

Timescape 111

Chapter 111: Jade Slip Contents

Xu Qing wasn't stingy about spending spirit stones on his cultivation. But when it came to daily expenses, he was frugal. In the past, even when he had a sudden windfall, he would still have a breakfast of a couple eggs.

Because of that, he was very familiar with the bounty list. And though the list was updated frequently, he was still able to keep all the details fresh in mind. Spirit stones were spirit stones, and if you got lucky, there might be good loot to be had in a criminal's bag of holding. As such, he immediately recognized this dead criminal. He was a member of some pirate organization, and his head was worth fifteen spirit stones.

Nowadays, that wasn't many spirit stones as far as Xu Qing was concerned. But he could only imagine that, to the Mute, it was a fortune. And the Mute had simply handed the body over....

Xu Qing's eyes narrowed as he looked at the spot where the Mute had disappeared. It was obvious the young man had been waiting here on purpose... to deliver a wanted criminal to Xu Qing as a gift.

Is it a trap? Ignoring the corpse, he continued on his way down the street, eventually disappearing around a street corner.

Meanwhile, the passersby had noticed the corpse on the street. Most were avoiding it, but a few disciples were looking at it with glittering eyes, as if they were considering taking it.

However, before any of the disciples could get near, an emaciated figure lunged out of the alley like a wild dog. Squatting above the corpse, he looked around with glaring eyes at anyone who got close, like he was guarding over food. He had sharp teeth, almost as if they had been filed into points, and looked so wild that even the nearby disciples stopped before getting too close. Then they noticed the bite marks all over the corpse, and decided just to back up and leave.

The Mute just squatted by the corpse, his expression one of confusion and even disappointment. Time passed. When dusk neared, the Mute dragged the corpse into the alley. Eventually, he reached a small hut.

This was where he lived. Not on a dharmaboat. A hut was a lot cheaper than a berth. Upon nearing, he didn't immediately enter. Instead, he went around the back, where he pushed open some bricks to reveal a hole in the wall. Squeezing through the hole, he entered the hut. Once inside, he breathed a sigh of relief. From this position, he could see both the window and the door. After a moment, he looked down at the corpse, and his expression once again became one of dismay. After some more hesitation, he patted down the corpse. Apparently, he hadn't searched it before. This time, he found the criminal's sack, opened it, and to his surprise, found three spirit stones.

Gripping them tightly, he looked around with vigilance, then put them away. To date, he had managed to save up 77 spirit stones.

After counting them, he looked just as dismayed as before. Some time passed, then he pulled out a rough stone that he used to file his teeth into even sharper points.

Right now, he was only in the third level of Qi Condensation, so he had no way of detecting Xu Qing standing outside the small hut, coldly assessing his every action.

Xu Qing was cautious by nature, so despite having a higher cultivation base than the Mute, he was still being very careful. Based on what Xu Qing was seeing, he'd come to the conclusion that the Mute really had been waiting there in the alley to give him a gift. However, there was something else going on. In the brutal and chaotic world they lived in, anything could happen. So instead of just accepting the gift, he had secretly followed the Mute to try to decide what to do next.

Is he trying to curry favor after being so terrified of me the day we met? Narrowing his eyes, he pushed open the door and walked into the hut.

The instant he entered, the Mute bared his teeth and bristled as if he might explode into action. But then he saw Xu Qing, and he trembled, his eyes filling with terror as he remained rooted in place.

"What do you see?" Xu Qing asked, tossing a jade slip to the Mute.

The Mute caught it, trembling.

Because of the moonlight, Xu Qing's shadow stretched into the hut, coming very close to the Mute's position.

The Captain had asked the same thing, but the Mute seemed to prefer death rather than answering. Right now, though, it was without the slightest hesitation that he imprinted some words on the jade slip and cautiously handed it back to Xu Qing.

Xu Qing took it and sent some spirit power inside to check the contents. When he did, his expression flickered. Eyes shining coldly, he looked at the Mute, then took out eight spirit stones and handed them over. Turning, he left.

Seventy-seven spirit stones, plus fifteen, plus eight equaled one hundred. And that was exactly enough to buy a dharmaboat.

Xu Qing walked back to his berth, the jade slip gripped tightly in his hand the entire way. Once on his dharmaboat, he crushed the jade slip, turning it into ashes. Then he entered the cabin, closed his eyes, and started working on his cultivation.

The night passed.

The next morning at dawn, Xu Qing went to find Zhang San. It wasn't hard for Zhang San to install the formation crossbow. It would now be Xu Qing's second most powerful trump card, just after the godliness attack.

"The crossbow is a real beauty," Zhang San said. "Xu Qing, once you get a Foundation Establishment power source, we can upgrade your dharmaboat to a dharmaskiff. Say, are you going to the Grand Tournament? It's only a few days away. I'm thinking of giving it a shot. If you're going, maybe we can team up."

"I'm going," Xu Qing replied with a curt nod.

Zhang San laughed heartily, but didn't say anything further.

Xu Qing clasped hands and left. On the way back to the port, he noticed that the shops were packed with Seventh Peak disciples buying all sorts of things. It was a lot more crowded than usual. There were more dharmaboats in the harbor compared to usual, and Xu Qing saw many unfamiliar faces on the street. He also detected quite a few people who were clearly in the eighth or ninth level of Qi Condensation. He even noticed some people in the great circle....

These were Seven Blood Eyes disciples who normally spent time either in secluded cultivation or out at sea. But now they were back for the Grand Competition.

All of them had chilling, murderous auras that emanated from the depth of their being.

Xu Qing had heard a rumor that the Northspirits from the Westcoral Archipelago were in a state of frenzy. Not only were they pleading for help from other nonhumans, but also, they had dispatched ambassadors to negotiate with Seven Blood Eyes.

This made Xu Qing think back to the Captain's speculations.

Could it be that the real target is the Merfolk?

Later that night, a familiar guest arrived at his berth in the harbor.

"Xu Qing. Xu Qing! You came back but didn't message me? I thought we were bros!" Standing on the shore was Huang Yan, and he didn't look very happy.

Hearing his voice, Xu Qing stepped out onto the deck and smiled. He had met a lot of people in Seven Blood Eyes, but few came across as honest and straightforward as Huang Yan.

"I had a few things to take care of after I got back," Xu Qing said.

Huang Yan seemed to accept his explanation immediately. Laughing, he sat down on the shore, just like last time.

"I learned a big secret today, Xu Qing," he said. As soon as Xu Qing heard 'secret' his guard went up, and he thought about the secret the Captain had told him that ended up costing 100 spirit stones.

Before Xu Qing could say a word, Huang Yan launched into a boastful, rapid-fire explanation.

"Haven't you got the feeling that something weird is going on with the Grand Competition? Sure, they usually announce the location where it's being held. But it just seems too specific. Given how the Seventh Peak operates... I bet that the real location of the Grand Competition actually isn't the Northspirit islands. In fact, after looking into it and asking around, I'm convinced that the real target is the Merfolk!"

Xu Qing looked over at Huang Yan and noted his facial expression. Without any prompting, Xu Qing plastered a look of surprise onto his face. Seeing that, Huang Yan nodded in satisfaction.

"Hahaha! Actually, I have to admit I'm exaggerating a bit. My Elder Sister told me all this. Nowadays, she and I don't keep any secrets from each other." Tossing a jade slip to Xu Qing, he lowered his voice and continued, "After I found out the news, I started

looking through the intelligence reports about the Merfolk Isles. Once I found out you were back, I figured I'd share. What do you think? Am I a total bro, or what?

“Even I was surprised by what I learned. The Merfolk are just ridiculously rich. They have four islands, which are known as Emiche Island, Nethervault Island, Joine Island, and Meegah Island. Every island is bursting with treasure, but thanks to my research, I've figured out the best treasures in each place. Few people know all the details, but I've put them on that jade slip.” [1]

Xu Qing sent some spirit power into the jade slip to examine it. As he did, Huang Yan started explaining the details, almost as if he had memorized them.

“Remember, it took a lot of hard work for me to get this information. Now, listen up. On Meegah Island there's a suit of armor called Meegah's Plate Armor, and it's hidden somewhere in the Meegah Volcanoes. It's the result of a thousand years of Merfolk craftsmanship, and is considered a magical treasure. Of course, it's incredibly valuable, and there's no way we could ever get our hands on it.

“Next is Emiche Island, which is known for the Tears of the Merfolk. The Tears of the Merfolk are similar to spirit pills. However, the most valuable of them all is the Tear of Emiche. Emiche is the name of the very first merman, and that tear was shed by him in the moment before he died. Then it was set into a crown.”

At this point, Huang Yan took out two eggs, one of which he tossed to Xu Qing. Poking a finger in his egg, he took a sip and kept on talking.

“Nethervault Island is like a huge graveyard, and there are countless treasures among the funerary objects. Probably the most interesting of them all is a feather. And you know who that feather comes from? It comes from Flame Phoenix! You know about Flame Phoenix, right? Flame Phoenix rules the forbidden region to the west of the Mountains of Truth, and is like the king of South Phoenix. In fact, the name of the continent comes from Flame Phoenix. You probably know that already.

“Next is Joine Island, which is a very astonishing place. Reportedly, there are tons of pill storehouses there, and within them, numerous Foundation Establishment Pills. That's where my Elder Sister got her Foundation Establishment Pills, although I have the feeling it was only after a deadly fight.

“Anyway, everything I've described so far is like nothing compared to a treasure from Joine Island that's worth about 500,000 spirit stones. It's called the Spirit Breath Lamp.

“The Spirit Breath Lamp is one of the Merfolk's Foundation Establishment holy items, and it's kept in Foundation Establishment Tower in the capital city of Joine Island.

“That’s where Merfolk cultivators go to reach Foundation Establishment, similar to the places here in Seven Blood Eyes where disciples can rent space for 100 spirit stones an hour. The difference is that our space relies on godly blood, while the Merfolk’s relies on that lamp.

“All great sects and species have items that can keep disciples safe during Foundation Establishment breakthroughs. And truth be told, the Merfolk’s lamp isn’t that amazing overall. Thus, the great sects and species don’t really care much about it.

“The reason I say it’s worth 500,000 spirit stones is that when my Elder Sister seized it by force and tried to sell it back to the Merfolk for 2,000,000 spirit stones, they only took it after negotiating her down to 500,000.

“Oh, by the way, I heard that the Spirit Breath Lamp holds clues to some sort of godly temple, but even after all these years, no one has figured out the details. My Elder Sister only sold it back to the Merfolk after she failed to extract the clues. The details are all in that jade slip, you can go over them later.”

After hearing all this, Xu Qing didn’t have much to say. But it really put things into perspective to compare the tens of thousands of spirit stones he was worried about to the millions that Huang Yan had just mentioned. It wasn’t a great feeling. He poked a hole in his egg and took a sip, but was unable to stop thinking about everything.

Huang Yan had finished with his monologue about the Merfolk, and had now started chattering idly about his Elder Sister.

For the most part, Huang Yan talked and Xu Qing listened. It was an odd way to have a conversation, but Huang Yan seemed to be having a great time.

When it started to get dark, Huang Yan finished the last bit of his egg, patted his stomach, and prepared to leave. Letting loose a burp, he lowered his voice and said, “Xu Qing, I probably don’t need to tell you this, but... don’t be foolish and try to take first place. Becoming a conclave disciple isn’t important. The point of the Grand Tournament is to get resources. You’ll understand more of what I mean when you actually get there.

“As a matter of fact, hardly anybody cares about the final rankings. The point is just to get rich. Also, keep all of this a secret. It’s just supposed to be between you and me. We’re bros, so I don’t mind sharing, but don’t spread the information. When we get there and figure out what island we’re on, then we’ll take what we can get and come out wealthy!”

Xu Qing nodded.

Patting his belly contentedly, Huang Yan turned and left. A short distance away, he took out his identity medallion to start sending sweet messages to his Elder Sister.

After he left, Xu Qing sat on the prow of his boat looking out at the Forbidden Sea. The waves came in slowly, causing the boat to bob up and down. In the moonlight, he could see his shadow on the deck in front of him, stretching out past the edge of the boat and into the black water. His eyes glittered coldly as he recalled the sentence written by the Mute in the jade slip.

