

## Timescape 101

### Chapter 101: If You're Doomed, You're Doomed

Xu Qing had no way of knowing that Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior was moaning and sighing in his sect headquarters. Back in the scavenger basecamp, he bought a small residence so he would have a place to rest when needed. In scavenger basecamps, newcomers usually had to go through certain formalities before being allowed to take up residence. But if you were strong enough, those rules didn't apply.

All Xu Qing had to do was show off the spirit power of the third level of Qi Condensation, and he had a new log cabin. Because of showing off the fact that he could easily afford something like that, he immediately attracted the attention of two scavengers with malicious intentions.

Before long, their severed heads were hanging outside his door.

After that, Xu Qing was accepted as a member of the camp. Days began to pass. A few people paid attention to him at first, but his behavior was exactly the same as the average scavenger, so he quickly blended in.

He would kill people who provoked him. He would go on missions. He would buy white boluses. And he prowled the camp with an instinctive vigilance and caution that made it so no one doubted that he was anything other than a random scavenger.

It didn't take long before people didn't even think of him as being a newcomer. After all, the wilderness was full of scavengers, and it wasn't unusual for them to eventually come look for a residence after a long period of wandering.

Of course, Xu Qing would slip out of the camp to go study the Golden Vajra Warrior Sect and the area around it. And he would occasionally see disciples make the trip from the sect to the basecamp to spend their time off.

Xu Qing recognized some of those disciples from when he'd attacked their previous sect headquarters, poisoned everything, and set the place on fire. They walked around the camp looking haughty and arrogant. But within their eyes was a deep sense of hesitation and helplessness that Xu Qing picked up on.

As more time passed, Xu Qing got more first-hand information about the sect moving into the area, as the event had not gone unnoticed by the local scavengers.

After about half a month, Xu Qing had a fairly good understanding of the whole situation.

There aren't even a hundred people left in the sect. Only four of the original seven elders remain. The sect leader is still around. That means that Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior only has four experts among his subordinates. This area is controlled by the Church of Departure, which is why he came here. To seek refuge with the Church....

Xu Qing was being patient. He might have impressive battle prowess, but he was dealing with a Foundation Establishment enemy. If they ended up fighting, he could probably win, but it would be a long, hard fight.

Therefore, Xu Qing was as cautious as usual. He took time to analyze all the bits of information he'd uncovered, and didn't take any action. Another half a month passed. One night when

shadowing two disciples on their way back to the sect, he overheard a conversation that provided some very interesting information.

“The patriarch is really blowing all of this out of proportion. Whenever he has guests, he makes us disciples leave the sect every three or four days to ‘accidentally’ spread rumors about the sect. But... what’s the point?”

“Exactly. It’s been half a year since we saw the Kid! Ai. I really can’t believe the patriarch is constantly inviting so many friends to the sect. When one leaves, barely a few days pass before another guest arrives. Furthermore, we’re being too obvious about spreading these rumors.”

“Well, there’s nothing we can do.... We can’t dare ignore the patriarch’s orders.”

When the disciples were just about to reach the sect, Xu Qing quietly made his way back to the basecamp feeling the need to be more cautious than ever. After that, he was more attentive in his observations.

One evening as he was staking out the sect headquarters, he saw a bright beam of light shooting from the top of the mountain and off into the distance. Just barely, he could make out someone on top of the mountain, seeing the guest off.

Xu Qing’s eyes narrowed, then he hurried back to the basecamp to organize his weapons and poisons. Then he looked up at the sky to check the time, and started waiting.

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At the grand hall at the very top of the Golden Vajra Warrior Sect, the patriarch watched his guest leave, then sighed. He could only persuade guests to stay for so long. Turning back toward the hall, he started thinking about who to invite next.

It won’t be long before that pill is done. I’ll consume it immediately and open my 30th dharma aperture. Once I have my first life flame, and can enter the profound radiance state... then I can finally breathe a sigh of relief.

The patriarch disappeared into the hall.

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As the glow of dusk turned darker and darker, a cold wind whimpered through the scavenger basecamp, slowly growing stronger and stronger.

The dirt ground was already frozen hard, so there was no dust to be kicked up. But there was trash, tumbling along the streets. And the cold wind eventually landed on the huddled forms of some of the children who resided in the camp.

It was like a sharp blade, trying to slice apart everything it encountered.

Eventually, snow started to fall, blanketing the Crimson Wilds for as far as the eye could see.

The later it got, the harder the snow fell. The snowflakes became like goose feathers piling up everywhere. The camp residents who didn’t have shelter could only shiver, their eyes looking numb

and dead. It seemed that this winter was going to be a cold one, and that meant more people would freeze to death.

Meanwhile, Xu Qing had made all his preparations, so he walked out of the log cabin.

Upon seeing all the snow, and feeling the cold wind, he wrapped his clothing a bit tighter around himself. He saw some shivering children nearby, thought for a moment, then continued walking. He didn't shut the door behind him. There was a fire in his cabin, making it a lot warmer than the outside. When the children noticed the open door, their dead eyes suddenly flickered with a bit of hope.

Xu Qing walked faster and faster in the snow, until eventually he merged with the wind, becoming a string of afterimages that headed straight toward the Golden Vajra Warrior Sect. The energy and blood within him boiled, and he kept the Seaforming Scripture operating at a maximum level. Violet light flowed through him, converging above his head in the very vague shape of a heavenly saber.

Soon he arrived at the sect, and looked up at the headquarters framed by falling snow. Moonlight fell, refracted by the snow, causing the sect headquarters to be illuminated clearly.

Seeing it, Xu Qing's eyes burned with killing intent. Without any hesitation, he jumped off the ground. The flight talisman glittered like the light of a saber as he shot up through the snow toward the hall atop the mountain. He moved faster and faster, and within a short moment, was standing outside the hall.

Without the slightest hesitation, he lifted his right hand, then chopped it down toward the hall.

Rumbling sounds filled heaven and earth as a huge heavenly blade took full form in the sky above him. The wind and snow were strong, but they didn't cause the blade to waver by even the smallest fraction. Violet light shone everywhere as the heavenly blade chopped down.

From a distance, it was possible to see that the blade was dozens of meters long. Even more shocking was the mad grandeur of the blade as it descended, as if it could sever anything that it touched. In the blink of an eye, it landed on the hall, and a massive boom shook the entire mountain. The hall couldn't stand up to even a single attack, and began to crumble. Then the light of the blade slashed into it, cutting the entire hall in half.

Within the gap was Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior, staggering backward with shock in his eyes. He saw Xu Qing hovering in the air, but before any words could be spoken, Xu Qing unleashed a second saber attack!

Along with his increase in cultivation base, Xu Qing's enlightenment of the saber attack from the temple had improved, and he could unleash it more times in a row. Furthermore, he had been stockpiling energy over the past month, and didn't hesitate to tap into it. As soon as the second heavenly saber appeared, he slashed it down toward Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior.

The violet saber descended amidst deafening rumbling sounds, and the patriarch howled and prepared to meet the second attack.

This time, the hall entirely collapsed. Meanwhile, the furious patriarch's energy and blood were also boiling. Shooting backward 300 meters, he waved his hand to summon the projection of a golden

vajra warrior, surging with immense energy. That said, his hair was disheveled and his eyes were bloodshot. It was obvious that Xu Qing's two saber attacks had put him in extreme danger.

The patriarch was actually a bit confused about what was happening. And he almost couldn't believe he was dealing with someone this powerful. Of course, he had his suspicions. Hoping to get some more information, he said, "Fellow Daoist, you—"

Before he could finish speaking, his face fell, and he tried to lurch backward. However, he was too slow. A shadow had been stretching out across the ground right toward him. Though he moved fast, it wasn't fast enough to stop the shadow from touching his arm. Instantly, mutagen exploded into him, turning his arm greenish-black, and causing his heart to fill with alarm.

Up in the air, Xu Qing looked down coldly at the patriarch. And without saying a single word, he tapped into his stored energy to unleash a third saber strike. Violet light erupted, and the saber appeared, slashing through wind and snow right toward the patriarch, who was only just starting to fall back.

The patriarch's summoned vajra warrior howled, throwing out both hands to block the attack. A boom rang out as the vajra warrior's arms collapsed, and blood oozed out of the patriarch's mouth as he staggered away.

In the end, though, he was a Foundation Establishment cultivator. He didn't have the techniques of a big sect, but Foundation Establishment was still Foundation Establishment. He had incredible battle prowess, and thus, the ambush with the saber and the shadow had only wounded him. Eyes bloodshot, he looked at Xu Qing, gritted his teeth, and said, "It's you, isn't it, Kid?"

Astonished, the sect disciples, elders, and even the sect leader charged out and looked up into the sky.

They saw Xu Qing up above, his hair floating around him. His scavenger outfit only made him seem more deadly. With the moon, the wind, and the snow around him, he looked like someone from the underworld, ready to take command over life and death.

## Chapter 102: Damned by Myriad Tribulations

When Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior blurted out his true identity, Xu Qing didn't say anything in response. He wasn't the type of person who liked chatting in the middle of a fight. Eyes narrowing as the patriarch backed up, he tapped into the flight talisman.

In the blink of an eye, Xu Qing became a streak of light shooting toward the patriarch. As he moved, the spectral drought demon appeared behind him. It looked vicious, with lava flowing through the cracks that covered its skin. And intense flames surrounded it in every direction, causing the snowflakes to melt and turn into a mist.

Xu Qing's energy and blood was stimulated to the ultimate degree. With the Sea and Mountain Incantation operating at full force, his body cultivation abilities were at the peak. In the blink of an eye, he was in front of the patriarch, unleashing a vicious fist strike.

The patriarch's eyes glittered with killing intent, and he waved his hand, causing the projected vajra warrior to howl to the heavens as it met the incoming attack with its own fist.

Neither side held back. When the two fists collided, the resulting explosion shoved Xu Qing backward, blood oozing out of the corners of his mouth. In terms of pure body cultivation level, he was still a bit under the Foundation Establishment patriarch.

That said, the patriarch suffered in the clash as well. His energy and blood were reeling as he also staggered backward. Though his facial expression was vicious, he was actually astonished. He was now certain he was dealing with Xu Qing, but that only made him more surprised.

He knew that Xu Qing would get stronger before coming back, but he could never have guessed that in less than a year he would be so strong he would try to directly kill him and wipe out his sect. He was so much stronger than last time that it was hard to believe.

“You...” the patriarch said, panting, but before he could continue with anything else, Xu Qing shot toward him with a fierce look in his eyes.

Booms rang out. Xu Qing was attacking with relentless speed, not giving any chance for pausing or catching breath. Fist after fist fell, and he attacked with kicks as well. Even his head was a weapon, as he landed vicious head-butts.

The savagery was so intense that the patriarch could do little more than gasp for breath and fall back across the field of battle. As his astonishment built, his projected vajra warrior suddenly reeled on the verge of collapse.

“Looking to die?!” he howled. Hands flashing in an incantation gesture, he activated the dharma apertures within him, causing the energy of Foundation Establishment to erupt. Crushing pressure weighed down on Xu Qing, and then the patriarch went through another incantation gesture, causing blinding golden light to appear. The light turned into a whip, which he lashed viciously at Xu Qing. A massive cracking sound filled the air.

Xu Qing’s spectral drought demon howled as the flames surrounding it met the attack of the whip. The drought demon didn’t shatter, and in fact, grabbed the whip in its hand. However, that whip was backed by the power of Foundation Establishment, and thus, a massive tremor passed through Xu Qing, and he coughed up a mouthful of blood.

At the same time, he was sent spinning out of the air and right toward the sect headquarters.

Down below were the sect leader and the three elders, whose eyes burned with killing intent. The other disciples of the sect looked the same, their eyes filled with animosity. As Xu Qing fell, they attacked.

“Time to die!” shouted the patriarch, whose bloodshot eyes raged with killing intent as he rapidly performed another double-handed incantation gesture. A Foundation Establishment magical art converged, creating a huge sealing mark in the air. It was dozens of meters from end to end, and its pulsing energy caused the wind and snow around it to change course wildly. Then the mark started to move down toward Xu Qing.

The entire sect trembled, and the snowflakes were crushed into dust.

The patriarch's eyes glittered coldly as he performed another incantation gesture, resulting in an additional two golden vajra warriors to appear, both of whom launched twin fist attacks.

There were three projected vajra warriors. Six fists. And they sailed toward Xu Qing from three different directions.

Any other person in Qi Condensation, even someone in the great circle, would not survive this situation. The magical techniques of Foundation Establishment were incredibly powerful, and the might of dharma apertures was shocking. It was the same level of attack that could be produced by seven or eight talisman treasures.

