

Timescape 121

Chapter 121: Joine Awakens

“Captain, you’ve been poisoned,” Xu Qing said.

The Captain’s eyebrows shot up. “Poisoned? I’m not poisoned. You think someone as skilled as me would get poisoned?”

“You’ve definitely been poisoned,” Xu Qing said with conviction, noting that the Captain’s face was about as dark as the black waters of the sea.

A somber expression overtook the Captain’s face. “Deputy Captain Xu, please don’t make irresponsible remarks. And always back your words with hard evidence. A moment ago I saw an interesting-looking sea fruit, ate it, and got sick. I suppose I shouldn’t randomly eat any fruit I see around here.” [1]

Suddenly realizing that his face was starting to feel numb, the Captain produced another handful of antidote pills and popped them in his mouth like candies. Inside, he was feeling very down. After falling into the water earlier, he’d hidden himself so that Xu Qing would be forced to explore the passage first. He’d then planned to just follow when the way was clear. Never could he have guessed that Xu Qing would actually lace the entire tunnel with poison.

Seeing that Xu Qing was about to continue the conversation about poison, the Captain suddenly looked over to Zhang San in his corpse disguise. “Hey, who’s that? Isn’t that Zhang San?”

Not waiting for Xu Qing to respond, he rushed over to Zhang San. Upon arriving, he launched a kick, but Zhang San jumped out of the way, then looked up to see the Captain and Xu Qing, who was also walking over.

Immediately noticing the greenish-black coloration on the Captain’s face, Zhang San said, “Captain, did you get poisoned?”

“Shut up.” Clearing his throat, he continued, “Cut the crap, Zhang San. By the way, do you really think you’re going to get anything good by laying around here pretending to be a corpse? Come with me. I’ll show you where the really good stuff is.” After looking around to confirm his location, the Captain picked a specific direction and started moving.

Zhang San didn’t hesitate for a moment. Jumping up, he called a quick greeting to Xu Qing then followed the Captain.

Before going too far, the Captain looked over his shoulder and called, “By the way, Deputy Captain Xu, the place I’m going to has those Foundation Establishment Pills you want. Come on!”

Xu Qing looked around at the chaos on the battlefield. Then he looked at the Captain, and realized he was heading in the same direction as that indicated by the Spirit Breath Lamp. Seeing no reason to hesitate, he followed.

And thus, the three of them left the fighting behind. They were mighty enough that, though they did encounter some obstacles, they were easy to overcome. The Captain was obviously in a hurry. His

hand constantly exuded a frigid energy, and whenever he encountered Merfolk cultivators, he froze them into blocks of ice instantly.

Zhang San had a very different manner of fighting than the Captain. He had all sorts of interesting items and gadgets that he would throw out, most of which created extremely deadly explosions. As a result, the Merfolk were almost incapable of getting close to them. He also wielded a silk thread that was hard to detect with the naked eye. It spun around him constantly, and was incomparably sharp.

Sometimes after the Captain froze an enemy into ice, Zhang San would follow up by slicing them to pieces. The way they worked together made it obvious that this wasn't their first time teaming up. And it also helped the group move very quickly.

Xu Qing also noticed that Zhang San had attached a thread to the Captain, which made it easier for Zhang San to follow him. Of course, Xu Qing's methods of attack were different from both the Captain and Zhang San. More specifically, he actually didn't launch any attacks. Instead, he laced the surrounding water with a colorless poison powder that he had specifically developed to target Merfolk.

As they moved along, any Merfolk who got too close would start dissolving. Even if they tried to flee after noticing they were poisoned, their entire bodies would rot away and they would die screaming in agony.

When Zhang San saw that, his expression flickered, and he quickly took out a handful of antidote pills. He also tried to move a bit faster to put more space between himself and Xu Qing.

The Captain, of course, continued to pop antidote pills. As they sped onward, Xu Qing eventually realized that, to his surprise, the Captain's destination was the very same place the godpriests had come from.

About an hour later, as the sounds of the battle faded behind them, they reached a location with numerous bizarre buildings.

They were made from coral, but they were all pitch black, and they were grouped together in a circular configuration. The architecture reminded Xu Qing of the temples from the forbidden region by the scavenger basecamp.

It's a temple complex, Xu Qing thought, his pupils constricting. At the same time, he was fairly certain the fluctuations from the Spirit Breath Lamp had pointed in that exact same direction. Unfortunately, he didn't have time to take the lamp out to confirm.

"We're here," the Captain said excitedly, accelerating toward the temple complex.

Their arrival attracted the attention of the Merfolk guards inside the complex, who rushed out to fight. There weren't very many of them. Normally speaking, there would have been more, but considering the calamity that had struck the Merfolk, and the fact that there was fighting going on everywhere in the underwater world, there were a lot fewer than normal.

Given the Captain's strength, Zhang San's gadgets, and Xu Qing's colorless poison, it didn't take very long for them to clear a path into the temple complex. A few Merfolk appeared who were Foundation Establishment cultivators, but had their cultivation bases suppressed to the Qi

Condensation level. But the Captain simply unleashed his explosive power, and they were frozen. It didn't matter what cultivation base level he faced, the result was the same.

The sight left Xu Qing feeling shaken. The Captain obviously had incredible battle prowess. Furthermore, Xu Qing was coming to realize that the Captain had a very clear idea of where he was going. During the entire trip, he hadn't taken them down one wrong path. They had made a beeline for this specific location.

Is the Captain after the same thing as me? Xu Qing kept his guard fully up as he followed.

When they were deep into the temple complex, they eventually found themselves in front of a specific temple building that was blue in color.

"Zhang San," said the Captain, "you set up some traps in the area. Use your best little gadgets. I'll pay you back later. Xu Qing, lay down some poison. Don't be stingy! I'll compensate you when we get back to the sect!"

Zhang San immediately got to work, and before long, there were explosive traps set up everywhere. And they were all placed in an ingenious and clever manner that would make them very difficult to detect, let alone disarm.

For example, he dug a hole in the floor and placed a trap into it, which would obviously be triggered when stepped on. Upon noticing that Xu Qing was watching him work, Zhang San grinned and explained, "Nothing will happen to the first person who steps on it. But when a second person steps on it... boom!"

Xu Qing watched, then looked around. Based on what he remembered from the Spirit Breath Lamp, he got the feeling this wasn't the exact spot he was looking for. He probably needed to go deeper into the complex. That caused him to breathe a sigh of relief. After Zhang San was finished setting up all his traps, Xu Qing spread out his poison powder, ensuring that this temple would be even more dangerous to enter.

Finally, he looked over at the Captain.

Visibly pleased, the Captain opened the door in front of them and beckoned for Xu Qing and Zhang San to follow. Beyond it was a huge open space with nothing in it other than a statue of Joine.

Looking around anxiously, Zhang San said, "Captain, what are you up to? There's nothing here at all, much less the thing I'm after."

Xu Qing didn't say anything, he just looked at the Captain.

"Calm down, you two," the Captain said, squatting on his haunches. "I guarantee that both of you will get what you're after. Just be patient." With that, he pulled out a withered-up eyeball that didn't look human. Putting it down in front of him, he performed an incantation gesture and pointed out. The eye opened, and then a projected image shot out from its pupil. It looked like the island and everything around it.

"Alright, let's take a look at what's going on," the Captain said, looking excited.

“A spirit rhino eye?” Zhang San exclaimed, walking over to look at it. “Those things are expensive. Where did you get it?”

Xu Qing looked closely at the bizarre eye, then the Captain. After that, he backed away a bit to look at their surroundings. What Zhang San had said was accurate. There was absolutely nothing around them but the statue. The statue itself seemed to be made from coral, and did not emit any fluctuations of godliness. But Xu Qing didn't feel he could relax. He fully remembered the statue with the saber in the temple complex near the scavenger basecamp. That statue had looked completely ordinary in nature as well.

That said, Xu Qing had no intention of sticking around for long. As soon as he had an opportunity, he was going to leave.

Even as he studied the area, the ground trembled, and the sound of a distant explosion reached their ears. They also heard a piercing sound that cut through everything in the underwater world. The source of that noise was the very same battlefield Xu Qing, the Captain, and Zhang San had left behind. The place was now strewn with corpses. The dozens of godpriests were still alive, but were in very bad shape.

Their god magic beasts were all dead, and the priests themselves were in a state of madness as they emitted piercing shrieks. At the same time, they burst into flames, burning their own life force to unleash a heaven-shaking, earth-shattering god magic.

The same thing happened on other battlefields throughout the underwater world. Although there weren't a lot of godpriests, when they burned their life force and shrieked, the sounds combined, growing louder and louder to a shocking level.

Within moments, several hundred godpriests throughout Joine Island were all shrieking, and the sound pierced the entire island. The sound even passed outside of the spell formations to reach the depths of the sea. They were summoning something!

Eventually, a howl echoed out from the depths of the waters. It was like a cry that originated from heaven and earth, and was indescribably intimidating. As the howl erupted, waves rose up on the surface of the water for thousands of kilometers in every direction. The sky changed colors, and wild winds sprang up. In the extreme depths of the sea... an astonishingly massive figure appeared, 30,000 meters tall, like a god.

It seemed that every movement it made took extreme effort, but at the same time, every step it took caused the seafloor to quake. Terrifying might erupted from the figure, causing countless sea beasts to tremble, regardless of the level of their cultivation base. At the same time, the souls of the Seven Blood Eyes cultivators trembled at the might exuded by the god-like figure.

Rumbling sounds echoed out constantly. If one could peer from the sky down into the bottom of the Sea of Endlessness, they would see an old woman wearing a long robe made of fish skeletons, tentacles writhing around her as she walked toward the Merfolk Isles. Wrinkles covered her face, and much of her skin was rotting off. But her emotionless eyes still shone with golden light. And when she exhaled, her breath contained strong mutagen, but also, traces of godliness. Her tentacles all had eyes on them, and they were also golden, and though they were only half open, they were all looking in the direction of the Merfolk Isles.

Emerging from the woman's back, jutting out of the fish skeleton robe, was a massive scarlet tongue covered with innumerable deceased souls. Shockingly, those deceased souls appeared to all be Merfolk godpriests, and it was their shrieks that the woman was responding to.

As all of this happened, the spell formations covering Joine Island weakened to the point where the cultivators there could see what was happening beyond the island.

This figure was the god worshiped by the Merfolk... Joine!

Chapter 122: Why is he Crazy?

The Merfolk worshiped a god named Joine.

That said, she wasn't truly a god. The term 'god' was applied to her by the Merfolk in a show of reverence and humility. The truth was that she was actually just a mysterious entity from the bottom of the sea who had godliness.

Even still, godly entities that could lie dormant on the seafloor would obviously be incredibly mighty. In fact, they were so mysterious that most species couldn't understand them, and the same could be said for their mightiness. Before the broken face of the god arrived, sea monsters did exist in the sea surrounding the Revered Ancient mainland. But they weren't like this. After the broken face of the god arrived, living beings were changed. In many places, entities appeared that contained some of the essence aura of the broken face of the god. And those beings came to be called godly entities. Their predecessors, which had been researched by various intelligent species, were evolved forms of grues from the forbidden regions. Joine was one such being.

To ordinary mortals... she was basically a god.

For many epochs, godly entities like her stood at the apex of creation, and were worshiped as deities by countless minor species. Even the most powerful species would fear them. However, as the epochs passed, and the intelligent species in the world grew stronger by struggling to survive, they came up with ways of defending themselves against godly entities.

In fact, some species could pose a threat to godly entities, and the most powerful species could even fight the emperors of the forbidden grounds. Humans, despite being scattered in so many locations, counted as one of the powerful species.

The waters seethed with every step Joine took on the seafloor. As she approached the Merfolk Isles, Master Seventh stood atop his dreadnaught, looking down at the bottom of the sea.

"Zheng Kaiyi," said the Merfolk patriarch, "if Joine comes, she'll bring a tempest of blood and carnage. There's no need for your sect and my people to fight each other. We're allies! And we can continue to be allies! We'll cede all our rights and benefits to you! We'll even help you defeat the Seazombies."

"You and your people are bending the knee too late," Master Seventh said coolly. Ignoring the Merfolk patriarch, he waved his hand and said, "Bring out the War Banner of Humankind!"

The moment the words left his mouth, the dracolizard dreadnaught roared to heaven, and the thirteen Gold Core elders bowed their heads respectfully. The over one hundred Foundation Establishment cultivators did the same.