“It’s sleeping....”

Time passed. Six hours later, disciples from the Seventh Peak felt their identity medallions buzzing as a voice message came in.

“All disciples participating in the Grand Competition have a quarter hour to gather at the central altar. The Seventh Peak’s Grand Competition is about to begin!”

Chapter 112: The Punishment of Extermination

Xu Qing’s eyes snapped open. Getting silently to his feet, he straightened his clothing and walked out of his boat.

It was a gloomy day. The sun had risen, but it seemed like the light of dawn had sensed the aura of slaughter in Seven Blood Eyes, and had donned a gray battle robe that sucked away all the light and warmth. Beneath the dark clouds, numerous figures came forth from different parts of the Seven Blood Eyes Port District and headed toward the central altar. They seemed vicious, like cold blades. And all of them had extraordinary cultivation bases, with the weakest being in the sixth level of Qi Condensation. There were also a good number who were in the eighth and ninth level.

In Seven Blood Eyes, where disciples were like venomous bugs in a jar, all such people would have their own way of surviving. Even kind, warm people who were in an environment like that would change. Those who didn’t would die.

As they emerged, an aura of killing spread out in all directions, becoming a stifling force that weighed down on the city, and ensured that most common citizens in the Port District stayed indoors. Those few who did venture out would stick to the sides of the streets, and would quickly make room for any disciples they saw.

The voice these people had just heard was like the howl of the ultimate wolf, calling all the other vicious, bloodthirsty wolves to a gathering.

Xu Qing hopped off of his dharmaboat, then waved his hand, causing the dharmaboat to shrink down and shoot into its bottle, which he kept in his bag of holding. He began walking, and his first step took him nine meters. It wasn’t flying, but it was something ordinary pedestrians weren’t capable of, and it enabled him to move down the street at incredible speed.

A whistling sound met his ears, and he looked up to see some disciples using flight talismans. However, most just ran along the streets. Upon passing the Violent Crimes Division, he spotted the Captain.

The Captain smiled, tossed him an apple, and quietly said, “Don’t look so sullen. It doesn’t matter which nonhuman species we target. The point is to get rich. Whatever the true goal is, it’ll be handled by the Onpeak bigwigs.” The Captain looked at him and blinked a few times.

Xu Qing nodded. Then he and the Captain sped toward the center of the city.

And thus, the 4,000 disciples participating in the Seventh Peak's Grand Competition closed in on the central altar.

Xu Qing spotted it from a distance. It was a massive circular spell formation, covered with countless magical symbols both large and small. Each symbol glittered with bright, violet light that seemed to connect the formation to the dome of heaven.

It was fully 300 hundred meters tall, and as Xu Qing neared, he saw that the magical symbols were arranged in numerous concentric rings. The rings were all rotating at different rates of speed, and at the same time, a heaven-shaking, earth-shattering aura pulsed out. The closer he got, the stronger and more terrifying that aura became, and thus, he slowed down.

By the time he arrived, there were already over 2,000 people present.

Everyone who approached had to slow down and eventually stand and wait. Though everyone maintained distance from everyone else, their desolate auras combined, causing the clouds above to grow denser. It was just barely possible to see something astonishing in those clouds, like a dragon, surrounded by countless lightning bolts. It was also possible to hear muffled thunder.

Xu Qing waited quietly for the time it takes an incense stick to burn. At that point, everyone was gathered. No one spoke.

However, all of the icy gazes were focused on the enormous spell formation.

The formation, which had been in constant motion this entire time, began to rumble.

Then, a long streamer of violet silk emerged from the formation, stretching up into the air. A thump could be heard after that as a figure appeared at the end of the streamer. Along with it came the fluctuations of a Foundation Establishment cultivation base.

Things weren't over yet. More silk streamers appeared, until there were a hundred of them.

And at the end of each one appeared a Foundation Establishment cultivator.

The auras of 100 Foundation Establishment cultivators caused even more weight to crush down onto the disciples present. That included Xu Qing, who stood there, his mind spinning.

Then an additional thirteen violet streamers emerged from the formation, like thirteen dragons flying into the air. Upon those streamers appeared thirteen god-like individuals. They included men and women, and their faces were blurry, making it impossible to see them clearly.

Rumbling sounds filled the entire area, and Xu Qing found himself gasping for breath. Although he couldn't see their faces, he had felt something like this before when in the presence of Elder Zhao.

"Greetings, Elders!" said the 100 Foundation Establishment cultivators, their voices rolling out like a massive wave.

The thirteen elders ignored the greetings of the Foundation Establishment cultivators, and instead inclined their heads to a spot higher in the air.

"We offer respectful greetings, Peaklord!"

As the words left their mouths, lightning crashed above, causing the dark clouds to part, revealing the enormous creature therein. It was a massive dracolizard, pitch black with vertical golden pupils, at least 3,000 meters in length. There was something holy about it, and each of the black scales that

made up its armored hide radiated terrifying fluctuations that caused all light around it to dim, and whipped the wind and clouds into a fury. If it had wings to flap, it could cause a tsunami, and if it roared, it could reduce all living things around it to ashes.

Shockingly, a host of luxurious palaces existed on its back. They weren't constructed; they were grown, as if they were a part of the creature's body!

Standing atop the tallest of the palaces was a lone figure. That person was too high off the ground for Xu Qing to make out any details, but he could sense a spectacular might and pressure coming from them.

Compared to him, the thirteen elders seemed much less impressive. In his presence, the 3,000-meter dracolizard seemed docile. That level of strength... was beyond anything Xu Qing had encountered before, and defied description. Without any hesitation, he bowed his head.

"That's the peaklord's dreadnaught!" said the Captain, who was standing next to Xu Qing. "Remember, dharmaboats are classified as boats, skiffs, ships, and cruisers. But above those four classifications are the legendary dreadnaughts..."

Mind reeling, Xu Qing was about to ask a question when the highest-ranking elder began to speak, his words echoing like claps of thunder.

"Listen well, disciples of the Seventh Peak. The Merfolk were once our allies. But they have broken faith and abandoned righteousness. They have forgotten favors and violated justice. How? By colluding with the mortal enemies of Seventh Peak, the Seazombies. They have offended Seven Blood Eyes in the deepest manner, and thus, by unanimous decision of the seven peaklords, the location of the Seventh Peak's Grand Competition will be located in the Merfolk Isles. Furthermore, the Merfolk... are sentenced to the punishment of extermination!

"For every Merfolk cultivator you kill, you will earn 10,000 merit points. More points will be awarded for those you kill with higher cultivation bases. As was previously announced, whoever takes first place will be named a conclave disciple! All battle trophies are yours for the taking, and do not need to be reported to the sect! Now... let the Seventh Peak's Grand Competition begin!"

As the words left his mouth, the spell formation rumbled even more loudly, and the concentric rings rotated even more rapidly. Then, dazzling light rose up from the circular structure.

Up in the sky, the dracolizard threw its head back and howled, and then dove into the spell formation.

After that, the light of the spell formation suddenly increased in size by several times over, covering the entire central altar, and rising high into the sky. And the light swept over the 100 Foundation Establishment cultivators, the thirteen elders, and all of the thousands of Seventh Peak disciples, including Xu Qing.

As the sea of light expanded, they all disappeared!

Out on the Endless Sea, it seemed like any ordinary day in the Merfolk Isles.

In terms of strategic position, the Merfolk Isles were in a superior location compared to South Phoenix. They also had an advantage in trade. That was because they were located in between South Phoenix and the Revered Ancient mainland. The isles' western borders neared the Westcoral Archipelago, and its north border was close to one of the forbidden regions in the Endless Sea. In some respects, that geographical position affected the temperament of Merfolk in general.

They were fickle and rebellious. When facing a more powerful force, they wouldn't hesitate to bend the knee. They could even offer sincere smiles when being harmed. But as soon as they got a chance, they would immediately bare their fangs and viciously take a bite.

That was what happened thirty years in the past. They had gone out of their way to provoke Seven Blood Eyes, and had acknowledged allegiance only after being crushed. They bent the knee and chose to become allies. Thirty years later, the Seazombies rose to prominence, so they started working with them in an attempt to lash back at Seven Blood Eyes.

Unfortunately for them, Seven Blood Eyes couldn't tolerate such behavior.

It was a clear day on the four islands that made up the Merfolk Isles. But then, in the blink of an eye, dark clouds roiled out, obscuring the sky and covering the sun. Immense darkness and terrible pressure weighed down everywhere. The sea was whipped into a fury, wild waves running amok from the pressure. Thunder crashed and lightning fell. Other bizarre meteorological or astronomical phenomena attracted the attention of Merfolk far and wide.

Everyone knew that today was when the Seventh Peak's Grand Competition was to begin. And though the Merfolk had long learned that the target was the Northspirit people, they had remained on guard anyway. Even still, when Seven Blood Eyes rose to action, it was hard to be completely prepared!

As the thunder crashed, a violet light appeared, spreading out in all directions. In the shortest of moments, it filled the dome of heaven above all four of the islands, turning the sky into a sea of violet light.

Then came a roar that could shake heaven and earth as, within that sea of violet light, a huge black dracolizard appeared. Below, all Merfolk were shocked to the core. As the dracolizard howled, it spit out a black pearl. It looked small, but was actually dozens of meters in diameter. When it appeared, rumbling sounds filled heaven and earth. Lightning crashed around it, and it emitted crushing pressure as it dropped toward the four islands.

Chapter 113: Joine Island

As the pearl fell, it created a tideflow power that caused the sea to surge. Waves crashed like the massive hand of a giant heading at top speed toward the Merfolk Isles.

However, at the same time, an enormous shield of light shot up around the four islands. It was a grand protective spell formation operated by the Merfolk, and with its incredible power active, the black pearl slowed down. However, its might was not lessened, and the shield trembled.

As for the incoming mass of waves, the shield blocked them, causing a huge crashing sound to fill the air. Along with it came a howl of rage from Eliche Island.

"Seven Blood Eyes! What is the meaning of this?"

As the voice rang out, a huge face appeared in the air by means of projection, growing larger and larger until it surpassed the size of the island below. It looked like an old man with gills on the side of his face, his eyes radiating astonishing might as he glared at the dracolizard. But even as the old man's howl still echoed through the air...

Many of the buildings that were connected to the spell formation nodes exploded! More than forty buildings suffered, causing an instant change to the formation. In addition, booms and shockwaves exploded out on other parts of the islands. Seven Blood Eyes wanted to slaughter Merfolk, and had been making preparations for a while now. They wouldn't have come this day unless they were completely confident in succeeding.

The old merman's face fell as the black pearl again flickered with dark light. As the light spread out, it became a massive hand that blotted out the sky. Covered with violet lightning, it crushed down toward the shield projected by the grand spell formation.

A deafening boom rang out as the spell formation shield sank inward. Then that portion collapsed, causing a huge hand-shaped hole to appear in the shield. Countless violet lightning bolts then shot down onto the jagged, broken parts of the formation. Every lightning bolt that landed destroyed more of the formation. After only a few dozen breaths of time passed, the Merfolk's massive protective formation had been destroyed. The force unleashed by the destruction caused more explosions on the islands.

Meanwhile, after piercing through the shield, the huge hand grew larger and larger, until it smashed into the projected face of the old merman and shoved it into the surface of the Eliche Island. A huge boom rang out as a massive palm print appeared on it.

Within that palm print were countless crushed buildings, as well as pulverized flesh and blood. Only one building stood up to the palm, and though it wasn't destroyed, it did end up covered in cracks.

It looked like some sort of temple made from bones, and appeared both magnificent and profoundly sinister. The reason for its sinister nature was that, astonishingly, the bones that made it up were all human! And from the bits of spirit power that remained in the bones, it was obvious that the majority were from Seven Blood Eyes disciples!

The old merman whose face had just been projected above the island was now fleeing from inside that tower, coughing up blood, his face very unsightly. After looking up into the sky, he started moving as if to fight back.