In that moment of extreme danger, Xu Qing landed on the ground in the sect headquarters. He was facing attacks from all the disciples of the sect, three golden vajra warriors' fists, and a huge sealing mark. Yet when he looked around, his eyes glittered. His hands flashed in an incantation gesture, and spirit power fluctuations erupted out in all directions. In the blink of an eye, they reached three hundred meters, forming a huge spirit sea! It was like a shockwave, filled with terrifying force.

The sect leader, elders, and disciples might as well have all had the same cultivation base level in the face of this shockwave, because when it hit them, they trembled... and then exploded!

Xu Qing's spirit power shook the mountain, destroyed buildings, and... killed everyone it touched, in body and soul!

Then massive rumbling sounds echoed out as the spirit power hit the patriarch's magical techniques. The three vajra warriors turned blurry, and then they vanished like fleeting shadows in the wind. As the huge sealing mark descended, it rippled and disappeared.

The patriarch's face fell as he shot backward. Yet even he was hit by the spirit power, and blood started flowing out of the corners of his mouth. He had suffered serious internal injuries, and what was worse, because he wasn't paying attention, Xu Qing's shadow grabbed onto his left arm. He ripped free, but not before his entire arm turned greenish-black from the surge in mutagen. And then, a black iron skewer shot toward him and stabbed into his right shoulder.

In addition to all that, he trembled to the core of his being when he realized that his energy and blood were unstable. He had been poisoned, causing his face to turn incomparably grim. Falling back, he threw some medicinal pills into his mouth and prepared to flee. But then he glared at Xu Qing down below, his eyes filled with killing intent.

"The Seaforming Scripture from the Seventh Peak in Seven Blood Eyes is capable of unleashing a one-time shockwave that can shake Foundation Establishment. But you can only do it once! Therefore, the time has come for you to die!"

Xu Qing breathed hard as the defensive talisman treasures glittered. Even still, he coughed up a massive mouthful of blood. All in all, he wasn't surprised about anything so far. Foundation Establishment was powerful, and he'd known that from the very beginning. But he was still convinced he could kill the patriarch!

From the moment he started his attack, he had resorted to his most deadly killing moves. The heavenly saber. The spectral drought demon. And instead of unleashing random magical techniques from his spirit sea, he released its power in one huge attack. Furthermore, from the beginning of the fight until this point, he had already utilized seventy-three different types of poison.

So far, nothing that had played out went beyond anything he had predicted would happen. Therefore, when the patriarch looked down at him grimly, Xu Qing lifted his right hand into the air toward the patriarch, and made a grasping gesture.

When that happened, the patriarch's pupils constricted; the countless snowflakes around him suddenly stopped moving and melted into droplets of water. From a distance, it looked like everything for 300 meters around him was liquid.

"You! You still have spirit power? How??" As the patriarch looked around in astonishment, the water droplets transformed into a massive hand that crushed down.

Rumbling sounds echoed, and blood sprayed out of the patriarch's mouth. But then, his astonishment increased as the huge hand of water transformed into... a snakeneck dragon!

This was Xu Qing's Forbidden Sea dragonwhale. Howling, its energy erupting explosively, it lunged toward the patriarch with snapping jaws!

Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior's face fell, and he blurted, "Forbidden Sea dragonwhale?"

He was familiar with Seven Blood Eyes, and knew about the Seventh Peak's Seaforming Scripture. He was well aware that, after cultivating it to the eighth level, some outstanding disciples could unleash a Forbidden Sea dragonwhale. When that happened, the dragonwhale became a second stockpile of spirit power for that disciple. Of course, not many people could form the dragonwhale.

What was more, he had seen Forbidden Sea dragonwhales before, and though Xu Qing's had the same type of energy, in terms of physical appearance and the power of the Forbidden Sea it contained, it was completely different.

The patriarch kept falling back. At this point, he didn't want to fight anymore. The mutagen within him was reaching dangerous levels, and he couldn't deal with the poison. His internal organs all started to dissolve, and the blood seeping out of his mouth was black and noxious.

If only I could enter the profound radiance state....

The patriarch felt completely helpless. That wasn't even to mention that gruish shadow that lurked around. All it had to do was touch him, and the mutagen levels within him would soar. What was more, the strength of the Forbidden Sea dragonwhale, combined with Xu Qing's body cultivation power, filled the patriarch with a sense of ultimate crisis.

"I'm a member of the Church of Departure. I—"

Even as the words left his mouth, Xu Qing's flight talisman glittered brightly, and he flew up into the air.

"Same difference," he said. It was the first time he had spoken in the entire fight.

Before the patriarch could say anything else, Xu Qing waved his hand... and his dharmaboat appeared!

It was several dozens of meters long, and looked like a mixture between a crocodile and a xuanwu turtle. It had sails like wings, and as it shot through the air, it pulsed with indescribable brutality and killing intent. [1]

What was more, the boat shone with golden light that converged on the spike at the prow. As it did, a holy, god-like aura erupted from the dharmaboat and locked onto the patriarch. That holy, god-like aura felt like it came from an actual god, and caused all of the surrounding wind and snow to simply vanish.

A shocking might descended.

Standing on the dharmaboat, Xu Qing seemed like he was a sovereign who could command gods. Staring coldly at the patriarch, he lifted his right hand, and as he did, godliness converged. Then, he dropped his hand, and the godliness exploded outward.

The godly attack was the strongest move his dharmaboat was capable of. Xu Qing had even considered leading with this attack, but he had worried that the Foundation Establishment patriarch wouldn't be felled with that one attack. Therefore, he had kept it until the right moment, which was now. And now, he was certain it would kill his opponent!

Meanwhile, the patriarch's face turned absolutely pale, and his scalp tingled as was overwhelmed with a sensation of disbelief.

“Godliness!!”

In that moment, despair overwhelmed the patriarch, and then became terror. Now more than ever he felt like he was going to die.... Every fiber of his being trembled in the face of that godliness.

I can't escape. If I faced this at the very beginning, I might have stood a chance. But now....

As Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior looked at Xu Qing standing on his dharmaboat, he thought back to those ancient records he had read. And suddenly he had an idea.

“Wait a moment, Fellow Daoist! Listen to me. I'm willing to be your servant. A servant for life! Milord, from now on I—”

Xu Qing, his expression cold as ice, ignored the patriarch. He had no interest in having servants. His right hand dropped!

Chapter 103: Back from Death's Door

Xu Qing was not in the habit of paying attention to his enemies' dying words. Nor was he interested in having a servant. Besides, human hearts were hard to judge, and it was always possible a servant could turn traitor later on. It seemed much better to just kill an enemy and be done with it.

When it came to enemies, he had one philosophy: a dead enemy was the safest. And the sooner you killed them, the safer you were.

Besides, though he was new to the Crimson Wilds, and had only spent a month acclimating, he had learned enough to know that because of the impoverished conditions and horrible environment, the Church of Departure didn't come often to proselytize. The scavenger basecamp was 50 kilometers away, plus there was a snowstorm. It seemed unlikely anyone knew about what was going on at the Golden Vajra Warrior Sect.

Because of the talisman treasure, he looked completely different. Furthermore, his dharmaboat had always been disguised, and the only person who knew what it really looked like was Zhang San.



Xu Qing had done all he could in the short time available. Things hadn't played out perfectly, and there were some flaws, but overall, he felt that things had gone very smoothly.

Of course, the main reason for it all was that Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior had misjudged when he would come. He had also underestimated how quickly Xu Qing would advance in his cultivation. Most importantly, there was no way he could have predicted that Xu Qing would come prepared with an attack of godliness, something that could be dangerous to even Foundation Establishment cultivators!

Godly entities were very rare, and materials related to them were astonishingly expensive. But Xu Qing had sacrificed a godly lizard skin, as well as well over 10,000 spirit stones, to have his dharmaboat crafted in this way.

How could things not have gone smoothly?

The wind howled, spreading snow in all directions.

The dharmaboat's power of godliness converged, and when Xu Qing's right hand dropped, it shot out of the horn at the prow of the ship, becoming a blinding mass of golden light.

Looking at the scene from below on the ground, one would see the snowflakes covering everything, except for that impossibly holy beam of golden light.

It was pure and god-like in a way that could crush all souls and vanquish all living beings. Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior trembled visibly, the terror in his eyes so intense it almost became corporeal.

The godliness swept toward him with the power to kill him in body and soul. And seeing that Xu Qing wasn't listening to him, the patriarch's eyes flashed with determination. Howling, he did something that Xu Qing could never have imagined that he would do.

He actually... killed himself before the godliness hit him!

As Xu Qing watched, he struck himself on the forehead with his own hand.

A boom rang out, and his Foundation Establishment cultivation base erupted with power as his palm struck his own head. And then, seemingly worried that he might not successfully kill himself with that one blow, he pulled out a knife and stabbed himself in the heart. The force of the blow caused the blade to explode, whereupon countless bits of metal shrapnel, backed by the power of Foundation Establishment, ripped through his body. At the same time, his head literally exploded.

All of it happened in the time it takes a spark to fly off of a piece of flint. Then the patriarch's headless, shredded corpse tumbled to the ground....

Xu Qing stared in shock. Wait, is he a nonhuman that doesn't need a head to live? Or is he trying to fake his own death?

Studying the corpse below, he confirmed that there were absolutely no signs of life in it. He had never heard of any human being able to fake their death after losing their head, and at the same time, he didn't get any sense that the patriarch wasn't human.

For the first time in the process of killing someone, Xu Qing hesitated, as he wondered if he should waste some of his precious godliness on what was obviously a corpse....

He had killed a lot of people over the years, but had never seen anything like this. The dharmaboat godliness attack wavered as Xu Qing started to rein it in.

Then, he waved his hand, and the countless water droplets in the area stabbed down into the mangled corpse.

Booms rang out as the corpse was chopped into pieces.

However, that was when a soul shadow appeared, wriggling out from the gore. It was somewhat indistinct, and trembling in the wind, like it might fade from existence at any moment.

Despite the indistinct nature of the soul shadow, it clearly bore the visage of Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior. However, it had not yet become a deceased soul, but instead, seemed to waver between clarity and blurriness. Yet Xu Qing could clearly see the signs of life in it.

Xu Qing's gaze sharpened, filling with killing intent again. Before he could do anything, the patriarch's soul shadow suddenly shot at top speed... toward the black iron skewer laying on the ground a short distance away. In the blink of an eye, he was next to the iron skewer, his expression one of anxiety, as though he were fleeing for his life, fearful that if he didn't get close enough to the skewer, he would be wiped out of existence by Xu Qing. Without any hesitation, the soul shadow merged into the iron skewer. The skewer trembled, and then the black glow that emanated from it suddenly seemed much colder.

From the way it pulsed it had obviously transformed into something precious!!

For the second time ever during the process of a battle, Xu Qing stared in open shock.

He was a member of Seven Blood Eyes now, and was not ignorant to the ways of cultivation, like he had been before. All it took was a single glance at the iron skewer, and he knew exactly what he was looking at.

It has a spirit automaton now?

There were many differences between prized treasures and magical treasures. But the biggest difference... was that prized treasure did not have spirits, and magical treasures did. Adding a spirit to a prized treasure didn't automatically make it a magical treasure, but with a spirit automaton, it would have the potential to become one!

After thinking for a moment, Xu Qing made a grasping gesture with his right hand, and the black iron skewer shot toward him. Grabbing it out of the air, he looked at it coldly and squeezed it hard. He then relaxed his hand before squeezing hard again. After doing that a few times, he considered the situation further.

He could tell that his iron skewer did indeed have a spirit automaton now. And that spirit automaton... was Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior.

Xu Qing had no idea how the patriarch did it, but it was obvious that, fearing death, he transformed his soul into a spirit automaton and then inserted himself into the iron skewer.

"Get the hell out of there!" Xu Qing growled anxiously.

The iron skewer trembled, and then the patriarch's face appeared on its surface. Seeing Xu Qing's expression, he shivered and smiled obsequiously.

"Milord, what matter can your humble servant handle for you?"

He spoke smoothly, with a touch of flattery, in a way that didn't seem forced at all. It almost seemed like he had practiced speaking in this way. And the truth was that... he had. Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior was a very cautious person, and always preferred to play things safe. He loved reading ancient records, preferred to do things differently than the average person, and was quite talkative.

