

Timescape 161

Chapter 161: Mission Alteration

Xu Qing ignored the screaming Seazombie, whose soul power was rapidly being sucked away. Instead, he checked his surroundings and also mentally reviewed the map he had been given as part of the mission. According to the map, this particular teleportation portal was supposed to be difficult to find.

Considering that the Seazombies had been waiting there in ambush, it seemed to indicate that things in the area weren't going very well for the sect. It was definitely not what the mission description had indicated.

After Xu Qing absorbed the souls of all the Seazombies, he looked back at the teleportation portal and thought about just reactivating it and leaving. If a mission turned out to be too different from its description, disciples had the right to give up on it.

A moment later, his heart sank. There was some strange force suppressing the teleportation portal, making it impossible to leave through it.

“Well, isn't this interesting.”

Still in the profound radiance state, he flew up into the air. Of course, he didn't just hover there like an idiot. He started moving, while at the same time, assessing his surroundings. All the while, he used the souls he'd absorbed to batter at his next dharma aperture. Unfortunately, with 40 open apertures, the soul power required going forward just kept getting more astonishing. An ordinary Foundation Establishment Seazombie just wasn't enough to break one of them open. He needed more than that.

After getting an overview of the island, Xu Qing dropped down out of the ash and lava-filled sky, landing atop a tree in the jungle. The treetop had no leaves, only charred branches.

He left the profound radiance state, and when he returned to his ordinary state, he frowned. He had just seen a large number of Seazombies in the distance. It was an army, surging out of the sea and onto the shore.

And he had also seen numerous locations on the island where Seazombies lay waiting in ambush. With that many Seazombies, there had to be some who could enter the profound radiance state. And it was even possible there were Gold Core cultivators among them. It was for that reason he'd left the profound radiance state; he didn't want to attract any unwanted attention.

There's something unusual going on with this mission!

Xu Qing braced himself mentally. The mission description hadn't mentioned anything about dangerous circumstances. There was no way that only twenty Foundation Establishment cultivators could hold this spot against an entire army.

Around then, his identity medallion vibrated, and he looked at it to find that the mission had been updated.

“A huge Seazombie army has suddenly assaulted the Pearl Archipelago. All escort and aid missions are being changed. The mission rewards are being doubled. Head

without delay to the central part of the island you are on and help any Second Peak cultivators there to evacuate.

“Be aware that all central areas have Fifth Peak disciples on duty. After the time it takes an incense stick to burn, the sect will activate the grand spell formation on the Merfolk Isles, and unleash a tideflow power to destroy the restrictive spell limiting teleportations on the Pearl Archipelago. At that time, all disciples can work with the Fifth Peak cultivators to teleport to safety.”

Even as Xu Qing read the information, the mission classification changed to red, indicating that it was now an extremely dangerous mission.

I wanted a simple mission that would allow for some rest. This is annoying.

Sighing, he shot backward to collide into a Qi Condensation Seazombie who had been sneaking up on him. The Seazombie was on such a lower level than him that he instantly exploded. Not bothering to look over his shoulder, Xu Qing waved, sending his snakeneck dragon out. As it slammed into the ground below, trees shattered, revealing several dozen Seazombies who had been preparing an ambush. They were all in Qi Condensation, and thus, they exploded one by one.

That said, their presence was concerning. Ordinarily speaking, why would Qi Condensation cultivators try to ambush a Foundation Establishment cultivator? He wasn't in the profound radiance state, but his fluctuations were that of Foundation Establishment. It didn't take long for him to find out the answer to the question.

Within the remains of the exploded Qi Condensation cultivators, he saw white threads. They were implanted within the bodies in a way that would allow those cultivators' minds and actions to be controlled like puppets.

Right when Xu Qing spotted the white threads, two shadowy figures suddenly shot toward him at high speed. They were both Foundation Establishment Seazombies.

One of them had a huge tumor on his arm that split open to reveal an eye. The eye glowed with white light as it stared at Xu Qing, as if it were assessing him. It reminded Xu Qing of the eye he had seen when he first teleported in. It seemed these eyes allowed Seazombies to check whether a Foundation Establishment cultivator could enter the profound radiance state.

Thankfully, Xu Qing's shadow was still keeping his life lamp concealed.

After these two Seazombies believed that Xu Qing couldn't enter the profound radiance state, they launched their attack.

As they closed in, one of them performed an incantation gesture to summon a huge battle-ax with a black dragon coiled around it, which stared at Xu Qing with vicious eyes. The other summoned a host of puppetized great circle Qi Condensation Seazombies, each of which stared at Xu Qing with glowing eyes as they spread out to surround him. At the same time, both Seazombies pulled out magical devices which vastly increased their destructive capabilities.

They were apparently skilled at performing magical attacks in combination with each other. As they unleashed their dharma force, a skeletal hand formed over Xu Qing, pulsing with power that bordered on the profound radiance state as it crushed down toward him.

Xu Qing took it all in, quickly checked the surroundings to make sure it was safe, then ignited his life lamp! It didn't matter that these opponents didn't have the profound radiance state. Xu Qing was going all out, like a lion pouncing on a hare. The last thing he wanted to do was fail where failure was least expected.

It was like a volcano erupting within him as dazzling light spread out to cover him. Terrifying force radiated out, smashing into everything around him with mountain-toppling, sea-draining force.

The attacking Foundation Establishment Seazombies' faces fell, and their pupils constricted.

As for the Seazombie with the eye on his arm, his mind reeled as that eye suddenly emitted bright red light. That was a warning that this Seven Blood Eyes cultivator was extremely dangerous!

However, the warning came too late.

With Xu Qing's life lamp lit, these two Seazombies were trembling so badly it seemed like they might collapse....

The skeletal hand they had summoned didn't have a chance to even reach Xu Qing before it started emitting cracking sounds. In the blink of an eye, it was so damaged it was obviously about to explode. The Qi Condensation puppets burst into flames and were wiped out of existence. The battle-ax flying toward Xu Qing turned bright red, as if it were about to melt, and the eyes of the coiling dragon changed from vicious to terrified.

The two Seazombies were already scared out of their minds. How could they ever have predicted that the cultivator they had already scanned and thought to be safe, would actually be able to enter the profound radiance state?

And this terrifying power obviously surpassed the level of a single life flame. This was the power of two life flames, in other words, mid-Foundation Establishment. And they knew full well how terrifying of a level that was.

Not all Foundation Establishment cultivators were the same. Those who had a life flame, and those who did not, were different. And the difference between one life flame and two... was poles apart.

It was possible for Qi Condensation cultivators in a lower level to fight a cultivator in a higher level of Qi Condensation. But in Foundation Establishment, the terrifying difference between levels made that impossible. There weren't many Foundation Establishment cultivators who had cultivated their way to having two life flames. As a result, people like that generally had high positions.

And none of them were random people no one had ever heard about. The only person who could fight someone like that was another cultivator with two life flames.