On the tallest building atop the dracolizard's back, an enormous banner appeared. It was fully 300 meters long, multicolored, and was splattered with blood. It looked tattered, as though it were actually only the corner of a much larger banner. As it flapped in the wind, it released an unparalleled murderous aura that caused heaven and earth to tremble. In fact, that aura was so strong it caused the air to go still, and the surface of the sea to become placid. It seemed capable of suppressing all beings in existence; even godly entities would bow their heads in its presence.

The blood splattered on the banner pulsed with godliness, as though countless godly entities had died beneath it. Especially noteworthy was one specific drop of blood that was a pure gold color. That blood exuded a sensation that surpassed godliness, making it seem very close to the broken face of the god above.

The Merfolk patriarch's face drained of blood, and in a trembling voice he said, "The War Banner of Humankind? There's no way Seven Blood Eyes could have a precious human treasure like that. Even if it is only one corner of it..."

The banner flapped, and a massive wave of force erupted from it, creating the illusory image of a finger. It contained a boundless sensation of ancientness, like something from the River of Time itself. It did not contain any special mightiness, but anyone who saw it, even from afar, would feel so shaken their mind would empty.

It seemed like that enormous finger represented a dao of heaven, and as it stretched forth, it pushed down toward the sea.

The surface of the sea for a diameter of 50,000 kilometers evaporated, revealing Joine, the eyes on her tentacles wide open as she fought back against the power of the finger. Her resistance did nothing. Most of her tentacles simply exploded, as did her fish skeleton robe. The long tongue coming from her back withered up, and the rot on her flesh spread out rapidly. Then, her lower half exploded, sending flesh and blood spraying out everywhere. Her top half survived, and as she screamed in agony, she retreated into the depths of the sea!

Of course, no one in the Merfolk Isles saw any of that happening, save the cultivators on the shoreline who could see through the weakening spell formation. The disciples in the underwater world had no way to see it, except for those who had special items that let them see what was happening outside. For instance... a spirit rhino eye.

Inside the temple, Xu Qing's eyes were wide as he stared at the image projected by the spirit rhino eye.

By means of that projected image, he saw the dreadnaught, the banner, and the huge finger. He saw the 50,000 kilometer area of sea evaporating, and Joine exploding. However, there were limits to what the spirit rhino eye could do, and after a certain point, the terrifying image caused the eye itself to explode. When that happened, the Captain did something that struck Xu Qing with profound shock, and left Zhang San wide-eyed and speechless. He took out a hand-sized crimson lump of flesh and slapped it onto the statue of Joine.

The flesh melted, spreading out over the entire statue as it did, almost as if it were eating the statue. They even heard bizarre chewing sounds. When the statue was completely devoured, and had become a massive chunk of flesh, a crevice appeared on it. It was almost like a door within the flesh. It wriggled and twisted as if it wasn't stable. The entire chunk of flesh did the same, like it might wither up at any moment.

Within the darkness of that crevice was what appeared to be the seafloor. And scattered about there were numerous chunks of flesh. Astonishingly, they were mangled bits left behind after Joine exploded. Apparently there were other beings in the depths of the water who found those chunks very attractive, and were rushing toward them greedily.

The aura from that flesh was so powerful it emerged from the crevice, allowing Xu Qing to sense it. It was so strong that it seemed capable of instantly killing anything it encountered. Even the Seven Blood Eyes forces in the air above the islands seemed leery of it, and weren't interested in trying to acquire it.

However, the Captain's eyes glittered with unprecedented madness. Turning away from the chunks of flesh on the seafloor, he looked at Zhang San and Xu Qing. "I know why the two of you are here. And I wasn't lying. I told you I'd bring you to the good stuff, and those things are right here. Zhang San, you want the blueprint for the Merfolk's Flying Fish Armor, right?"

The Captain pulled out a bright red jade slip. It was clearly an extraordinary object, as it radiated strange fluctuations, almost as if whatever was inscribed therein was alive. Within those fluctuations was the image of a fantastic suit of armor. Even at a glance it was obvious it was extraordinary.

Zhang San's eyes went wide as he reached out toward it. "What is it doing here?"

The Captain smiled and handed the red jade slip to Zhang San, who took it excitedly. Next, the Captain looked at Xu Qing.

"Now for you, Xu Qing. You wanted some Foundation Establishment Pills, right? Here are three. And they're very high quality. Very expensive. Very precious. First-class pills, no doubt. Definitely not like ordinary Foundation Establishment Pills." He produced a jade box that he handed to Xu Qing. "Well, what do you think? That's what you wanted, right?"

Pupils constricting, Xu Qing opened the box and saw three blue-colored medicinal pills that exuded a fragrant aroma. They also emitted a faint mist, making it seem like they were living things. Shaken, Xu Qing closed the box, put it away, and looked up at the Captain. There was no way he would believe that the Captain was just going to give him something as valuable as this.

"It took a lot of work for me to help the two of you out. And since I helped you, now you're going to help me. Stand guard here, for just a short while. I'll be back in the time it takes an incense stick to burn! When I'm back, I'll share some of the loot with you. And if I'm not back in that amount of time, you can just forget about me and leave.

"I'm going to collect some of Joine's flesh. She's a god to the Merfolk, so it'd be great if the two of you could pray for me to live through this. If I do get back alive, then the three of us are going to be rich. Rich, you hear me?"

Xu Qing couldn't have been more shocked to hear that. He looked at the flesh through the crevice, and sensed the terrifying aura. Then he looked at the crazy look in the Captain's eyes, and came to

the conclusion that the man must be insane. Either that, or he didn't like the idea of living for too long, and wanted to live dangerously.

Xu Qing had encountered people like that before. They usually came in two varieties, which were polar opposites. One was the type who quickly ended up dead, and the other... benefitted wildly.

Xu Qing hoped the Captain was the latter, and therefore he asked, "How can we increase your chances of coming back alive?"

"You can't. It all comes down to luck."

Xu Qing nodded.

"What's the point of life, anyway?" the Captain said. "To have fun, right? And it's not my first time having fun. Alright, here I go!" Taking a deep breath, and his eyes burning with that crazy look, he dove into the crevice of flesh and blood.

There was something else in his eyes besides craziness, and that was ruthlessness. He really did seem like he had a death wish as he shot toward the mangled remains of half of Joine's body. The wriggling lumps of flesh already seemed like they were starting to wither, as though they might not last much longer.

Zhang San watched for a moment, then sighed. "Have you ever seen someone in Qi Condensation like this? Does he freaking want to die...?"

Xu Qing shook his head. Even if the Captain cut open his own belly to show his cultivation base and prove he was a Qi Condensation cultivator, Xu Qing wouldn't believe him.

"Are coffins expensive in the capital city?" he asked.

"I had one made for him before," Zhang San replied, "but never needed it, so I demolished it. Oh, this reminds me. I used the demolished coffin in your dharmaboat. I ran out of materials and didn't have anything else on hand. When we get back, I can make him a new one...."

"...."

Xu Qing didn't say anything in response. Then, a moment later, he looked toward the entrance of the temple complex. Narrowing his eyes, he quietly said, "Something's coming."

A moment later, they heard sizzling sounds, as though something was being melted by poison. Then they heard the booms of Zhang San's traps exploding.

Chapter 123: The Temple of Meegah

It was a bizarre situation.

That said, both Xu Qing and Zhang San had experienced things like this before. What was more, compared to what the Captain was doing, whatever unseen enemies were on the way didn't count for much.

Xu Qing hadn't looked up to many people in his life. In the slums, he had admired his teacher. In the scavenger basecamp, he had admired Sergeant Thunder and Grandmaster Bai. Now, there was

another person on that list. The difference was that when it came to the Captain, what Xu Qing admired was his crazy way of living dangerously. At a moment like this, the Captain was going to the seafloor and risking his own life to get some of Joine's flesh. It seemed like absolute insanity. As far as who the Captain really was, and what the true level of his cultivation base was, Xu Qing didn't bother trying to speculate. There wasn't any point.

"I hope you succeed, Captain," Xu Qing whispered.

The Captain had given him three Foundation Establishment Pills in exchange for an incense stick's worth of protection. So Xu Qing would keep him safe for that long. Without any hesitation, he headed toward the main entrance of the temple.

At the door, he looked out, then waved his hand, sending out a large collection of poison powder into the water. These powders weren't colorless. Instead, there were powders of many colors: black, red, blue, green, and more, which instantly combined into a multicolored, highly poisonous cloud.

Meanwhile, the sizzling sounds and explosions from outside grew louder. Ripples appeared in the water, followed by a huge tentacle that shot directly toward Xu Qing. It moved with incredible speed, sending out pulses of energy through the water as it did. There wasn't just one such tentacle. More followed, until there were dozens of them shooting in Xu Qing's direction.

Eyes cold, he dodged the first tentacle, then slashed his dagger through it, completely severing it. Backing up a step, he engaged the next tentacle to reach him. Blood erupted everywhere, but there were so many tentacles trying to grab him that eventually he dropped his dagger, grabbed one of the tentacles, and pulled as hard as he could. Rumbling sounds could be heard as a huge crater opened up in the ground and a bizarre beast was dragged out into the open. As it twitched and writhed, its head appeared, complete with a vicious mouth that lunged toward Xu Qing.

Xu Qing remained calm as the spectral drought demon appeared behind him, and he struck the beast with a vicious punch. A boom caused the water to explode, and the beast collapsed.

However, the fight wasn't over. Xu Qing grabbed another tentacle, pulled the beast out into the open, and then punched it into oblivion.

Further back inside the temple, Zhang San was breathing hard as he watched. Xu Qing isn't quite as crazy as the Captain, but he's definitely pretty ferocious.

Zhang San wasn't just sitting around. His hands flashed in a double-handed incantation gesture, causing nearly invisible threads to shoot out from him toward the outside. He was also taking part in the slaughter.

More and more explosions could be heard from outside as Zhang San's traps continued to be sprung. Many enemies fell victim to Xu Qing's poisons and were forced to show their faces. These newcomers were Merfolk.

However, they weren't like ordinary Merfolk. They had the ability to turn invisible, and they were also unusually fierce. As they appeared, coughing up blood and showing other signs of being poisoned, they chose not to retreat, but instead charged toward the temple entrance.

Their target wasn't Xu Qing, but rather, the statue covered in flesh. In fact, they seemed to be going mad with the desire to stop the fluctuations coming from that flesh. However, the moment they

burst into the entrance of the temple, a huge explosion occurred. They had walked right into one of Zhang San's traps. Xu Qing wasn't hurt at all, but the Merfolk were blown to bits.

The explosion forced the rest of the Merfolk back. As for Xu Qing, who was still struggling with the tentacles, a look of shock appeared on his face. He had just sensed some powerful fluctuations, and could tell that an intense aura was approaching the temple from under the ground.

"Elder Brother Zhang San, carry that statue out of here!" he shouted.

Zhang San reacted with lightning speed. Without the slightest hesitation, he ran back, threw the flesh-covered statue onto his shoulders, and charged out of the temple. At the same time, his right hand danced, manipulating the sharp threads to swirl around him. Exactly as he burst out of the temple, the temple collapsed, and a massive, rotting hand exploded from the ground. Although it didn't grab anything, it did slap down onto the surface and then exert tremendous force to pull a huge, 300-meter-tall figure out of the ground. As it came up, powerful zombie poison spread out in all directions.

Shockingly, this was a zombie creature. Except, it wasn't a single zombie, but rather, a host of zombies all bunched together. Once out into the open, it crouched on all fours like an animal before charging toward Zhang San.

Zhang San's expression flickered. Taking the statue from his shoulder, he tossed it toward Xu Qing.

Xu Qing leaped up and grabbed it, then backed up. At the same time, he used his dagger left-handed to slash at something next to him. Blood bloomed as a head tumbled down.

Meanwhile, the giant zombie shifted directions toward Xu Qing.

Xu Qing's eyes narrowed. Picking up speed, he fled. Meanwhile, Zhang San borrowed some of Xu Qing's speed to hurry after him. Xu Qing wasn't surprised by that. The moment he caught the flesh-covered statue, he had sensed a thread connecting it to Zhang San.

"What is that thing?" Zhang San asked as he got close. "It took the Captain to the bottom of the sea, but it seems to have driven the Merfolk and Seazombies mad."

Xu Qing didn't respond. He was thinking about what the Captain had said about an incense stick's worth of time. He tossed the statue back to Zhang San. "Elder Brother Zhang San, you hold the line here."