That said, he didn't think of himself that way. Given the chaotic state of the world, he felt that his own cultivation base level, and his inability to enter the profound radiance state, made him worthless. Furthermore, his sect was tiny. Therefore, based on the ancient records he had read, he knew that he would make the perfect grindstone for one of those legendary people with unbeatably strong destiny.

The patriarch had read about such 'grindstones' many times in the ancient records. They always died horrible deaths, and not one of them ever survived. That had left him feeling terrified about his future prospects.

He could have simply given up and retired into seclusion, but he couldn't bear to do that.

Years in the past, when it had seemed unlikely he would end up so unlucky, he had decided to put in place some failsafes. And thus, he took an ancient magical technique he had found in some ruins, and secretly started cultivating it.

That ancient technique was something ordinary people wouldn't cultivate, as it had only one purpose: it allowed you to sacrifice yourself to become a spirit automaton. Furthermore, there was a high failure rate, and failure led to the destruction of one's spiritual and physical souls.

But the patriarch felt that the ancient technique was very important, and viewed it as a way of having a second life. Therefore, he had continued to cultivate it every so often. And you could say he had some natural gifts in that regard....

He had always felt that, it was highly possible that if he reached the point in which someone was about to kill him, and calling them 'milord' and even swearing a dao oath of service didn't convince them to spare him. Then not even using some sort of death-faking talisman would be truly reliable. The most reliable thing would be to turn himself into the spirit automaton of a weapon. After all, the vast majority of cultivators thought of spirit automatons as being very useful.

The more the patriarch read the ancient records, the more he became convinced that his plan was a good one....

And it was on this very day that the technique he had cultivated for his whole life finally became useful. He had been in a position in which death was certain, but now he had a chance to keep living.

Even as the patriarch smiled flatteringly, Xu Qing stood there feeling nervous. This was his first time being in a situation in which he was hesitating about killing an enemy. It was just that spirit automatons were so incredibly precious....

"How did you turn into a spirit automaton?" he asked coldly.

With an ingratiating smile, the patriarch loudly said, "Years ago, your humble servant had a dream. In the dream, I traveled to the future and met a Lord of Destiny who would baptize this cruel and cold world, and give it warmth and kindness. I was so moved that I swore an oath to follow him. When I woke up, I spent all my savings to purchase an ancient magical technique that can be used

to turn oneself into a spirit automaton. You see, I've been preparing for this very moment for years!"

"You sound like a lunatic," Xu Qing said coldly, and his killing intent started bubbling.

Seeing this, the patriarch shivered, and mused that it had been a wise choice to kill himself when dealing with a person like this, who sought revenge over the smallest grievance. Only by transforming himself into a spirit automaton had he come back from death's door.

There really had been no other options. This wolf cub would never have accepted a servant, and had been dead set on killing. The patriarch knew that if he had acted even a bit slower, then he would really be dead now. It had been an exhausting ordeal, and he couldn't help but grumble to himself about how much effort it had taken.

With such thoughts in his mind, he lowered his voice and told the truth, and even revealed his life essence spirit to Xu Qing.

As Xu Qing listened to the story, inspected the life essence spirit, and looked at the iron skewer, the killing intent in his eyes waxed and waned. Seeing that, the anxious patriarch said, "Milord, my poor little life is worthless. But I'm a spirit automaton now, which means I can make your weapon more effective, and provide it with endless opportunities for future growth. I might only be a Foundation Establishment spirit automaton, but with my augmentation, a prized treasure will be considered rarer and more dangerous. In the future, there are many other ways I can be of use. But of course, milord, you can exterminate me with a mere thought.

"Milord, don't hurry to get rid of me. On my corpse you'll find a medicinal pill that's almost complete, and that thing can really boost your cultivation base.

"Also, milord, there's a treasure storehouse in my sect, and inside is a formation crossbow designed to be used on a Seventh Peak dharmaboat. I don't have a dharmaboat, so I could never use it. I planned to give it away as a gift....

"Oh, right. Milord, we should get out of here. A few days ago I invited a Fellow Daoist to come visit, and he should arrive sometime tomorrow. Also, the Church of Departure is supposed to send an emissary here soon."

Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior knew that, since he'd made the choice to submit, he needed to submit thoroughly and completely. That was the only way he could stay alive.

Xu Qing's face remained completely expressionless. After putting away the patriarch's life essence spirit, he made a grasping gesture to pull the bag of holding from the corpse. Then he made to destroy the corpse itself, except the patriarch quickly interfered.

"Milord, milord, uh... that bag of holding is just for show. It's not even real. There's another holding device on my corpse. It's hidden in a talisman treasure."

Xu Qing looked deeply at the patriarch.

Chapter 104: Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity

With Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior's enthusiastic help, Xu Qing found a pearl of holding, which the patriarch had actually kept buried in his flesh. There were only three things inside of it.

The first was a spirit note worth 500 spirit stones. The second was a jade box used for liquidizing medicinal pills. Inside of it was a violet pill that was in the process of liquidizing. The third was a stack of three jade slips, which were the Golden Vajra Warrior Sect's techniques, plus the spirit automaton technique.

The fake bag of holding only contained random items worth about a hundred spirit stones in total.

Seemingly worried that Xu Qing wasn't pleased, the patriarch quickly whispered, "That second highness was simply too ruthless. That's why I don't have much left."

"The bag of holding you left out in your previous sect headquarters was also a fake?" Xu Qing asked slowly.

"Yeah..." the patriarch replied, trembling.

Xu Qing didn't respond. Sprinkling Corpse-Ravaging Powder on all the corpses, he headed into the ruined sect headquarters, where he found the secret treasure storehouse the patriarch had mentioned. The only thing inside was the formation crossbow. As the patriarch had said, it was specifically designed to be used on a dharmaboat, and even required a dharmaboat spell formation to work. After looking it over, Xu Qing took it.

He cleaned out the rest of the sect, but there wasn't much to take. The dead disciples didn't have anything valuable, and the sect lord and the elders only had a bit more than that.

"You were right to kill them, milord. These traitors were secretly planning to rebel against me next time I went into seclusion. I was actually planning to take care of them myself."

Xu Qing didn't care if what the patriarch said was true or not. After searching the sect thoroughly, he disappeared into the snow and wind.

As the dark sky filled with more and more snow, it slowly covered the Crimson Wilds until they were white instead of red.

The wind grew more bone-chilling, carrying snow everywhere to cover everything.

This was true winter. A lot of people would die.

Xu Qing kept his clothes wrapped tight around him as he sped through the wilderness. He didn't go back to the scavenger basecamp. Instead, he headed through the night to the city on the edge of the Crimson Wilds.

"I need to get back to Seven Blood Eyes as quickly as possible," he murmured. "I can't stay out here." As he sped along, he glanced down at the iron skewer in his sack.

He still hadn't decided whether to destroy the spirit automaton that was Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior. However, he decided that since he had the patriarch, he might as well ask some questions.

"Tell me about the Church of Departure."

Sensing that he wasn't completely safe, the patriarch nervously went into every detail he could think of. "In the continent of South Phoenix, the Church of Departure is one of the big powers that stands alongside Seven Blood Eyes, the Violet Lands, and Words of Truth. It also has its foundation in Revered Ancient. The South Phoenix branch is considered a subsidiary congregation."

"What do you mean 'its foundation is in Revered Ancient?'" Xu Qing asked, looking at the patriarch. Although Xu Qing knew something about the power structure in the continent of South Phoenix, it was obvious that as a Foundation Establishment cultivator, the patriarch would know more.

Sensing the doubt in Xu Qing's voice, the patriarch, hoping to prove his value, began a rapid-fire explanation. "Milord, of the four major powers in South Phoenix, the Violet Lands is the only truly native force. The other three have foundations away from South Phoenix.

"Your sect, milord, is a perfect example. The seven mountain peaks of Seven Blood Eyes seem like they're all united. But the truth is that each mountain peak is self-governing. It just so happens that they all follow the same rules. And after all the years that have passed, they've gradually become like one united force.

"Even still, the seven peaks are actually branches of the Seven Sect Coalition, which is made up of seven of the largest human sects on the Revered Ancient mainland! Branches like that actually exist on all the islands in the Endless Sea on which humans live. It just so happens that South Phoenix is one of the largest islands on the sea, so the branches here are particularly formidable.

"As for Words of Truth, well, they're very secretive, and I don't know much about them."

It was Xu Qing's first time hearing anything like this. "Tell me more about the Seven Sect Coalition."

"The Revered Ancient mainland is massive, and humans occupy only a small area. That said, the area they occupy could still be considered huge. Of course, I've never been there, so I don't know all of the details. But I've heard that the Seven Sect Coalition is a superpower that exists near the coast. I get the feeling... that if you consider all humans as a whole, the Seven Sect Coalition probably isn't the strongest group out there.

"Of course, everything is relative. To your humble servant, even one of Seven Blood Eyes' mountain peaks is a colossal monster of an organization...."

Xu Qing was shocked to hear all of this, and as he looked out at heaven and earth, he realized that he only knew a little bit about the world around him.

“However,” the patriarch continued, “I do know about the Church of Departure. They have countless adherents all over the world, and they’re very powerful. It’s all because of their teachings....”

“The Church of Departure’s teachings stretch far beyond the brutal world we live in. They fanatically believe that in ancient times, when the broken face of the god arrived, the Ancient Emperors and Imperial Sovereigns departed to establish a holy land. And they firmly trust that, one day in the future, those Ancient Emperors and Imperial Sovereigns will take them there.

“One of the reasons the Church of Departure has so many congregations is that their holy writings say that there were a total of nine Ancient Emperors and Imperial Sovereigns who created that holy land.

“Because of that, the Church of Departure has nine factions, each of which adheres to a different one of the Ancient Emperors and Imperial Sovereigns. None of those factions get along, and they all believe that they worship the greatest of the nine, and that only the one they worship will lead them to the holy land.

“Of course, the Ancient Emperors and Imperial Sovereigns weren’t all human. Some were nonhuman. And that’s why you’ll find adherents of the Church of Departure among all types of living beings.”

Hearing all this, Xu Qing felt deeply shaken. However, as he digested the information, he asked, “What are these Ancient Emperors and Imperial Sovereigns?”

The patriarch looked a bit stunned. The truth was that he didn’t even know the answer to the question. However, not wanting to look ignorant while Xu Qing was still deciding his fate, he thought for a moment and then said, “The realm of the Ancient Emperors and Imperial Sovereigns is beyond my ability to fathom. But one of the ancient records I read said... that Ancient Emperors were the beings who united the Revered Ancient mainland and conquered all living beings. And the Imperial Sovereigns were beings who did not unite the Revered Ancient mainland, but had the power to defy heaven and were strong enough to do battle with the Ancient Emperors.”

Xu Qing seemed fascinated by all this, but didn’t say anything.

Seeing that look on his face, the patriarch secretly breathed a sigh of relief. Truth be told, he had no idea if that description was accurate. After all, the ancient records that he read were mostly considered folk tales....

With that, he shifted the conversation topic back to the Church of Departure.

“The most supreme entity in the Church of Departure is the mysterious Arbiter of Destiny, who is supposedly not even a cultivator from this world, but rather, comes from the holy land itself.

“The leaders of the nine factions are called the apostles.

“The congregations here on South Phoenix are all branches of the Dark Serenity faction. The Dark Serenity faction headquarters is on Revered Ancient, and they worship the human Ancient Emperor, who is none other than Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity!

“According to the ancient records, before the broken face of the god arrived, there was once an epoch among the many other epochs which was called the Epoch of Dark Serenity. That epoch was founded by Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity, and it was during that time that he led humans to unite the Revered Ancient.”

Hearing all of this left Xu Qing feeling more than a little bit shaken. However, he sped on through the night. By the time the light of dawn appeared, his destination was in sight. It was the chaotic city that was the location of the only teleportation portal in the Crimson Wilds. By now, Xu Qing had come to a decision about what to do with Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior.

“What kind of pill is in that jade box?” he asked.

Looking at the city in the distance, the patriarch quickly replied, “Ah. That’s a spirit whale pill, and there’s a very special way to use it. You can’t consume it right now. It needs to liquidize in that jade box for a hundred days. At this point, there are three days left.”

“I like quiet,” Xu Qing suddenly said.

The patriarch shivered and was about to say something, but then he felt great pressure weighing down on his life essence spirit. It covered the iron skewer, inflicting serious damage on his spirit automaton self, and then ultimately sealed him.

Xu Qing still didn’t feel at ease having the patriarch simply sealed, so he added a bit more pressure. Under all of that weight, Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior grew weaker, and then slipped into a deep sleep.