Up in the air, on one of the palaces on the dracolizard, a figure appeared, looking down at the temple on Eliche Island. When he spoke, his cold voice echoed throughout heaven and earth.

"Merfolk! For years, Seven Blood Eyes has treated your people well. After you became our ally, we provided immense financial aid. Twenty-three years ago, when you faced a mutagen plague, we spared nothing to help you. We provided you countless resources that surpassed a value of 100,000,000 spirit stones.

"Sixteen years ago, when the Witherspirits attacked you, and you faced the threat of extermination, no one came to your aid. But I personally brought a group of disciples here, many of whom sacrificed their lives as we resolved the crisis. Countless members of your people begged us to bury our disciples here as a testament to our

friendship. You should have honored those sacrificed disciples, but instead, you curried favor with the Seazombies by digging up the bodies and using them to build a tower as a blood tribute.

“You have forgotten favors and violated justice. You have returned evil for good. Heaven and earth will not tolerate your existence, and thus, you will be exterminated.”

The speaker stepped out into the air, revealing that he was the peaklord of the Seventh Peak, Master Seventh. He wore a violet gown, and his eyes shone as if with lightning. He seemed threatening without being angry, and had such an imposing and magnificent manner that his voice caused the clouds to stir around him. Glaring at the Merfolk patriarch, he unleashed another palm strike, then flicked his sleeve and pointed down with his right hand.

Rumbling sounds echoed out as the Merfolk patriarch was crushed downward. At the same time, innumerable water droplets appeared around him, forming into a huge sphere.

Inside the sphere, the Merfolk patriarch tried to struggle, but was incapable of doing so. Face distorting, he howled, “Don’t waste your breath, Zheng Kaiyi. The Seazombies will protect us. Their army will make you pay for this incursion. In fact, they’re already on the way!” [1]

“I’m waiting,” Master Seventh said coolly, and then he extended his finger. The spot where he pointed to rippled and distorted, and then astonishingly, a figure appeared there.

It wasn’t a Merfolk, but instead, appeared to be a middle-aged human cultivator. He wore a black suit of armor, and had a powerful aura. However, he reeked of death; his skin was covered with necrotic patches, some of which were infested with maggots. It was like he was actually a corpse.

He had obviously been waiting in hiding to launch an ambush. Now that he had been revealed, he wanted to attack, but was unable to. Countless water droplets surrounded him, transforming into a sphere that kept him sealed inside. Just like the Merfolk patriarch, he was now immobile.

After sealing the two, Master Seventh ignored them and turned his attention to the Merfolk Isles. He pointed, and the dracolizard howled. Shockingly, row upon row of magical devices appeared on its back, releasing a host of magical techniques.

At the same time, numerous figures appeared within the violet sea above. They were the Foundation Establishment cultivators from the Seventh Peak, and alongside them were their astonishing dharmaskiffs. They came in all sizes and shapes, but all of them were incredibly magnificent. As they lined up, dharma force converged, then was unleashed in a massive attack.

Numerous dharmaskiffs unleashed magical techniques, like a hundred deadly spears shooting down. In addition, there were thirteen watercraft that were even more dramatic than the hundred. Each one was around 200 to 250 meters in length. They were dharmaships, and they also released terrifying attacks on the islands.

The four islands trembled as the attacks of the Seven Blood Eyes forces focused on the places where they had either magical devices or Gold Core cultivators.

The locations with magical devices were all destroyed. As for the Gold Core cultivators, they had nowhere to hide. They were all locked down, sucked up into the air, and then suppressed.

A moment later, there wasn't a single Gold Core entity on any of the four islands!

Having accomplished these things, Master Seventh waved his hand, and the violet sea of light descended onto the four Merfolk islands. It created an all-encompassing formation that crushed down on the Merfolk within, provoking howls of grief. Numerous Merfolk cultivators coughed up blood.

Those in Qi Condensation didn't suffer many ill effects. But those Foundation Establishment cultivators found their cultivation bases restricted, forcing them to drop down an entire realm into the great circle of Qi Condensation.

At the same time, violet teleportation light rose up from the Forbidden Sea around the Merfolk Isles as the Seventh Peak disciples arrived. None were fazed by the fact that they were teleporting in above water. They simply took out their dharmaboats and landed on the sea. Xu Qing was among them.

This was when Master Seventh spoke coolly from above.

“The Seventh Peak Grand Competition has officially begun, my wolf pups. This Grand Competition... will be observed by many peoples. Kill well, and make every kill bring glory to Seven Blood Eyes!”

With that, he flicked his sleeve, and a violent wind sprang up, giving a blessing of speed to the 4,000 disciples' dharmaboats, and sending them shooting through the water like blades toward the four islands!

Xu Qing looked up at the terrifying dharmaskiffs overhead, and the islands covered by the violet spell formation, and he felt deeply shaken. From his perspective, he had simply gone through a teleportation. Yet in that short amount of time, victory had already been decided. It was just as the captain had said. The important matters had been handled by the Onpeak bigwigs.

For the Offpeak disciples, the important thing was to get rich. Of course, the premise was that you needed to be capable of taking what you wanted to get.

Xu Qing's eyes glittered. He had already decided the direction he wanted to take, and thus shifted his dharmaboat to head toward Joine Island. That was the location of the Foundation Establishment lamp and the Foundation Establishment Pills. Although he couldn't think of how the former would be of much use, if he could sell it for 500,000 spirit stones....

He wasn't the only disciple to be thinking in that way. Many others who had high cultivation bases headed toward Joine Island. In fact, from above, it looked like more than a thousand were going there. Some whose dharmaboats focused on speed had already arrived.

But Xu Qing wasn't far behind. When he reached the shore, he put away his dharmaboat and immediately raced toward the jungle. Just before he reached the tree line, his eyes glittered as a magical rain of arrows shot out toward him with deadly speed.

There were Merfolk cultivators in the jungle, and seeing Xu Qing arrive, their killing intent boiled over. Howling, they rushed toward him. Xu Qing didn't slow down. His dagger flew, taking off a

head. Three more bodies fell. Then he suddenly lunged backward, and blood sprayed as he ripped open the belly of a Merfolk cultivator who had been about to fall on him from behind. Then more snarling Merfolk cultivators rushed out of the jungle in his direction.

His eyes narrowed. Although he had no deep hatred for Merfolk, he was here for the Foundation Establishment lamp, and didn't want to waste time. So he turned to go around them.

However, more Merfolk cultivators arrived, and they immediately fanned out, their killing intent burning. It only took moments before he was surrounded. Seeing that he had no easy way to leave, he lunged forward to take the fight to them.

Shortly after, he left the scene of the battle behind, his dagger dripping blood as he entered the forest.

At this point, Seventh Peak disciples were all over the Merfolk Isles, and fierce fighting had broken out everywhere!

Chapter 114: Nonhuman Lands

From high in the sky, the Merfolk Isles looked like a crescent moon covered by violet light.

On the top of that moon-like shape was Meegah Island. The middle two were Joine Island and Emiche Island, and on the bottom was Nethervault Island.

Emiche was the main island, with the other three being subsidiary islands.

Previously, Xu Qing didn't know much about the Merfolk. But after closely studying the jade slip Huang Yan gave him, he learned a lot.

That slip didn't just contain information about places and objects of value. It also went into detail about Merfolk history and culture.

The Merfolk believed that when they died, they traveled through the Temple of Meegah to a place called the Field of Clouds, which was a bizarre world that they called a kingdom of gods. Buried there was the original god from their ancient mythologies. That god's name was Meegah. Meegah Island was named after that god, as was the suit of armor that had been sacrificed to the volcanos there. Although Meegah was considered a saint in the Merfolk mythologies, he eventually died. And the Merfolk faith needed a substitute. There were even experts among them who required that the replacement be able to unleash godly magic.

Therefore, they put their faith in another mysterious entity whose name was Joine. Joine Island was named after her. According to the jade slip from Huang Yan, although Joine was called a god, the truth was that... Joine was actually just a godly entity from the depths of the sea. Strength was strength, and Joine was a far cry from truly being a god.

As for Nethervault Island, it was devoted to relics of the past. The Merfolk thought it was important to bury their dead with funerary objects. The more such objects someone was buried with, the more important they were in life. That was why important Merfolk were buried on Nethervault Island with all of the riches they had accumulated in life. Furthermore, there was no stigma for later generations to dig up those riches. In Merfolk culture, it was a form of destiny for other Merfolk to recover such objects and fight over them, and in fact, was considered a type of rebirth.

Finally, there was Emiche Island. Considered the main island, it bore the surname of the original chieftain of the Merfolk. Because of that, Emiche was considered the surname of the royal house, and Emiche Island was viewed as the cradle of all Merfolk civilization.

As Xu Qing thought back to all that information, he recalled how Huang Yan mentioned the Foundation Establishment holy treasure, which was officially named the Spirit Breath Lamp, as well as the clues it contained regarding that mysterious temple.

According to Merfolk legends, after their original god Meegah died, he took the Temple of Meegah with him. The stories claimed that the Spirit Breath Lamp contained clues as to the location of that temple, although no one had identified any such clues despite all the years which had passed.

Xu Qing didn't care about that aspect. He just cared about how valuable the lamp was. As he mentally reviewed all of this information, he sped through the jungle without pausing for a moment.

Eventually, he heard the sound of explosions up ahead, and sensed spirit power fluctuations. Clearly, there were Seven Blood Eyes disciples up ahead fighting with Merfolk cultivators.

Xu Qing's eyes narrowed as he scanned his surroundings, then bent forward and moved ahead at top speed, sticking to the treetops and the shadowy areas. He was very used to traveling in a jungle.

While he moved, he spent some time analyzing what he knew about Third Highness and the sect in general. After considering everything in context, he felt certain that no one was going to come cause problems for him because he killed that young merman back in the capital city. That was quite a relief.

Eventually, he leaped onto one particular treetop, and stopped in place, his pupils constricting.

A sense of profound danger had just risen up within him. He jumped backward, and at that exact moment, a bright red tree branch snapped through the air toward the spot where he'd been standing. It looked almost like a tentacle.

Simultaneously, the tree behind the branch withered rapidly, as did several other trees in the area. Along with the withering came more red branches, whistling through the air directly toward Xu Qing. His facial expression was the same as ever as he nimbly jumped up to avoid them. Then, instead of attacking, he simply went around the area with the trees. Off in the distance, he could see the location where the branches came from.

Within a muddy crater was a huge red tree, slowly rising up, glittering with red light. Despite the glare, Xu Qing could see that inside the trunk of the tree was a mass of severed limbs.

Some were human. Some were nonhuman. All were greenish-black. It was almost as if they had been buried in that spot so their flesh and blood could feed the tree. What was more, all of them had mutation blotches on them.

As the tree slowly grew, Xu Qing noticed that it had a dozen or so huge fruits growing on it. They were semitransparent, and within each one was a Merfolk cultivator, eyes closed.

Large amounts of mutagen was coursing out of those cultivators, into the fruit, and through the tree to the severed limbs.

Clearly this was a special method the Merfolk used to purge mutagen.

There wasn't just one of these trees present. Xu Qing saw at least seven or eight just within his field of view. And when he thought to how much of Joine Island was covered in jungle, he realized that there must be many, many more such trees.

As he took all of this in, the numerous tentacle-like red branches shot toward him with obvious killing intent.

As they neared, the closest tree branch suddenly withered, its red coloration suddenly being covered with black spots. Those black spots almost seemed alive as they spread across the branch like rot.

As the rot continued to cover the incoming branch, it began to drip with black fluid. The black fluid contained poisons that infected anything it touched, even the soil below, which started hissing when the poisoned liquid landed on it. It wasn't just one branch that was affected. All of the incoming branches started rotting. What was more, the black spots of rot continued to spread toward the main trunk of the tree.

There were soon dozens of branches that were completely rotten, with the effect coming right up to the trunk. As the rot spread onto the tree, the huge fruits shivered, as the Merfolk cultivators inside sensed the sudden danger. A few opened their eyes and broke out of the fruits. Not all of them could react so quickly. Only four managed to break free. As for the rest... the rot quickly spread to them.