These terrified Seazombies now wanted nothing more than to simply flee.

To Xu Qing, everything was moving in slow motion. Reaching out to the two shocked Seazombies, he made a grasping motion with his right hand.

The battle-ax shattered. The black dragon screamed as it crumbled into ashes. The skeletal hand crumbled.

The two terrified Seazombies were wrapped up with massive force that dragged them toward Xu Qing. That force was so strong that cracking sounds rang out from inside their bodies. A moment later, black balefire erupted from Xu Qing and engulfed them. They didn't even have time to

scream. Their dharma apertures collapsed, their bodies exploded, and their flesh and blood became a haze as their souls were sucked into Xu Qing. Turning, he left.

Everything happened in the time it takes a spark to fly off of a piece of flint.

And after Xu Qing disappeared, the area went still, as if nothing had just happened. The ground was dry, the plants and vegetation gone. The skeletal hand and the battle-ax were nowhere to be seen, and the Seazombies had turned into dust that mixed with the black ash falling from the sky.

Xu Qing was moving in the profound radiance state, like a lightning bolt crossing the island toward the central area.

He could accept a change in the mission. Circumstances on a battlefield could transform very quickly, and often in ways that no one could predict or control. However, the fact that the mission had been amended so quickly went to show that the overall situation was still under the control of Seven Blood Eyes.

Therefore, he would carry out the mission to help the Second Peak cultivators evacuate. As for the other disciples who had accepted the same mission as him, he didn't care about them. He knew that he only had the time it takes an incense stick to burn. And thus, he didn't hold anything back. In only ten breaths of time, he caught sight of the central valley.

Chapter 162: Hair Like Black Snow

The valley wasn't very big, and was filled with the fluctuations of teleportation. There were over a hundred Second Peak disciples, most of them disassembling pill furnaces and other magical devices that Xu Qing didn't recognize. Behind them was a mid-sized teleportation portal. Next to the portal were a handful of Fifth Peak disciples in green daoist robes, attempting to make adjustments to the formation. Every so often, the portal would emit fluctuations and glitter with light, then go dark.

There was fighting at the entrance of the valley. About thirty cultivators from various peaks were engaged in fierce combat with a swarm of Seazombies. The ground beneath their feet was littered with corpses, severed limbs, and the like. It was a shocking and ghastly sight. The fighting was primarily between Foundation Establishment cultivators, and the shockwaves from the combat rolled out far in all directions.

Meanwhile, further in the distance were two cultivators who surpassed the others. Shockingly, they were both in the profound radiance state.

The Seazombie had been an old human man in life. He wore an extremely tattered gray robe, the extraordinary fluctuation of which pegged it as a magical device.

The Seven Blood Eyes cultivator was a tall young woman. [1]

She wore the orange daoist robe of the Second Peak, and though her beauty carried with it an air of maturity, she moved with incredible speed. Unfortunately, Second Peak disciples weren't known for their fighting ability. Therefore, despite the fact that she and her opponent were both in the profound radiance state, she was clearly at a disadvantage. Blood oozed out of the corners of her mouth, and she didn't have time to wipe it away.

The profound radiance state made cultivators capable of incredible speeds. However, the slightest misstep could be fatal, and therefore, she couldn't afford to get distracted.

Right when Xu Qing appeared, the young woman from the Second Peak ran out of dharma force, and her life flame started flickering out. Her speed suffered as well, and the Seazombie took advantage of the opportunity to land a vicious blow to her chest.

The young woman's garments were shredded open, revealing flesh beneath. At the same time, blood sprayed out of her mouth as she flew backward and slammed into a nearby boulder. The boulder cracked in half and sent chunks of small rock flying out in all directions. The young woman struggled to get back to her feet, but her life flame was already out. Once again, she coughed up blood, causing her face to turn even more ashen than before.

Seeing that, the Seazombie snorted coldly, then ignored the young woman as he turned toward the teleportation portal in the valley. Before he could move toward it, his expression became one of shock as he looked over his shoulder.

"The power of two life flames!" he blurted. From his perspective, everything in the valley was moving in slow motion. However, off in the distance, he saw a shocking figure blurring toward him at incredible speed.

The contrast between the slow motion and the incredible speed prompted the Seazombie to immediately turn tail to flee.

Given that he only had one life flame, he knew full well that he was as different from someone with two flames as a regular Foundation Establishment cultivator with no profound radiance state was different from him.

Dammit, there's a two-flame cultivator here. That's mid-Foundation Establishment! Only a fellow Seazombie who also has two flames could fight him! The intelligence reports were wrong!!

Though the Seazombie tried to flee, he was too late.

Xu Qing had already spotted him! And now, this Seazombie with only one life flame was his prey.

Right now, Xu Qing needed souls to open dharma apertures, and ordinary Foundation Establishment cultivators weren't enough to open them. In fact, even the two Seazombie cultivators he had just killed weren't enough to open his 41st dharma aperture.

But assimilating a Seazombie with a life flame would be totally different. Even just one would be enough to open a dharma aperture.

As soon as the Seazombie started fleeing, Xu Qing changed directions. Instead of heading toward the portal in the valley, he shot right toward the Seazombie. He was moving so quickly that it only took three breaths of time before he was right in front of his target.

Clenching his right hand into a fist, he unleashed a blow backed by the terrifying power of his life lamp.

The Seazombie could only attempt to avoid the blow. He was in the profound radiance state, but was so far below Xu Qing that he couldn't compare to him in terms of speed. Therefore, he failed, and Xu Qing's fist slammed into his chest. A boom rang out, like heavenly thunder, crashing out in all directions.

Blood sprayed out of the Seazombie's mouth, and his body was ravaged as he was sent spinning off to the side, where he slammed into a boulder. In fact, he hit the boulder so hard he couldn't extricate

himself. He was clearly grievously wounded. It was only due to the fact that he had released the power of the magical device that was his robe, and simultaneously overdrawn on his dharma apertures, that he wasn't killed in one blow.

Even still, he was so badly injured that he clearly wouldn't recover anytime soon. Despair filled his eyes.

And that was because, from his perspective, Xu Qing had just vanished.

A moment later, black flame filled the Seazombie's field of vision. It was Xu Qing's hand, reaching out toward his forehead.

As rumbling sounds filled the Seazombie's mind, Xu Qing's shadow went crazy, lunging forward to corrode the Seazombie's fleshly body. The iron skewer also stabbed into the daoist robe, and began to absorb the magical device.

Because of those three assaults, the Seazombie let loose a bloodcurdling scream. However, it didn't last long, as he transformed into nothing but ashes a moment later. The only things left behind were his daoist robe and bag of holding, which Xu Qing took, then hovered in midair looking down at the fighting in the valley.

More black 'snow' fell, intermixed with crimson droplets of lava that looked like phoenix feathers.

The red light from the lava shone on Xu Qing's stern face, creating a stark contrast to the coldness of his eyes. It was an image like something from an ethereal scroll painting, filled with both beauty and somberness.