Xu Qing had decided not to kill him. A spirit automaton was too valuable, so he would keep him around and use him to perfect his iron skewer. However, without any reliable methods to control the spirit automaton, Xu Qing planned to wait until he was in Foundation Establishment before waking him up. And he was ready to wipe him out of existence immediately if he caused any problems.

Having accomplished that, Xu Qing took a deep breath and made his way through the morning snow and away from the city.

The truth was that, earlier in the night, he had muttered about returning to Seven Blood Eyes so that Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior would hear him. Although the spirit automaton seemed to be telling the truth about everything, Xu Qing wouldn’t trust him that easily.

His question about the medicinal pill had also been a test. If the patriarch lied about the pill, then he would exterminate him instantly. As for mentioning Seven Blood Eyes, he’d done that in case the patriarch had some way to secretly pass a message to someone else. After all, he didn’t actually plan to go back to Seven Blood Eyes.

As he sped through the wind and snow, he used all of his flight talismans to move as quickly as possible.



Eventually, when night was about to fall again, he found a remote cave to hole up in. After sprinkling poison powder all around the entrance, he sealed himself inside, sat down cross-legged, and took out the jade box with the medicinal pill.

Your life or death depends on whether you told the truth about this pill!

Putting the box down, he stepped back a bit, then waved his finger. The lid of the jade box slowly opened, and a medicinal aroma wafted out.

Chapter 105: 810

There was a melting medicinal pill inside the jade box. In fact, about half of the box was filled with a liquid that emanated a strong medicinal aroma in the cave.

Xu Qing had never heard of a spirit whale pill, but he understood plants and vegetation. So, after smelling the aroma, his mind kicked into high gear as he analyzed it.

Halfmaple blossom, hundredgrass leaf, storax seed... also plumed cockscomb musk, trumpet vine lotus.... Xu Qing made a brushing motion with his hand, bringing some of the fragrant aroma right to his nose. He inhaled. And seagold paste!

Looking very serious, he stared at the jade box as he analyzed everything.

The pill had a lot of complicated ingredients, so Xu Qing couldn't break down the entire mixture just by smelling it. But he could identify the major components. Given his skill with the dao of poison, and his general knowledge of plants and vegetation, he could tell that the pill was intended to be a nourishing supplement. After all, every living thing had spirit power in it, especially plants.

The basic theory behind nutritional medicines was to take the spirit power in plants and change it into something a cultivator could bring into their cultivation base.

I can smell numerous medicinal ingredients in this pill, including something that seems like blood. I wonder what it's from. The pill name has 'whale' in it. Could it be from some sort of sea beast? After some thought, he extended his right hand, and the jade box flew into his palm.

Although I don't know all the details of the pill, I can easily catalyze it to the completion point. Narrowing his eyes, he took out some medicinal plants from his bag of holding, adjusted the ratios, and then put them into the jade box.

A few hours later, it was completely dark outside, and there was even more wind and snow than the day before, to the point that the cave Xu Qing hid in was completely buried. However, the snow couldn't mask the screaming of the wind. Xu Qing listened to it as he watched the jade box.

The half of the pill that had remained before was now gone, and the entire box was filled with medicinal liquid. It was translucent and bright orange, and the aroma from before was a bit more faint.

After looking at the liquid, Xu Qing picked up the box and drank it.

As the liquid poured down his throat and into his belly, a mysterious wave of heat erupted inside him. It was a stark contrast to the frigid cold outside, and it made him feel like he was about to explode. Every single one of his meridians opened up to accept the heat, which spread through all of his flesh and blood. It was like he had become a sponge, sucking up every bit of the spirit power in the medicinal liquid. A tremor passed through him, and his eyes shone. He could tell that this

medicinal pill had shocking medicinal efficacy, and as a result, felt his trust in Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior growing a bit.

Part of the reason for his lack of hesitation in consuming it was his natural ability to resist poison. As he activated the Seaforming Scripture, his spirit sea, which had reached 291 meters on Sealizard Island... started growing rapidly.

It instantly reached 294 meters!

And it didn't stop there. With the help of the spirit power from the medicinal liquid, his spirit sea kept growing rapidly, reaching 297 meters. And then... 300!

When that happened, a bright violet glow erupted in his eyes, causing him to inhale sharply. He had just broken through from the ninth level of Qi Condensation and into the tenth!

To most disciples, that was the absolute limit of the Seaforming Scripture! The technique was broken into ten levels, each of which brought different transformations to spirit power, and more crushing might from the energy of the Forbidden Sea. This was a level of strength that surpassed most small sects and clans, and was considered a high-level technique. It was also the source of strength for Seventh Peak disciples.

However, there were limits to it. The first level started with a 30-meter spirit sea. The tenth level ended with a 300-meter spirit sea. That was the final limit of the technique's growth!

But occasionally, a disciple would come along who broke past that limit, and continue to grow their spirit sea. People like that weren't very common, and even when they did come along, they usually only went ten or twenty meters past the limit. Even still, anyone like that was considered outstanding among their peers.

However, based on what Xu Qing had come to understand, the reason for those limitations to the Seaforming Scripture was mutagen!

When cultivators practiced cultivation, it was impossible for the mutagen to not accumulate over time. Even using medicinal pills to cleanse the body was simply treating the symptoms but not the root cause. After enough time passed, mutagen eventually accumulated. And the more mutagen you had, the more severe the limitations on the Seaforming Scripture.

But he... had absolutely no mutagen in him.

What influences the size of my spirit sea isn't mutagen, it's my own limitations.

His eyes flickered with violet light as he sensed the spirit power raging in him thanks to the medicine. In fact, he was somewhat shocked that Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior had acquired a pill like this.

To the patriarch, this pill must have been absolutely precious....

Having reached this point in his train of thought, his eyes filled with determination. Whether it was the danger he would surely face once he returned to the sect, or simply his desire to improve himself, he wanted to see what level he could push his spirit sea to.

Taking a deep breath, he activated the Seaforming Scripture, and started bringing the medicinal pill's spirit power into him. He did the same with his fleshly body, and a moment later, the spectral drought demon appeared and began to perform breathing exercises.

There was no sound outside, but in Xu Qing's mind, there were deafening rumbling sounds as wave after wave of spirit power caused his spirit sea to expand.

303. 393. 483....

His spirit sea grew at a terrifying rate. Before long it was at 690 meters, and it was still going. Thanks to the terrifying breakthrough, as Xu Qing sat there cross-legged, he emanated a might vastly beyond anything from before.

A vortex formed, causing the wind and snow outside to distort and ripple in an area the exact same size as Xu Qing's spirit sea: 690 meters.

It kept growing!

720. 750. 780 meters....

It was at this point that the medicinal properties began to lose effectiveness within him.

Meanwhile, the wind and snow around the cave had transformed into a dramatic tornado. Thankfully, he had picked a remote part of the Crimson Wilds to do this, a place where there were few inhabitants. And during a big storm at that. As a result, no one was there to witness it.

According to the Seaforming Scripture description, from ancient times until now on the Seventh Peak, the biggest spirit sea to ever form in Qi Condensation was 810 meters....

Opening his eyes, he quickly performed a double-handed incantation gesture, then threw his hands wide. The previously vanishing medicinal effects were suddenly put under immense weight. At the same time, random bits of spirit power from the surrounding wilderness flowed wildly toward Xu Qing. It wasn't the purest spirit power, but he absorbed it nonetheless, and it was enough for his purposes.

The combination of his actions caused his spirit sea to grow again!

789. 798. 807....

And finally, 810 meters!

The entire cave shook in that final moment. The wind and snow collapsed, and cracks appeared on the surface of the ground. Then the entire hill exploded, revealing a huge crater with Xu Qing sitting in the middle of it.

Terrifying spirit power fluctuations rolled off of him, and the wind and snow didn't dare to get close to him. The spectral drought demon threw its head back and howled, and violent flames erupted out from it.

More cracks appeared on the drought demon's skin, and the lava within them grew more intensely hot. All of the snow in the area transformed into rain, which then melted into hissing water vapor. Two bulges appeared on the drought demon's back, which seemed to be fleshy wings that could spring out at any moment.

Xu Qing opened his eyes, and they erupted with violet light. Looking down at himself, he could sense his spirit sea and the shocking aura that surrounded him.

"The great circle of Qi Condensation!" he murmured. He had the feeling that he wouldn't even need an attack of godliness to defeat the old Patriarch Golden Vajra

Warrior. With his magical techniques, heavenly saber, and dao of poison, he could kill the man in his own right.

At this point, Xu Qing waved his finger toward the sky, and his Forbidden Sea dragonwhale appeared in the form of a snake-neck dragon. As it stretched out, it reached a length of 810 meters. Then Xu Qing murmured something, and it shrank back down to 300 meters.

He did the same with his spirit sea.

As was his custom, he kept the true extent of his strength hidden. After making sure he was sufficiently disguised, he got to his feet, his eyes shining with deep anticipation. And that was because he could sense that his spirit sea had not reached its final limit. It could still grow further.

I guess I'll find out for sure later!

With that, he sped off into the night. His plan was to find another city to get passage back to Seven Blood Eyes. He had been away for over a month, had taken care of some important matters, and had improved his cultivation base. Now was time to go back and see if things with the Merfolk and Third Highness had blown over.

Using flight talismans, Xu Qing took three days to reach his destination, which was a Seven Blood Eyes city some distance away from the Crimson Wilds. Entering the city, he headed straight to the teleportation portal. Upon reaching it, he paid the fee, looked back at the Crimson Wilds, and then let out a sigh of relief.

After all this time, he felt he could breathe a bit easier. Although Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior wasn't actually dead, the end result was something he could accept.

And now, as long as things are calm in the sect, I can get a good night's sleep.

The teleportation portal activated, and a sea of light swept over him. When the light faded, he was gone.

Wind and snow still swept over the lands, turning them white. Everything looked clean. Coldness filled every inch of the wilderness, turning into killing intent, and ruthlessness.

How very brutal.

## Chapter 106: The Mute

In the seaside capital city of Seven Blood Eyes, the winter wind was soft and cool on every street corner. It was different from the frigid cold of the Crimson Wilds. This cold was gentle and humid, and was easy to overlook. But eventually, it would seep into the depths of your being. When it reached that point, it was impossible to get rid of.

It was similar to Offpeak disciples. Hidden underneath every smile was raw brutality, so that each disciple was like a needle concealed in silk.

That was especially true with the Seventh Peak. Seventh Peak disciples all seemed innately skilled at maintaining deceptive exteriors. They didn't care about false dignity; they focused completely on profit and self-interest. Xu Qing had long come to a deep sense of how true that was.

By now, he was fully assimilated into life in the capital city. Furthermore, as his cultivation base improved, he had no choice but to rely on ruthless methods to stay alive, to avoid danger, and to earn a reputation. Of course, his caution and vigilance had not suffered in the slightest.

Xu Qing knew that the low-level Seventh Peak disciples were easier to deal with. They were less subtle. But the higher-level disciples, such as those in the ninth level of Qi Condensation, or the tenth, were profound schemers. They were good at putting on false faces and were also very patient, like vipers hiding in the shadows. If they targeted you, you would probably die before even realizing who your enemy was. And it didn't stop there. People who climbed to the top and became Foundation Establishment cultivators excelled even further in that regard.

For example, Third Highness....

As Xu Qing walked the streets of the capital city, his expression was calm, but inside, he was fully on guard. He still hadn't reverted to his true appearance. He had spent the better part of the day in the city sticking to crowded places where he could listen in on the latest gossip. His main goal was to see if the situation with Third Highness and the Merfolk had calmed down.

He was patient in his efforts. When evening came, he didn't revert to his true form. Upon entering the city earlier, he hadn't registered with his identity medallion, but rather, had used an anonymous jade slip.

In Seven Blood Eyes, anonymous jade slips were an industry of their own. They were a good choice for criminals or other people who wanted to get into the city without revealing who they truly were.

Of course, they were extremely expensive. But the advantages were just too incredible for those who needed them. The sect generally turned a blind eye to the matter. There would be occasional crackdowns, but for the most part, as long as someone didn't break the law or do anything too outrageous, nothing would happen to those who used them.

Xu Qing had killed a lot of criminals on the bounty list, and as a result possessed many such jade slips. Therefore, when he came back into the city, he found an inn and used one of them to book lodging.

Three days passed by in a flash.

During that time, Xu Qing gathered information using all sorts of methods, even spending some spirit coins. After all of that, he didn't get any clues about the Merfolk situation. It seemed that there hadn't been any repercussions at all. Nor had Third Highness followed up on the matter.

