance, he opened a narrow path in the formation—
but awaited the real Li Qing to surface...

> so he could strike with full force at the exact right moment.

Neither side trusted the other.
But both moved forward.

And the board grew ever tighter—
each shadow concealing another, each step echoing with silence.

—

Li Qing once again contacted Haoran Saint.
He said that next, a rift in the formation must be opened—
another would cooperate with Haoran Saint to create a breach, and at that moment, Li Qing would escape.
Haoran Saint agreed.

Haoran Saint believed the Precious Treasure Pagoda was merely bait.
And the only one left who could be the “cooperator” was none other than the Radiant Emperor.

The Saint speculated that Li Qing and the Radiant Emperor had already reached some kind of accord.
But then—why approach him to open the way?

Haoran Saint felt there was more to this than met the eye.
This could very well be a part of Li Qing’s scheme—
to mislead both him and the Radiant Emperor,
while Li Qing’s true escape route lay elsewhere entirely.

Even the Saint and the Radiant Emperor were likely just pieces on his chessboard.
Should either of them show signs of movement,
the attention of all the Immortals would instantly shift toward them—
thus opening the true path of escape for Li Qing.

Thus, Haoran Saint also pretended ignorance,
and simply went along with the current.

Just as the resistance of the Precious Treasure Pagoda began to weaken,
and the Immortals believed they were about to breach it—
Li Qing’s outer clones, arranged far in advance,
swept in toward the great formation from beyond.

Using weapons looted from the unmanned headquarters of various sects,
they launched a frenzied assault on the formation.

At that moment,
Li Qing gave the signal to Haoran Saint and the Radiant Emperor—
it was time to disrupt the formation.

Coordinated with the external attacks,
the massive formation trembled violently.

The Immortals soon realized—
the Precious Treasure Pagoda was merely a decoy.

They immediately split their forces to reinforce the formation anew.

Haoran Saint and the Radiant Emperor also silently withdrew their interference,
each now waiting, silently, for Li Qing to reveal himself.

And Li Qing knew—
the moment had arrived.

His grand plan for escape had entered its final phase.

With the suppression weakened,
and all eyes shifted away from the Pagoda,
he needed only thirty seconds more—
and he would be free.

—

The 30th second.

The Sword of the Annihilation King erupted with unimaginable power—
a hidden card Li Qing had laid down long, long ago, now detonating without warning.
It caught the Immortals completely off guard.

In that instant, they realized—
they had fallen for yet another trap.

The final trump card wasn't hidden within the Precious Treasure Pagoda after all,
but had always lain within that Annihilation King Sword,
which had been in plain sight from the very beginning.

With devastating might,
the sword tore through the wards and restraints,
leaving the Immortals no time to react.

Just as it was about to pierce through the great formation,
the Radiant Emperor emerged—
and locked down the sword.

All of this…
had been well within Li Qing's calculations.

Now, to prevent "Li Qing" from falling into the Radiant Emperor's hands,

the Immortals poured their power toward the Radiant Emperor all at once.

The Radiant Emperor—
caught between resisting their combined suppression
and unraveling the secrets of the Annihilation King Sword in order to uncover Li Qing's true treasure—
was pushed to the brink.

—

The 17th second.

The Immortals could no longer afford any restraint—
they unleashed their full might upon the Radiant Emperor.

—

The 16th second.

Li Qing's clones, both inside and outside the formation, launched relentless assaults on the boundary—
with not the slightest concern shown for the "Li Qing" sealed within the Annihilation King Sword.

—

The 15th second.

The Immortals came to a grim realization:
Li Qing's soul might very well be hidden within the sword...
or perhaps among the attacking clones inside the formation.

In other words—
both the sword and the clones were his escape routes.

—

The 14th second.

The dark spirits and celestial guardians stationed at the formation's core were dispatched, sent to hunt down the clones.
A brutal clash broke out.

—

The 13th second.

All of the clones—

were captured and destroyed.

—

The 12th second.