The battlefield had gone still. All eyes were fixed on Xu Qing, and they seemed as dazed as if they were gazing at the child of a god. As the cultivators who had come here for the same mission as Xu Qing arrived, they also saw him, and felt shaken to the core, their hearts filling with reverence as they saluted him formally.

It was the same with the Second Peak disciples, as well as the Fifth Peak cultivators who were trying to fix the teleportation portal. All of them looked at him with deep respect.

Gu Muqing was in the crowd, and when she looked up at Xu Qing hovering amidst the black snow and falling crimson sparks, she seemed lost in a daze. It was a profoundly moving visual image that she would never be able to forget. [2]

As for the Seazombies trying to invade the valley, they were all trembling. And though it was hard to say which one was first, they began to flee in terror.

Unfortunately for them, a black iron skewer was waiting for them, as well as a shadow that, because evening was falling, was hard to see, yet was very interested in competing with Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior.

Just outside the valley was the Second Peak young woman who had finally struggled to her feet. With a strange look in her eyes, she said, "Well met, Elder Brother! Many thanks for the kindness of saving my life!"

After she spoke, everyone said similar things.

"Well met, Elder Brother!"

“Well met, Elder Brother!!”

The wind blew, causing the black ‘snow’ to swirl along with Xu Qing’s long hair. Then he looked up, and his eyes glittered like stars.

As the disciples offered greetings, screams could be heard in the distance as Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior and the shadow unleashed a whirlwind of death. To the shadow, any Seazombie could be considered food, and though they didn’t taste very good, the shadow wasn’t picky. Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior specifically needed magical devices. However, he felt like he didn’t quite match up to the shadow in terms of strength, so he made a big show of the fighting. The reality was that he hoped to arouse the shadow’s fighting spirit. The faster the shadow absorbed enemies, the sooner the patriarch would be able to find the magical devices. Given that, the circumstances actually ensured that they were working well together.

That said, compared to the wily old fox that the patriarch was, the shadow was actually a bit immature. As a result, the shadow never realized what was going on, and continued to fight harder and harder, even occasionally looking a bit contemptuous of the patriarch. The patriarch, in turn, egged on the shadow by pretending to look annoyed.

The screams of the Seazombies created a stark contrast to the Seven Blood Eyes disciples in the valley offering respectful greetings to Xu Qing

After looking over the group, Xu Qing turned his attention to the Second Peak young woman, who was in a very weak state. Nodding to her, he exited the profound radiance state.

He had a lot of dharma force, but could only support the sustained use of his life lamp for about six hours. Therefore, he wanted to conserve dharma force as much as possible. Of course, most two-flame cultivators who knew about that would be shocked, as they would only be able to remain in the profound radiance state for about an hour, perhaps a bit more. Because of all the work Xu Qing had done in Qi Condensation to prepare for his breakthrough, that was how different he was from the crowd.

Xu Qing moved down into the valley.

Now that he had extinguished his life flame, it was much easier for the other disciples to make out his features. Before, they had only been able to catch a glimpse of his face, but now they could clearly see his spectacularly good-looking, nearly bewitching, features.

All the disciples who looked at them, be they male or female, felt dazed. Of course, the female disciples seemed to remain in a daze for longer than the male disciples. Much of that had to do with the dazzling display they had seen moments ago.

Regardless, Xu Qing’s features, plus the power of his cultivation base, combined with his violet robe and long, flowing hair, made everyone feel like they were looking at an immortal.

As he walked through the valley, the Second Peak disciples all treated him with great respect, and the female cultivators’ eyes glistened as they secretly studied him from head to toe.

When Xu Qing spotted Gu Muqing in the crowd, he gave her a slight nod. Because of that, many of the surrounding Second Peak disciples glanced in her direction. She blushed a bit, and was thinking of saying something, but Xu Qing just walked past to the teleportation portal.

“When can we teleport out of here?” Xu Qing asked quietly.

The Fifth Peak disciples greeted him respectfully. Then one of them, a Foundation Establishment cultivator with no life flame, said, "Elder Brother, the formation is mostly ready. Once the sect's tideflow power arrives, I think we should be able to open the portal."

Chapter 163: A Freak!

Seven Blood Eyes was a sect in which profit was the most important thing to everyone. For that reason, the weak showed clear respect to the strong. And no one would be foolish enough to behave improperly in front of someone stronger than them. People who did that didn't end up living for very long.

That was why the Fifth Peak Foundation Establishment disciple was acting as respectfully as if Xu Qing were a sect elder. It didn't matter what he thought inside, he made sure to show the right attitude on the outside. In response to the disciple's words, Xu Qing nodded, then found a place to sit down cross-legged and meditate. His plan was to wait for the tideflow, and simultaneously work on his 41st dharma aperture. The soul of a life flame Foundation Establishment cultivator turned out to be just as useful as he'd imagined. It only took a moment for him to open his 41st dharma aperture, and even make some progress with his 42nd. He felt very pleased. If he could keep up this level of progress, then it wouldn't be long before he could ignite his second life flame. At that point, it would look like he had two flames, but would actually be as strong as someone with three.

Sadly, Foundation Establishment cultivators with life flames aren't very common. I guess it's going to come down to luck. The more he thought about it, the more he realized he was probably going to have to accept dangerous missions.

As he pondered the matter, more disciples entered the valley to help the Second Peak disciples dismantle their pill furnaces and magical devices. When all of the work was done, the disciples gathered near the teleportation portal to wait for the sect's tideflow to arrive.

Of course, many of them were surreptitiously looking at Xu Qing and whispering amongst themselves. He was their pillar now. Though they were still on the battlefield, his presence made them feel a lot safer. As time passed, the island shook and trembled. Simultaneously, the fluctuations of teleportation continued to spread out. Also, the mutagen got stronger. Meanwhile, the sky grew darker, and the clouds above made the sky vague and indistinct, as though great danger were hidden inside them.

As Xu Qing sat in meditation, the young woman from the Second Peak approached, holding her ripped garment against her chest as she did. She was obviously seriously injured, as her face was pale white. However, it didn't make her any less attractive. She had an oval face with arching eyebrows and phoenix-like eyes that seemed perpetually sad. Her age was probably around thirty, and because of her constant work with medicinal pills, she was similar to Gu Muqing in that she exuded a pleasant, medicinal aroma.

"Elder Brother, I previously hid a lot of magical eyes on this island. More than half have been destroyed, but there are enough left to get a good idea of what's going on."

Xu Qing looked at her. It was hard to say if she was doing it intentionally, but the way she stood over Xu Qing as he sat there made it impossible for him to not see right through the ripped part of her garment to her half-covered bosom, which was as fair as snow.

Xu Qing shifted his gaze to focus on her face.

Meanwhile, as she got a good look at his face, and sensed how terrifyingly powerful he was, her heart started pounding. However, she quickly realized she was acting inappropriately, so she bowed her head, performed an incantation gesture, and summoned a projected image.