Actually, the biggest topic of interest among most disciples was the Seven Blood Eyes' Grand Competition. Xu Qing heard a lot about that subject as he gathered intelligence. In fact, he heard more about that than anything else. The more he heard about it, the more interested he became.

The Grand Competition was hosted every thirty years, and was usually held in an outside location. It was known for being a very brutal and bloody event. For example, the previous tournament, thirty years ago, had been held in Merfolk territory, and had resulted in the Merfolk being crushed. Only afterward did they become allies with the humans.

The host location had already been decided. It was an island in the Westcoral Archipelago inhabited by the Northspirit species. They were a brutal and bloodthirsty lot who made their living via piracy. They were backed by other large nonhuman groups, who provided them resources that they used to

carry out their activities on the Forbidden Sea. They were a big threat to trading vessels, including those from Seven Blood Eyes, many of which had been plundered by them recently.

That had attracted the wrath of the sect, who wanted the piracy stopped. As it happened, it coincided perfectly with the timing of the latest Grand Tournament, and therefore, the tournament was to be held on Northspirit Island.

A lot of people were very interested in the latest developments, and that was especially true among disciples of the Seventh Peak. Because of that, prices on cultivation resources in the Port District had increased by twenty percent.

The sect had also released the rules and regulations regarding attendance. The Seventh Peak had a total of thirteen divisions. Each division could send no more than four hundred people to the tournament, for a final total of 4,000.

It wasn't going to be an easy task for each division to pick four hundred people to send, and the problem wasn't a lack of disciples to draw on. Even the smallest divisions had close to a thousand disciples, and the larger ones had thousands.

Of course, the harder it was to get into the tournament, the more people wanted to join.

After all, there were incredible rewards up for grabs. Anyone who killed a Northspirit cultivator would earn 10,000 merit points, and that was just the base reward. The higher the cultivation base of the enemy, the greater the reward. The rewards would be automatically distributed to the identity medallions. The amount of wealth that could be acquired was enough to provoke deep envy among any disciple who was struggling to acquire cultivation resources.

But what was causing the most widespread excitement was that whoever took first place in the tournament...

Would become a conclave disciple!

To virtually all Seventh Peak disciples, the conclave disciples in their pale violet daoist robes, were like the children of gods. As the Captain had explained early on, a hundred Offpeak disciples could die, and nobody would care. But if a single conclave disciple died, it was a huge deal. Given that, it was no surprise the disciples were going crazy with the idea of taking first place.

That said, Xu Qing didn't care much about becoming a conclave disciple. Back when he first joined Seven Blood Eyes, the conclave disciple position had seemed enticing. But now that he was in the great circle of Qi Condensation, he was much more interested in breaking through to Foundation Establishment.

Furthermore, he had the feeling the tournament situation was more complicated than it seemed. He suspected that hosting the event on Northspirit Island was just a front. If he was right, the real battle was going to be with the Merfolk.

With that thought in mind, Xu Qing spent a few more days gathering information and observing things.

After determining with absolute certainty that there were no ramifications because of the Merfolk or Third Highness, Xu Qing finally resumed using his real form. However, for a few days, he laid low and stayed vigilant. He didn't want to leave Seven Blood Eyes unless it was absolutely necessary.

He wasn't far from Foundation Establishment, and really wanted to start earning that monthly five thousand spirit stone income.

It was with full vigilance that he slowly resumed his normal routine. A few days later, he got a message from the Captain.

The second reward for the Night Dove operation had finally come in, and Xu Qing was being promoted to deputy captain of Celestial Bureau, Unit Six. His salary was going up. Instead of 3,000 merit points per month, he would get 6,000.

The Captain took a bite of an apple, smiled, and said, "You owe me, Xu Qing. If I hadn't pushed hard for this, you would never have been promoted."

Then he eyed Xu Qing up and down, obviously assessing his cultivation base fluctuations. After, he simply smiled and took another bite from the apple.

"Thank you, Captain," Xu Qing replied, smiling. Ever since arriving at Seven Blood Eyes, he had been practicing his different facial expressions. By now, smiling came a lot more naturally.

"Therefore," the Captain said, "don't forget that you owe me 1,000 spirit stones."

Xu Qing's smile faltered. "It's 100. And I already paid you back."

"Huh? You paid me back?" The Captain facepalmed and sighed. "Aiya, my memory is so bad. Ohhhh, I remember now. You did pay me 100. Fine, so you only owe me 900 now."

Xu Qing's face looked very unusual, and out of instinct, he had dropped his hand to the sack at his side. He blinked a few times.

"Say, Xu Qing, are you attending the Grand Competition?"

Xu Qing didn't respond.

"Can you keep a secret?" the Captain continued. "Given how familiar I am with the sect, I can tell you... that the Grand Competition isn't about the Northspirits!" Looking excited, he hopped up onto the desk, squatted, then took out two tangerines. Tossing one to Xu Qing, he peeled the other and continued, "I think the tournament is about a much bigger, much richer nonhuman species. The Northspirit thing is just a smokescreen. And guess what? I checked the tournament applications in some of the other divisions, and all the shameful characters have signed up!

"Every single one of those shady bastards has long since saved up enough spirit stones to purchase Foundation Establishment Pills. But they haven't broken through, and are even keeping their cultivation bases suppressed for that purpose. They're like dogs: they can smell a good opportunity a mile away. Think about it, Xu Qing. Why would they delay Foundation Establishment for months? It's because they think

they're going to have an opportunity to seize some amazing cultivation resources during this competition!

“Remember, a lot of people got rich during the Grand Competition thirty years ago. Very rich! I heard that shrew Second Highness rose to prominence back then. And she got so rich that some of the elders got jealous. She even won eight Foundation Establishment Pills!!

“In addition, there are a lot of people in the sect whose cultivation bases have reached the breakthrough point, but they just don't have enough spirit stones. You can imagine how enticing the Grand Competition is to people like that. Given the opportunities to get rich at this thing, are you going?” The Captain looked at Xu Qing with a smile on his face.

Like usual, Xu Qing didn't say anything. He had already come to the same conclusions as the Captain, and already had his own ideas about the true reason for the tournament.

“Well,” the Captain continued, “you really ought to go. You could get rich! And you could also lock in your chance to reach Foundation Establishment. Oh, by the way, we have a new member of Unit Six. I'll call him over for you to check out.” The captain pulled out his identity medallion and sent a voice message. Before long, soft footfalls could be heard outside the office door.

Then the door opened, revealing a young man standing there. He had messy hair, a dirty face, and though he wore a gray daoist robe, it bulged because of the black, dog skin jerkin he wore underneath it. What was most unusual about him were his eyes. They contained a harshness and brutality that made him seem less like a person and more like a wild dog. There was a murderous aura around him that made it seem like he made a practice of devouring his enemies. When he opened the door and saw the Captain and Xu Qing, he grinned, which made it obvious... he had no tongue.

“Meet the Mute,” the Captain said.

As Xu Qing's gaze fell on him, the Mute's smile faded, and his eyes went wide. He looked at Xu Qing sitting there in the chair, and his expression changed, as if he were suddenly looking at something absolutely terrifying. Then he started trembling physically.

This sudden change made the office seem... like it was filled with death!

Chapter 107: Junior Brother Xu Qing, Are You Around?

In the office, the Mute trembled while the Captain looked on curiously.

Xu Qing's eyes narrowed, but he didn't say anything. However, what he did notice was that the Mute seemed to be looking with terror at his shadow.

As Xu Qing stared at him, the Mute trembled, clenching his fists tightly as beads of sweat popped out all over him. And popping sounds could be heard from his legs, as his muscles and bones grated



against each other. It seemed like, on an instinctual level, he was ready for a deadly battle. As the moments ticked by, it seemed like he was undergoing unimaginable torment.

Eventually, Xu Qing looked away, clasped hands respectfully to the Captain, and then turned to leave.

As he walked toward the door, the Mute's terror seemed to grow, yet he didn't dare to back up. It was similar to how Xu Qing acted in the forbidden regions when he encountered a grue. As Xu Qing passed, the Mute's terror reached a fever pitch. His mind screamed at him, and spittle appeared at the corners of his mouth. He was literally shaking.

Xu Qing frowned. He wasn't unleashing any pressure or revealing any killing intent. After looking deeply at the young man one more time, he walked out of the room.

After Xu Qing was gone, the Mute's terror finally subsided. He stopped trembling, and his facial expression returned to normal, leaving behind only a few traces of lingering fear. Clearly, he didn't dare to look over his shoulder at Xu Qing.

Seeing all this, the Captain's eyes glittered with curiosity. Munching an apple, he walked over to the Mute, circled around him a few times, then handed him an apple.

"You know him?"

The Mute shook his head.

"You don't know him. Then why are you so afraid of him?"

The Mute had been in the Violent Crimes Division for about half a month. Similar to Xu Qing early on, he had killed a lot of criminals from the bounty list. He was like a wild dog, incredibly vicious, a person who looked at everyone with hostility and caution. In fact, this was the first time the Captain had ever seen him look so afraid.

The Mute heard the Captain's question, but he kept his mouth shut.

However, that only got the Captain more interested in finding out the explanation for all this. Seemingly forgetting about the apple he was eating, his eyes glittered as he suddenly unleashed a shocking murderous aura.

As it spread out, it locked down on the Mute.

Upon sensing it, the Mute tensed. He turned a bit pale, and even trembled. However... there was no terror in his eyes, only an unbending strength. The Captain retracted his killing intent and sighed.

"If you tell me why you're so scared of him, I'll go talk to the director and have him promote you early. How about that?"

The Mute didn't say a single word.

"Right, I forgot you can't talk. How about you write it down?"

The Mute looked at him with a determined expression and shook his head. It seemed he would prefer dying to answering the Captain's question. At that point, the Captain gave up. Waving the Mute away, he squatted back onto his chair and started eating his apple again.

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A short distance away from the Violent Crimes Division, Xu Qing looked over his shoulder in the direction of the Celestial Bureau, then glanced down at his shadow. There was no question about it; the mute young man had been afraid of his shadow.

Could he sense it? His eyes turned cold.

Looking away from his shadow, he thought about what the Captain had said about owing him spirit stones. Xu Qing took out his bamboo slip, found the Captain's name, and scratched out the question mark behind it.

He had already scratched out Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior, as well as the young merman. The innkeeper was still there. As for the Captain, he had a few scratched-out and crossed-off question marks after his name. Xu Qing looked at them, then went to Third Highness' name and added a question mark.

Finally, he put the bamboo slip away and headed toward a medicine shop.

He didn't go to the shop he usually frequented. Instead, he went to a much larger shop that he knew sold Foundation Establishment Pills. The prices were outrageous. Xu Qing was quite wealthy now, but even he sighed in disappointment when he saw how expensive they were.

100,000 spirit stones...?

He quietly walked back to his berth.

Although his cultivation base and battle prowess had reached a shocking level, he was as cautious as ever. Before taking out his dharmaboat, he inspected the entire area carefully.

After ensuring there was nothing suspicious, he took out the dharmaboat, stepped aboard, and activated the defenses. Then he entered the little medicinal plant laboratory he had set up and sat down cross-legged. A moment later, violet light spilled from his chest.

Without hesitation, he directed the power of the violet crystal to suppress his shadow. After exerting pressure three times, he stopped his efforts. That was his usual practice. He wasn't sure what exactly his shadow was now, but that wasn't important. To play it safe, he would keep his shadow suppressed.

Having accomplished that, Xu Qing started concocting poison.

The Seventh Peak's Grand Competition....

As he concocted, he thought about the competition.

His cultivation base was in the great circle of Qi Condensation, and though he knew he could continue to cultivate the Seaforming Scripture, he also knew that he should start collecting the items he would need to break through to Foundation Establishment. He didn't know a lot about Foundation Establishment, but he did know that having Foundation Establishment Pills would increase the chances of success when attempting the breakthrough. And having one pill wasn't enough.

The sect had records with information about Foundation Establishment, but they weren't public. You needed to spend a huge amount of merit points to gain access. If you didn't get that information from the sect, you would have to buy it from someone else.

After thinking about it for a while, he decided that he should pick a good time to wake up Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior and ask some questions.

Foundation Establishment Pills are just too expensive. I definitely can't afford to buy them. I guess that means I'll have to go win some in the Grand Competition. Having made his decision, and considering evening was falling, he finished his poison concocting and started working on his cultivation.

Outside, the setting sun spread a saffron gauze out over the port. The structures in the Port District looked like parts of an ink painting, and the clouds in the sky were bright red.