Seeing this, the four who had broken free glared at Xu Qing with killing intent, then rushed toward him, bursting with the energy of the great circle of Qi Condensation. From their perspective, Xu Qing was in the great circle, the same as them. And since it was difficult for humans to unlock the latent talents of their species, it was common for nonhumans to be superior when fighting someone in the same cultivation level as them.

Although the dao of poison was dangerous, their body structures were different from humans, and therefore, they looked down on human poisons.

Four Merfolk cultivators bore down on Xu Qing from four different directions. However, as they got close, Xu Qing's eyes glittered and he suddenly accelerated dramatically.

It was a level of speed that completely surpassed anything the four Merfolk cultivators could have anticipated. There wasn't even a chance for them to look surprised before Xu Qing appeared in front of the first of them, his dagger flashing. The cultivator's head flew off his shoulders, and then Xu Qing bashed into the second cultivator.

Cracking sounds rang out. This specific Merfolk cultivator had an innate species skill making his fleshly body incredibly powerful. It also gave him a power of dispellation. Despite all that, he couldn't sustain the force of the blow, and screamed as his body collapsed into a mash of blood and bone fragments.

As the gore splattered to the ground, Xu Qing's dagger stabbed through the forehead of the third cultivator. The fourth cultivator of the group looked terrified, and immediately turned and fled.

However, he wasn't fast enough.

Before getting thirty meters away, he started shaking from head to toe as black spots appeared all over him. He shrieked in agony as his body began to rot, then melt. Merfolk did have different body structures that made certain poisons useless against them. But Xu Qing had accounted for that, making his poison powder even more effective against them.

After killing the four of them, Xu Qing calmly went through all of their possessions. As he did, he suddenly looked up as another Seven Blood Eyes disciple appeared.

Xu Qing didn't know him, but based on his spirit power fluctuations, he could tell that he was in the great circle of the Seaforming Scripture. At the same time that Xu Qing looked up, the disciple stopped in place.

Their gazes met, and the other disciple stopped breathing for a moment. To him, it was like he had just run into some powerful sea beast out on the Forbidden Sea. He felt himself going stiff, and it took a great deal of force not to simply freeze in place. Looking incredibly vigilant, he quickly said, "I bear no ill will, Elder Brother. I'm just passing through."

Then he took out a handful of medicinal pills and stuffed them into his mouth. Putting both hands above his head to indicate he wasn't a threat, he slowly backed away.

Xu Qing watched coldly as he left, then organized his battle trophies before moving on.

After making sure Xu Qing was gone, the disciple who had just encountered him exhaled sharply. He was feeling profoundly shaken.

If I'd gotten any closer, or if I'd shown any malicious intentions, I'd be dead already!

His heart still pounded with lingering fear. Xu Qing's aura had weighed down on him with such pressure that, for a moment, he'd wondered if Xu Qing wasn't a Qi Condensation disciple, but rather, a Foundation Establishment honor guard.

When did the Offpeak disciples get such a fierce new member...?

This disciple had been out at sea for half a year, and had no way to know who Xu Qing was. He started moving, but only got a few steps before coughing up a huge mouthful of black blood. Terrified, he consumed some more medicinal pills, whereupon the symptoms faded a bit.

Lucky for him, Xu Qing's poison had been created to target Merfolk. If it had been the original version, the disciple would have died beyond the shadow of a doubt.

He has a strong cultivation base, kills decisively, and has a terrifying dao of poison....

Not wanting to risk crossing paths with Xu Qing again, he picked a different direction to travel.

And thus, time passed. Fighting raged throughout the Merfolk Isles, with casualties on both sides. At the same time, Xu Qing slowly slaughtered his way through the jungle.

Eventually, he spotted a Merfolk city up ahead. It was a very unique place. Instead of being built of brick and tile, the entire city was formed from a massive fish skeleton, large enough to rival one of the districts in the Seven Blood Eyes capital city.

Xu Qing compared what he was seeing with the information in Huang Yan's jade slip about Joine Island. Then he continued toward the city.

Chapter 115: Destination, Foundation Establishment Tower

Joine Island wasn't huge. It only had three cities, plus a number of village-like camps. Xu Qing's destination was Joine City, which was one of those three main urban areas. He had selected his debarkation point with that in mind. As such, it was no surprise that the fish skeleton city ahead was his target destination.

“Joine City...” he murmured, his eyes shining.

The city was in chaos, with many sections crumbling or in ruins. That was thanks to Master Seventh and the dharmaskiffs of the Foundation Establishment disciples and Gold Core cultivators. Smoke rose up everywhere, and there was chaotic fighting left and right.

Xu Qing kept his eyes on the city as he sped toward it. Although it seemed close, the truth was that even at the speed he was moving, it would take him an hour to reach it. The closer he got, the more of the astonishingly large fish skeleton he could see. He could only imagine how amazing that fish must have been when it swam the waters of the Forbidden Sea. Even dead, it still radiated a mighty pressure.

That pressure was no threat to the Merfolk, presumably because of the characteristics of their species. But it was different for non-Merfolk. The immense pressure would cause the heart and mind to reel, and it would suppress the cultivation base to a certain extent. Of course, thanks to the violet sea of light that covered everything, the pressure put out by the fish skeleton was reduced by more than half.

What remained wasn't enough to significantly affect the cultivation bases of the Seven Blood Eyes disciples.

As he neared, Xu Qing heard the sounds of fighting, and he could sense the fluctuations put out by magical techniques. Obviously there were a lot of disciples already in the city. Upon reaching the borders of the city, he sped inside.

The architecture in Joine City was unique. Some structures were constructed in the style of human buildings. Others had a bizarre honeycomb structure, while others looked like they were giant poisonous mushrooms. There were even some buildings that resembled shipwrecks or seashells. The human structures were made from brick and tile, and looked exactly like the architecture in Seven Blood Eyes. Obviously, those were places that Seven Blood Eyes had built.

Xu Qing didn't spend time sightseeing. He simply ran toward the city center, and his ultimate destination, the Foundation Establishment Tower. According to the clues provided by Huang Yan, that was where the Spirit Breath Lamp was, normally guarded by top experts from the Merfolk.

I need to figure out a way to get it. And if I can't, then I'll head to the pill storehouses to look for Foundation Establishment Pills. He knew time was of the essence, and therefore, he accelerated even more as he headed toward the tower.

That said, he didn't use a flight talisman, as it would attract too much attention. Although the Merfolk cultivators had their cultivation bases suppressed, Xu Qing didn't think it would be an advantage to paint himself with a target. As he moved along, he saw a lot of Seven Blood Eyes disciples. Most of them kept to the shadows and side streets as they looked for loot. Though some of them fought and killed enemies, most were just looking for profit.

Almost no one was specifically focused on slaughter. In some cases, disputes arose among disciples over who had the right to take what. Usually, one side would back down. After all, the city was large, so there was no need to get into conflicts over every little thing.

Occasionally, Xu Qing saw monuments dedicated to the alliance between Seven Blood Eyes and the Merfolk. One of them was a large stone stele, upon which were written a host of names. Glancing at

the names, he realized that they were Seven Blood Eyes disciples who had died helping the Merfolk in past crises. And the monument contained their remains.

The stele looked immaculate, as though it had been regularly cleaned and maintained. However, because of the power of the spell formation covering the island, it was possible to see that the stone stele had previously been protected with an illusion spell. Now that the spell wasn't effective, it was obvious that the remains from inside were no longer there. Someone had dug them out....

Xu Qing looked at the stone stele, then looked up at the Onpeak cultivators in the sky. Now he realized why the Seven Blood Eyes leadership was so furious about this situation. Xu Qing had only been in Seven Blood Eyes for a short time, and was mostly concerned about his own interests. That said, he instinctively loathed the concept of forgetting favors and violating justice.

Suddenly, he waved his hand, causing numerous water droplets to appear and form a defensive shield, which blocked a dozen bubbles that had just shot out of the stone stele. When the bubbles hit the water, they collapsed, sending out powerful ripples. At the same time, five Merfolk cultivators sprang out, vicious expressions on their faces as they charged toward Xu Qing.

Eyes cold, Xu Qing waved his hand, causing the water shield to collapse and transform into a collection of water arrows.

As the arrows shot toward the Merfolk, Xu Qing sped onward. A second later, the five Merfolk became pincushions, and as they toppled over dead, the droplets of water took their sacks toward Xu Qing. Putting them into his collection, he sped onward to the Foundation Establishment Tower.

Xu Qing handled all conflicts like that. He wasn't interested in fighting and killing, just reaching his destination. But if there were fools that wanted to bring a fight to him, he would kill them and take their belongings.

About an hour later, Xu Qing saw the city center up ahead, as well as the Foundation Establishment Tower. It wasn't an ordinary tower. Just like the description in the jade slip, it actually resembled the Merfolk's god Joine.

The tower looked like an old woman in a long robe. She had countless tentacles snaking out from her, each one covered with eyes. And if viewed from the correct angle, it was possible to see a ghost face on her back, its long tongue draping down her side and onto the ground, like her shadow.

The top of the tower was Joine's head, and it was built with an open framework that made it possible to see a lamp inside.

Given the distance, Xu Qing couldn't make out all the details, but it seemed like there was a person sitting there cross-legged, possibly in the middle of a breakthrough. There were also a lot of guards around the tower. Whoever that person was making the breakthrough, they certainly had bad luck. If they were in the middle of Hundred Suns Foundation Establishment, then given the circumstances, it seemed highly unlikely they would be able to see it through to the end.

Right when Xu Qing caught sight of the Foundation Establishment Tower, he suddenly sensed explosive killing intent from off to the side. Then he saw a green hand holding a sharp seashell, speeding noiselessly toward his throat.

Eyebrows raised, he unleashed the power of his cultivation base, causing the spectral drought demon to appear behind him and send intense flames out everywhere. The shell collapsed, and the

hand holding it pulled back. Then, ripples and distortions revealed a partially visible figure backing away from him.

Eyes burning with killing intent, Xu Qing looked at the disappearing figure, clenched his hand into a fist, and launched a punch.

Rumbling sounds filled the air as the spectral drought demon joined in the attack. Even a Foundation Establishment cultivator in the profound radiance state would be shaken by this attack. The partially visible figure was clearly shocked, and had no way to evade.

In that moment of deadly crisis, a blue glow sprang up from a talisman treasure to protect the partially invisible cultivator. A boom rang out as the blue light collapsed, and the talisman treasure tumbled off to the side. However, as Xu Qing lunged forward, he found that the cultivator was gone.

He can turn invisible?

After looking around suspiciously, he turned and walked toward the Foundation Establishment Tower, making it seem like he was giving up on finding his opponent. However, after taking only seven steps, he suddenly lunged backward.

As he slammed into the cultivator behind him, a dagger appeared in his right hand, and he started stabbing his enemy over and over again.

The cultivator struck him back, but Xu Qing's fleshly body power was so strong that he could shrug off the blows. And even if he did sustain some injuries, they wouldn't count for much.

Spinning, he reached out and grabbed the partially invisible outline in front of him. He had already stabbed this person dozens of times, and had also thrown out some deadly poisons. At this point, the person's true form was revealed.

He was a middle-aged merman with green eyes, a body covered with scales, and prominent gills. His cultivation base was in the great circle of Qi Condensation. If an ordinary Seven Blood Eyes disciple in the great circle faced this opponent, they would die.

Because of his ability to resist Xu Qing's poison, and also because of his strange abilities, it was obvious that this person's true cultivation base wasn't actually in the Qi Condensation level.

This merman was a Foundation Establishment cultivator! It was only because of the spell formation that his overall realm had fallen into Qi Condensation. Eyes full of disbelief, he bit down on the tip of his tongue to release a counter attack. However, that was when a black streak shot forth, and Xu Qing's iron skewer pierced his forehead and shot out the other side.

As it passed through his head, the skewer released the fluctuations of Foundation Establishment, which inundated the merman, bursting all of his internal organs.