Then, eyes erupting with killing intent, Xu Qing gripped his dagger with his left hand and pulled out his black iron skewer with his right. As the spectral drought demon howled behind him, he charged toward the incoming giant zombie. He moved at top speed, and as he closed in, the spectral drought demon joined him to launch a strike. He also released plenty of poison.

Under the force of his relentless attacks, individual Seazombies fell off of the giant composite zombie, until it was falling back in retreat.

Next, Xu Qing summoned a host of water droplets to create a set of fetters to lock the giant creature in place. Then he waved his hand to summon his dharmaboat and unleash an attack of godliness. A golden beam of light appeared that seemed capable of purifying anything and everything. Shooting through the water, it landed right on the giant zombie. The giant thing trembled, then exploded into bits.

Xu Qing didn't want to waste the godliness he had. Putting away his dharmaboat, he turned, killing intent flickering in his eyes. Then he launched himself toward the other Merfolk. His dagger danced, spreading blood everywhere. His iron skewer zipped about, piercing one Merfolk after another. Though Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior was still sleeping, now that the iron skewer had a spirit automaton, it was an extraordinary and deadly weapon.

A short time later, the entire area had been cleared by Xu Qing. He was covered with blood, and he looked a bit tired, but his killing intent burned as intensely as ever.

The iron skewer was in a similar state. It pulsed with a baleful aura, as well as a hint of Foundation Establishment. From the look of it, Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior would awaken soon.

Behind Xu Qing, the spectral drought demon looked around viciously as if to bear witness to the carnage.

Off to the side stood Zhang San, who was deeply shaken. He saw Xu Qing covered in blood, standing there like an unsheathed blade. And suddenly, he realized he'd made an error in judgment. Though Xu Qing wasn't as crazy as the Captain, in terms of ferocity, he was on exactly the same level! That was especially true considering that all the bodies on the ground had their necks sliced open.

Enough time had passed for an incense stick to burn. And the Captain wasn't back.

Xu Qing stood there silently looking at the flesh-covered statue on Zhang San's shoulders.

They waited long enough for another half an incense stick to burn. Even Zhang San was starting to think too much time had passed. He looked a bit gloomy. Some more time passed.

Finally, Xu Qing said, "Time's up, Elder Brother Zhang San. I have some other places to go. Take care of yourself."

He gave Zhang San a bag of poison, told him how to use it, then turned and sped away. He hoped everything went well with the Captain, but he wasn't going to just sit around waiting. He had more important things to take care of.

After he was far enough away that he was sure he was alone, he took out the Spirit Breath Lamp and put it into his shadow. Almost immediately, he was able to confirm which direction he needed to go. He continued moving through the huge temple complex. An hour later, he stopped in front of what appeared to be a very ordinary temple. Though it didn't seem any different from the surrounding buildings, this was where the Spirit Breath Lamp was pointing to. After looking around and confirming he was alone, he took out some poison and scattered it around, making sure it covered the entire temple, and even drifted inside.

Even then, he didn't just go in. He waited for a while to see if anything happened. When nothing did, he finally cautiously entered the temple. There was nothing inside other than a statue. It was not a statue of Joine. Instead, it depicted an old merman. He looked threatening without being angry, and wore a royal crown on his head. Other than that, there didn't seem to be anything special about him.

Xu Qing looked around, even taking time to study the walls.

However, the place was indeed empty, even the walls. After finding no clues, Xu Qing took out the Spirit Breath Lamp. Nothing happened. After some thought, he ignited the lamp and walked around the entire temple, yet still didn't notice anything noteworthy.

He put some more thought into the matter, then put the lamp into his shadow. Almost instantly, the flame changed color, turning from amber to a pale green. As the light touched the walls, Xu Qing realized they looked different.

Eyes narrowing, he walked up to one of the walls.

As he got close, and the lamplight shone more directly on the wall in front of him, it rippled. Then, to his shock, a mural appeared on the wall. It depicted a massive altar, piled high with so many bones they were like a sea. And atop that sea of bones towered three figures. Two of them were bowing, the other stood tall. One of the two bowing figures was the same old merman depicted in the statue in this temple. He looked like an emperor, regal, formidable, and out of the ordinary. On his head, he wore a royal crown covered with jewels.

The other bowing figure was an old woman with a host of tentacles wearing a robe of fish skeletons. On her back was a ghost face. It was, of course, Joine.

As for the figure to whom they bowed, it was a giant, around whom coiled a huge, nine-headed serpent. The giant wore a suit of armor covered with magical symbols. On each shoulder, he carried a separate world, and a sword floated above his head. The sword looked extremely disturbing, as if it was powerful enough to sunder the heavens and crush the earth. In fact, this figure that the Merfolk emperor and Joine were bowing to seemed very much like a god.

One of the serpentine mouths held a burning lamp.

That lamp resembled an upside-down umbrella. In that respect, it looked like the Spirit Breath Lamp. However, the feeling it let off made it seem like it was something far beyond the Spirit Breath Lamp. [1]

That difference was like the difference between an ordinary rock and a piece of fine jade.

And it exuded a royal might that ensured that anyone who looked at it would know that it was real and authentic.

Chapter 124: Xu Qing's also Crazy!

Xu Qing looked at the mural, shaken in mind and heart as he saw the black umbrella glowing with such intensity it seemed real. In fact, the light coming from it emerged from the wall and spread out in all directions.

At the same time, the Spirit Breath Lamp Xu Qing held glittered with even more intense light. Together the two fields of brightness created a surging, glowing sea.

Xu Qing's expression flickered as that light washed over him. Even if he had made the decision to back away, he wouldn't have had time. In the blink of an eye, the sea of light vanished, and Xu Qing went along with it! Paradoxically, the process seemed to take a very long time, but also, happened in an instant.

Everything faded away from Xu Qing's perspective. Then things started to grow clear again. The first thing he sensed was an absolutely terrifyingly mighty pressure, almost like the roar of an

immensely powerful wild beast, coming from straight ahead. There was clearly no sound, just the pressure. But nonetheless, it caused Xu Qing's ears to ring so badly he worried they might collapse. Blood even started oozing out of them.

Then blood started dripping out of his nose, and his eyes hurt so badly he was having trouble opening them. It was worse inside of him, as his internal organs all started to tremble.

Because of the intense pain, and the fact that he couldn't open his eyes, he had no idea what was around him. All he could do was drop to his haunches and try to fight back against the pressure. He did sprinkle some poison powder around him, and also took out his iron skewer. Next, he didn't hesitate for an instant to release the sealing mark on Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior. The moment the sealing mark was removed, a howl of grief erupted from the skewer.

"I'm sorry, milord! I'm really sorry! Where are we? Oh my god! This... this.... Milord, you really didn't need to throw me in here to suffer endless torment. I'm familiar with the ancient records, and have read the story of many characters who were punished like this.

"Milord, I swear that I've truly acknowledged allegiance to you. I really want to be your spirit automaton. Don't kill me! I'll follow orders. I know what I did was wrong. Okay, I confess that I actually have another spot with a spirit stone stockpile. Actually, I paid some fellow daoists a lot of money to come track you down if I ever disappeared. I'll tell you who they are, milord, and you can just kill them!"

"Shut up," Xu Qing growled, still unable to open his eyes. "Just tell me where we are!"

The patriarch didn't dare to do anything but follow orders. After all, his life was in Xu Qing's hands, as Xu Qing could end him with a thought.

Voice trembling, the patriarch said, "Milord, it looks like we're near some sort of altar. There are bones everywhere. A whole sea of bones! We're on an elevated spot, and there's a staircase in front of us. It leads down to a narrow path that runs between two cliffs. And at the end of the path there's a circular altar. The sea of bones is in front of the altar. Oh my god. It's so huge! There are also three astonishing statues in front of the altar!"

"Are they standing in a row?" Xu Qing asked.

"No. Only one of them is standing, the other two are kowtowing." Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior had no idea that he'd once again managed to save his own life.

"Continue," Xu Qing said.

"The standing one is a giant with a nine-headed snake wrapped around him. He looks like a god! Holy moly, what is he? I feel like I'm going to go blind looking at him. If I wasn't a spirit automaton, I'd probably be blind. And there are two more in front of him... I'm sorry, milord, really. What is this place...?"

As the patriarch continued to jabber, Xu Qing reeled as he came to the conclusion that he was somehow inside the world of the mural. After mulling the matter over, he waved his hand to seal the patriarch again. Once everything went quiet, he just waited to acclimate to the environment.

As enough time passed for an incense stick to burn, the violet crystal's powers of regeneration worked constantly. Eventually, he started getting used to the mighty pressure around him. He still felt pain, but didn't feel like his entire body was about to be crushed. And it took a lot of effort, but he managed to open his eyes and look around. Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior had described the place accurately. On the one hand, this place seemed like an enormous cave temple. On the other hand, it seemed like a different world.

The stairs in front of him were enormous, like they hadn't been built for humans to walk. And in the middle of the sea of bones were three divine statues. The pressure that Xu Qing could hardly tolerate was coming from the statues.

As blood leaked out of the corners of his eyes, his pupils constricted because of the sight of the giant standing in the middle of the bones. In one of the nine-headed snake's mouths was the black umbrella lamp. The black umbrella lamp cast out glittering, scintillating light onto the two worlds that rested on the giant's shoulders, making them seem incredibly lifelike. Xu Qing struggled to breathe, his heart pounded, and his mind spun as he stared at the black umbrella lamp.

A life lamp?

He'd had his speculations when he arrived in this place, but had been too out of sorts to think about it. But now he was certain that the black umbrella was actually a life lamp! As he thought back to what the Captain had said about life lamps, an indescribable desire to acquire that lamp erupted in his heart.

If word of this got out, the Grand Competition would end immediately, and this place would become the center of all attention. And the first people to come would be from the Seven Sect Coalition on the Revered Ancient mainland. It would lead to complete insanity. When compared to a life lamp, the entire Merfolk species would be considered trivial.

The Merfolk obviously had no idea the life lamp was here, otherwise they could have given it to some powerful sect in return for protection from Seven Blood Eyes.

And Xu Qing would never have had this chance if his shadow hadn't found this place and led him here. As he looked at the life lamp, his heart pounding, he chose not to do anything rash. Instead, he took a deep breath to calm himself and steady his nerves. Reaching up, he wiped the blood off his face. As the violet crystal continued to heal him, he realized he felt a lot better than earlier.

After some more breathing and rest, he felt even better. Looking up at the lamp, his eyes flickered with determination. He cautiously walked forward until he was at the edge of the first of the massive steps. Then he dropped down to the second step. The moment he landed, the pressure suddenly grew vastly more intense than before.

His entire body trembled, and blood sprayed out of his mouth. As his face turned pale, he immediately got into a cross-legged position to stabilize his breathing.

After some time passed, he started to recover. Gritting his teeth, he kept walking forward, shaking the entire time. Blood oozed out of his eyes, ears, nose, and mouth, and his bones felt like they might shatter.

Eventually, he reached the end of the second step. At that point, he felt like he had reached his limit. He was even having trouble seeing. He was certain that he couldn't continue, and had the feeling that if he dropped to the third step, something even more terrifying would happen. But then he looked up and stared at the life lamp. He just couldn't bear to leave without it. So, he looked back down at the ground.

Because of the light from up ahead, his shadow wasn't visible in front of him. Looking back at the shadow behind him, he narrowed his eyes and said, "Wake up. You like extinguishing lamps, right? I've got one right here for you."

As he spoke, he took control of his shadow. It twitched, almost as if it wasn't willing to move from its spot behind him. But then it slowly crept forward. The bright light made his shadow so faint it almost wasn't visible. But he knew it was there. And under his control, it slid down to the third step.

Xu Qing felt no adverse effects.

Eyes glittering, he stretched his shadow out to the fourth step, then the fifth. Eventually, it reached the altar, where it continued through the sea of bones to the three statues.

Xu Qing actually wasn't sure how far his shadow could stretch. But he could tell that the further it went, the more effort he had to expend to control it. At the same time, the shadow was growing unstable, which made it even more difficult to control. As it closed in on the statues, it was so unstable in Xu Qing's mind that he didn't think he could push it any farther.

His eyes were bloodshot as he looked at the life lamp and then checked his shadow. Unfortunately, he had only one option left.

Tapping into the violet crystal, he used the power of suppression on the shadow, hoping it would make it a bit longer. It was an option when he was out of options. And yet, before the power of suppression could even be fully unleashed, the unstable shadow suddenly twitched and, as if tapping into power it didn't even possess, stretched out even farther. It reached the statue of the giant, stretching up it until it was almost touching the life lamp in the snake's mouth.