In that evening light, a beautiful young woman appeared, clad in a pale violet daoist robe, her hair in a ponytail. She had an ancient bronze sword strapped to her back as she walked in the direction of Harbor 79. She was slim and pretty, and her ponytail and ancient sword made her seem valiant and heroic. She looked just like a conclave disciple should look, and even radiated a dashing aura. Wherever she went, the surrounding disciples would bow their heads and clasp their hands in greeting. Many of them felt their hearts pounding as she passed.

She was in a good mood. Whenever disciples offered greetings, she would nod back in acknowledgement. Eventually, she reached Harbor 79, where she stopped for a moment, her face flush and her heart racing a bit.

After taking a few deep breaths, she kept walking... right up to Xu Qing's berth.

When she saw the familiar dharmaboat there, memories came flooding back. Raising her voice, she said, "Junior Brother Xu Qing, are you around?"

Harbor 79 wasn't usually a very loud and bustling place. People didn't come around very often, and therefore, someone with a pale violet daoist robe would stand out a lot. As a result, this young girl had already captured a lot of attention. And when the disciples realized she had come to Xu Qing's dharmaboat, their eyes went wide.

The fading light of the setting sun shone down on her, her long hair streaming behind her in the breeze and her daoist robe rippling around her curvaceous form.

It was hard to say if her face was naturally flushed in this moment, or if it was the sunlight shining on her. Either way, her eyes seemed to flash with liveliness and spirit.

"That's conclave disciple Elder Sister Ding Xue!" [1]

"What is she doing over here...? Is she here for Elder Brother Xu Qing? Ai. If only she'd come here looking for me."

As the surrounding disciples looked on jealously, Xu Qing sat in his dharmaboat cross-legged. When he heard her voice, he frowned slightly, then walked out and saw her standing on the shore.

"Elder Sister Ding," he said by way of greeting. Truth be told, he didn't like it when people interrupted his cultivation.

"Junior Brother Xu Qing, I returned to the sect recently, but when I came to visit, you weren't here. I'm sorry to inconvenience you by showing up unexpectedly, but I have a lot of questions about plants and vegetation. Could you help me out a bit?"

Suddenly, a spirit note appeared in her hand as she continued, "Sorry for the trouble, Junior Brother Xu."

Xu Qing was originally planning to refuse. But after seeing the spirit note and thinking about how many things he needed to prepare for Foundation Establishment, he changed his mind. After all, even a hundred spirit stones was a hefty sum.

Nodding, he lowered the dharmaboa's defenses. He didn't feel completely safe outside. But on his dharmaboa, with the blessing of godliness it contained, and all of his poisons present, he felt very safe.

Ding Xue seemed very pleased to see him open the defenses. Stepping aboard gracefully, she walked over to him. She smiled. "Junior Brother Xu, where have you been recently? I heard you got back to the sect a while ago."

"What questions do you have about plants and vegetation, Elder Sister Ding?" Xu Qing didn't dislike Ding Xue. When they were on the open sea together, she had worked hard to learn from him. However, he still felt it was best to keep some distance.

She didn't seem to care that he was on guard, and went right into the questions she had prepared.

Xu Qing listened and answered accordingly. For a hundred spirit stones, he felt she deserved very detailed answers. As the sea breeze blew, and the evening light covered them, the two of them made a very charming image. It was a scene that made all the surrounding disciples very jealous, including nearby cultivators on patrol.

Meanwhile, some distance away in the city was a young man in a pale violet daoist robe, rushing anxiously toward Harbor 79, seemingly unconcerned that his actions were not befitting of a conclave disciple.

Elder Sister! How could you be so foolish? You and I have been getting along so well! Y-y-you... you really didn't need to look for him, did you?

This person was none other than Zhao Zhongheng.

He really was full of anxiety, especially when he thought back to how Elder Sister Ding looked at Xu Qing back when they were out at sea. And when he thought about how Xu Qing eventually stopped charging money to give advice, his heart started pounding.

It was obvious Xu Qing was about to make a move. And that made Zhao Zhongheng extremely nervous.

I can't let this happen. I have to hurry!!

Chapter 108: Chrysanthemum Mollusk

The crimson sunset seemed brighter and more colorful than usual. There was also something indescribably gruish about it, as though someone was using fresh blood to paint a picture on the dome of heaven. Moreover, there seemed to be traces of gold in the red, which caught the attention of people on all seven of the peaks in Seven Blood Eyes. Quite a few Onpeak cultivators stepped

out of their mansion grottoes to look at the horizon, curious expressions on their faces. Many disciples in the Port District also noticed the unusual situation.

Xu Qing in Harbor 79 was no exception. Noticing the bright red glow, he quickly answered all of Elder Sister Ding's questions, took the 100-spirit-stone note, and then looked back toward the horizon.

I feel like I've seen this described somewhere before.

He thought back to the sea annals and tried to recall the specific passage.

The red glow didn't last for long. It soon began to fade, as though it wished to sacrifice its own beauty to delay the setting of the sun. But the sun set over the horizon anyway. When Elder Sister Ding saw that it was getting dark, she had no choice but to say her farewells.

Before leaving, she looked at Xu Qing again, and then her eyes glittered. Earlier, she hadn't paid much attention to Xu Qing's cultivation base, but after inspecting him, her expression became one of disbelief and she said, "Junior Brother Xu, your cultivation base... is it in the great circle?"

Xu Qing had been attempting to hide his cultivation. However, Ding Xue's techniques were obviously special, allowing her to detect someone's spirit power. Seeing his cultivation base fluctuations left her visibly shocked. She had known all along he was strong, but this surpassed anything she could have predicted would happen. It caused her eyes to shine.

"Junior Brother Xu, since you're on the verge of reaching Foundation Establishment, do you mind if I ask how much you know? About Foundation Establishment, that is?"

Xu Qing looked at her, feeling more on guard than ever now that she had seen through to the truth about his cultivation base. Shaking his head slowly to indicate 'not much,' he reached out and bolstered the dharmaboa's defenses.

"Well, I know a lot!" she said with a happy smile. "My aunt has talked to me about it so many times I've lost track." As the words left her mouth, she pulled three jade slips out of her bag of holding and offered them to Xu Qing. [1]

Xu Qing stared blankly at them. He knew how expensive information about Foundation Establishment was in the sect. He was moved by the sight of the three jade slips, but at the same time, also knew that good things didn't come for free. Everything in the world involved trading one thing for another.

"How many spirit stones?" he asked.

She smiled. "Don't be so polite, Junior Brother Xu. If it wasn't for you, I would never have made it to the Westcoral Archipelago so smoothly. After everything we went through together out at sea, these jade slips count for almost nothing.

"Besides, you've taught me a lot about plants and vegetation. Given the level of your cultivation base, you're obviously going to make friends with other conclave disciples. I just want to get first in line. If you think it's not appropriate, then how about you promise to help me in the future, if I ever find myself in a dangerous situation? Okay?" With that, Elder Sister Ding put the jade slips down on the deck of the

dharmaboat. She smiled again. "Truth be told, I'm the one taking advantage of you. Now, Junior Brother Xu, I'll take my leave."

With that, she turned to walk away. Xu Qing opened the dharmaboat's defenses, and she hopped off.

Back on shore, she walked away looking very happy. At the same time, she took out her identity medallion and started sending messages to some of her best friends. Unlike men, women are usually very eager to share news with friends, and that's especially true if it's news related to the opposite sex. Perhaps that wasn't the case for people who struggled bitterly to survive. But for conclave disciples who lived mostly sheltered lives, it was definitely the norm. It was like how winter was different in the Crimson Wilds compared to the Port District. Actually, the moment she returned to the sect, she told the whole story of Xu Qing to her best friends. And it was only her friends egging her on that gave her the courage to go see him on his dharmaboat.

"See what I mean, girls?" she whispered into her identity medallion. "This Xu boy is mine for the taking!"

In the middle of sending her voice messages, and before even getting out of Harbor 79, she suddenly noticed Zhao Zhongheng rushing toward her.

"Elder Sister Ding... that Xu fellow didn't try to pull a fast one, did he? I'm here to help!"

"Oh, for god's sake!" Ding Xue muttered impatiently as she turned and walked in another direction.

Zhao Zhongheng chased after her, and though she ignored him, he started following closely behind. Inside, he was more determined than ever about what to do.

One of these days, Ding Xue, you'll understand that all other people in your life are passing travelers. Migrating birds! Only I, Zhao Zhongheng, am like the sea itself. I will never leave or forsake you. Once you get used to me being around, you'll realize how important I am. No matter how many passing travelers you encounter, none will ever measure up to me!

Zhao Zhongheng glared over his shoulder at Xu Qing's dharmaboat, envy eating at his heart. However, when he thought of how strong Xu Qing's cultivation base was, and also the threat of the Captain, he dared not show his resentment on his face. He could only grit his teeth and endure the torment.

What does he have other than a pretty face? Compared to my endurance and companionship, he's got nothing! Everything will become clear with time!

As Zhao Zhongheng's emotions stirred, the red glow in the sky disappeared completely.

Darkness spread out over the sea, and as it did, something unusual happened. Countless gorgeous points of light appeared on the surface of the water outside the port, illuminating the sky and attracting attention throughout Seven Blood Eyes.

An uproar began to build as numerous figures stepped out onto the dharmaboats, and people gathered on the shores to watch.

The points of light transformed into streams, swirling through the water at high speed, forming together into densely packed groups. Before long, the surface of the water was covered with them. It almost looked like entire rivers of shooting stars. Then, the countless glittering streams of light passed the main gate of the port and started flowing into the various harbors.

It caused widespread shock among the Seven Blood Eyes cultivators, and as for Xu Qing, he stood on his dharmaboat watching, his eyes shining. He could see that, within each stream of light was a palm-sized creature that resembled a snail or conch. They possessed the natural ability to emit light, which was causing the beautiful scene.

“Chrysanthemum mollusks....”

At this point, Xu Qing recalled the description from the sea annals, and his eyes lit up. [2]

Although the sea annals didn't go into a lot of details about chrysanthemum mollusks, there was a description of a bright red sunset with tinges of gold. After such a sunset, the chrysanthemum mollusks would appear. There wasn't much detail beyond that, other than a note that the mollusks weren't dangerous.

However, the medicinal codex Grandmaster Bai had left him contained more detailed information about them. They were a very precious medicinal ingredient from the sea, and they were especially effective as a harmonizing agent used to reduce the explosive effects of other medicines.

Around this time, Elder Sister Ding and Zhao Zhongheng, who were still in Harbor 79, also noticed what was happening. Elder Sister Ding seemed entranced.

Off to the side, Zhao Zhongheng was talking nonstop. And seeing Xu Qing not very far off, he made sure to talk very loudly.

“Do you know what those are, Elder Sister? They're chrysanthemum mollusks, also called star snails. Occasionally, when there's a bright red sunset, they'll float up to the surface. They're completely useless, as all they do is glow. They look pretty, but don't do much else.”

Xu Qing's expression was the same as ever, and he didn't feel the need to waste time correcting Zhao Zhongheng. In fact, he didn't pay him much attention at all. Instead, he stood at the prow of his dharmaboat and looked at the surface of the water.

Beneath the rolling waves, the chrysanthemum mollusks glittered brightly as they intertwined with one another. Some moved along as if in unison, others moved in a completely chaotic fashion. Those moving in unison stuck close together. Those moving in chaos would collide with the others then move off in another direction, as if they were looking for something.

It was the latter that interested Xu Qing.

Thinking back to some of the things Grandmaster Bai had taught him, he kept his eyes on the chaotic chrysanthemum mollusks and waited for the right opportunity.

Not all chrysanthemum mollusks made good medicinal ingredients. Instead, you needed to wait to identify a male mollusk that couldn't find a suitable mate. Because of certain aberrations in such mollusks, they were the type that could be considered medicinal minerals useful for cultivation!

Zhao Zhongheng seemed very pleased with himself when Xu Qing didn't say anything in response to him. Chin jutting out arrogantly, he said, "Sect records indicate these things are useless. The show will be over shortly."

Elder Sister Ding seemed annoyed with Zhao Zhongheng as she coolly said, "It's good enough that they can glow. They don't keep their gorgeous light to themselves; they illuminate others as well. That's a lot better than being pitch black."

Zhao Zhongheng's eyebrows shot up, and he was about to say something further when, out of nowhere, Xu Qing, who had been completely ignoring them up to this point, suddenly shoved his hand in the direction of the water and made a grasping gesture. The water vapor in the area instantly turned into water droplets, which then converged into the shape of a hand. Moving with shocking vigor, the hand dropped into the water toward the countless chrysanthemum mollusks.