After confirming the man was dead, Xu Qing stepped over to get his iron skewer, then took a bag from the cultivator. It wasn't an ordinary sack, it was a bag of holding!

Xu Qing's heart raced, but he didn't open it. Putting it away for the time being, he started moving toward the Foundation Establishment Tower again.

High in the sky above, Master Seventh looked off into the distance, his hands clasped behind his back. Behind him were thirteen elders and a hundred Foundation Establishment cultivators. None of them spoke.

On either side of Master Seventh were two huge spheres of water. Sealed in one was the cultivator who looked like a corpse, and in the other was the Merfolk patriarch.

Looking down at the islands below, the Merfolk cultivator chuckled and said, "Do you actually believe you're going to win this, Zheng Kaiyi?"

At almost the exact same time that the words left his mouth, rumbling sounds erupted from the four islands below. Then, black light shot out from the sea, spreading toward the islands. It was a huge spell formation, like a black cover that spread out of all the islands.

The black light rippled and distorted as if it were trying to fight the power of the Seven Blood Eyes formation. Of course, if the Seven Blood Eyes formation collapsed, all of the Merfolk Foundation Establishment cultivators would recover their true strength. And if that happened, the Grand Competition would turn into a slaughter!

"The Seazombies are on their way, Zheng Kaiyi! And when your sect's spell formation falls, those disciples of yours will be sacrificed to my people!"

Suddenly, black light shone on the horizon as a huge vortex appeared in the air. It erupted with an aura of death, and an intense, frigid coldness that turned the seawater into ice.

As that aura spread, a 3,000-meter half-decomposed crocodile crawled out of the vortex.

It had cold, yellow eyes, and its body seemed to pulse with the power of countless resentful souls. As the vicious, rotting crocodile crawled out, it was possible to see a host of figures on its head. All of them had shocking auras, and behind them... was an entire army of cultivators!

These people were none other than... the Seazombies!

"They're finally here," Master Seventh said, a faint smile on his face.

Chapter 116: Hungry Sir Bloodsmelter

Inside and outside Revered Ancient, on whatever island one reached, there were countless forbidden regions, within which existed all sorts of unusual species.

The Seazombies were just one of many. They originated on the fringes of a forbidden region in the Sea of Endlessness. However, they didn't exist in the countless epochs before the arrival of the broken god's face. When that god arrived, bringing an aura that assailed the world and transformed countless living things, some species vanished into history. Other species struggled hard enough to survive, while at the same time, many new species arose.

Among those new species were the Seazombies. They were a strange species that were able to directly absorb mutagen. Furthermore, they were incapable of reproducing, and had to use a special method to multiply. That method was... zombification. By placing a special mark on the dead of any other species, they could resurrect them! The resurrected corpses wouldn't have intact memories from their past, to the point where they were like different people. They would become more violent, cruel, and ruthless, and they would pulse with mutagen. They hated the world around them, and at the same time, felt a constant call to join the Seazombies.

That call would lead them to the Seazombies' ancestral land, where they would become a full-fledged seazombie. After that, they could cultivate seazombie techniques, gradually recover their mind, and become stronger.

Because of the unique qualities of this species, as they advanced in cultivation, they became more ruthless, and cared less about the world. Furthermore, the stronger their cultivation was before death, the greater battle prowess they would have as a seazombie. However, there were many limitations that came with the zombification process. Also, there was a high failure rate. Therefore, other species didn't view them as a huge threat. But for various reasons, they had survived and multiplied.

Over the epochs that had passed, the Seazombies had come to discover that the corpses of human cultivators had a higher success rate when hit with seazombie marks. Therefore... Seazombies came to focus on humans. Because the Seazombies' ancestral land was close to Seven Blood Eyes and the continent of South Phoenix, the two hated each other. As that hatred grew, war would break out every so often.

Now, because of what was happening in the Merfolk Isles, the Seazombie army had come. Thus, the vortex appeared, and a 3,000-meter crocodile climbed out of it.

Atop the crocodile's head were numerous figures who pulsed with black energy and strong mutagen. Because of the black energy, they weren't fully visible. It was only possible to see red eyes within a dark fog. However, they seemed to have cultivation base fluctuations no weaker than the Merfolk patriarch.

Seeing that the Seazombies had arrived, the Merfolk patriarch howled with laughter. "I can't wait to see what your sect is capable of, Zheng Kaiyi!"

"Then pay attention." Master Seventh's facial expression was the same as ever as he produced an ordinary jade slip, which he threw in the direction of the Seazombies.

Before the Seazombies could do anything to the jade slip, it reached their ranks and exploded.

At that instant, it seemed like countless thunderclaps erupted out. The dome of heaven sank down, and great rifts spread out across the sky. The rifts looked like serpentine dragons whipping about wildly. From a distance, it was like a massive brush was being used to draw a painting in the sky.

Before long, those rifts connected together. Shockingly... they formed the image of a person! It was an old man! He seemed connected to the canopy of heaven itself, and his face was completely expressionless as he looked down at the living beings below. Beneath his gaze, the sea surged with massive waves, and for 5,000 kilometers in all directions, all of the beasts hidden beneath the surface trembled.

His terrifying gaze caused the Merfolk patriarch to cough up mouthfuls of blood, then drop to his knees trembling.

When he looked at the force of Seazombies, the half-emerged crocodile howled in grief, and the rot covering it began to spread rapidly. However, it didn't dare to move. The powerful experts on the crocodile's head also began to shake, and the mutagen surrounding them fluctuated wildly. In their shock, all of them coughed up blood. Many Seazombies in the army behind them immediately exploded.

“We offer respectful greetings, Patriarch!” Master Seventh clasped hands and bowed respectfully to the composite image of the old man.

The elders and Foundation Establishment cultivators all did the same, and they joined their voices with Master Seventh to offer greetings. The moment they clasped hands and bowed, the countless rifts that made up the image of the Seven Blood Eyes patriarch sprang into motion as if they were alive, becoming countless red streams of light that crashed down into the seazombie army, throwing it into chaos.

The seazombie cultivators reacted with open astonishment as the red streams of light stabbed into one after another of them. Each seazombie that was stabbed in this manner seemed like they were being devoured from the inside out, and within moments, withered into husks.

In the blink of an eye... the 3,000-meter crocodile collapsed into nothing, and the experts atop its head were withered into destruction.

The rest of the army had no way to flee, and within moments had been reduced to ashes....

Next, the red streams of light shot toward the vortex that had brought the seazombie army. Apparently, that vortex was the true goal!! The vortex began to close, but it wasn't fast enough. It was with insatiable madness that the red light streamed inside....

A moment later, the vortex disappeared. However, it was possible to imagine what was happening on the other side!

With the vortex gone, the sky turned bright and clear again, and the sea went back to normal. It was as if nothing had happened. However, the withered husks of the dead Seazombies fell down to the surface of the sea like raindrops. It was a very ghastly sight.

“What do you think?” Master Seventh said, turning to the prostrated and trembling Merfolk patriarch.

The Merfolk patriarch's eyes shone with despair as his mind and heart crumbled. “H-he broke... broke through...? The patriarch of Seven Blood Eyes, Sir Bloodsmelter... he broke through? You didn't come here for us Merfolk, did you, Zheng Kaiyi? This was all a trap for the Seazombies!!”

The Seazombie cultivator in the other sphere of water looked like he was about to melt, and his previously cold expression had turned into one of absolute terror.

“So, you aren't an idiot after all,” Master Seventh said. “Our sect couldn't care less about you puny Merfolk. Our patriarch broke through and was hungry, therefore, we decided to lure out the Seazombies. I do have to thank you for bringing them here. Just in the moment our patriarch broke through and was feeling hungry, they opened their front door for him. And now, the Grand Competition can continue.”

Sweeping up the Merfolk patriarch and the Seazombie, he stepped onto his dreadnaught and sat down, looking very carefree. He didn't bother observing the competition below. When raising venomous bugs in a jar, genuine moments of danger were a good thing.

“The wolf pups are just there to make some money. There's nothing worth paying attention to.”

Down on Joine Island, in the fish skeleton city, Xu Qing was heading toward the Foundation Establishment Tower. Suddenly, he looked up, but didn't see anything noteworthy overhead; the sky was clear.

However, the Merfolk spell formation was eating away at the Seven Blood Eyes violet sea, causing the pressure from the latter to slowly ease up. Sensing that, Xu Qing's pupils constricted.

I need to hurry!

Taking out a flight talisman, he slapped it onto himself, then suddenly shot forth as a beam of light toward the Foundation Establishment Tower. It only took thirty breaths of time for him to get close to the tower, which was over thirty meters tall. That was when he saw at least seventy Merfolk cultivators standing as dharma protectors around the tower.

Obviously, whoever was in that tower was no ordinary person. There were seven or eight Seven Blood Eyes disciples around as well, all of whom seemed interested in the Spirit Breath Lamp. That was no surprise considering it was worth 500,000 spirit stones.

The fighting was fierce, and corpses were already piling up, some from Seven Blood Eyes disciples, and some from Merfolk. There was so much blood and gore that anyone unused to such things would vomit.

Both sides noticed Xu Qing rushing onto the scene. However, before any of them could get a good look at who he was, he transformed into a series of afterimages that headed straight toward the tower itself.

Instantly, the Merfolk cultivators who weren't involved in any fighting roared and jumped to intercept him.

One of them was currently in the great circle of Qi Condensation, though in reality he should have been in Foundation Establishment. Glaring at Xu Qing, he performed an incantation gesture and waved his right hand. The projected image of a merman appeared behind him, pitch black in color and holding a trident. As it charged viciously toward Xu Qing, the other Merfolk unleashed magical techniques in his direction.

At the same time, the other Seven Blood Eyes disciples looked over with grim eyes. One after another, they produced various trump cards which they used to charge toward the Foundation Establishment Tower, hoping to use Xu Qing's actions as a distraction to acquire the lamp.

Xu Qing's eyes filled with coldness. He had already made the decision that he would kill anyone who tried to take what was his. Therefore, he waved his hand, causing black light to spread out as his dharmaboat appeared.

It was dozens of meters from prow to stern, and was awe-inspiring in a way that made it obvious this dharmaboat was different from the boats of other disciples.

The moment it appeared, Xu Qing's hand flashed in an incantation gesture, and the boat's four legs reached down to the ground. Cracking sounds rang out as the spikes on them shot out with explosive force, creating a tempest in all directions.

The Merfolk cultivators who were hit by the storm screamed in agony as they were punched full of holes. The Foundation Establishment cultivator looked shocked, but not even he was able to escape. His flesh was ripped into gore as he screamed, until a knife flashed with shocking speed through his throat, killing him.

The Seven Blood Eyes disciples who had thought to compete with Xu Qing met the same fate. From the moment they chose to take what he wanted, he decided not to hold back. After the storm subsided, the area around the tower was filled with corpses and silence.

Meanwhile, Xu Qing had never stopped moving, and was now racing to the top of the tower. Looking through the open framework to the interior, he saw a young merman sitting cross-legged in front of a lamp. The lamp looked like an opened black umbrella, turned upside down, with the handle serving as the wick. It was a strange sight, as the light's auburn glow covered over the young merman, offering him complete protection.

Chapter 117: The Shadow Awakens!

After taking everything in, Xu Qing launched a fist strike. However, the walls of the tower were very tough, plus there was a defensive shield in place that dispersed the force of his attack.

That said, the Seven Blood Eyes spell formation lowered the cultivation level of everything on the island that was in the Foundation Establishment level or higher, and that included this tower and its shield. Therefore, though the force of his blow was dispersed, it wasn't negated entirely, and ripples flowed across the shield.

Seeing that, Xu Qing's eyes glittered. Not wanting to waste any time, he quickly performed a right-handed incantation gesture, causing his dharmaboat to shift directions and bash into the shield.

His dharmaboat was already almost at the level of Foundation Establishment. In fact, other than lacking the proper power source, it was a Foundation Establishment dharmaskiff. When his boat slammed into the tower, cracks spread through the shield, then it shattered. It also punched a hole in the wall.

Xu Qing put his dharmaboat away, then leapt through the hole and into the tower. Once inside, the light of the Spirit Breath Lamp cast his shadow onto the wall.