However, this time, the shadow had really reached its limit, and was visibly trembling and starting to break apart. It didn't matter how much more Xu Qing suppressed it, he couldn't go any further. What was more, it looked like it was about to start shrinking back. Xu Qing inhaled sharply.

He just wasn't sure that he could actually trust his shadow. For all he knew, it was doing this on purpose, and actually could reach the lamp.

"If you don't get that lamp," he said calmly, "then after I leave this place, I'll suppress you a thousand times, even if I die in the process!"

Though his voice was calm, the shadow could sense the deadly intent in his voice. Trembling, it tried to push itself farther, but clearly, was incapable of doing so. It was really starting to break apart now. At this point, Xu Qing finally believed that his shadow was at its limit. However, decisiveness still gleamed in his eyes as he took out a talisman treasure, as well as his dharmaboat, whose defenses he activated.

Climbing onto the dharmaboat, he took out a huge quantity of spirit stones and loaded them into the spell formation magazine, to bolster the defenses. Taking a deep breath, he sent the dharmaboat forward, until it was over the third step. As the dharmaboat moved, the shadow advanced, closing

the distance to the lamp in the snake's mouth. The shadow touched the lamp, and tightened around it.

Before Xu Qing could confirm whether or not he'd succeeded, the advance of the dharmaboat caused a massive rumbling sound to build up, louder than anything from before. It exploded from in front of him, like rolling thunder, turning into a mountain-toppling, sea-draining force that slammed right into him. His dharmaboat couldn't stand up to the force, and the sails, which were the first line of defense, ripped apart, and the dharmaboat tumbled backward. Then the second set of defenses collapsed, and all of the spirit stones were drained and subsequently shattered. The dharmaboat tumbled backward even more rapidly. Next, the force hit the prow, and the godliness from the lizard skin erupted out, but not even that could stand up to the rumbling force. Starting at the prow, the dharmaboat crumbled, until it was half-destroyed.

As the dharmaboat suffered grievous damage, the force reached Xu Qing, who was surrounded by the protection of a host of talisman treasures. They fought back wildly against the attacking force, but the calligraphy on the paper rapidly grew faint, then disappeared. Then the force hit Xu Qing.

He trembled violently. It felt like he was being struck by an entire mountain, causing enormous amounts of blood to spray from his mouth. Many of his bones shattered, and his flesh was ripped to shreds. By then, his dharmaboat had tumbled back as far as it could go, and glittering light rose up everywhere.

Back on Joine Island in the Merfolk Isles, Xu Qing and his dharmaboat shot out from the mural.

The massive force which had assailed him propelled him all the way across the temple to the opposite wall, which collapsed. The dharmaboat left a huge, 300-meter furrow in the ground all the way back to the mural.

Xu Qing was still coughing up mouthful after mouthful of blood. In many places, his flesh was shredded so badly his bones were visible. And of course, many of those bones were broken. There was a huge wound in his stomach that pierced through his entire torso. And most of his clothing had been shredded off. He was surrounded in blood, and could hardly see. He had never been injured this badly. However, his right hand was tightly clenched onto something.

It was the life lamp that his shadow had successfully grabbed!

I can't pass out.

As his vision swam, he bit his tongue hard and forced his eyes to stay open. From inside his bag of holding, he produced a huge handful of medicinal pills. Not wanting to waste time eating them, he shoved them directly into the wound on his belly. He also scattered some poison powder around him, just in case any enemies showed up. There was no time to inspect the life lamp. He immediately put it into the pearl of holding he'd acquired from Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior. [1]

Then he put the pearl of holding into a bag of holding, yet still wasn't convinced that was safe enough, so he put the bag of holding into another bag of holding. Hopefully, burying the bag in so many layers would prevent its aura from seeping out.

There was only a bit of godliness left in his dharmaboat, and though he hated to lose it, now wasn't the time to be miserly. Using the godliness, he created a defensive barrier around himself.

As he accomplished that, he coughed up another mouthful of blood. He now felt so weak he was certain death was calling for him. Thankfully, the violet crystal within him glittered as it sent its power throughout his body. His entire body thrummed with intense pain, to the point where he couldn't hold back from moaning. Gritting his teeth to stay conscious, he endured the pain as he waited for the violet crystal to heal him.

Chapter 125: It Was Worth It!

Xu Qing had never even come close to being this badly injured. Both of his dharmaboat's lines of defense had been destroyed, and even though he fought back with godliness, the front half of the boat was crushed. He had used a large number of talisman treasures as well, and had fought back with every scrap of his great circle fleshly body strength. Despite all that, he barely made it out alive.

In fact, he could tell that even with the violet crystal's powers of regeneration, it would take quite some time before he was back to normal. Fear still lingered in his heart despite the fact that he'd made his escape. He had the feeling that if he'd been missing even a single line of defense, then he would be dead right now.

"But... it was worth it!" he murmured as he gritted his teeth against the pain. Then he decided to take a quick inventory.

He didn't care as much about the talisman treasures as he did his dharmaboat, which he had worked so hard to upgrade. Right now, it had almost no godliness left. The front half was almost completely destroyed. It was going to cost a lot to get it back in shape.

Even still, he was extremely excited at how much he had benefited.

And I still have the knockoff Spirit Breath Lamp! Now I understand why the Captain was willing to put everything on the line. As long as you succeed, the rewards are spectacular!

That said, Xu Qing didn't think it was a good idea to make a practice of this sort of thing. Otherwise, he really would end up dead one day.

Taking a deep breath, he forced himself to calm down, then circulated his cultivation base and tried to get the violet crystal to heal him faster. At the moment, he couldn't even move, and knew that the longer he stayed in place, the more danger he would be in.

Before long, an hour had passed.

Some distance away from Xu Qing, but still within the bounds of the temple complex, was an area where someone had dug out a small cave in the ground. Inside the cave was a flesh-covered statue, and sitting next to it was Zhang San.

Zhang San was guarding the entrance of the cave. Outside were a host of explosive devices, as well as a lot of poison. Anyone who tried to approach would have a hard time not dying while doing so. Leaving the cave would be tricky, but Zhang San had left a path and knew how to tread it.

But not even all those preparations were good enough for Zhang San, so he had spread his thread weapon throughout the area as well. Occasionally, he would look back at the flesh-covered statue and sigh.

“Come on, Captain. You’re not going to die inside there, are you? Did you really have to do this? Why are you so interested in risking your poor little life? Wouldn’t you rather have some fun with some of the girls back in the sect?”

“That was Joine! She might not be a real god, but she’s a terrifying godly entity. None of the Merfolk are on her level, except for maybe that Meegah, although who knows if he’s even real.

“Don’t die on me, Captain. If you do, then all these years of investments in you will have been for nothing.”

Zhang San had been sighing in this manner for about four hours, and had already resigned himself to the fact that the Captain was probably dead. Shaking his head, he decided that he would wait for the time it takes an incense stick to burn, and if the Captain didn’t come out by then, he would stop waiting.

Looking around, he was contemplating whether or not he should cut off a chunk of flesh from the statue to keep as a souvenir, when suddenly the statue trembled. And then, a cry echoed out from inside that made Zhang San shiver.

Expression flickering, he backed up, while simultaneously manipulating his thread weapon to surround the statue.

Then the statue trembled again, and the crevice in the flesh split open, growing larger and then smaller, then back and forth between those two states, as if it were breathing. The howling inside also grew clearer. It seemed like some terrifying creature was inside, trying to get out.

Astonished, Zhang San backed up again, until he was at the entrance of the cave, ready to flee at any moment.

As he waited there nervously, the flesh on the statue twitched, and a hand stretched out from inside. It was covered in blood, and only had three fingers attached. Most of the skin was flayed off, making the bones clearly visible.

The hand gripped the flesh on the statue, and used it to struggle out from inside. Eventually, the Captain’s torso appeared. He had no hair, and his head was completely covered in blood. Most of the skin on his face was melted off, and all the bloody flesh made it seem like he wasn’t even human. He was covered in all sorts of ghastly wounds, some of which pierced all the way through him. However, his right hand was tightly gripping a wriggling chunk of golden flesh. From the terrifying godliness that radiated off of the bloody flesh, it was obvious that it was Joine’s flesh! As soon as the flesh was out in the open, the air around it rippled and distorted, and seemed to fill with countless agonized shrieks.

Zhang San’s mind spun, and blood oozed out of his eyes, ears, nose, and mouth. His entire body felt unstable.

“Pull me out!” the Captain said urgently.

It took effort, but Zhang San wrapped his thread around the Captain, then pulled. Slowly but surely, the Captain’s torso emerged from the crevice in the statue.

Then he dropped to the ground.

His lower half, including both legs, was gone. Only his upper half remained, though it was all a mass of mangled flesh.

“Hurry up and destroy the statue!” the Captain cried. “There’s something behind me!!”

At the same time, he performed a one-handed incantation gesture and pointed at the statue.

Zhang San could sense the danger, so he gritted his teeth and joined in the effort. Booms rang out as they attacked the flesh-covered statue. A moment later, it exploded.

As it was destroyed, a howl of rage echoed out from inside.

The mere echo of that howl caused blood to spray from Zhang San’s mouth, and he staggered backward, cracking sounds emanated out from him as upwards of forty jade slips on him shattered. Then he fell to the ground, heavily injured. After struggling to produce some medicinal pills, he consumed them. Only then did some of the color return to his face.

The Captain also coughed up blood as he tumbled off to the side. However, he didn’t let go of the chunk of flesh.

After it was all over, he laughed uproariously.

“Who else could have done this but me?” he said excitedly. “As soon as I heard about the attack on the Merfolk Isles, I hatched this plan. And now I finally got some flesh from a godly entity. I pulled it off! I really pulled it off this time!”

Grimacing in pain, but still chuckling, he quickly put away Joine’s flesh.

“Was it worth it?” Zhang San asked, smiling wryly. “You lost your legs in the process.”

“It was worth it!! Who cares about half a body? I specifically cultivated a secret magic for regrowing lost limbs. Couple that with some of the best medicine from the sect, and I’ll have my legs back in a few months. And with the godliness from Joine’s flesh, I’ll recover even faster.”

The Captain looked around. “Hey, where’s the deputy captain?”

Continuing to consume some medicinal pills, Zhang San said, “You told us to wait for the time it takes an incense stick to burn. That was four hours ago. Junior Brother Xu stood guard for two incense sticks’ worth of time. When you didn’t come back, he went to take care of some other things. Before he left, he gave me a bunch of poison powders.”

“That makes sense. Even I didn’t think I would be in there that long. And I almost didn’t make it back.” The Captain produced an apple, took a bite, and was about to continue explaining what happened when a huge rumbling sound reached their ears.

In fact, all of Joine Island shook down to its core, so violently that all of the buildings collapsed. At the same time, streams of black mist emerged from the buildings, the seagrass, and the anemones. Massive amounts of it seeped out of everything in the underwater world, and as it congregated together, it turned into black clouds that roiled out in all directions.

The mutagen it contained was so strong it melted everything it touched. What was more, there was something gruish in it that, when it touched the mangled corpses in the underwater world, caused them to come back to life.

More black mist seeped out, and it made the black clouds thicker and thicker, covering everything. Seeing this development, the Seven Blood Eyes disciples in the underwater world reacted with shock. Without any hesitation, all of them rushed toward the exits.

The ground trembled as if dragons were hidden in the earth, to the point where the Captain's torso fell over. Barely managing to keep his apple in his mouth, he scrambled to climb up Zhang San's back.

"The Merfolk are finally using their ultimate trump card. I took too long getting back. Hurry, we have to get out of here! Get us to the exit!"

As the black mist surged toward them, Zhang San started running toward the exit.

In another part of the temple complex, the violet crystal had healed Xu Qing enough that he opened his eyes. When he sensed the rumbling, and saw the black clouds gathering, his pupils constricted.

Without the slightest hesitation, he put away his dharmaboat, which was so badly damaged it couldn't fly. Gritting his teeth, he started running. Only moments after he left, black clouds filled the area where he had been recuperating.

Because of the masses of black mist, no one could possibly see that, on the seemingly blank walls of the temple, the mural was glittering, almost as if it wanted to reveal itself. However, the Merfolk emperor in the mural slowly faded away and disappeared.

All of the Seven Blood Eyes disciples under the water were now rushing to escape.

Dramatic things were also happening in the outside world. Black clouds weren't just appearing on Joine Island. They were also present on Emiche Island, Meegah Island, and Nethervault Island.