The image revealed large amounts of Seazombies pouring onto the other islands from the water. It was a shocking scene. There were Seazombies converging on this island as well, in several locations, including the valley they were in.

“How long until the tideflow?” Xu Qing asked.

“A hundred breaths of time.” The one to answer wasn’t the young woman, but Gu Muqing.

She seemed anxious as her long black hair swirled around her. A few strands of hair fell across her face, but that only made her seem more beautiful. Her bright eyes, and the pleasant aroma she naturally exuded, made her seem like a beauty from a painting.

Looking at the injured Second Peak cultivator, she bowed slightly. “Well met, Sect Aunt Li.”

The woman smiled, then gave a deep, meaningful look to Gu Muqing, who in her eyes was nothing more than a little girl.

Gu Muqing turned back to Xu Qing. “Elder Brother Xu.” When she confirmed that Xu Qing didn’t mind if she addressed him in that manner, she relaxed a bit inwardly. “Elder Brother Xu,” she continued, “this jade slip contains all the instructions for the taboo pills here. We were instructed to activate the pills before we left. You have the highest cultivation base here, so the decision is yours to make.” With that, she handed him a jade slip.

He took it, not bothering to think about why Gu Muqing possessed the jade slip, and not the Foundation Establishment cultivator. As he well knew, many of the old-timers in Second Peak trusted conclave disciples more than anyone else, so it was no surprise to him.

As he scanned the jade slip, shouting could be heard from outside the valley as a group of Seazombie cultivators appeared. Hardly paying any attention at all to the corpses on the ground, they charged into the valley.

Everyone in the valley seemed nervous, but Xu Qing didn’t look away from the jade slip.

However, only a moment later, agonized shrieks rang out as the approaching Seazombies realized they had started melting. Some only managed to take a few more steps before becoming nothing more than pools of blue blood. The disciples in the valley were all shaken. However, the Second Peak disciples recovered their wits more quickly than the others. Looking at the area where the Seazombies had been killed, they then looked at Xu Qing. They knew that it was poison.

Only a very unique poison could kill a Seazombie so quickly, and could only be concocted by someone with a very deep understanding of medicinal theory. And it would also require a lot of experimentation. The former was a lot more attainable than the latter.

That was one reason why not very many people on the Second Peak specialized in concocting poison. Oftentimes, the person concocting the poison would end up poisoning themselves and dying before they even had a chance to use their poison on someone else.

The presence of the deadly poison made everyone feel a little less nervous, and the area outside the valley went quiet. The poison there, plus the presence of the iron skewer and Xu Qing's shadow, ensured that things were still.

Thus, a hundred breaths of time passed, and everyone stood and approached the teleportation portal to wait for its activation. The portal wasn't very large, and thus, it was going to take three rounds of teleportation to get everyone out.

Standing, Xu Qing walked over to the portal, and was about to say something when his expression suddenly flickered, and he looked in the direction of the valley entrance. There in the distance, from out of the darkness of the night, emerged a burning fire surrounding a man in a white robe. He pulsed with zombie poison, and had a profound radiance state that obviously surpassed the level of one life flame. As he neared, thunder rumbled.

He moved with such incredible speed that ordinary Foundation Establishment cultivators couldn't track his movements properly. Not even the Second Peak woman with one life flame was able to see him clearly. The other disciples present simply felt an immense pressure building up in their minds.

The volcanic power within this Seazombie, combined with his zombie poison, made it so that the flames surrounding him were green.

Two life flames. Xu Qing's pupils constricted.

This was the first cultivator Xu Qing had seen on the battlefield who had two life flames. His shocking power and burning light made everything in the area turn a shade of green. It was like a huge green hand was approaching the valley to crush it.

When the approaching white-robed Seazombie got close enough to see everything in the valley clearly, he seemed to pause for a moment. But then he laughed bizarrely and sped up. Xu Qing's eyes narrowed as he stepped forward and ignited his life flame.

The volcanic eruption caused him to enter the profound radiance state, which was now becoming quite familiar. Then, everything around him slowed down except for the incoming white-robed Seazombie. Xu Qing shot up into the air to meet him.

In the blink of an eye, they slammed into each other, causing a boom to crash out that surpassed any kind of thunder. Then Xu Qing clenched his right hand into a fist and let loose a punch backed by his burning life flame. The white-robed Seazombie did the exact same thing, and when their fists met, another huge boom exploded out.

A tremor passed through Xu Qing, and he felt his internal organs vibrating. This opponent was so powerful that he was now gaining a new appreciation for two-flame opponents. Thanks to the reserves he had built up in Qi Condensation, and his life lamp, he should still have an advantage over someone with two life flames. But from what he could tell, he was about on equal footing with this white-robed Seazombie.

Waving his hand, he sent his snakeneck dragon roaring forth, while simultaneously tapping into his balefire to summon a host of flame daggers. As the daggers flew forth, he raised his left hand over head to summon the heavenly saber. Boosted by the profound radiance state, the saber was stronger and could affect a greater area. And black flames wreathed it as it slashed toward the white-robed Seazombie. A huge boom rang out.

The white-robed Seazombie staggered backward, as if it had been difficult to stand up to the attack, and his life flame was flickering dangerously.

Then, Xu Qing's expression turned more vicious as he pressed the attack. The Seazombie's white robe was so voluminous it was hard to make out his facial features. But his zombie poison was extremely potent. What was more, his eyes were visible, and they radiated a crazy look that caused Xu Qing to frown briefly. However, there wasn't time for him to consider the situation at length. Charging forward, he slammed into the Seazombie again.

Booms rang out continuously as they clashed back and forth, moving at incredible speed and unleashing shocking magical techniques. In the space of only a few dozen breaths, they attacked each other over a hundred times.

After a final barrage, the two of them backed away from each other. Xu Qing was coughing up blood, as was the Seazombie. However, as the Seazombie glared at Xu Qing, his eyes radiated that crazy look, plus... a bit of defiance.

Xu Qing looked him in the eyes. Then, without a word, he tapped into that volcanic power and shot forward like a blade.

His dagger danced, and the heavenly saber appeared. His spirit seas unleashed crushing might, and the black iron skewer shot through the air, its bell tinkling. Of course, Xu Qing released poison as he attacked. As he closed in at top speed, he aimed his dagger right at his enemy's throat.

The white-robed Seazombie was also extraordinarily skilled. His hands flashed in a double-handed incantation gesture, causing frigid cold to freeze the entire area in front of Xu Qing, blocking his path. As that barrier shot up, the Seazombie also launched an attack.

Xu Qing was forced to back away. At this point, the Seazombie cultivator's eyes shone brightly as he suddenly used a secret magic to pierce through the air and appear right in front of Xu Qing and reach out toward his throat.