Not pausing for a moment, he leapt toward the lamp to grab it. However, that was when the young merman opened his eyes. Expression that of anxiety and fury, he was about to say something, but then coughed up a massive mouthful of blood. His cultivation base power was thrown into chaos, yet he still managed to grit his teeth and point his finger at Xu Qing. As a result, the projected image of a merman appeared and viciously attacked Xu Qing.

With no time to spare, Xu Qing clenched his right hand into a fist and thrust it at the incoming merman.

The projected image collapsed, and more blood sprayed out of the mouth of the young merman as he was thrown back against the opposite wall. Without the defenses to bolster them, the walls were ordinary, and thus, the young merman crashed through and fell to the ground. It was impossible to tell whether he lived or died, and Xu Qing wasn't going to waste time checking. He strode up to the lamp and reached out to grab it.

However, at that exact moment, his shadow suddenly twitched, and, completely without Xu Qing doing a thing to control it, started moving!

Before Xu Qing could grab the lamp, his shadow's pitch-black hand reached past him and, seemingly in revulsion of the burning flame, it... extinguished the lamp!

A tremor passed through Xu Qing and he looked over his shoulder at the wall. However, now that the lamp was out, his shadow wasn't visible.

That said, Xu Qing could sense that his shadow had stretched back to its original shape, and was now ordinary in nature.

Expression unsightly, he picked up the Spirit Breath Lamp. Now that it had been extinguished, the lamp didn't seem very special, other than its unique craftsmanship.

However, Xu Qing didn't care about the lamp by now. Looking coldly at the spot where his shadow lay in the darkness, his expression turned grim. The shadow wasn't doing anything unusual now, but he couldn't help but think back to what the Mute had written in the jade slip.

"It's asleep."

All of a sudden, Xu Qing realized that what had occurred just now was like when a sleeping person was annoyed by a flickering lamp, and reached out to turn it off.

Eyes glittering, he sent some spirit power into the Spirit Breath Lamp, and after a few attempts, managed to ignite it. Light spread out everywhere, and his shadow was once again cast onto the wall. The moment that happened, his shadow twisted and distorted. Then, it yet again sent out that pitch black hand to the Spirit Breath Lamp to extinguish it.

Snorting coldly, Xu Qing sent his will out to seize control of his shadow. As a result, the shadow's hand stopped short of the lamp, then started to struggle against him to close the distance.

"Are you sleeping?" Xu Qing asked coldly. "Or just pretending to sleep?"

At the same time, he activated the violet crystal and used its power to viciously suppress the struggling shadow. Xu Qing was very familiar with how to do this. In the past, he'd done it on a daily basis, usually performing the same process five or six times. But this time, he performed the process thirteen times.

Only then did the shadow tremble and then fade a bit.

Not pausing for even a moment, he went through the suppressing process another twelve times. At that point, the twitching shadow finally stopped fighting back. Xu Qing still wasn't happy though. Looking coldly at his shadow, he held the Spirit Breath Lamp up to it, then slowly relinquished control.

Despite being free, the shadow didn't try to extinguish the lamp. It trembled, but did nothing more.

Expression cold, Xu Qing then put the lamp directly onto the shadow. When he did, the light of the lamp changed the color of the shadow, turning it from amber to a light green color. It looked extremely bizarre. Despite its intense trembling, the shadow didn't do anything to resist.

Xu Qing narrowed his eyes and was about to say something when his expression flickered and he looked at the Spirit Breath Lamp.

Back when he had picked up the lamp, and even when he lit it, he didn't sense anything unusual about it. But when he put it into his shadow, he felt faint fluctuations.

At the same time, he sensed fluctuations coming from somewhere underground, almost as if something down there was calling out to the lamp. He quickly pulled the lamp away from the shadow, and the fluctuations ceased. Also, the lamp reverted to its ordinary state.

Then he put the lamp back, and the fluctuations rose up again, this time more clearly. They were essentially pointing in a specific direction.

"This..." he muttered, narrowing his eyes. Suddenly thinking back to the jade slip from Huang Yan, he recalled the legend about the clues leading to the Temple of Meegah, which were supposedly hidden in this very lamp. He couldn't help but wonder if what was happening with his shadow had anything to do with that.

Glancing coldly at his shadow again, he said, "You can go back to sleep."

He wasn't sure if it would understand or not, but after making sure to remember the general direction where the fluctuations came from, he extinguished the lamp, put it away, and jumped out of the Foundation Establishment Tower.

After landing on the ground, he looked around for the young merman he had blasted out of the top of the tower. Having been interrupted in the middle of a Foundation Establishment breakthrough, he should either be dead or severely injured. It didn't take long for Xu Qing to spot him a short distance away.

He looked like he was in the middle of crawling. Apparently he'd survived the fall, and had tried to crawl away, only to die from his injuries moments later.

Xu Qing didn't want to risk him actually being alive, though, so he unleashed a few magical techniques on him, and also sprinkled some poison powder on him. After confirming that he was well and truly dead, he squatted down and searched him for his bag of holding.

He was obviously an important person, so he definitely had some Foundation Establishment Pills. I just hope he didn't consume them all. After finding the bag of holding, he quickly opened it. The contents made him smile. Standing, he was about to leave, when all of a sudden... he heard someone clapping.

Swiveling, he saw someone walking toward him, half of a little apple in his mouth as he slowly clapped.

It was the Captain!

"Wowww. Did you kill everybody here, Deputy Captain Xu? Looks like you made out quite nicely. I guess you must have taken the Spirit Breath Lamp already?"

Remaining on guard, Xu Qing kept his face expressionless and replied, "No, I got here just a moment too late."

Xu Qing suddenly wondered how the Captain was managing to talk with half an apple between his teeth.

The Captain didn't look surprised at Xu Qing's expression. He bit through the little apple, causing one section to fall, which he reached out to grab before it hit the ground. Flashing a cocky grin, he then looked around at the mangled corpses.

"Your dharmaboat did this? That punk Zhang San really put a lot of hard work into your boat. By the way, you owe me 2,000 spirit stones. When do you plan to pay up?"

"I don't owe you anything," Xu Qing replied, eyeing the apple in the Captain's hand. Face completely expressionless, he pulled a large apple out of his own sack and started eating it.

The Captain stared at him blankly. He looked at Xu Qing's large apple, then his own small apple, which suddenly didn't look as appetizing. He cleared his throat.

"Cut the act," the Captain said, sounding slightly irritated. "Your acting skills are subpar at best. You should take lessons from me. Why go to the trouble of pretending you didn't take the Spirit Breath Lamp? I couldn't care less about that thing. In fact, I wouldn't take it if you offered it to me. It's not like it's a life lamp."

Xu Qing didn't respond to what he'd just said.

"Aren't you going to ask me what a life lamp is?" the Captain asked, apparently surprised at Xu Qing's lack of reaction.

Xu Qing looked at him. "What's a life lamp?"

The Captain sighed. "Since we're on the same unit, and you owe me 2,000 spirit stones, I guess I'll tell you. The Spirit Breath Lamp is actually a knockoff version of a life lamp. And even as a knockoff it's not very well made.

"You've heard how Foundation Establishment cultivators can enter the profound radiance state, right? It's when they ignite the life flames within their body. And the top limit for life flames is three.

"One life flame equals early Foundation Establishment. Two is mid Foundation Establishment. And three is late Foundation Establishment. Theoretically speaking, once you reach that point, you can attempt core formation. Only people with amazing destiny can get four life flames. Now, all these things related to life flames and the profound radiance state were the same even before the broken face of the god arrived.

"However, there are some very rare people that don't follow the normal trend. The direct bloodline descendants of the Ancient Emperors and Imperial Sovereigns follow a different path. Because of their bloodline and imperial-class techniques, they don't just have life flames in Foundation Establishment, they have life lamps!

“One life lamp makes one life flame as powerful as two life flames!! Life flames have no foundation, but life lamps do. The former are like dandelion seeds, the latter are like boulders.

“With only one life lamp, you could fight someone with much higher cultivation than you. With two, no Foundation Establishment cultivator could match you, and you’d already be ready for core formation. And with three, you’d be the top individual among all species, at least under Gold Core. Of course, the exception would be other people with life lamps.

“In the modern era, the Ancient Emperors and Imperial Sovereigns have been gone for many epochs, so hardly anyone cultivates life lamps. The only people who do are consummate chosen experts on the Revered Ancient mainland, thanks to their spectacular background and unmatched destiny.

“Furthermore, their life lamps are legacies passed down by deceased descendants of the Ancient Emperors and Imperial Sovereigns. When you have a life lamp, then after you die it can be removed and given to someone else to be used in their cultivation.

“Of course, you might as well not even bother hoping to get one. For all intents and purposes, life lamps are things of legend. Even just one lamp like that would cause the great sects from Revered Ancient to mobilize.

“Anyway, it’s almost not even worth talking about. If you want to reach Foundation Establishment, you need to think of a way to get some Foundation Establishment Pills. Lucky for you, I happen to know where one of the Merfolk’s big pill storehouses is. There should be quite a few Foundation Establishment Pills there. Why don’t we go together? There’s nothing else worthwhile on this island.

“The good stuff is all underground. Come on, we need to hurry. That brat Zhang San is probably already down there.”

The information about life lamps left Xu Qing feeling shaken. What was more, the fluctuations from the Spirit Breath Lamp had his heart pounding.

Life lamps?

Chapter 118: There’s Always a Dolt Somewhere

Xu Qing looked down at the ground.

Wherever the Spirit Breath Lamp had been pointing specifically, he knew it was underground. Huang Yan’s jade slip had gone into some detail about what was beneath the Merfolk islands.

For complicated cultural reasons, the Merfolk civilization was divided into an upper world and a lower world. The upper world was on the surface of their islands, and the buildings there were usually made of either skeletons or shells. Merfolk liked skeletons. It didn’t matter if they were the skeletons of fishes, animals, or other intelligent non-Merfolk species. The more sinister and evil-

looking the skeletons were, the more they liked them. It was a cultural legacy that was passed down within the very souls of the individual Merfolk.

The second world was under the surface. It wasn't a cave network. Rather, that world existed beneath the islands themselves, within the sea. All of the Merfolk Isles were like that. The reality was that the islands were like leaves floating on the water, with buildings both above and below, and some mysterious force that prevented them from sinking. The jade slip used only one word to describe the undersea world of the Merfolk: magnificent.

Reportedly, the buildings there were constructed of colorful coral, atop which grew sea anemones with countless tentacles. Other than that, Xu Qing wasn't sure what the place looked like.

"Let's go," the Captain called. "There's nothing good up here. The fish eye is where the entrance is."

With that, he blurred into motion.

Xu Qing decided to follow, though he kept some distance. His relationship with the Captain was unusual, and though he trusted him in some ways, he distrusted him in others. The Captain had always seemed like a mysterious person. And though Xu Qing couldn't quite figure the man out, he had the feeling that he was dangerous. That was especially true since, despite the fact that Xu Qing was now capable of fighting Foundation Establishment enemies, whenever he sensed the Captain's aura, it seemed stronger than his own.

It was very puzzling. Every time he achieved a breakthrough, he would intentionally feel out the Captain, and every time, the man seemed stronger than himself. Because of that, he had to keep his guard up.

The two of them sped along through the fish skeleton city toward the entrance of the world below.

Along the way, they saw quite a few Seven Blood Eyes disciples. Some moved along in the shadows, some looted buildings, and some searched Merfolk corpses hoping to find spirit stones. Others waited to ambush others, be they fellow disciples or Merfolk.

The disciples were like wild dogs, adept at both staying concealed and at hunting prey. Those who saw Xu Qing and the Captain made sure to stay out of their way, though it was hard to say if it was because of the former or the latter.

"See those fellows?" the Captain said, pointing to a group of disciples demolishing a building. "Most of them could have broken through a long time ago, but they kept their cultivation bases suppressed so they could come here and get rich. Each one has a keener sense of smell than a dog. My god... they're even demolishing houses to take as loot. It's outrageous."