From a distance, it looked like all four islands were being covered with black clouds.

This was the final trump card the Merfolk had to play.

High in the air on his dreadnaught, Master Seventh looked down at the Merfolk Isles and the spell formation covering them. Although the spell formation blocked physical sight, he could sense what was happening. However, instead of causing a serious expression to appear on his face, it prompted him to turn to the Merfolk patriarch and laugh.

"Nice. You're finally doing something impressive. And here I was worried that this competition was going to be too easy for these wolf pups. Up to this point it was hardly a competition. It was more like you just giving us gifts. Thankfully, you do have some fight in you. Now that the difficulty has been ramped up, the wolf pups are finally going to face some real danger!"

Chapter 126: A Reunion of Three

In the undersea world beneath Joine Island, Xu Qing felt immense pain with every move he made. The wounds on his arms, legs, and belly kept ripping open and bleeding. What was left of his tattered daoist robe was soaked with blood.

Though he had spirit power defenses around him, preventing the sea water from reaching his wounds, he still felt wracked with pain. He had been injured so badly that not even the violet crystal had the ability to heal him in a short time.

Black mist seethed around him. Xu Qing wasn't worried about the mutagen it contained, but he was worried about the intense zombie poison within it. Given his current state, if he got infected with zombie poison, the power of the violet crystal wouldn't be able to neutralize it. He also saw corpses within the black clouds getting back to their feet. Howling like beasts, they began to run amok.

One thing was for sure: if that black mist reached him, he would be in a deadly crisis. He had to get away quickly. Gritting his teeth against the pain, he picked up speed.

He had no options other than to endure the pain. In fact, he even used a flight talisman as he sped toward the exit. It wasn't just his fleshly body that had taken damage. His spirit power was almost completely drained. Given he was in such dangerous circumstances, he needed to conserve what little spirit power he had left in case he got into a fight. Thus, he resorted to using a flight talisman rather than tap into his cultivation base.

Enough time passed for an incense stick to burn, whereupon he emerged from the temple complex. Looking around, he saw that the black mist was everywhere. It filled the temples and coral buildings. Everything was being consumed by it. There hadn't been many living people in this area to begin with, and now there were none at all. There were only the howling zombies.

Xu Qing's expression was grim as he realized that the black clouds seemed to be coming from the sea floor, which meant he couldn't escape in that direction. Having no other choice, he started speeding along on the ground.

Unfortunately, the exit was just too far away. After proceeding for the time it takes an incense stick to burn, the clouds were building up to the point where he couldn't avoid them. As soon as they enveloped him, his spirit power defenses started corroding. What was more, he was now having a hard time seeing things clearly.

The howls of the zombies grew louder and more distinct.

Eyes flashing with killing intent, he waved his right hand, and his iron skewer shot out toward one of the zombies.

This zombie looked different from the Seazombies. It was a Seven Blood Eyes disciple who had been killed. Now, he was pitch black, both his skin and his eyes. And even after Xu Qing's iron skewer slashed through his throat, and his head fell to the ground, he still reached out toward Xu Qing with claw-like hands.

Xu Qing's left hand flashed in an incantation gesture, and a screen of water spread out, then shoved the zombie back by about thirty meters.

Xu Qing didn't waste time on further fighting. There were more howls coming closer. Eyes filled with determination, he performed an incantation gesture with his left hand, causing countless water droplets around him to form into a snakeneck dragon.

After appearing, the snakeneck dragon quickly grew to 300 meters, wrapped around Xu Qing, then howled as it carried him forward. As they moved, the snakeneck dragon would slap aside any zombies that got in their way.

This was Xu Qing's final trump card. If the snakeneck dragon were to be destroyed, then it would be a big challenge escaping. Thankfully, the snakeneck dragon was capable of astonishing levels of speed, and was strong enough to barrel through any resistance. The corroding effect of the black clouds ate away at it, causing it to shrink, but Xu Qing had stored up a lot of spirit power in it. As a result, the snakeneck dragon kept Xu Qing moving through the clouds, getting closer and closer to the exit.

Along the way, he saw a few Seven Blood Eyes disciples, struggling to fight their way to freedom. None of them paid any attention to him. However, as he got closer to the exit, he also got closer to areas where the fighting had been fierce, and a lot of cultivators had been killed. Therefore, the howling of the zombies grew more intense.

The Seven Blood Eyes disciples who had made it this far were going to have a tough time dealing with the sea of zombies. Grim-faced, Xu Qing performed a double-handed incantation gesture, then threw his hands out.

The snakeneck dragon shrank down, withering as its spirit power flowed into Xu Qing, restoring some of his lost reserves.

Unfortunately, that resulted in him losing the snakeneck dragon.

There was no other option. By the time the snakeneck dragon disappeared, his spirit power reserves had been restored by about half. He was still badly wounded, but at least his battle prowess was restored to an extent. Performing an incantation gesture, he caused water droplets to circulate around him, and then he charged forward, leaping directly over the sea of zombies. When the occasional zombie tried to intercept him, he would sacrifice some of his water droplets to encase them in water and prevent them from reaching him.

As he moved along, and as he trapped one zombie after another, he eventually caught sight of the exit. However, that was also when he suddenly looked to the side to see a figure rushing in his direction. As this person ran, they tossed out random traps that would instantly explode. And on his back was another person, who was calling out in a familiar voice.

"Go, go, go, Zhang San! Right! Throw them like that and blow them up! Aiyo, you threw that one in the wrong direction. You should have thrown it that way!" The person running was Zhang San, and the person yelling was the Captain.

Zhang San gasped for breath as he sprinted. On his back, the Captain was laughing as if he wasn't worried at all about their current circumstances.

"Shut up!" Zhang San yelled.

"Huh? Zhang San, how could you use such a tone on someone that used to be your captain!" Taking out an apple, he took a bite.

"If you don't keep your mouth shut, I'll throw you down and you can run the rest of the way on your own!"

“Go, Zhang San, go!”

An odd expression appeared on Xu Qing’s face as he watched Zhang San running toward him with the Captain on his back. Seeing that the Captain was missing his lower half, he once again was struck by how crazy the Captain was. When Zhang San finally saw Xu Qing, his eyes went wide. Sending his thread whipping out, he used it to grab onto Xu Qing and then pull himself toward him.

Then the Captain noticed Xu Qing’s wounds, and his tattered daoist robe, and his eyes went wide.

“Yo! Deputy Captain Xu! Look at the state you’re in. You must have accomplished something amazing. You look drained! Don’t tell me you found the sleeping chamber of the mermaid princess, and she wore you out?”

Meanwhile, Xu Qing looked at the Captain’s missing lower half and calmly asked, “Will it grow back?”

“I’m not worried about it,” the Captain said proudly. “I’ll be shipshape in no time once we get back.”

“Alright,” Xu Qing said coolly. “I’ll give you a feather when we’re back at the sect.”

“Feather? Why would you give me a feather?” The Captain looked completely confused. [1]

“My god, now’s not the time for chatting!” Zhang San snapped. “We need to get out of here!”

As far as Zhang San was concerned, both Xu Qing and the Captain were freaks. After all, who else would sit around chatting in such dangerous circumstances?

Looking away from the Captain and his damaged body, Xu Qing started moving again. Zhang San used his thread to borrow momentum from Xu Qing. And thus, the two-and-a-half of them rushed into the exit and then disappeared.

Not long after they left, the black clouds inundated the entire area.

Although the entire underwater world had been filled with the clouds, things weren’t over yet. Soon, the clouds started seeping onto the surface of the islands as well, moving through the tunnels and various other passages. The poison Xu Qing had laced the water with had mostly dissipated already, though he wasn’t sure if it was naturally or by some other means. After moving through the tunnel for the time it takes half an incense stick to burn, he broke the surface of the water and flew out into the open with the power of the flight talisman.

Zhang San was right behind him, also moving with a flight talisman. Meanwhile, the Captain was talking nonstop.

“What did you mean about the feather, Xu Qing?” he asked.

Xu Qing didn’t respond.

“Deputy Captain Xu, don’t forget you owe me 8,000 spirit stones! Now tell me what you mean about the feather!”

Ignoring him, Xu Qing looked around at the outside world, felt wind on his face, and suddenly looked surprised. Zhang San reacted in the same way.

They were surrounded by chaos and whipping winds. Black clouds were rising up everywhere, creating huge pillars that looked like dragons, connected to the spell formation above. There were eight such pillars in total, two per island.

Countless streams of black mist on the ground fed into the eight pillars. And as Xu Qing, Zhang San, and the Captain watched, the pillar nearest them began to transform.

Started at the very top, it split into multiple parts, with each part coming to resemble the head of a snake. In total, there were nine heads, and after they formed, they let loose howls that caused the earth to quake.

The howls caused boundless mutagen and zombie poison to emerge from the ground. Meanwhile, the howling of the serpents grew more intense, as if it might be able to pierce through the Seven Blood Eyes formation. In fact, it seemed to be climbing toward the Gold Core level.

The scene caused Xu Qing's mind to spin as he realized he recognized this huge snake. It was the same snake that had been wrapped around the giant in the mural.

The other seven pillars were undergoing the same transformation, and as they howled, the mutagen in the Merfolk Isles grew vastly more intense.

Merfolk and Seven Blood Eyes disciples alike all began to corrode under its strength. At the same time, countless corpses opened their eyes as they were resurrected.

Chapter 127: Elder Brother, I'm Ling'er

The Merfolk Isles were in chaos.

The mutagen continued its assault, and the zombie poison spread more and more. The surviving Merfolk cultivators had vicious expressions as they fought with even more ferocity than before. It almost seemed like they hoped to take all the Seven Blood Eyes disciples with them into death.

However... those surviving Merfolk cultivators soon realized that something unusual was going on.

The eight nine-headed serpents looming above the four islands were getting stronger and stronger. The mutagen and zombie poison was impressive. And more and more resurrected corpses became zombies.

However, the Seventh Peak disciples all seemed prepared for such things.

In fact, they were all popping white boluses like they were candy. Many had talisman treasures designed to provide temporary protection from mutagen, and they didn't hesitate to use them. Some dug into their surroundings, hoping to simply stay out of sight of the zombies, and power through the mutagen and zombie poison. Most such individuals had extraordinary cultivation bases. Some of the disciples produced their dharmaboats, and stayed inside while watching what was happening outside.

A few disciples took out prebuilt defensive spell formations, and called out to other nearby disciples that they could join them inside for a fee. Most outrageous of all was a group of disciples on Emiche Island who had somehow taken control of a group of several dozen zombies, and had

stationed them in a perimeter to absorb the mutagen and zombie poison. They didn't look like they were worried about the situation at all, and were even inviting other disciples to join them in safety. Just about everything imaginable could be seen.

There were some disciples who actually slipped into the sea of zombies to pickpocket their bags of holding, or to set up ways to lure the zombies away and ambush them. All in all, it didn't seem like any of the disciples were worried about the nine-headed snakes. More precisely, they weren't going to let the terrifying snakes impede their efforts to make money.

What seemed to worry them most was the possibility of not making a profit. Their attitude seemed to be: either kill me, or get out of my way while I make money.

Seeing this caused waves of shock and helplessness to rock the Merfolk cultivators. However, it didn't take long for them to realize what was happening. High in the sky, Master Seventh on his dreadnaught, had initially seemed excited about the competition becoming more difficult.

However, when he saw the eight nine-headed dragons, his eyes glittered, and he shoved his hand down toward them. Instantly, three of the dragons let out howls of grief as they collapsed, turning into masses of black clouds that flew toward Master Seventh.

As they gathered into his hand, his expression became one of delight. "Well, isn't this interesting."

The thirteen Gold Core cultivators were also surprised, and tried to collect their own samples. The spell formation made that difficult, but all of them managed to get bits of the black mist.

As for the hundred Foundation Establishment cultivators, they joined in the effort, with some of them even flying right up to the spell formation in the hopes of acquiring some of the mist.

Because of that, the five remaining snakes all seemed to weaken. One of them even withered so badly that it screamed in anguish and then vanished from existence. As for the other four, they were drained so badly that they fell from the Gold Core level to early Foundation Establishment.

However, the process didn't stop at that point, it just slowed down.

When the Merfolk patriarch saw what was happening, and how the Seven Blood Eyes cultivators were so excited, he fell into despair.

"Oh how mighty Seven Blood Eyes is," he muttered. "The sect changed after Zheng Kaiyi became peaklord of the Seventh Peak. It changed. Everything changed...."