Seeing that, Xu Qing did something the Seazombie couldn't ever have predicted. Instead of evading, he viciously head-butted the Seazombie's hand.

As blood flowed out of Xu Qing's head, the white-robed Seazombie's hand collapsed past the wrist, and he howled in anguish. Then, just as he was about to flee, Xu Qing pressed the attack and slashed his dagger into the Seazombie's abdomen.

The attack was so quick that the white-robed Seazombie's pupils constricted, and he lunged in the opposite direction. Though he succeeded, he didn't quite move fast enough, and Xu Qing's blade slashed open his robe, causing some items inside to fall out.

It was an odd assortment of things, but what stood out most to anyone who could see it was the fruit. There were tangerines, peaches, pears, and of course a lot of apples....

Chapter 164: Seeking Revenge over the Smallest Grievance

Xu Qing froze for a moment and looked at all the fruit. Especially noteworthy was that the pile included several very large apples. Xu Qing had to wonder why this Seazombie would have so many things like that stuffed into his robe.

The white-robed Seazombie had been in the process of retreating at full speed. But now he also froze in place. As he did, the hood of his robe shifted, and though it didn't reveal his face, it did cause some of his hair to fall out into the open. At the same time, he looked down at the fruit.

The two of them looked back up, and their gazes locked. Xu Qing stood there quietly. The white-robed Seazombie also stood there quietly.

Then, the ground quaked, and the surface of the sea beyond the shores of the island exploded into motion. Off in the distance, a rumbling sound echoed out that could shake heaven and earth, like the roar of a god.

A violet light appeared off in the distance, like a violet sea, spreading out rapidly. Looking at it closely, it was possible to see that the source of that rumbling, and the light, was the Merfolk Isles. This had to be the Seven Blood Eyes Formation's tideflow power that was mentioned in the mission description.

As the sea of light expanded, the Seazombie's ability to suppress the teleportation portals in the Pearl Archipelago waned, allowing for teleportations to begin. Thus, the Fifth Peak disciples behind Xu Qing in the valley made some adjustments and activated the teleportation portal. The first wave of disciples stepped onto the portal and vanished. Similar things were happening on the other islands in the archipelago. Xu Qing didn't pay close attention to all that, but he could sense that the second wave of teleportations would begin soon. Right now, what interested him more was this white-robed Seazombie.

A moment after their eyes locked onto each other, Xu Qing burst into motion. In the profound radiance state, he was capable of spectacular levels of speed, and the life lamp gave him immense strength. In the blink of an eye, he was closing in on the white-robed Seazombie. However, instead of aiming a blow at his abdomen, this time he aimed toward his hair.

For some reason, he seemed particularly interested in this Seazombie's hair. The white-robed Seazombie gasped and again unleashed the power of his life flames. A terrifying wave of energy erupted out, allowing him to evade Xu Qing's grasp. Then the two of them started fighting again, and booms echoed out.

Xu Qing moved so fast that the cultivators in the valley couldn't even see him clearly. The Second Peak woman, who had not yet teleported out, nervously activated her own profound radiance state, but not even she was able to see exactly what was happening. All she could see was a host of blurred afterimages. The ground shook, and the terrifying crashing sounds made it obvious how dangerous this battle was.

The white-robed Seazombie also fought with deadly precision, although, as the battle raged, he seemed mostly interested in protecting his hair. He was so incredible that Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior was incapable of doing anything to him; the patriarch couldn't catch up to him, and in fact, could hardly see him. It was the same with Xu Qing's shadow. Compared to the white-robed Seazombie, the shadow was slow.

However, Xu Qing attacked with brutal ferocity. On a number of occasions, he almost managed to grab some hair. At one point, he sent his dharma force into his fist, only to dodge to the side to avoid the Seazombie's attack, then send his knee flying viciously toward his opponent's lower half.

The white-robed Seazombie's expression flickered. However, this Seazombie was a ferocious opponent. Blocking the knee with one hand, he opened his mouth and spat out a huge cloud of zombie poison.

The poison attack seemed like it would immediately start to melt Xu Qing. And yet, Xu Qing's facial expression was the same as ever. With his knee strike blocked, he spun, sending his left leg flying toward the Seazombie's head like a whip.

A boom echoed out, and the two separated. Not hesitating for a moment, Xu Qing performed an incantation gesture, causing black fire to rage out into the shape of numerous hands, which then shot toward the Seazombie.

By this point, the Seazombie was gasping for breath. Obviously this battle was very draining to him. Howling, he threw out a hand and performed an incantation gesture, then shoved his hand toward Xu Qing. Instantly, the air in front of him crumbled in on itself, the effect spreading rapidly toward Xu Qing.

Xu Qing's expression flickered, and he dodged to the side. As he did, the white-robed Seazombie suddenly accelerated, appearing right in front of him and shoving his hand out to hit him in the chest.

Xu Qing tumbled backward about 300 meters, blood oozing out of his mouth. Then he stabilized himself and shot back toward the fight. As he did, ten heavenly sabers appeared above him which he slashed down in an attack.

The Seazombie's pupils constricted. There was no time for him to avoid the attack, and thus the attack slashed into him, sending him flying back 300 meters, blood spraying out of his mouth. However, he immediately shot back into the fight. The two opponents clashed again in midair, and this time Xu Qing's knee again flew viciously toward his opponent's lower half. It was almost as if Xu Qing knew that his opponent's lower half was his weak spot.

The white-robed Seazombie cursed, but the sound of it was lost in the chaos of the combat. Then a crazy look appeared in his eyes as, instead of blocking the attack, he also sent a knee flying toward Xu Qing.

At exactly the same time, Xu Qing managed to reach out and grab a handful of his opponent's hairs. One of them let loose a muffled grunt, the other shouted miserably.

The muffled grunt came from Xu Qing, and the miserable shout came from the Seazombie. Although both exclaimed in different ways, as they backed away from each other, both of their knees were bent unnaturally. However, the awkward bend to the Seazombie's knee made it obvious his injury was far more severe. Furthermore, sweat was dripping down his face.

Xu Qing backed up, his eyes gleaming. As the Seazombie watched, he held up the handful of hair. Then the hair turned into ashes. It was a very familiar scene, except this time, it was a handful of hair instead of a single strand. [1]

As the ash drifted away, Xu Qing prepared to charge forward again. However, that was when an urgent voice rang out behind him.

"Elder Brother, the tideflow is about to end. This is the last chance to teleport out!"

Hearing that, Xu Qing's eyes narrowed. At the same time, it was possible to see that, on the horizon, a mass of black flames was approaching, spreading out through the sky. Within those flames was a Seazombie that appeared to be a young boy, his hands clasped behind his back as he stared at the Pearl Archipelago. As he moved along, the sea beneath him split, forming a valley with two huge cliffs of water on either side. The Pearl Archipelago trembled as terrifying might weighed down, and wild winds whipped over them.