The building they were tearing down was unique, as it was constructed from shells that pulsed with spirit power.

As Xu Qing looked over, the Captain suddenly rushed toward the group of disciples, his cultivation base flaring with power. In response, the group backed away and then disappeared into the shadows. Eyes glittering, the Captain then continued the demolition work. Xu Qing joined him, taking the shells away one by one. [1]

“These things are amazing,” the Captain said. “I wonder whose house this was. Even just one of these things will sell for a few dozen spirit stones.”

Xu Qing didn't respond, but he started collecting the shells even faster. After enough time passed for half an incense stick to burn, they left. The house was gone.

Along the way, they found other similar situations, and the Captain stopped at all of them.

“This is ridiculous. These old-time disciples are obviously extremely strong! I can't believe they're stooping to stealing loot from kids like us!”

Xu Qing looked at the Captain's face, confirming that he appeared to be about twenty-seven or twenty-eight years old.

“What are you looking at?” the Captain asked, looking askance at Xu Qing.

“You're no kid,” Xu Qing replied calmly. “I am.”

This was only the fourth thing Xu Qing had said since encountering the Captain.

The Captain sighed. “Deputy Captain Xu, I think it might be better if you just stayed silent. No talking, okay? By the way, I'd appreciate it if you hurried up and paid me the 5,000 spirit stones you owe me.”

With that, the Captain started moving along at top speed.

Xu Qing pretended to have not heard. He followed silently, and the two of them got closer and closer to the head of the fish skeleton. Soon enough, they caught sight of a very large cavern there. That was when they heard a huge boom off in the distance.

Looking over, they saw a Merfolk cultivator fleeing from what appeared to be a bright blue streak of light. As the blue light got closer, it became obvious it was a young man wearing a flight talisman. It was none other than the chosen member of the Coast Guard Division, Ding Xiaohai. [2]

Ding Xiaohai looked very somber. During his time on the island, he constantly searched for Merfolk cultivators to kill, and everywhere he went, he left behind corpses. Unless it was absolutely convenient, he didn't take any loot, as he felt it would influence his slaughter.

As he chased his quarry, he didn't seem to even notice the Captain and Xu Qing, much less stop to talk to them. He just kept pursuing the Merfolk cultivator he was chasing. He was behaving very differently from the other disciples. Instead of focusing on getting rich like everyone else, he wanted to rack up points!

“What a great disciple!” the Captain said loudly. “See that, Xu Qing? That's what a real member of Seven Blood Eyes is like! It's only because of disciples like him that Seven Blood Eyes has a future!” Clenching his hands into fists, he threw them over his head and shouted, “You're awesome, Elder Brother Ding! Go, go, go! Elder Brother Ding, Celestial Bureau Unit Six from the Violent Crimes Division backs you one hundred percent! You're definitely going to take first place and become a conclave disciple!”

Ding Xiaohai glanced coldly at the Captain as he fought his opponent.

To Xu Qing it was obvious that Ding Xiaohai was dead set on taking first place.

Meanwhile, the Captain sighed, then leaned over to Xu Qing, lowered his voice, and said, "Don't be like him. He's obviously cultivated his way into being an idiot. Why should he give a crap about being a conclave disciple? He's going to break through soon and get a violet robe. When that happens, the conclave disciples will have to offer him respectful greetings. So why is he working so hard? Does he like the sect that much?"

"Everybody's different," Xu Qing said. "It's hard to say why he's doing this."

It was the fifth time Xu Qing had spoken to the Captain. The Captain smiled and pointed at Xu Qing as if he was going to say something in response. But then his expression flickered. Xu Qing reacted similarly, and the both of them jumped backward at the same time.

As they did, the ground in front of them exploded, and four pitch black hands shot out. Though they snatched nothing but air, they also unleashed explosive fluctuations.

From the crumbling ground emerged two figures. Both wore black armor, had long unkempt hair, and had necrotic patches on their exposed skin. Their eyes were bright red, and they exuded a brutal and bloodthirsty air. Without hesitating for a moment, they rushed toward Xu Qing and the Captain.

"Seazombies!" the Captain said. "Be careful, Xu Qing. Both of them are in the great circle of Qi Condensation. They're not in Foundation Establishment, but Seazombies are strange. Their cultivation relies on mutagen, which means they're full of the stuff. Plus they have incredibly strong fleshy bodies, and also use zombie poison. We can't let ourselves get hit too badly."

A long spear appeared in the Captain's hands, which he swept toward the incoming Seazombies.

Meanwhile, the ground erupted near Ding Xiaohai as a third seazombie emerged and attacked him.

All three disciples were instantly embroiled in fighting.

Xu Qing quickly experienced what the Captain had just mentioned. Even when he landed a fist strike at full force, his seazombie opponent simply staggered back a few steps, seemingly uninjured. And when he slashed the seazombie's throat with his dagger, it didn't even seem to notice. After joining Seven Blood Eyes, Xu Qing had seen quite a few different nonhuman species. But this was his first time encountering a species this bizarre. And then his opponent tossed out some zombie poison, and Xu Qing's curiosity piqued even further.

Which will be more ferocious? Zombie poison? Or my poison?

Chapter 119: Above Forbidden Grounds

High overhead, the violet sea of light and the black spell formation clashed. Neither of those forces were intelligent, but their inherent qualities were such that they couldn't tolerate each other's existence. It was similar to the six cultivators fighting atop the fish skull.

Ding Xiaohai gracefully wielded a long sword in the manner of the Seaforming Scripture; it produced numerous sword flowers, each of which contained stupefying killing intent. He also used talisman treasures which, when combined with his magical techniques, created something like a sea around him. As a result, the Seazombie that was fighting him was temporarily unable to equal him.

The Seazombies, with their mutagen and zombie poison, plus their inherent brutality, were generally beyond Ding Xiaohai's ability to defeat. Thankfully, he had trump cards to rely on.

The Captain's spear swished about like a dragon, moving with incredible speed as he engaged the Seazombie. His moves contained numerous variations, sometimes being domineering, other times incisive. Occasionally, he would stab his spear like an embroidery needle, other times he would slash it down like an ax. He was clearly very skilled with the weapon. In fact, he didn't use his offhand to perform incantation gestures, but rather, held an apple from which he munched. He even took moments to cheer on Ding Xiaohai.

"That was amazing Elder Brother Ding! You're awesome, Elder Brother Ding! Go, go, go!"

Then he turned to cheer on Xu Qing. "Xu...."

His eyes went wide, his jaw dropped in amazement, and he nearly dropped his apple.

Moments ago....

Xu Qing moved in a blur, using his dagger to slash wounds into his Seazombie opponent, into which he threw handfuls of his poison powder. It looked almost like he was carrying out experiments to improve his dao of poison. He made so many slashes with his dagger that the Seazombie's flesh looked like mincemeat.

In fact, much of the flesh had fallen off, revealing the bones beneath. Scattered about on the ground were... masses of blue skin and blood. Xu Qing's face remained completely expressionless despite the ghastly sight of the blue gore around him. He seemed completely focused on poison research.

Truth be told, Xu Qing was not doing experimentation. The Seazombie cultivator he was fighting didn't seem to feel pain, and none of Xu Qing's poisons were working on him. Despite having his throat slashed, he fought viciously, as if he didn't care about his own life. Even after suffering the most grievous of wounds, he would keep attacking. He kept glaring at Xu Qing with red eyes, as if he wished to rip him to pieces. He pulsed with the fluctuations of magical techniques. However, they didn't contain spirit power, but rather mutagen. And they caused a black cloud of ghost faces to rage toward Xu Qing.

Xu Qing didn't fear mutagen. However, he didn't want to publicize that fact. Frowning, he backed away and used a talisman treasure to defend himself. Seeing that this opponent was as ferocious as ever even after being wounded, Xu Qing's killing intent grew stronger. Dancing away from the Seazombie's attacks, he plunged his dagger toward his opponent's head.

Red eyes burning, the Seazombie cultivator reached out with his hand to meet the dagger.

A crunching sound rang out as he used his own bones to block the dagger, and then he opened his mouth wide and lunged forward to bite Xu Qing.

Xu Qing's eyes flashed as, instead of dodging, he head-butted the enemy. A boom rang out as the Seazombie's mouth exploded, his teeth shattering, and half of his head being bashed in. Then Xu Qing attacked again, slashing out viciously with his dagger. One of the Seazombie's arms fell off. The dagger flashed again, and the Seazombie's belly was slashed open.

Putrefying viscera and organs spilled out. It was such a grievous wound that, finally, a look of terror appeared on the Seazombie's face. It was that specific sight that caused the Captain to drop his apple.

Seazombies weren't emotionless. It was just that they had much more simple emotions than other beings. And it didn't matter how simple their emotions were, when they were about to die, they would feel the urge to flee. This Seazombie cultivator had reached the point where he didn't want to fight any more, and instead wanted to escape. But Xu Qing wasn't going to let that happen. He jumped forward again, his dagger flying. At the same time, he sent out a host of water droplets to create a barrier blocking the path of the Seazombie.

As rumbling sounds echoed out, the Seazombie's terror grew more obvious. This disciple from Seven Blood Eyes was incomparably bizarre. For one thing, he seemed unaffected by mutagen, which seemed like a complete impossibility to the Seazombie.

Even chosen disciples who had no mutagen in them wouldn't be unafraid of mutagen. Such a person who went into a forbidden region would still have to deal with the encroachment of mutagen. But when the Seazombie's mutagen entered this opponent, it just seemed to disappear.

What was more, the zombie poison that Seazombies were so proud of didn't seem to have any effect at all. It was like this disciple wasn't even afraid of it. And the disciple's poison was causing the Seazombie's mind to spin, and filled his body with pain. Seazombies didn't fear pain, and had powerful fleshly bodies, but this disciple... seemed even more powerful than him.

And then there were his powers of regeneration. Seazombies had unique characteristics that gave them powers of regeneration that non-zombie cultivators couldn't match. But this opponent... seemed to surpass him in that regard as well. Was he some sort of grue?

The Seazombie's red eyes glittered as he tried to back up, but then Xu Qing's dagger flashed, and more blue blood splashed out onto the ground.

Eventually, it was thanks to the mutagen and the corroding effects of the zombie poison that Xu Qing's dagger collapsed. Thankfully, he had spares.

It was at this time that the Seazombie thought he would be able to make his escape. Until a black flash of light stabbed through his chest. It was the black iron skewer. The moment it pierced into his chest, the weapon erupted with the power of its spirit automaton. Foundation Establishment fluctuations poured out into the Seazombie's ravaged body. With a boom, the Seazombie exploded. The iron skewer flew around and returned to Xu Qing's hand. Meanwhile, the blood on the ground vanished, as if it had been sucked into the soil.

Off to the side, the Captain looked at the destroyed zombie, and then at Xu Qing's iron skewer. Then he noticed Xu Qing looking at him, and suddenly felt a bit foolish. Waving his spear, he caused it to ripple and distort as it turned into a stream of water that rushed toward his Seazombie opponent.

The water emanated frigid coldness as it rapidly wrapped around the Seazombie. Then, in the blink of an eye, it froze the Seazombie into a solid piece of ice.

Astonishingly, that coldness was something that could harm the soul.

Xu Qing's pupils constricted. Seeing that lump of ice filled him with a sense of danger; it was obviously not ordinary ice, but something filled with a mysterious power he couldn't identify. Clearing his throat, the Captain said, "See that, Xu Qing? When you kill an enemy, you need finesse. Artistry! Not just brute force."

Sticking his chin out, he took a bite of his apple, walked over, and tapped on the ice with his knuckle. Cracks spread out through it, and a moment later it collapsed, along with the Seazombie cultivator inside of it.

Seeing this, Xu Qing's guard went up even further. That Seazombie cultivator had been in the great circle of Qi Condensation, and considering the Seazombies were superior to human cultivators in the same level, he should have been very difficult to kill. That just went to show... that the Captain was incredibly strong.

"By the way," the Captain continued, "I suggest you improve your magical techniques a bit. Why not try putting poison into your water droplets? That would make them a lot more difficult to deal with."