When the Seven Blood Eyes disciples saw what was happening, many of them joined forces to attack the huge snakes.

On Joine Island, Ding Xiaohai's clothes were tattered, but he looked as energetic and imposing as ever. He was the first one to charge toward the snake outside the fish skeleton city. Three other disciples joined him. That said, the other three just seemed to want riches, while Ding Xiaohai wanted the kill.

Booms rang out, and as Xu Qing watched, he noticed that among the three disciples, all of whom had extraordinary cultivation bases, there was one young woman in a gray daoist robe who was particularly eye-catching.

She was petite but bewitchingly charming. Her face was as beautiful as a lotus flower, her eyebrows were like willow leaves, and she had eyes more seductive than peach blossoms. Her long, beautiful

hair flowed around her, and her red lips were slightly parted, making her seem extraordinarily attractive. Though her daoist robe was voluminous, as she moved, it was possible to see her slender waist and dramatic curves. Her looks made her exactly the kind of person who attracted a lot of attention.

Upon seeing her, Zhang San gulped. However, the pressure from the huge snake left him feeling shaken, and he had the feeling that if he got hit by that snake, he would be crushed to death.

Xu Qing did not have any such reaction. He was more interested in the nine-headed snake, which looked exactly like the one he remembered from the mural. Not only was he shocked, but also felt the need to be very careful. If this snake was here, then what if the giant with the two worlds on his shoulders also showed up?

As for the Captain, he finally stopped asking Xu Qing about the feather. As he perched on Zhang San's back, he stared at the huge snake, his eyes shining. "That thing's amazing! Look at how strong that living mutagen is. It would be the perfect weapon for treacherous people!

"It's being suppressed by the spell formation, which makes it much easier to deal with. Anybody who manages to take it down and sell it would get rich overnight. The Onpeak bigwigs would trip over themselves to buy it. I honestly can't believe that Ding Xiaohai, who normally acts so honest and upright, would actually try to fight over something like that! No way. I have to get this thing. Come on, Zhang San! Let's go!"

Zhang San's face twitched, and then he started walking in the exact opposite direction.

"Don't be scared, Zhang San. Come on, let's go. That thing is pure money!"

"How about I put you down and you can crawl over there yourself!" Zhang San shot back.

The Captain sighed and looked at Xu Qing. "Xu Qing, you go over there. That thing is totally worth it."

Xu Qing ignored him. The treasure he had hidden on him was so dangerous that, as soon as the competition was over, he planned to leave this place and try to reach Foundation Establishment as soon as possible.

Seeing that Xu Qing wasn't doing anything, the Captain sighed heavily several times in a row. Taking a bite of his half-eaten apple, he looked longingly at the huge snake. From the look of sorrow on his face, one might think he was watching someone steal something that belonged to him.

Meanwhile, the bewitchingly charming young woman who was fighting the snake alongside Ding Xiaohai seemed to realize people were looking in her direction. As she danced nimbly around the snake, she looked over to see Xu Qing and the others standing off in the distance. When she saw Xu Qing, her face lit up, and she gave him a nod as if in greeting. When he didn't seem to notice, her flight talisman glittered as she abandoned the fight with the snake and flew over to him. Xu Qing instantly went on guard, pulling out his iron skewer and preparing some poison powder.

Considering they were strangers coming together by chance, the fact that she was rushing toward him seemed suspicious.

When Zhang San saw what was happening, and realized Xu Qing might release some poisons, he quickly put some distance between the two of them, while simultaneously keeping his eye on the girl. The Captain's eyes narrowed, and he smiled enigmatically.

"Hello, Elder Brother," the young woman said, apparently not even noticing that Xu Qing seemed ready to take action. Running up to him, she extended her right hand, within which was a small bottle with some black mist in it.

It was none other than some of the huge snake's flesh. "Elder Brother, I'm Ling'er from the Intelligence Division. I have a question I'd like to ask you. If you answer it, I'll give you this chunk of flesh. Sound good?" [1]

Her voice sounded like the singing of birds. However, she didn't seem adept at reading facial expressions, as, before Xu Qing could respond to her request, she immediately asked her question. "Elder Brother, do you A) like snakes in general, or B) like eating snake gallbladders?"

Then she stood there looking at him with keen expectation, and completely ignoring the Captain and Zhang San. It was as if this was a question she had been pondering for a very long time.

Zhang San looked at this petite young woman who was almost ridiculously attractive, and then he looked at Xu Qing. In his heart, he sighed.

Meanwhile, Xu Qing frowned and instinctively took a few steps away from Ling'er. It seemed like a very unusual question, so he kept his guard up and cautiously replied, "Snake gall bladders are too bitter."

"So that means you like snakes in general!" Her eyes lit up even more. Apparently, she also wasn't adept at hiding her feelings, as a look of joy appeared on her face, and she twirled excitedly in a circle. Tossing the bottle to Xu Qing, she turned and raced back to rejoin the fight with the nine-headed snake.

The Captain, still perched on Zhang San's back, looked at the little bottle that was now in Xu Qing's hands, and then at the young woman running back toward the snake. "Junior Sister Ling'er, you can ask me a question too! Hey, three questions is fine. Even ten!"

Ling'er looked over her shoulder and stuck her tongue out at him, then kept running toward the huge snake. Looking angry, the Captain slapped the top of Zhang San's head. "What gives? I'm just as good-looking! Ten questions isn't much of a difference from the one question she asked Xu Qing!"

"You want to know what gives?" Zhang San said. "You're missing your lower half. That's what gives."

The Captain seemed inclined to argue back, but then Zhang San moved his hands up as if to throw the Captain on the ground, so he didn't say anything. And thus, time slipped by slowly but surely.

The Onpeak cultivators continued to extract bits of the four snakes through the spell formation, and the snakes grew weaker. Coupled with the fact that the disciples on the island could tell how

valuable the snakes were, they swarmed like wolf cubs to join in destroying them. When the last of the snakes was destroyed, the competition was over.

The spell formation up above was opened, and sunlight once again spilled onto the battle-damaged surfaces of the islands, and the disciples with their bulging bags of loot.

More than half of the disciples who had participated lost their lives. But the survivors' eyes shone brightly in the light of the sun. Xu Qing was among them, looking up at the cultivators in the sky, and the figure atop the head of the dreadnaught.

"You did well," Master Seventh said proudly. "I imagine the Seventh Peak will have some new Foundation Establishment cultivators soon. Congratulations in advance!"

Chapter 128: Silly Girl

Master Seventh's words officially ended the Seventh Peak's Grand Competition in the Merfolk Isles. This time, the Merfolk didn't have the opportunity or right to become allies. Well over half of the Merfolk were dead, and their top experts had been suppressed and enslaved. All of the wealth on the four islands had been plundered. Of course, it was to be expected that a species such as the Merfolk would have other wealth and treasure hidden away. That said, those were things that the Offpeak Qi Condensation disciples couldn't deal with. Although the spell formation had suppressed everything on the islands, there were still many private chambers and reserve items that Qi Condensation cultivators couldn't detect.

One could only imagine the windfall the Seventh Peak Foundation Establishment cultivators were about to experience.

"Seven Blood Eyes has won a major victory," the Captain said, still perched on Zhang San's back. "We killed many birds with one stone!"

He threw his head back and laughed, though that seemed to aggravate his injuries. He quickly took out a new apple and took a bite, and the look of pain disappeared. Apparently, eating apples helped him stop thinking about the pain.

"How many birds?" Zhang San asked.

It was the same question Xu Qing had been thinking about.

"Making the Merfolk Isles the location of the Seventh Peak's Grand Competition was just the tip of the iceberg. First, the Offpeak disciples got their share of plunder. Next, the Foundation Establishment will get their share. And finally the Gold Cores will carry out the third round of looting. After that, the old man will come in for the fourth and final round. Everything the Merfolk have been saving up over the years will be taken away. That's the first bird down.

"After that are all the secret agendas. For instance, the Merfolk were just bait to draw out the Seazombies. Once their teleportation portal was open, our patriarch, who had just experienced a breakthrough and was ravenous, got to fill himself up. That was the second bird.

“Everything that happened will provide an overt warning to all other nonhumans, showing them how powerful Seven Blood Eyes is. That was the third bird. Amazing!

“And then we come to the fourth bird. The Merfolk Isles are halfway between Seven Blood Eyes and the Seazombies. It’s the perfect staging ground for war. And war is coming. Soon.”

Xu Qing had been missing a few key pieces of information, so the Captain’s analysis was very enlightening. However, there was still something he didn’t understand. “Why was the patriarch hungry after his breakthrough?”

“You don’t want to know,” the Captain said, giving him a meaningful glance.

Around then, Master Seventh looked contentedly downward and waved his hand. His dreadnaught roared to heaven, and then spat out a flow of violet light. It spread out, becoming a sea of light that covered all four islands and started a teleportation.

When the rumbling sounds echoed out, Xu Qing finally started to relax. A moment later, he and all the other disciples vanished as they were teleported back to the Seven Blood Eyes headquarters.

After they were gone, the Foundation Establishment cultivators looked down with glittering eyes.

Master Seventh glanced at them and smiled.

“Go!” he said.

Instantly, a hundred beams of light shot down to the four islands. If these Foundation Establishment cultivators didn’t get their chance at some profit, they would not have been happy. The Grand Competition was limited to Qi Condensation cultivators, and thus, they hadn’t been very interested in the proceedings. But now was their chance to get some loot.

In midair above the central altar in the Seven Blood Eyes capital city, a violet sea of light appeared, creating a huge circle. Within the circle appeared all the Seventh Peak disciples, who floated down to the ground.

It was only now that Xu Qing realized that there weren’t even 2,000 people present. As for those who were present, they all pulsed with murderous auras.

4,000 went, and barely half came back.

It really hammered home the point that the Seven Blood Eyes’ Grand Competition was a brutal event. After landing, he looked around and wasn’t able to spot Zhang San and the Captain.

Though the returning disciples all had murderous auras, they also looked excited. Everyone had obviously profited significantly.

Xu Qing spotted Huang Yan in the crowd. He had ended up going to a different island than Xu Qing. Right now, he stood there with his eyebrows dancing in delight. He had seven or eight bags of holding on his belt, and looked very high and mighty. Noticing Xu Qing, he hurried over.

“How’d you do? Did you make out well? I certainly did.”

Xu Qing nodded. However, he was still wracked with pain, and felt incredibly weak and tired.

Huang Yan was about to continue talking when another figure emerged from the violet sea of light. The instant the person appeared, his cultivation base fluctuations weighed down on the entire area, causing all the disciples to go silent and look up.

That included Xu Qing. Above, he saw Zhao Zhongheng's grandfather, the Seventh Peak's Third Elder.

"There are still matters to attend to on the Merfolk Isles," Third Elder said. "The peaklord needs to wait there for the patriarch to return. Therefore, since the Grand Competition is over, I will announce the results.

"Your kill count was recorded in your identity medallion. Don't worry, the medallions don't keep track of the items you looted. They're not capable of doing that. Whatever you took is yours. Historically, the Grand Competitions have always been like that. The sect won't pry into your business. And now, the time has come to announce the winner. Ding Xiaohai, step forward!"

Ding Xiaohai rose up into the air using a flight talisman, his daoist robe in tatters, his body covered in wounds.

"Ding Xiaohai, you have taken first place in the Grand Competition. As such, you are promoted to conclave disciple. You may now wear a pale violet robe, and have the right to live on the mountain peak. However, mansion grottos are expensive, and you have to buy one with your own money."

Looking excited, Ding Xiaohai clasped hands and bowed deeply. "Many thanks to the sect!"

Third Elder looked down at Ding Xiaohai with a look of approval on his face.

Ding Xiaohai had long been considered the top figure among Offpeak disciples, and had always won acclaim.

Third Elder appreciated the fact that this disciple had gone all out for the glory of the sect. But his appreciation was limited to that, and he had no intention of showing him favors. Besides, Ding Xiaohai had thanked the sect, not the elder. From the perspective of the sect, a disciple like Ding Xiaohai was great, as he had fought hard and killed many enemies to take first place. But from Third Elder's perspective, he believed Ding Xiaohai to be stubborn and obstinate. He cared too much about prestige, and had sacrificed possible profit simply to win the competition. People like that usually didn't survive long in the chaotic world they lived in. And it was a waste to bestow favors on someone who wouldn't live long. In troubled times, it was generally better to keep a low profile and not attract attention.