Xu Qing's gaze hardened, and without any hesitation, he retreated back into the valley. At this point, the second wave of teleportations had ended, and the third was beginning. The Seven Blood Eyes disciples on the portal had previously been closely watching Xu Qing's fight as they waited for the portal. But now they were waiting for Xu Qing to join them. As soon as he appeared among them, the Fifth Peak disciples immediately activated the portal. Thanks to the continuing tideflow, light glittered on the portal.

The white-robed Seazombie didn't give chase. His eyes were glued to Xu Qing, and despite the distance between them, and the teleportation beginning, they could both see the odd expression in each other's eyes. Then, the teleportation light reached an apex, and their mutual gaze ended as Xu Qing was whisked away.

After Xu Qing and the other disciples were gone, the white-robed Seazombie looked up into the sky and realized that the incoming Gold Core Seazombie had gone to a different island. Gritting his teeth against the pain, he rubbed his knee vigorously, then touched the spot on his head where some hair had been ripped out.

What exactly is going on here? How could the brat have become so strong in such a short time?
OUCH!

I think he recognized me, too. He was targeting my lower half! And it seemed like he was trying to rip out my hair out of revenge! This sucks! He has no respect for his superior! Besides, all I did last time was pluck out a single hair, right?

It's not like this big mission of mine has been easy. If I want to get a high-level zombie heart, then I have to pay a lot of merit points. I freaking invested a lot to perfectly disguise myself as a Seazombie.

I was just trying to scare them, grab some pill furnaces, and then turn them in for merit points. And once I realized that brat was here, I was just planning to give him a good thrashing as payback for the poison in that tunnel in the Merfolk Isles.

OWWWW!

The white-robed Seazombie shook out his half-destroyed right arm, then used some unknown method to regrow the hand. Gasping for breath, he took a short time to recover. Cursing to himself, he lurched over to where his fruit had fallen to the ground. Most of the fruit had been destroyed. There was only half of one of the large apples left. Picking it up gingerly, he took a big bite. But then, his eyes went wide and he spat it out.

"It's poisoned!" he shouted angrily. At this point, he realized this situation wasn't acceptable. As a captain, he couldn't allow himself to suffer such a loss of face. In fact

he decided that he was going to find an opportunity to remove one of his seals and teach a good lesson to the brat. That was the only way to maintain dignity. Although he was loath to remove a seal, he would have to endure that pain to make sure he saved face. Having made that decision, he shot off into the distance.

Back on Meegah Island, a teleportation portal glittered as Xu Qing and the other disciples appeared. As Xu Qing walked off the portal, he noticed that the atmosphere in the frontline camp was tense. Numerous figures zipped overhead in flight.

The battle raged off in the distance, and everyone seemed busier than before. All of the disciples who had just teleported in from the Pearl Archipelago clasped hands and offered greetings to him. The Second Peak woman joined them. After exchanging contact information with him, she then hurried away.

Then Gu Muqing approached to say farewell. As she did, Xu Qing returned the taboo pill jade slip, and told her that he had activated them before leaving.

“Elder Brother Xu, my fellow disciples and I still have to complete this mission. We need to go to another location to activate more taboo pills. I heard my Master say that Seven Blood Eyes is prepared for this war to drag out for years, and that we have to win it. And there are going to be some big operations coming soon. Please be careful, Elder Brother.” At this point she hesitated for a moment, then edged a bit closer to Xu Qing, lowered her voice, and continued, “I’m a conclave disciple, so there are times when I have no choice but to go out on certain missions. But you don’t have to do that, Elder Brother. By the way, if you see any missions related to the Seazombies’ seven fortified islands, you absolutely must not take them.”

With that, Gu Muqing gave a curtseying bow and then left.

Looking thoughtful, Xu Qing took a look at his identity medallion. The mission he had been working on just now was complete, and more new missions were flooding in.

Meanwhile, he thought back to his fight with that white-robed Seazombie, who had seemed like a Seazombie in every respect, down to his zombie poison. But it hadn’t taken Xu Qing long to realize he seemed familiar. That was especially true of his eyes. And of course the fruit.

Why is the Captain disguised as a Seazombie? Is there some Seazombie loot he’s trying to get that requires it? I guess it’s also possible he just got unlucky and got killed by a Seazombie, and was turned.

If it were any other person, Xu Qing would assume the second option was the most likely. But with the Captain, it actually seemed like the first was more in line with his crazy personality.

Given how petty the Captain is, I bet he’s not happy with how our fight ended. His cultivation base really is unfathomable. He’s definitely going to try to get back at me. I need to open more dharma apertures!

Chapter 165: A Mysterious Summons

A month went by.

During that time, many dramatic things occurred in the war between Seven Blood Eyes and the Seazombies. The Seazombies made several full-scale assaults on the Merfolk Isles, but failed to take them. They could do nothing but watch as Seven Blood Eyes grew more deeply entrenched, bringing in more magical devices and more allies. The islands were becoming an increasing threat to the Seazombies.

However, the Seazombies had some victories of their own. Thanks to their diversionary tactics, they successfully took control of the Pearl Archipelago, which became their new command base. The taboo pills that Seven Blood Eyes had buried on the islands were all dug up by the Seazombies after a very thorough search of all the islands in the archipelago. For the Seazombies, it was a military victory. For Seven Blood Eyes, it was an embarrassing slipup.

And in war, slipups could be fatal. For about half a month, Seven Blood Eyes was put into a passive position, and thus, there were two dangerous Seazombie offensives that almost succeeded in taking the Merfolk Isles. On one occasion, the peaklord of the Third Peak fell into a Seazombie ambush and nearly perished. Only by using a technique called Grue Death Substitution did he manage to make his escape, badly wounded. In addition to that, the peaklord of the Sixth Peak was also ambushed and seriously injured.

Ten Gold Core elders were wounded to the point of being on death's door. All of those things were a huge blow to the morale of Seven Blood Eyes, and resulted in an immediate decline in mission participation. This was one big flaw in Seven Blood Eyes' methods of operation. When they had the upper hand, the disciples were as ruthless as wolves or tigers. But when things didn't go well, it was easy for the disciples to lose courage. And when that happened, it wasn't easy to recover.

After the Seazombies' trap successfully won them the Pearl Archipelago, Seven Blood Eyes launched a counterattack. It was half a month later in the middle of the night. Intense rumbling sounds echoed out, and Xu Qing, who was just coming back to Meegah Island from a minor mission, looked out and saw numerous mountain peaks rising up from the sea.

Together, they formed a majestic mountain range.

As the seawater seethed, the mountain range continued to rise, until it seemed like a spine. Using his snakeneck dragon, Xu Qing looked under the water and realized it was actually a huge beast. In fact, that beast was familiar. It was a sealizard! And those mountains were the sealizard's back!

It was so massive that it made the islands of the Pearl Archipelago seem like insignificant ants. The sealizard simply rolled over, and the Pearl Archipelago was completely smashed into oblivion. Afterward, the sealizard, who had only revealed part of its back above the surface of the water, left.