A moment later, the hand returned to Xu Qing, then vanished. The chrysanthemum mollusk that it held then dropped into Xu Qing's palm. The creature's spiral shell was covered with natural striations that resembled a chrysanthemum flower. And though its shell had been glowing, that light was starting to fade. Just before it went completely dark, a stream of frigid coldness shot from Xu Qing's hand and spread out over the chrysanthemum mollusk, turning it into a block of ice. Once frozen, it continued to glow faintly.

Grinning, Xu Qing put the block of ice away and then looked back at the water.

Around the same time, there were seven or eight other people in different parts of Harbor 79 who, similar to Xu Qing, knew the value of chrysanthemum mollusks, and were using various means to capture them. It was the same in the other harbors. In fact, it was possible to see figures flying down from the mountain peaks to do the same.

That was especially true of the Second Peak.

It was like a huge slap in the face to Zhao Zhongheng, who had just called the chrysanthemum mollusks useless. He could only look around, dazed and wondering what was going on.

Seeing what was happening, Elder Sister Ding curiously went back toward Xu Qing's dharmaboat.

"Junior Brother Xu, why are there so many people trying to capture these chrysanthemum mollusks?" Being used to Xu Qing's personality, she pulled out a spirit note and offered it to him.

Xu Qing didn't take the spirit note, yet still answered her question. "In the moment before a male chrysanthemum mollusk dies, it transforms into a rare medicinal ingredient that can be very helpful for cultivation."

Then, thinking about the jade slips she had given him with information about Foundation Establishment, he went into a more detailed description.

"Chrysanthemum mollusks, also known as star snails or snake mollusks, are mutated soft-bodied cephalopods, and can be categorized as invertebrates. Their name comes from the chrysanthemum-like striations on their shells. Active year-round, they prefer living in rocks and crevices on the deep sea floor. They become active during breeding season; whenever they appear in the open sea, it causes golden-tinged red



clouds to appear. Though they're distributed throughout the Forbidden Sea around South Phoenix, their breeding season times are indeterminate, and they're difficult to track. Because of that, they're rarely seen close to land. They're effective in converting mutagen into spirit power. Further, by using them to treat the five stranguraries and white urinary discharge, they can complement spirit power in producing the transformations of the tides.

"They are characterized by sweetness and frigidity, are slightly poisonous, and can calm the nerves. By using yin-yang polarity techniques on them, and by extracting their hemocoel fluids, you can concoct spirit ascending pills.

"Most modern medicinal theories treat chrysanthemum mollusks as parasite hosts. By using special methods to extract their spirit, their shells can be used as natural pill furnaces to produce high-quality pills. At the same time, using them as part of harmonizing techniques can suppress violent medicinal effects in other ingredients."

As he explained all this, Xu Qing continued to stay focused on the water and capture more chrysanthemum mollusks.

Elder Sister Ding didn't understand everything he was saying, but she was extremely impressed nonetheless. Her eyes brightening, she asked, "Why do they glow?"

"Because, during the breeding season, when they come to the surface, the males want to attract females, so they emit a bright light. The females emit light for a similar reason. After finding a potential mate, if their lights shine in harmony, then they're a successful match. But if the male's light can't remain in harmony with the female's, then the male is rejected. If a male can't find a suitable partner, his light will fade, and he will die."

Xu Qing reached out again and captured another chrysanthemum mollusk.

Elder Sister Ding looked at Xu Qing with an expression that bordered on worship. However, she didn't ask any more questions, and instead chose to learn by observation. Every time he captured a new mollusk, she paid close attention. And once she understood the basics of what he was doing, she started to help.

Xu Qing didn't need help, and in fact, felt that she was actually making things a bit harder. But given the jade slips, he didn't say anything.

Time went by, and more disciples showed up because of the event. Eventually, the night passed.

By the time the light of dawn appeared, the chrysanthemum mollusks which had successfully found mates made their way off in the distance to return to the sea floor. The only ones that remained behind were the floating bodies of the dead males who hadn't been captured. As the sky grew bright, they disintegrated and became part of the sea again.

Elder Sister Ding seemed very happy after the night of hard work. Finally, she said goodbye.

Zhao Zhongheng followed her, looking very depressed. His eyes still shone with a bit of hope, You just watch, Ding Xue. You'll appreciate me sooner or later!

## Chapter 109: Glorious Life Flames Illuminate Heavenly Palaces

Xu Qing made out well that night.

He acquired over 700 chrysanthemum mollusks. When he examined the collection of mollusks in ice blocks in his bag of holding, he could think of at least six or seven ways to use them in poisons. And each one would be very formidable.

And then I have my ghostlonging horseshoe crabs. If I combined them with the chrysanthemum mollusks, and added in some medicinal plants that provoke transformations in yin and yang... then I might be able to create a poison powder that would instantly kill a Foundation Establishment cultivator.

After more thought, he realized he was probably being too optimistic. Thinking back to his fight with Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior, he remembered how well the man resisted poison. And that was probably typical for Foundation Establishment cultivators. What was more, that combination would probably be a strong attracting agent to wild beasts. That said, the presence of the chrysanthemum mollusk could have a harmonizing effect on the attractant.

I need to make more powerful poisons!

Eyes glittering, he decided that he needed to find another opportunity to go out to sea and do some experimenting with the dao of poison.

With such thoughts on his mind, he looked away from his bag of holding and produced the three jade slips Ding Xue had given him. Sending some spirit power into one of them, he started studying the contents. Before long, an astonished look gleamed in his eyes.

Hundred Suns Foundation Establishment?

Looking thoughtful, he studied the second jade slip. And thus, an entire day passed. It was evening of the following day when he finished the contents of the third jade slip. Putting it down, he rubbed the bridge of his nose. His eyes still contained that look of astonishment.

The glorious life flames illuminate heavenly palaces!

Establish apertures in a hundred suns; hide your cultivation the entire time!

According to the description in the jade slip, the process of a cultivator breaking out of Qi Condensation and into Foundation Establishment was a terrifying event. Apparently, there was some unknown evil force that would interfere with the breakthrough.

Furthermore, it took a long time for the breakthrough, which was why the event was called Hundred Suns Foundation Establishment. It didn't mean that the breakthrough would require a hundred days. Rather, it meant that once the process started, it couldn't go past a hundred days. And the longer it took, the more terrifying it was. The jade slips didn't go into detail about why it was so terrifying. But it did imply that when a cultivator tried to break through to Foundation Establishment, it would attract grues. And even those who escaped death and survived the ordeal would end up in a wretched state.

Because of that, the passage of time was an important factor in Foundation Establishment breakthroughs. The breakthrough process was almost like stealing destiny and trying to make sure the act wasn't discovered.

What was more, in order to avoid the attention of those terrifying grues, cultivators attempting a breakthrough would usually use special magical devices to protect themselves. Such devices weren't necessarily rare, but they were usually under the control of great sects and species. Seven Blood Eyes had them, and they were kept in special locations. When a disciple wanted to attempt a breakthrough, they could apply to use them.

Of course, they were very expensive; you had to pay an hourly rate of 100 spirit stones to use them.

Rogue cultivators, or people who didn't plan to use magical devices of protection, were taking a huge risk in attempting to reach Foundation Establishment. The death rate was high, and thus, few people would ever try to make a breakthrough on their own.

Xu Qing immediately thought of the broken face of the god. It didn't seem like much of a stretch to think that the god had something to do with the difficulty in the breakthrough.

Taking a deep breath, he closed his eyes and mentally reviewed the information from the three jade slips.

Foundation Establishment was about using your spirit sea to open dharma apertures within your body! Dharma apertures were spots hidden throughout the body which contained a mysterious force within them. Upon opening them, one's life level could be completely transformed. Qi Condensation and Foundation Establishment were fundamentally different. In Qi Condensation you built reserves of spirit power into a spirit sea. In Foundation Establishment, cultivation was about opening consecutive dharma apertures.

Once you reached the great circle of Qi Condensation and then tried to step into Foundation Establishment, the first step was to sense how many dharma apertures you had, and where they were. Next, you used your spirit sea to batter open a single dharma aperture. Spirit power would flow into that dharma aperture, and would give birth to dharma force, something that vastly surpassed spirit power.

Qi Condensation cultivators had spirit power. Foundation Establishment cultivators had dharma force. The latter was poles apart from the former!

Similar to how different cultivators could accumulate different amounts of spirit power, the amount of dharma force that came with the opening of dharma apertures was also different. The more spirit power you accumulate during Qi Condensation, the more dharma force you would have later. That advantage applied to every single dharma aperture you opened later. And that effect would build up, leading to wildly varying differences in cultivators.

Sensing the location of those dharma apertures was the most important factor. If you wanted to open a large number, you needed to be able to sense all of them. That was where Foundation Establishment Pills came in handy.

Because the initial breakthrough would determine one's future potential, it was a very important moment for cultivators.

As for mutagen, it would interfere with one's ability to sense the location of dharma apertures.

In a world encroached upon by the aura of a god, ninety-nine percent of all living beings had different levels of mutagen within them. Only a very small minority didn't.

The more mutagen a cultivator had when trying to reach Foundation Establishment, the fewer dharma apertures they would be able to find.

Generally speaking, being able to sense 80 of them was considered acceptable.

Those who sensed 90 were outstanding, and was generally only possible for disciples in the great sects.

Casting your senses out to find dharma aperture was like groping around in the darkness of night. It was possible to encounter terrifying things, and it could attract the attention of grues.

That was the origin of the saying establish apertures in a hundred suns, hide your cultivation the entire time!

In terms of the upper limit of dharma apertures, it was 120. However, that was only a theoretical limit. People who could open that many dharma apertures were as rare as phoenix feathers or qilin horns.

One of the jade slips mentioned that in the Revered Ancient mainland, where humans originated, there were special methods that could be used to purify the body of mutagen, and then attempt to reach the higher limits. But that required a massive amount of spirit power. And even being purged of mutagen, one's natural characteristics would influence one's ability to sense the dharma apertures.

People who accomplished that always had impressive backgrounds, or were fundamentally terrifying in nature. They were usually people who came from superpower sects or extremely ancient clans, the type that had once produced Ancient Emperors and Imperial Sovereigns.

Seven Blood Eyes was powerful, but that was only in the context of South Phoenix. Only the Seven Sect Coalition could possibly be considered a superpower sect on the Revered Ancient mainland.

In fact, Seven Blood Eyes didn't even qualify to produce disciples like that. From ancient times until now, not a single one had appeared there.

Not a single one.... Xu Qing looked away from the jade slip and up into the dark sky. Up in the inky blackness, he was able to spot a few twinkling stars. Looking at them, he thought about the second part of the process of reaching Foundation Establishment.

The first was sensing the dharma apertures.

The second was actually breaking open the first dharma aperture, unleashing dharma force, then sending it throughout one's body to push it into a different level of life!

When you did that, your breakthrough to Foundation Establishment was considered a success.

Afterward, your cultivation would involve using your sect's various techniques to open more dharma apertures. After you opened 30 dharma apertures, you could use the resulting dharma force to form your first life flame.

After opening 60 dharma apertures, you could form a second life flame.

With 90 dharma apertures came a third life flame.

At that point, you could attempt a breakthrough to the Gold Core level. In terms of a fourth life flame, that was something only extremely talented and lucky individuals could ever attempt.

As for the life flames, all you needed was a single one to cast light over you, and you would be like sparks in the night, illuminating the heavenly palaces. A Foundation Establishment cultivator who formed a life flame was on a completely different level of existence compared to one who had not. And that was because one of the characteristic abilities of Foundation Establishment cultivators was the ability to enter the profound radiance state.

Life flames were very draining, but igniting them released astonishing might. Therefore, most cultivators kept them in a state of being extinguished. Only when they were in a full-fledged fight would they choose to ignite them. Once ignited, the cultivator's battle prowess would increase dramatically, allowing them to surpass anything they were capable of before. And that was called the 'profound radiance state.'

Normally speaking, someone who had developed a 300-meter spirit sea, and then opened a 30th dharma aperture, would be able to enter the profound radiance state for 1,800 breaths of time.

Every breath of time involved draining a huge amount of dharma force.

Xu Qing took a deep breath and let all the details about Foundation Establishment sink in.

The information Ding Xue had given him was very comprehensive. However, Xu Qing was cautious by nature, and though he didn't get the sense any of it was false information, he couldn't be absolutely sure until he corroborated it. Besides, though his spirit sea had previously reached the size of 810 meters, he knew that in his recent cultivation it had already expanded to 870 meters.