People who stuck out usually ended up paying dearly for that. Because of that, Third Elder actually admired a young fellow named Xu Qing, who had advanced to a very high level with hardly any fanfare.

As Ding Xiaohai offered his excited thanks, the surrounding disciples all congratulated him.

“Congratulations, Elder Brother Ding!”

“Congratulations, Elder Brother Ding!!”

Xu Qing stood in the crowd, with Huang Yan next to him cheering. A moment later, Huang Yan turned to him and quietly said, “Elder Brother Ding is great. All he cares about is killing. He’s not like you and me, who care about profit. If everyone in Seven Blood Eyes was like Elder Brother Ding, that would be great.”

Xu Qing looked at Ding Xiaohai hovering in midair, and he remained calm at heart.

Everyone had their own way of living. Some people cared about profit. Some people cared about reputation. Neither were wrong. Although Ding Xiaohai was already on the verge of a cultivation base breakthrough, whereupon he would get an ordinary violet robe, perhaps it had just been his dream to become a conclave disciple. Xu Qing didn’t feel the need to judge him either way.

All he knew was that he didn’t care about those things. The only thing about Seven Blood Eyes that he cared about was the potential profit. He needed to reach Foundation Establishment, both to ensure that he could stay alive, and also to get a share of the sect’s monthly profits.

Besides that, he didn’t like sticking out in the crowd, unless it came with astonishing benefits. Otherwise, he preferred to stay hidden in the shadows where it was safe.

After bestowing rewards upon Ding Xiaohai, Third Elder went back into the violet sea of light. Then the disciples on the altar went their separate ways.

Xu Qing was exhausted. However, he didn’t dare to stay in Seven Blood Eyes for very long. He had profited far, far too well during the competition. If anyone got any hint of what he had taken, all of Seven Blood Eyes would be shaken to the core. After all... even the great sects on the Revered Ancient mainland coveted life lamps.

Therefore, the first thing he did was go to the shops in the Port District and sell all of the random things he’d acquired. He bought some new talisman treasures, then went to a spell formation shop and used the vast amount of merit points he’d earned in the competition to buy five sets of defensive spell formations.

These spell formations were astonishingly effective. Even one of them would protect a disciple from a Foundation Establishment cultivator for an extended time period, as long as they weren’t in the profound radiance state.

And as long as you had enough spirit stones, and the proper cultivation base power, you could keep the formation going for a long time. With five of them operating simultaneously, they would be even more effective. Buying those five formations drained Xu Qing’s merit points by about ninety percent. But it was worth it. Next he went to a medicine shop to buy all sorts of medicinal pills and poisonous plants.

At that point, he felt mostly prepared, with the exception of his dharmaboat.

I’ll go see how long it will take to get my dharmaboat repaired. If it’s less than a day, I’ll wait. But if it’s longer than that... I can’t afford to stick around.

He wanted to get into Foundation Establishment as quickly as possible. Considering he had a life lamp, every additional day he waited was another day of anxiety and danger.

It was obvious that he couldn't attempt the breakthrough in the sect. He wasn't sure if using the life lamp during the breakthrough would emit fluctuations that others could detect. But he wasn't willing to risk it. Back on Joine Island, he had seen what could happen if things went bad during a Foundation Establishment breakthrough. Although it was unlikely something like that would happen in Seven Blood Eyes, it wasn't impossible. Xu Qing wanted to be prepared for anything.

Given he could use the Spirit Breath Lamp, he felt that he could attempt the breakthrough outside of the sect. Therefore, he didn't dally at all on the way to the Transportation Division to find Zhang San. It was already dark by that point.

Back at Plankspring Way, the old innkeeper sat on the floor, tenderly treating some wounds on the anaconda lying in front of him.

"I can't believe you secretly bought a shapeshifting pill without telling me. You can't just go around consuming those things. You're not ready for shapeshifting yet. Besides, the effects only last for a few days. And if you consume too many, you could cripple your cultivation base. Understand?"

The old innkeeper obviously cared dearly for the anaconda. After applying the medicine and wiping away the excess, he continued to scold her. "You silly little snake. I'm even more stunned that you used the shapeshifting pill to join the Seventh Peak's Grand Competition. Do you know how dangerous that competition is?"

The anaconda actually seemed very happy as she looked at the innkeeper and said, "Coo. Coooo. Cooooooo."

"I'm not lying. That Xu scoundrel really was looking at your gall bladder. Wait a second." The innkeeper glared. "You didn't go to the Grand Competition hoping to run into him, did you?"

"Coo. Coooo!" the snake said.

The innkeeper looked at the snake and sighed. Then he reached out and stroked her head. Sounding like an old dad talking to his daughter, he said, "You silly girl. If he said that snake gall bladders are bitter, doesn't that mean that he's eaten them before? And probably not just one...."

The snake looked stunned, and then her eyes turned red like she might start crying.

Chapter 129: Going Out for Foundation Establishment!

In the Seven Blood Eyes capital city, the wind settled over everything like fine sand. And Xu Qing walked on a carpet of moonlight as he made his way through the city.

His cultivation base was in the great circle of Qi Condensation, but he had not yet healed from his wounds. Therefore, he remained as much on guard now as he had been when he first arrived at Seven Blood Eyes.

Considering he had a life lamp on him now, he was in a state of complete readiness. His right hand swayed at his side in a seemingly natural motion, but the truth was that at the slightest provocation, he could use it to pull out his black iron skewer. He had learned this behavior here in Seven Blood

Eyes. The best way to survive was to be a needle concealed in silk. Unless there was an urgent need, it was better to hide your advantages.

Another skill he had picked up in Seven Blood Eyes was the ability to be even more relaxed the more his guard went up.

Back in the slums and the scavenger basecamp, he had been wound up too tight. He had walked around looking like he was ready to fight at a moment's notice. But the truth was that being that anxious all the time made him slower. The ideal method was to remain relaxed, but ready to take action. That way, enemies wouldn't realize he was in a state of readiness.

Many of his habits and attitudes had changed subconsciously thanks to picking up these new abilities. That said, Xu Qing was still young, and hadn't reached the same level as the Captain, whose mastery over his facial expression had reached the level of perfection.

Xu Qing wasn't trying to imitate the Captain. Everything he did was based on instinct. It was in that manner that he hurried through the city toward Zhang San and the Transportation Division.

However, as he walked along, he stopped upon passing a certain alley. Looking over his shoulder, his eyes turned cold. Slowly emerging around the corner was an emaciated figure. The Mute.

The Mute's daoist robe was voluminous, but he was still wearing a dog skin jerkin underneath it, making it look bulky. One difference from his appearance before was that he had a Violent Crimes Division badge on his robe. He was now a formal member of the division. Seeing that Xu Qing had noticed him, he squatted down onto his haunches to make it clear he wasn't planning to do anything hostile. Instead, it seemed more like he was following Xu Qing, perhaps watching over him protectively.

Xu Qing eyed the Mute, including his daoist robe and badge. He had read the Mute's file, and thus knew that he had originally been assigned to the Violent Crimes Division as an intern. Obviously now he was a full-fledged member.

"I don't like people following me."

The Mute looked at him for a moment, then backed away and disappeared into the night.

Xu Qing looked away. At the moment, he wasn't in the mood to try to figure out if the Mute's intentions were good or malicious. But Xu Qing would kill him if he ignored the warning and kept following him.

He continued on his way, and before long, reached the Transportation Division. Zhang San was there, organizing the items he'd acquired in the Grand Competition.

Zhang San saw him coming and waved. After doing a last bit of organizing, he pulled out his pipe and started smoking. "Junior Brother Xu Qing! We just got back. Shouldn't you be resting? What are you doing here?"

Xu Qing didn't ask Zhang San why he hadn't put his loot into a bag of holding. Instead, he took out his dharmaboat. It thumped down onto the ground with a bang, and sent damaged parts scattering every which way.

"I need my dharmaboat fixed," Xu Qing said calmly.

Zhang San's eyes seemed like they might pop out, and he stood there with his pipe just held in his hand, staring at the partially familiar, partially unfamiliar half of a dharmaboat. After a moment passed, he said, "Hold on, we did meet during the Grand Competition, right? You, I, and the Captain went into a temple complex. And we came back together. Right?"

"That's right," Xu Qing said, looking a bit confused.

"Okay, so I wasn't hallucinating. It really was you that I ran into during the Grand Competition. In that case, do you mind telling me how the hell your dharmaboat got into this shape? My god! This was my finest work! I-I-I mean... even a freaking Foundation Establishment cultivator shouldn't have been able to damage your dharmaboat this badly!! How exactly did you manage to destroy half of it? Did you pull it out and use it as a shield?"

From the way he spoke, it seemed Zhang San was more upset about the damage to the dharmaboat than Xu Qing was. He clearly remembered Xu Qing using the dharmaboat in the fight against the giant composite zombie, and at that time, it was in one piece. It seemed inconceivable that it could have been damaged so badly after that. Unless Xu Qing did something as crazy as the Captain had done....

Zhang San's heart suddenly skipped a beat when he thought back to their flight from Joine Island, and how bedraggled and weak Xu Qing had seemed. He inhaled sharply. "Did you really do something as crazy as the Captain?"

Xu Qing shook his head no. "How long will it take you to fix it, Elder Brother Zhang San?"

Zhang San walked around the entire dharmaboat to inspect it, then sighed in resignation. "Alright, fine. Last time all you brought back was the flying boat, so compared to that, this actually isn't that bad. At least you have half a dharmaboat this time.

"That said, I can't fix it anytime soon. Tomorrow, the Captain and I are going out for a while. He needs me to carry him to some place where he can heal himself. He also said it would be a good place for my Foundation Establishment breakthrough.

"If you're not in a rush, then I'll wait until after I'm in Foundation Establishment. That way, I could do an even better job. Plus, the Captain got some flesh that would serve as an excellent power source."

Xu Qing thought about it, then nodded. He didn't ask Zhang San any questions about his plans for Foundation Establishment. It didn't matter how close you were to someone, asking questions like that would be suspicious.

Clasping hands, he took his leave.

This late at night, the Seven Blood Eyes teleportation portals were never activated unless it was an emergency. And Xu Qing didn't want to stay at an inn. Instead, he headed to the Violent Crimes Division. Now that he was a deputy captain, he had his own office in the Celestial Bureau. He rarely used it, but considering he had nowhere else to stay, he decided to spend the night there. After all, the Violent Crimes Division was a lot safer compared to the inns.

The bureau was empty this late at night, so Xu Qing went into his office, activated one of the defensive spell formations he'd bought, and sat down to meditate.

The night passed.

The following morning when the sun rose, he opened his eyes, quickly put away the spell formation, and left the Violent Crimes Division. He headed straight toward the teleportation portals in the city center. He moved quickly, and arrived at his destination in only an hour.

There weren't many people in line. But there were two individuals who stood out in the crowd. One was Zhang San, and the other was on his back. The Captain. Given their conversation yesterday, Xu Qing wasn't surprised.

The Captain noticed Xu Qing right away. Taking a bite of an apple, he waved.

As Xu Qing approached, Zhang San said hello, and the Captain smiled at him enigmatically.

"You don't want to break through in the sect, so you're going out. Am I right? Want some suggestions on where to go?"

Zhang San's eyes gleamed when he heard the Captain's questions, as if he was pleased to see his investment paying off.

Glancing at the line leading to the teleportation portal, Xu Qing calmly said, "No, I just have some business outside the sect."

"Deputy Captain Xu, your expression is waaay too fake. Okay, let me give you a quick lesson. When you lie, you need to look the other party in the eye. That way, you come across as being sincere. Considering how evasive you're being, I can only come to the conclusion that you must have encountered something amazing on the island. Come, come. Bring it out and let me see. I want to know if it's worth as much as this apple."

Finishing his current apple, he produced the large apple Xu Qing had given him on Joine Island and took a bite.

Looking back from the teleportation portal, Xu Qing nodded. "Sure. So, where are you going, Captain?"

"Me? I'm going to heal up and come back even stronger than before. When I'm back, you little punk, you'd better pay me the 10,000 spirit stones you owe. If not, I'll crush you mercilessly."

Eyes narrowing, the Captain slowly looked down at Xu Qing's bag, then looked back up and took a huge bite of his apple.

"I hope you recover quickly, Captain," Xu Qing said, looking the Captain directly in the eyes.

The Captain's eyes went wide as he returned Xu Qing's gaze, and recalled what he had just said moments ago about sincerity.