That sealizard attack was a huge shock to the Seazombies. An entity like that was multiple levels above them, and obviously was not something Seven Blood Eyes could casually call on for help. Yet it had come, and it had obviously been targeting the Pearl Archipelago.

Even Xu Qing was shaken by what happened. It gave a big morale boost to Seven Blood Eyes. What was more, there was an official announcement regarding the matter. The announcement made it clear that the sealizard had come at the behest of the peaklord of the Fourth Peak. Many years ago, that peaklord had been friends with the giant lizard, so it had come to destroy the Pearl Archipelago as a favor.

According to the official announcement, the entire thing had been arranged in advance. In other words, the entire situation with the Pearl Archipelago had been a double trap. Seven Blood Eyes had encouraged the Seazombies to attack it, and had buried taboo pills there to lure them in. The Seazombies had fallen right into the trap.

The end result was an instant boost in morale for Seven Blood Eyes.

Of course, Seven Blood Eyes disciples weren't stupid, and the Seazombies were inherently schemers. It didn't take much analysis for anyone to come to the conclusion that the Seven Blood Eyes leadership's story was probably only partly true.

Besides, if Fourth Peaklord could get a giant sealizard to destroy an entire archipelago, then why not send it to attack the Seazombies' fortified islands or their main island?

So the matter led to a lot of questions, and many people assumed it had something to do with the Seven Blood Eyes patriarch. As for what was really going on, no one but the Seven Blood Eyes leadership knew. Regardless, the Pearl Archipelago was gone, and the Seazombies there had been routed.

Seven Blood Eyes took advantage of the situation to launch assaults on the Seazombie positions surrounding the Merfolk Isles. This also was the call for a general offensive. The Seazombie's main army was constantly battered backward and forced into defensive fighting. Seven Blood Eyes pressed the assault, forcing the battle lines further and further away from the Merfolk Isles, and closer to Seazombie territory.

Now, the only thing between the Seven Blood Eyes forces and the Seazombie's main island were their seven fortified islands. That was their last line of defense. The close proximity of the enemy put a lot of pressure on the Seazombies. However, due to their fierce counterattacks, the fighting eventually reached a stalemate.

There were casualties on both sides, though the Seazombies had it worse.

That said, Seven Blood Eyes also suffered horrendous casualties. As a result, there was already a wave of applications from disciples wanting to leave the fighting. Although the sect didn't refuse such applications, they did combat the trend by offering greater rewards for missions, including the first batch of destined opportunities for core formation. They also added in two trump cards. The first were fifty magical treasure projections. Every disciple who reached the top fifty would be able to call upon a projection of the sect's magical treasure.

Magical treasures were legendary items, each one of which would have heaven-shaking, earth-shattering power. In fact, they were so unimaginable that Seven Blood Eyes only had one such item.

But even the projection of that item would be incredibly shocking. The news caused a big stir among the disciples participating in the war. However, the second trump card was even more astonishing. And that was... the patriarch would accept ten Foundation Establishment disciples as inner sect apprentices and three Gold Core cultivators as successor apprentices! The apprentices would be selected based on the missions they had completed and how many Seazombies they killed.

This news caused such a commotion among Seven Blood Eyes disciples that many who had applied to leave the war changed their minds and stayed.

After all, for years, the patriarch had not accepted any apprentices. And considering he had just experienced a breakthrough, it was obvious that whoever he selected as apprentices would benefit spectacularly.

Getting into that position would make one like the carp leaping over the dragon's gate. An inner sect apprentice would be superior to elders, and would stand on a similar footing as the peaklords. And a successor apprentice was an even loftier position.

The news wasn't enticing to just Foundation Establishment cultivators. Even the Gold Core cultivators were moved. Not even they were sure when the sect would ever offer rewards like this again.

From all of this, it was possible to see how determined Seven Blood Eyes was to defeat the Seazombies.

Xu Qing was moved, but he quickly suppressed thoughts of pursuing such lofty goals. Although the rewards were amazing, he knew that there were a lot of strong people in the sect. He was a far cry from being the strongest in Foundation Establishment, as each mountain peak had disciples with three life flames.

With people like that around, it would be hard to secure an apprenticeship without putting his life on the line. That said, he was confident he could make it into the top fifty, and thus get that magical treasure access.

The overall ranking for the war effort was different from the kill count. The overall ranking took into consideration both missions and kill count, and was also weighted based on the type of mission and its requirements. Because of how Xu Qing had gone a bit wild earlier trying to inflate his kill count, his name wasn't far from being in the top fifty.

"Seventy-third," he murmured as he accepted another mission.

Another half a month went by, during which time Xu Qing's name climbed up to fifty-ninth. At the same time, as he slaughtered more Seazombies, his dharma apertures continued to open. He was now at forty-four. As he progressed, he needed more and more souls.

One day, as he had just accepted a reinforcement mission, a personal summons appeared in his identity medallion.

It was obviously a message from someone important, as it immediately dismissed all other missions, even the one he had just accepted. In fact, he instantly received the reward for that mission, despite not having done a single thing.

"Seventh Peak Foundation Establishment disciple Xu Qing, come to Joine Island and report to the command tent there. The vice-peaklord of the Seventh Peak wishes to see you!"

Xu Qing was stunned. After mulling the matter over, he had some ideas about what it was about, but couldn't be sure. After all, he had never even heard of there being a vice-peaklord. However, there was no doubt that the summons was authentic. And as he thought about it, the message repeated itself several times with the same information. Obviously, there was no way he was going to get out of this. Finally, he headed toward Joine Island.

Although he did not enter the profound radiance state, he still moved quickly. Before long, he saw the island ahead of him, and the huge eye in the middle of it all. This was where Seven Blood Eyes' main command base was.

Normally speaking, disciples couldn't even get close to this place without being summoned. As Xu Qing neared, he felt a terrifying divine will lock onto him. Also, the massive eye shifted to look at him.

Xu Qing stopped in place and presented his identity medallion. "Disciple Xu Qing here at the summons of the Seventh Peak's vice-peaklord. I seek an audience."

His identity medallion glittered, and the huge eye blinked three times. Then a teleportation power swirled around him, and before he could react, he vanished.

Inside of the huge eye was a magnificent grand hall, which was where Xu Qing had been teleported to. As he materialized, he heard the voice of a woman speaking.

"So, you're Xu Qing?"

Chapter 166: The Seventh Peak is Her Home....

The voice was lyrical and unearthly. But at the same time, it was cold, and when it entered Xu Qing's ears, it became an iciness that pierced through all of his body, leaving him shivering. He exhaled, and his breath became white vapor in front of him. His eyebrows and hair were starting to freeze, and he felt himself going stiff from head to toe. It reminded him of times in the past when he had encountered deadly grues. Even the air around him seemed to crack as if it were turning to ice, and that wasn't even to mention his 44 dharma apertures. Xu Qing felt like they were dead. His dharma force seemed incredibly sluggish, and his spirit seas were the same. As for his life flame, in this state, he couldn't even ignite it!