And that wasn't his final limit. Nor was he finished with the Sea and Mountain Incantation. He wanted to push both his fleshly body and his spirit sea to the absolute limit before aiming for Foundation Establishment.

That said, he could still start working on accumulating the resources he would need for the breakthrough, for instance, the Foundation Establishment Pills.

I might not have mutagen in me, but if I want to play it as safely as possible, I should still get some Foundation Establishment Pills. Ideally, I should get two, although I'm not sure how I can afford that. Looking into his bag of holding, he sighed. He really was a long way from having that much money.

I'll also have to rent a safe place, and that's also ridiculously expensive. The jade slip says Seven Blood Eyes disciples can get loans to cover the cost. Once you reach Foundation Establishment, you'll have three years to pay it back in principal and interest. But I would still have to provide the pills....

He really didn't like the idea of paying interest. After all, his payments would work out to about fifty percent interest.

At 5,000 spirit stones per month for three years, that's 180,000 spirit stones. The rent for a hundred days would be 200,000. No, it's not worth it.

He had to sigh at the realization of how difficult it was to reach Foundation Establishment. Now he realized what the Captain had been talking about. This was why so many disciples kept their

cultivation base low and were setting their sights on the Grand Tournament. And it seemed he was in the same position, and was now really starting to look forward to the tournament.

After some more thought, he took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and started working on his cultivation.

The next morning at dawn, as Xu Qing was still hard at work on his cultivation, he shivered and opened his eyes. Walking out to the deck of his ship, he looked up into the sky, his cultivation base pulsing with spirit power.

Almost at the same moment that he looked up, he saw a bright beam of light flying through the air in his direction. The person in the air didn't seem like he planned to stop, as if he intended to go right through the dharmaboat's defenses and land on the deck.

But after seeing Xu Qing step out, he made an exclamation of surprise, and came to a stop in the air above the boat. It was a young cultivator in a dark violet daoist robe. He was obviously in Foundation Establishment, and looked with open surprise at Xu Qing standing there.

"Well met, Honor Guard Li," Xu Qing said. Of course, his guard was up, and he was scrambling to think of the reason why Honor Guard Li had come.

After all, this was the same person who had come to take Zhao Zhongheng away to see Elder Zhao. And he was also known as one of Elder Zhao's favorites. [1]

"Well isn't this a surprise," Honor Guard Li said with a smile. "You secretly cultivated your way to the great circle of Qi Condensation. You're almost at the breakthrough point." All of a sudden, his seemingly rigid attitude softened. "You don't need to worry. Elder Zhao just sent me here because he wants to ask you some questions about that giant pulling the dragon chariot. That's all." [2]

Honor Guard Li recognized the look of vigilance on Xu Qing's face. Honor Guard Li wasn't a conclave disciple who had reached Foundation Establishment. Rather, he was an ordinary Offpeak disciple who killed his way to the top. Normally speaking, he wouldn't treat a disciple the way he was treating Xu Qing. But now that he realized Xu Qing was on the verge of reaching Foundation Establishment, things were different.

## Chapter 110: The Sun's Imperial Carriage

The giant pulling the dragon chariot?

It took a moment for Xu Qing to realize what Honor Guard Li was talking about. After going out to sea and returning, Xu Qing had indeed gone to the Hall of Sea Annals to submit a report about seeing a giant pulling a chariot at the sea floor. Shortly after, he left for the Crimson Wilds. Now he was back. On the one hand, it made sense that someone would want to talk to him about that chariot, but on the other hand, it didn't make sense. What made sense was that some time had passed. What didn't make sense was that such an important individual would want to talk to him in person.

If this invitation was genuine, then Xu Qing could only guess that the giant and the dragon chariot were very important, and thus the matter had been escalated to Elder Zhao.

Of course, refusing the invitation wasn't an option. With a silent nod, Xu Qing put away his dharmaboat, stepped onto the shore, and looked up at Honor Guard Li. The honor guard looked back at him with an enigmatic smile.

"I suggest you don't keep the elder waiting," he said. "We're going up the peak; given the level of your cultivation base, you surely have some flight talismans on hand. Do I need to carry you up? Or can you follow on your own?"

With a nod, Xu Qing took out a flight talisman, put it on his thigh, and flew up into the air.

Honor Guard Li smiled again, then turned into a beam of light that shot toward the Seventh Peak.

Xu Qing followed.

As they got closer, Xu Qing thought about how this was actually his second time coming to the Seventh Peak. The first time was when he'd joined the sect. He still remembered something that the round-faced cultivator had said.

"This could well be the only time you ever go up the mountain." [1]

Up to this point, that cultivator had been right. After all, not everyone had real hope of reaching Foundation Establishment. Even now, Xu Qing was trying to figure out how to get all the resources he needed.

As the Seventh Peak grew more and more clear in Xu Qing's eyes, he was able to make out the verdant vegetation that covered the mountain, as well as a path that wound from the foot of the mountain to the peak.

Many side paths branched off from it, leading to all sorts of palaces, halls, and other buildings. There were also public squares in different places on the mountain, as well as mansion grottoes.

As they flew past various buildings, Xu Qing spotted the location where he'd received his daoist robe and dharmaboat. Then he noticed a magnificent hall at the very top of the mountain. It was constructed in a very imposing manner, with white spirit tiles. It was richly ornamented, with carvings of fantastic beasts that were so lifelike they looked like they might fly into the air at any moment. In front of the entrance of the hall were two stone statues that radiated awe-inspiring might.

The hall's doors were opened, yet for some reason the interior wasn't visible to Xu Qing. Everything inside looked blurry.

Honor Guard Li landed in front of the hall, and Xu Qing landed next to him a moment later.

Instantly, a sense of intense danger filled Xu Qing from head to toe. There were spell formation fluctuations in the area that he could sense were capable of crushing him to a paste in the blink of an eye.

But what was more terrifying came from the hall itself. It felt like there was some astonishingly terrible beast inside of it, exuding an aura that could shake one's soul with the force of a tempest.

Honor Guard Li looked very respectful as he bowed his head and said, "Elder, Xu Qing has come."

"Come in," a hoarse voice responded from within the hall.

To Xu Qing, that voice sounded like thunder, and he gasped softly for breath as an immense pressure weighed down on his heart and mind. It was a struggle for him to stay on his feet as he bowed his head and clasped his hands in front of him. Then he started walking forward, one step at a time, working hard to stay steady.

With every step he took, beads of sweat popped out on his forehead. The astonishing grandeur inside that hall made his mind spin as he got closer. All of his muscles trembled and twitched.

However, he got no sense of maliciousness from whoever was in the hall. The pressure and might were released naturally, and therefore, given Xu Qing's body refinement level and cultivation base, he was able to proceed into the hall.

Once inside, he realized why the interior of the hall had seemed blurry to him. It was because... everything inside of it was twisted and distorted.

The chairs, the pillars, and even the walls all looked like they were swaying constantly. And all of the distortions led to one spot: an old man sitting on a throne at the far end of the hall. Xu Qing couldn't see his face clearly, but he did see that the old man wore a violet daoist robe and had white hair. The ripples and distortions radiated out from the man, apparently the result of some invisible force within him.

Fighting back against the vertigo he felt, Xu Qing inclined his head, clasped hands and bowed. "Greetings, Elder."

"Tell me the details of the golden crow dragon chariot that you saw." Though the old man spoke calmly, his words became like echoing booms inside Xu Qing's mind.

Xu Qing took a deep breath. There wasn't really anything about the incident that he could hide. Since it was a single chance encounter, he'd chosen to report it. And in response to the elder's command, he recounted all of the details.

Elder Zhao didn't interrupt to ask any questions.

When Xu Qing was finished, silence filled the hall. He just stood there, enduring the pressure.

After a very long moment passed, Elder Zhao spoke again, his voice devoid of any sort of emotion.

"You missed out on a destined opportunity."

Xu Qing stood there quietly.

"But that also saved your life."

Xu Qing hesitated for a moment. Then, struggling with vertigo, he clasped his hands and said, "Elder, might I ask... what was that dragon chariot?"

More silence filled the hall for a moment. Then the elder said, "Since you saw it, I guess there's no harm in explaining. That was the sun's imperial carriage!"

The words caused Xu Qing to reel even more than he already was.

"Inside the bronze dragon chariot is inscribed a secret magic known as Golden Crow Refines Myriad Spirits. From ancient times until now, it stands as one of the very rare imperial-class secret magics.



“Very few people have ever seen the sun’s imperial carriage. And even fewer people encounter the carriage and then have the opportunity to see that secret magic. And even rarer are people who can learn the secret magic.” At this point, a tinge of emotion could be heard in the old man’s voice, as if he were sighing with sorrow or regret.

Secret magic? In Xu Qing’s mind, he thought back to that giant and the dragon chariot.

“That’s why I say you missed out on a destined opportunity. Luck was not with you. But things like that can’t be forced.

“Only one person has ever learned some of that secret magic. It was the exalted president of the Seven Sect Coalition, which oversees Seven Blood Eyes. When he was young, he caught a glimpse of the interior of the dragon chariot, and thus picked up a fragment of the secret magic.

“After that, the dragon chariot disappeared into the depths of the sea. Now, a hundred years later, it seems to be looking for someone else connected to it by destiny. When another person gains enlightenment of the secret magic it carries, it will again disappear into the depths of the sea, and wait for another period of time before awakening.”

Xu Qing felt deeply shaken by all this information. It was obvious this matter was a secret that couldn’t be revealed to other Offpeak disciples.

“I’m telling you all of this because we can’t put such information into the Hall of Sea Annals, and therefore, are not able to give you a reward of spirit stones. As such, the knowledge itself will be your reward. It seems your cultivation base is on the verge of a breakthrough. The Seventh Peak’s Grand Competition is coming up. Do your best.”

As the old man’s words echoed in the hall, a stream of power wrapped around Xu Qing and removed him from the hall. Once outside, everything on the interior again seemed blurry to him.

Hands clasped, he bowed deeply in the direction of the hall. He was now covered in cold sweat. Though he had only been inside the hall for a short time, the immense pressure had been difficult to endure. Elder Zhao reminded Xu Qing of some of the beasts he had seen in the forbidden regions in the past, except vastly stronger and far more terrifying.

Honor Guard Li was waiting outside. Upon seeing Xu Qing emerge, he smiled.

“I’ll escort you down,” he said. [2]

With that, he flew into the air.

Xu Qing took a deep breath and followed him. As he flew, the wind blew, drying his sweat. However, it couldn’t remove the memory of the terrifying feeling of being in Elder Zhao’s presence.

Looking back at Xu Qing, Honor Guard Li said, "Elder Zhao isn't an ordinary Onpeak elder. Of the thirteen elders on the Seventh Peak, he ranks third. By the way, I heard Zhongheng mention you. Zhongheng is... well, as the elder himself has said, he's an idiot, but he has a good heart."

At this point they were beyond the Seventh Peak. Leaving those words with Xu Qing, Honor Guard Li turned and went back to the mountain.

Xu Qing watched him go, then entered the city.

He knew exactly what was meant by the final words. They were a warning that, regardless of what friction existed, he shouldn't try to kill Zhao Zhongheng.

Xu Qing hadn't even been considering that anyway.

Zhao Zhongheng has a good grandpa. Also... the Grand Competition is almost here, isn't it?

As he walked through the city, he thought back to what he'd felt in the presence of Elder Zhao's might. And then he thought about the formation crossbow he'd acquired from Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior, and he decided to head toward the Transportation Division.

He really needed to improve his dharmaboat before the Grand Tournament.

It was currently noontime, and people in the city were all hustling and bustling on various business. As Xu Qing made his way along, he noticed a vendor cart selling some unusually large apples. After looking them over, he bought all of them, put them in his sack, and then continued toward the Port District.

Just when he'd spotted the Transportation Division off in the distance, something caught his attention. Looking into a nearby alley, he saw a pair of very cold eyes.

Peering deeper into the shadows of the alley, he saw a young man in a gray daoist robe. The robe bulged a bit, as underneath it was a dog skin jerkin. The young man's face was dirty and smudged. He was none other than the Mute from the Violent Crimes Division. It seemed like he'd been waiting in this spot for a while. After seeing Xu Qing, he suddenly pulled a corpse out from behind him. After putting it down in front of Xu Qing, he plastered an ingratiating smile onto his face, then backed away into the alley and disappeared.

Xu Qing frowned, then looked down at the corpse. It was a criminal from the bounty list. The head was intact, but there were wounds covering the rest of the body. They looked like bite marks, as if the man had been ripped to shreds by a wild animal.