Xu Qing thought about it and realized what the Captain said made sense. He nodded.

The Captain seemed very pleased that his little speech had improved Xu Qing's impression of him. "Let's keep moving. If we get down there too late, Zhang San won't be around anymore."

With that, he sped toward the fish eye, not paying any further attention to Ding Xiaohai.

Xu Qing followed, similarly ignoring Ding Xiaohai. His thoughts were currently focused on the suggestion just put forth by the Captain. As they neared the eye, Xu Qing suddenly asked, "Captain, are the Seazombies... corpses?"

It wasn't common for Xu Qing to ask questions, so upon hearing this, the Captain's eyes lit up. Clearing his throat, he looked over at Xu Qing and said, "A question like that is worth—"

Xu Qing tossed him a large apple that was at least double the size of the small one he'd been eating.

The Captain paused to take a big bite, then continued, "Alright, since you're a member of my unit, I guess I might as well tell you. The Seazombies are basically reanimated corpses. They're fantastic, really. Their ancestral land is located on the border of the ninth forbidden ground. You know about the forbidden grounds, right?" [1]

"Forbidden grounds?" Xu Qing asked.

"When the eyes of the god above open, the location those eyes look upon becomes a forbidden region. But... what happens if those eyes look upon a place that's already a forbidden region?" The Captain looked at Xu Qing with a very profound expression on his face.

Xu Qing had never thought about this question before. After pondering it for a moment, his eyes glittered.

Taking another bite of apple, the Captain continued, "If the god looks at a forbidden region, then the mutagen there gets even stronger. And after the mutagen passes a certain point... the place becomes

a forbidden ground. There are some huge differences between forbidden regions and forbidden grounds.

“Forbidden regions usually have mutant beasts and grues in them. But forbidden grounds... can give birth to new intelligent species!

“According to the records in Seven Blood Eyes, there are at least fifteen forbidden grounds in the world, and maybe more. In some cases, we know what new species have come to exist in the forbidden grounds, but in other cases, we don't. There's one forbidden ground in the Sea of Endlessness, and it's called Forbidden by the Zombie. The Seazombies came to be on the edge of that forbidden ground. Here on the continent of South Phoenix, we also have a forbidden ground. And that's Forbidden by the Phoenix, which I'm sure you've heard of. Within Forbidden by the Phoenix is an emperor named Flame Phoenix, an apex godly entity. Although Flame Phoenix isn't exactly on the same level as a real god, it's close enough to count as one. Flame Phoenix came to be within the forbidden ground known as Forbidden by the Phoenix.”

Hearing this, Xu Qing's heart started to race. Thanks to the Captain's word, some of the veil of mystery that obscured the world around him was being lifted.

“In that case,” Xu Qing asked, “what happens if the god's eyes open and look at a forbidden ground?”

The Captain didn't respond, as they had just reached the fish eye, and were looking down at a deep pit. He jumped in, and then started to talk, his words echoing up behind him. “From ancient times until now, that's only happened four times. I'm not sure exactly what happens when he looks at a forbidden ground. However, I do know that afterwards, they aren't called forbidden grounds anymore. They're called... god domains.”

Chapter 120: Leaving Poison Behind

As Xu Qing watched the Captain drop into the chasm, his words also fell, except not into the chasm, but rather, into Xu Qing's heart.

This new information was very astonishing. In the past, Xu Qing's understanding of forbidden regions came mostly from the jungle outside the scavenger basecamp where he'd lived. All he knew was that the deeper in you went, the more sinister danger there was.

He had heard about Forbidden by the Phoenix on the other side of the continent, but had been under the impression the only difference was that it was larger, and the mutant beasts and grues inside were stronger.

Now he realized that understanding was mistaken, and what he knew before was just the tip of the iceberg. The world was huge, and humans were just a small part of it. And the larger part was made up of nonhumans and numerous forbidden regions. Above the forbidden regions were the forbidden grounds, which were on a completely different level, and could produce new species of intelligent life. And then... the Captain mentioned god domains, but offered no explanation about them.

Regardless, there were many types of powerful entities and grues in the world. It made Xu Qing think of the saber-wielding statue in the temple complex, the giant pulling the dragon chariot, and the true form of Sealizard Island.

Looking over his shoulder at the Seazombie Ding Xiaohai was fighting, his eyes shone. Forbidden by the Zombie had produced Seazombies, and they were very powerful.

If Xu Qing had faced a Merfolk or human cultivator in the great circle of Qi Condensation, he would have killed them much faster.

I wonder what Foundation Establishment Seazombies are like.

He had the feeling that there were definitely Foundation Establishment Seazombies below. The spell formation above restricted cultivation bases, but even still, he would have to be very cautious about engaging any Seazombies. That was especially true considering the spell formation was obviously becoming increasingly unstable.

The more he learned about the mysteries of the world he lived in, the more he felt like he was simply too weak. He needed to get to Foundation Establishment as quickly as possible. He needed to get stronger.

Taking a deep breath, he jumped into the pit. It was essentially a huge tunnel carved through the dark soil, and it was so deep he couldn't see the bottom.

He could just barely make out the Captain as a tiny dot below him. As Xu Qing fell, his eyes narrowed. He didn't attempt to control his speed, but just allowed himself to fall, while simultaneously examining his surroundings.

The further down he got, the more humid it became. He saw lichenoid plants growing, and even spotted a few places where flowers bloomed in the darkness. As the humidity grew, he eventually heard a sound from below. It didn't seem like the Captain had been attacked, but rather, had splashed into water.

Xu Qing tapped into his cultivation base, then took out his iron skewer and stabbed it into the wall. A grating sound rang out as the skewer dug a huge furrow into the soil. Eventually, the friction caused him to slow down.

He could see water at the bottom of the tunnel. It was pitch black, and he couldn't see anything underneath the surface. However, it was obvious that the path forward went through the water. After some thought, he scattered some poison powder, then waited a few moments. Nothing happened.

Next, he took everything that wasn't waterproof and put it in his bag of holding. Finally he dropped into the water, surrounded by the defenses of the Seaforming Scripture, which kept the water at bay.

After proceeding through the water for a time, he realized the Captain was nowhere to be seen. It made it seem like this dark tunnel contained some unknown danger that had swallowed the Captain whole.

Without any hesitation, Xu Qing took out a bag of varied poison powders that he had prepared for a situation like this, and sent it outside of his defenses. Once it was in the water, the poisons started spreading everywhere. Keeping a good grip on the bag, he continued sinking down. As he went, the black water was infected by the poison, and turned even darker.

Perhaps because of how deadly Xu Qing's poisons were, as he sank down, no dangers appeared. As he got closer and closer to the end of the tunnel, he ran lower and lower on poison. Finally, he shoved the bag down toward the exit of the tunnel. There, it opened, and the poison spread out like a cloud of ink.

If there was no enemy waiting there to ambush him, nothing would come of it. But if there was an enemy there, then they would regret setting an ambush. Suddenly, the water below seethed, and screams could be heard as six Merfolk cultivators emerged who had been lying in wait. Their skin was already turning greenish-black and rotting away. Moments later, they were dead.

Coldness filled Xu Qing's eyes as he moved as quickly as possible toward the exit. As soon as he was out of the tunnel, he heard rumbling booms everywhere, along with muffled shouting through the water. He was in the middle of a chaotic battle.

At the same time, the magnificent underwater world spread out in front of his eyes. Everything here was upside down, and in fact, you had to turn yourself around so your feet would touch the surface of the island. Multicolored coral was everywhere. Every building was made of it, and they were all very luxurious. And there were sea anemones all over. The anemones had red centers surrounded by masses of swaying white tentacles, all of them covered with sharp spines. The tentacles of the anemones were of varying lengths. Some were only a handful of meters long, others were dozens of meters long. But the way they swayed made the underwater world seem exceedingly beautiful.

Countless semitransparent eggs floated everywhere, and within each one was a child of seven or eight years old. Shockingly, these were the Merfolk children.

This was the true world of the Merfolk, and their real foundation. As Xu Qing took in the sights, he looked around at the surrounding fighting.

There were Seven Blood Eyes disciples plundering both the coral itself and anything else of value. And there were large numbers of Merfolk cultivators, viciously attacking the disciples. Because blood couldn't fall to the ground, it floated everywhere in the water. Before Xu Qing could fully take stock of the situation, his eyes glittered coldly, and he lunged forward to bash into a Merfolk cultivator that had been about to ambush him.

A thump rang out as the Merfolk cultivator's body collapsed, sending out clouds of blood everywhere. At the same time, one of the nearby anemones opened its mouth and sent its tentacles sweeping toward Xu Qing. Before the tentacles reached him, they started withering up. The effect spread to the anemone's main body, and it turned pitch black. Ignoring the anemones, Xu Qing started moving while simultaneously looking around.

There weren't just Merfolk fighting the Seven Blood Eyes disciples, there were also Seazombie cultivators. At a glance, Xu Qing could tell there were around a hundred in total. They were all extremely fierce, and there were seven or eight who seemed very close to the Foundation Establishment level. To fight Seazombies like that, disciples had to work together in groups of five or more.

Seeing all that, Xu Qing waved his hand, and his iron skewer shot out, stabbing into the forehead of an enemy that had been rushing toward him before returning to him.

He kept moving.

He rarely took the initiative to attack anyone. He wasn't here for killing. Rather, he wanted to find the source of the fluctuations that had called out to the Spirit Breath Lamp. Actually, he didn't even want to be on this battlefield. As he moved in the direction of the fluctuations, a sense of danger suddenly rose up in him.

Stopping, he looked off into the distance.

Across the battlefield, he noticed a group of a few dozen Merfolk who looked different than the ones he was familiar with. They wore white robes, and emanated bizarre fluctuations that were neither mutagen nor spirit power. In fact, when he sensed those fluctuations, Xu Qing was reminded of the godliness in his dharmaboat. His pupils constricted.

What was more shocking was that each of these Merfolk had a vicious mutant beast with them!

Some of them were humanoid, except extremely tall and slender. They were dozens of meters tall, making them seem as slender as bamboo. Furthermore, they had very large heads and green skin. Some looked like giants with two heads, their faces vicious as they walked along snapping their teeth in attacks. Some had eyes that looked like boils, with extremely long tongues snaking out from the pupils. And there were some that looked like rotting sharks with rusting weapons stabbed all over them.

"Godpriests," Xu Qing murmured. He had learned of the godpriests from Huang Yan's jade slip. They were a special type of Merfolk cultivator who were very rare, and didn't use magical techniques powered by spirit power. Instead, their power stemmed from the Merfolk's gods, and they were known as god magic.

The strange beasts the godpriests led were materializations of their god magic.

They immediately had a big effect on the battlefield. The Seven Blood Eyes disciples seemed flustered. However, the disciples were like venomous bugs in a jar, and were ruthless by nature. In fact, many of them seemed interested in targeting the godpriests with attacks. After all, since the godpriests were high-level Merfolk, they obviously had riches that surpassed those of ordinary cultivators.

Xu Qing wasn't interested. Looking away from the godpriests, he prepared to continue on his way when his expression suddenly became very odd. On another part of the battlefield, he noticed a mangled 'corpse' that, despite being covered with blood and very grisly wounds, was actually crawling along at high speed. It would crawl, then stop, occasionally stopping at the corpses of Merfolk and disciples, where it would clearly search through them for things to take. It would then keep moving.

If it encountered some powerful enemy, the corpse would just lay there unmoving. If it encountered someone with an ordinary cultivation base, it would suddenly attack and kill them, take their belongings, then continue to act like a corpse. Although this 'corpse' had a good disguise on, Xu Qing still recognized who it really was. Elder Brother Zhang San....

The moment Xu Qing noticed Zhang San, he sensed some fluctuations from behind him, and he spun in place ready to throw out his iron skewer. That was when he heard a familiar voice.

"Hey, Deputy Captain Xu! It's me!"

It was the Captain.

However... he looked quite different from earlier. He was greenish-black, and looked like he might have been poisoned recently, as his lips were purple. As he walked toward Xu Qing, he popped antidote pills into his mouth.