Zhang San sighed. He was starting to wonder if the freaks that were the Captain and Xu Qing would always start chatting like this when they ran into each other. He was about to interrupt when, all of a sudden, the sky above Seven Blood Eyes started turning dark. And then, a mighty pressure descended that caused the entire capital city to tremble, and even the seven peaks! Everyone in the city, from cultivators to mortals, was shaken to the core, and looked up at the dome of heaven. Huge waves surged through the entire port area, almost like it was high tide.

As for Xu Qing, his expression flickered as he looked at the source of the darkness.

It was a majestic and seemingly never-ending layer of black clouds coming from the direction of Forbidden by the Phoenix. As it passed over Seven Blood Eyes, it blocked out the sun, and turned everything below it dark. The black clouds were filled with endless lightning that crashed down to the lands below it. And the clouds emanated a threatening air that affected all living beings. Anyone who saw it would feel an instinctual sense of deadly crisis rising up within them.

Within those black clouds, it was just barely possible to see something like a god that resembled both a phoenix and a hawk. It was brown like a rock, with feathers that burned like fire. It seemed to be moving with rage and anger toward the Forbidden Sea, and as it moved out over the water, it whipped the waves into a fury.

Based on the sensation alone, this level of might vastly surpassed that of Joine.

As Xu Qing stared at the clouds, a splitting pain filled his head. It was the same with everyone else, and many people even bled from their eyes, ears, nose, and mouth.

To Xu Qing's shock, he knew who this being was. He had encountered these black clouds on his first trip out to sea. This was none other than the emperor of the number one forbidden region on South Phoenix. It was Flame Phoenix! Back on that occasion, Flame Phoenix had seemed calm, and thus, Xu Qing had not experienced any pain. But now Flame Phoenix was obviously furious, and those emotions affected everything around it. [1]

"If Flame Phoenix is going out to sea, something big must be going on," the Captain said quietly. "I wonder if the emperor of Forbidden by the Zombie has left the forbidden ground?"

The black clouds passed over Seven Blood Eyes and then disappeared into the distance. The sun once again shone down on the city, but everyone remained shaken.

After returning from sea, Xu Qing had asked Zhang San about Flame Phoenix, and had a general idea of the phoenix's identity and terrifying nature. He also knew that though it was generally asleep, it did wake up occasionally. It treated humans and nonhumans equally, and acted as something of a protector to the living beings on the continent of South Phoenix. In fact, that was one reason why humans continued to live on South Phoenix.

With Flame Phoenix gone, things in Seven Blood Eyes gradually started returning to normal. As for Xu Qing, he looked away from the disappearing clouds, walked up to the teleportation portal, and vanished.

"The little punk doesn't trust me," the Captain said. "He must have got something really good. But I doubt it could be as impressive as some of Joine's flesh." Grinning,

he slapped Zhang San on the top of the head. "Let's go, Zhang San. Big Bro's going to treat you to some delicious meat!"

Zhang San sighed and thought, Xu Qing doesn't trust you? Well neither do I! But considering how much I've invested in you, I don't really have any choice, do I? All I can do is follow orders.

"Investments of mine aren't big bros. They're big grandpas!" Shaking his head, Zhang San carried the Captain into the teleportation portal.

After Xu Qing, Zhang San, and the Captain left, Seven Blood Eyes gradually returned to normal. However, the skies seemed a bit overcast. A big storm was coming.

Chapter 130: Using a Lamp in Lone Cultivation

Xu Qing knew he had to be very careful about picking a location for his Foundation Establishment breakthrough.

There were many aspects to consider. For example, he needed to make sure no one was following him. At the same time, he needed to determine if there were any powerful organizations nearby. The local spirit power levels were important; he wanted a place where it wasn't too strong, but wasn't too weak. He didn't want to be too close to a forbidden region, but at the same time, didn't want to be near a city. All things considered, the wilderness seemed like the best option.

It didn't seem like there were going to be a lot of places to pick from.

After he narrowed down the places that were suitable, he needed to determine if anyone else had used those places in the past for breakthroughs.

He had considered the temple complex in the forbidden region by the scavenger basecamp. But the surroundings were too dangerous. Besides, the Singing made him hesitant. So in the end, he chose not to go there.

The first place he visited was a Seven Blood Eyes city near Violet Lands territory. It was in the heartland of human-occupied South Phoenix, where there weren't many forbidden regions, and things were relatively safe.

That said, there were a wide variety of people here.

As the light of teleportation faded, Xu Qing walked off the spell formation. He didn't immediately leave the city. Instead, he found an inn where he could keep an eye on his surroundings and rest. The next morning, he used a talisman treasure to change his appearance, then teleported out of the city.

That was how he spent the next two weeks. He teleported to seven or eight different locations, changing his appearance each time. Not only did it give him a chance to see what the rest of South Phoenix was like, but also, it allowed him to confirm that nobody was following him. At that point, he breathed a sigh of relief.

During those two weeks, his wounds recovered by about seventy or eighty percent, placing his battle prowess at roughly the same place it had been when he went to the Merfolk Isles.

After his last teleportation, he left the city and began searching the wilderness for a suitable spot for his Foundation Establishment breakthrough. That search took another half month. The place he

finally selected was a mountainous region in the southeast of the continent. There were many mountains here, and most of them were covered with jungle. It wasn't a forbidden region. Rather, it was more like a rainforest, with high humidity and silty soil.

Because of the terrain, there weren't many cities nearby. In fact, the nearest one was about a week away. The mutagen wasn't very strong, but neither was the spirit power. Because of that, there were no major organizations nearby. Although there were some aspects to this area that weren't perfect, after having inspected so many other areas, Xu Qing decided that it would work for him.

The specific location he picked wasn't on top of one of the mountains, but rather, in a deep jungle valley between two mountains.

Given his experience dealing with jungles, it wasn't hard for him to find a space to excavate a cave. The soil was loose, making it difficult to dig in. However, Xu Qing was able to use the Seaforming Scripture to extract most of the moisture from one section. Then, deep beneath the surface, he created something like a cave temple.

He concealed the entrance, and also scattered poison powder all over the area. Then, he sat down cross-legged in the cave, took a moment to settle in, then set up and activated all five of his defensive spell formations.

He had an additional formation that would conceal his aura and fluctuations. Putting some spirit stones into the formation to activate it, he settled into place and started breathing deeply. At long last, he was feeling safe.

This is where I'll reach Foundation Establishment.

Looking down into his bag of holding, he checked the various food items he had purchased on his journey through the various cities recently. There was enough food to last for at least half a year.

He wasn't sure how long he would need for the breakthrough, but he had already decided that once he started the process, he wouldn't go outside until it was finished.

He was now totally ready for the breakthrough. However, before beginning any actual cultivation, there were two things he needed to take care of.

Taking out his black iron skewer, he performed an incantation gesture with his left hand and then sent spirit power into it to suppress Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior. The patriarch instantly wailed in agony.

"What's going on, milord? I'm sorry! I was wrong! Don't kill me. Just tell me what I did wrong!"

Xu Qing ignored him and continued with the suppression. Eventually, the patriarch became so weak that he passed out. At that point, Xu Qing stopped. He had been worried that the patriarch might interfere with him in the middle of the breakthrough process. But now the patriarch was weak enough that it wouldn't be an issue. Next, with numerous incantation gestures and portions of spirit power, he put a host of seals on the iron skewer.

His shadow was able to sense everything he had just done, and now it was trembling with the knowledge of what was to come.

Face expressionless, Xu Qing looked at his shadow.

The shadow trembled even more. Then, as Xu Qing stared at it, it started splitting apart, as if it were damaging itself intentionally.

“Not enough,” Xu Qing said tranquilly. Using the power of the violet crystal, he viciously suppressed the shadow, until it became so faint it looked like it was about to collapse. Only then did he stop and say, “If I fail to reach Foundation Establishment, then right before I die, I’ll suppress you out of existence!”

With his shadow taken care of, Xu Qing had weakened two of his greatest potential calamities. Only then did he feel like he could rest at ease. Taking out the Spirit Breath Lamp, he lit it.

Instantly, the light of the lamp spread out to encompass him. Normally speaking, using protective magical devices like this was very expensive. Because of that, cultivators generally would only light them right on the verge of reaching Foundation Establishment.

It was the same even in the fabulously wealthy Seven Blood Eyes. Most disciples who were approaching a breakthrough would rent a spot in the sect, not go outside like Xu Qing. Doing that was considered a luxury.

That said, Xu Qing wasn’t ready for his breakthrough quite yet. His first goal was to expand his spirit sea as much as possible. What was more, he wasn’t going to power the lamp with his own resources, but rather draw on the lamp’s inherent spirit power. He could sense that the lamp had an abundance of spirit power, and he felt no qualms about burning it.

Next, he produced two jade boxes.

One of them contained three Foundation Establishment Pills. The other contained two. The first he’d acquired from the Captain, and the second was from the corpse of the unlucky merman whose breakthrough Xu Qing had interrupted at Foundation Establishment Tower in the Merfolk Isles. That merman had obviously been an important person, and had originally possessed more than these pills. But he had consumed several of them, leaving only two remaining at the time of his death.

Xu Qing was pleased to have a total of five pills. Taking a deep breath within the light of the Spirit Breath Lamp, he closed his eyes and began cultivating.

Seven days passed.

During that time, Xu Qing completely immersed himself in cultivation. He constantly used the Seaforming Scripture, bringing in spirit power from the surroundings and sending it coursing through his body and into his spirit sea. As the process continued, his spirit sea grew larger. It went from the previous limit of 891 meters to 1,020!

That alone smashed all historical records in the Seventh Peak. After all, when Master Seventh broke through, he only reached 810 meters. [1]

Before Master Seventh, no one had reached that level. Now, a full sixty-year-cycle later, in a little cave no one knew about, Xu Qing pushed the Seaforming Scripture to new heights. [2]

His 1,020-meter spirit sea was shockingly majestic, and if he revealed it openly, it would shake the jungle around him. If people in Seven Blood Eyes found out about it, they would be shaken, from the top leaders to the lowliest disciples.

Unfortunately, that would attract far too much attention in the sect. And in a place where the only unifying force was profit, being so dazzling wouldn't necessarily lead to a good outcome.

Xu Qing had no intention of letting anyone know the truth. Prestige didn't matter to him. He just wanted to stay alive, and maybe increase his quality of life. In the brutal world he lived in, the only way to do that was to get stronger. If an enemy threatened your safety, you needed to be able to kill them. That was the only way to stay truly safe.

Of course, if there was some purpose to revealing his spirit sea, he would consider it. But until he was sure that he was superior to everyone around him, he would keep it hidden, and use it only to strike a killing blow unexpectedly. That was his way of staying alive.

Taking a deep breath, he calmly continued with his cultivation.

More days passed. He had not reached the final limits for his spirit sea, and thus, every day it would grow by another thirty meters.

1,050.

1,110.

By the time another seven days passed, his spirit sea reached the shocking level of 1,200. His spirit sea was now quadruple the size of an ordinary disciple in the great circle.

Thanks to the light of the Spirit Breath Lamp, Xu Qing seemed sparkling and translucent, as though endless seawater was flowing through him. In fact, the entire cave was filled with thick water vapor.

Opening his eyes, he took a short break to eat, check the spell formations and poison powder, and then prepared to continue.

I can still push it farther!

1,230 meters. 1,260 meters. 1,290 meters.

At the end of the third week, his spirit sea reached 1,410 meters, and at long last, he was starting to feel pain.

It was like he was a bag of water. As that bag filled with water, it would eventually reach its limit, and burst if too much was added.

Breathing unsteadily, Xu Qing mulled the matter over and then gritted his teeth and continued with his cultivation. This time, he went slower. Instead of adding 30 meters per day, he instead added 15.

As he made further progress, the pain increased. Half a month later, his spirit sea reached the astounding size of 1,500 meters.

Pain assailed him throughout his body, to the point where he seemed like he might burst. Meanwhile, the violet crystal worked madly to help him recover.

"That's my limit," he murmured.

He had pushed himself so far that he felt like it would be difficult to move. It was like entire mountains and seas were resting on his shoulders, pushing down on him with incredible force. Thankfully, he had the violet crystal, otherwise he wouldn't be able to continue with cultivation.

Now it's time for Foundation Establishment!

Eyes shining with determination, he took out the first Foundation Establishment Pill and put it in his mouth.

It was like throwing water into boiling oil. His 1,500-meter spirit sea exploded, its surface instantly turning into raging waves as it spread out with mountain-toppling, sea-draining force.