Yet the diversion had already taken its toll—
with the Immortals forced to pull away even more of their power,
the countdown dropped to nine seconds.

—

The 9th second.

Haoran Saint suddenly sensed something was wrong.

In an instant, his attention shifted—
to the Treasure Tower that was about to break free.

Only then did he realize—
the Annihilation King Sword and all the clones were but decoys,
meant to stall for time…
so that the Treasure Tower could escape.

The Radiant Emperor was merely a pawn.
The sword had served its purpose—baiting him into revealing himself and drawing all attention.
Once the Radiant Emperor acted,
every Immortal instinctively believed that he had found the real Li Qing,
and none dared gamble that it wasn't.

And the clones?
They were nothing more than noise—
a smokescreen forcing the Immortals to divert even more power to reinforce the boundary,
thus weakening the restraints on the Treasure Tower.

The Treasure Tower, cast out at the very beginning and dismissed as mere bait—
was, in truth, the genuine article all along.

—

The 8th second.

Haoran Saint did not reveal himself.
Instead, he silently gathered power, waiting for the perfect moment—
to deliver a fatal strike against Li Qing.

What he did not know was—

Li Qing had already anticipated this.
In crafting this plan, he had delved to terrifying depths.
Even going so far as to ask himself:
“What if someone sees through the truth hidden among the lies?”

And thus…
He prepared for that possibility as well.

—

The 3rd second.

The Immortals began to realize—
Something was wrong.

If the Three Demon Lords had shown signs of betrayal,
how could Li Qing not have foreseen it?
After all, even the Netherworld Demon Sovereign had fallen into his calculations.

The Annihilation King Sword…
It must have been nothing more than a lure,
used to bait both the Radiant Emperor and the Immortals.

Which meant—
From beginning to end…
Li Qing’s true self had always been inside the Treasure Tower.

Instantly, Haoran Saint made his move—
followed closely by the rest of the Immortals.
All their power surged toward the Treasure Tower.

At that moment—

The final remaining true body of Li Qing,
hidden deep within the seal,
entered self-destruction mode.

Overloading his body with forbidden power,
he broke free from concealment and charged straight for the boundary.

—

The 2nd second.

Attacks upon the Treasure Tower suddenly halted for a heartbeat.
Everyone froze.
They had believed the Tower was the last piece—
But now… was this the real Li Qing?

—

The 1st second.

Li Qing’s true body self-destructed.
The explosion tore through space.

And in that very moment—
The Immortals realized they had been fooled once more.

That was not Li Qing.
Just another decoy.

—

The 0th second.

In the span of that fleeting instant—
The Treasure Tower broke through the barrier.

And within it—
Li Qing’s soul escaped.

Leaving behind only an empty shell—
and countless stunned Immortals,
each one tasting the bitter, helpless sting of total defeat.

—

In this grand scheme, Li Qing’s strategy revolved around a single core:
Desire.

He crafted countless decoys—
Each one meticulously designed to make every faction believe:
"This must be the real Li Qing."

And so, none dared to hold back.
Because none could be certain—
Was this truly him?
And if not seized now,
would he fall into someone else’s hands?

Every force poured all their strength into the snare.
And that…
was the trap.

This created a dilemma—
With every new decoy's appearance,
all powers were forced to shift their focus,
pulling away attention from the true body hidden in plain sight.

Even earlier, when the Immortals had confirmed
Li Qing's presence within the Treasure Tower,
they only committed seventy percent of their strength,
leaving the rest for contingencies.

That reserve…
Was what Li Qing aimed to exploit.

By activating the Annihilation King Sword in a surprise move,
he lured the Radiant Emperor into action,
splitting the battlefield into opposing factions vying for him.

And from that moment on,
every subsequent decoy drew them deeper into chaos.
Because they were no longer united.
Their strength had turned upon itself.

Every decision each side made—
seemed like their own.
But in truth,
they had no other choice within the context Li Qing had crafted.
Every step, every reaction,
was foreseen.

And that—
was why he won.