He felt absolutely shaken to the core. The sense of security he'd acquired after getting his life flame was completely gone. And now he realized what it was like to be in the presence of someone truly powerful. They could prevent him from entering the profound radiance state!

That said, he wasn't completely powerless to fight back. As the coldness spread through him, he could still sense warmth in his life lamp. It didn't seem affected at all by the invasion of frigid cold. In fact, Xu Qing suspected that he actually could use it to light his life flame. That realization made his guard go up even further. He knew that he absolutely, positively couldn't allow anyone to know about his life lamp. After confirming that his shadow was still covering the lamp, he took a deep breath and, with great effort, turned around.

As he did, he saw that there were two women standing behind him. One was middle-aged, the other was younger.

The middle-aged woman was dressed in a crimson, double-breasted official's garment. It was embroidered in gold thread with the images of butterflies and flowers, and was as extravagant as the rising sun. However, that did nothing to dispel the iciness that she exuded from head to toe, or the seemingly endless depths of her phoenix-like eyes. It was as if everything she looked at would be turned into ice. And anyone who looked into her eyes for long enough would be shaken to their soul. Right now, this woman was looking right at Xu Qing.

Her clothing was not that of any specific mountain peak. And Xu Qing had never seen her in Seven Blood Eyes. However, he had seen the young woman who was standing next to her.

She wore a voluminous daoist robe of pale violet, which almost resembled a formal gown. She had an ancient sword strapped to her back, and her hair was tied into a ponytail. She seemed valiant and formidable, but at the same time, whatever skin her garment didn't cover was fair and slightly rosy. She seemed heroic, but at the same time, warm and tender. In fact, she was smiling at him, and her eyes were like glittering crescent moons. This girl was none other than Ding Xue. [1]

She blinked a few times as she looked at him, an enigmatic smile playing out on her face. "Elder Brother Xu, this is my aunt. She's the vice-peaklord of the Seventh Peak, providing assistance to my uncle, the peaklord." [2]

Within Ding Xue's softly spoken words were something of a warning.

Despite the fact that the vice-peaklord's mere gaze made Xu Qing feel like he was about to be frozen, he clasped his hands respectfully and said, "I'm Disciple Xu Qing. Well met, Vice-Peaklord."

She seemed surprised to see him react in this way. Looking him up and down, she said, "Relax."

She could see how brightly her niece's eyes were shining. Having been around the block herself, she knew what that gaze meant. Sighing inwardly, she reduced the intensity of the coldness in her gaze. Her voice also seemed softer as she said, "I summoned you here today to give you a mission. I want you to be Ding Xue's dao protector for a time."

"Aunt," Ding Xue blurted, reaching out to grab the older woman's arm, "we're just friends helping each other out!"

Xu Qing's expression was the same as ever, and he remained standing in place just like before. But inside, he was shocked. For one thing, he could never have guessed that Ding Xue would have such an impressive background. Beyond that, from what he could tell, this vice-peaklord's cultivation base gave him the same feeling as when he'd encountered the peaklords out at sea.

More than ever, he realized how terrifying people on the level of the peaklords were.

In response to Ding Xue's outburst, the middle-aged woman's cold gaze turned a bit warmer. Patting Ding Xue's head, she said, "Xu Qing, I know you and Ding Xue are friends. So I'm not asking this of you as the vice-peaklord. Instead, I'm asking it as a member of the older generation. The front lines aren't safe, but Ding Xue has to be here. And I have other matters to attend to that I can't ignore. I'm worried about Ding Xue's safety, so I want you to take care of her for a month. What do you think? Once the mission is over, I'll give you the right to leave the war at any time you want. Plus, I'll also give you three entropic teleportation talismans."

When Xu Qing heard 'entropic teleportation talismans,' his heart started beating faster. Entropic teleportation talismans were a type of jade talisman that were actually more expensive than magical devices. A single one would usually sell for more than 700,000-800,000 spirit stones.

They were also very rare, and when they appeared, people would often fight over them. Back when Xu Qing went to the Brightness Pavilion in the Sixth Peak's Rocbright District, he had seen one, except it wasn't for sale. Items like that could count as an extra life, as all you had to do was crush

it, and it would randomly teleport you to another location. It could be nearby, or it could be 5,000 kilometers away.

This alone made it obvious that Ding Xue had specifically asked for Xu Qing to be her dao protector. After all, there were countless top experts who would fight fiercely for the chance to get three entropic teleportation talismans.

Xu Qing looked at Ding Xue.

When she noticed, she blushed slightly, and gave him a sweet smile.

Seeing that, Ding Xue's aunt shook her head. Handing a bag of holding to Ding Xue, she coolly said, "You two make the final decision."

With that, she turned and left.

Seeing that, Ding Xue hurried up to Xu Qing and said, "Elder Brother Xu Qing, my aunt usually stays in the Westcoral Archipelago as opposed to Seven Blood Eyes. Remember back when you escorted me across the sea? I told you I was going to visit her. [3]

"Zhao Zhongheng insisted on coming with me, and my aunt's so nice that she gave him a medicinal pill. If you had come with me, I bet she would have given it to you instead. Zhao Zhongheng used that pill to make his Forbidden Sea dragonwhale. What a cheapskate."

Xu Qing thought for a moment, then looked at Ding Xue and asked, "Who is Seventh Peaklord to you?"

"He's my uncle," she said with a smile.

Xu Qing didn't say anything in response.

"My aunt and uncle are daoist partners, but they have differing views on some things, and because of that, my aunt moved out of Seven Blood Eyes. That's why she lives in the Westcoral Archipelago now. However, because of the war, she came back.

"Elder Brother Xu Qing, can you please agree to watch over me? I'm here to fill out my résumé. You see, conclave disciples get assessed every so often. And my uncle wants to send me to the Seven Sect Coalition. If I want my application to be accepted, I have to have some real-life experience. By the way, going forward, I really want to focus on plants and vegetation. And that's why I'm hoping you can help."

Ding Xue was very direct in explaining the entire situation. At the same time, she put the bag of holding into his hands. Clearly, she was going to give him the entropic teleportation talismans whether he agreed or not. He looked at the bag of holding, and then at Ding Xue.

He had always liked the way she seemed so enthusiastic about learning new things. And whether it was the Foundation Establishment jade slips she'd given him, or these three entropic teleportation talismans, he knew he had no logical reason to refuse to help her. If he did, he would feel bad. So he nodded. Within the bag of holding were glowing jade slips that pulsed with dharma force.

“Awesome! Thank you, Elder Brother Xu Qing!” Ding Xue looked extremely excited, and even reached out to grab Xu Qing’s arm, though he pulled it away from her reach. She didn’t seem bothered by that. Smiling, she led him to a nearby teleportation portal to leave the central command base.

After that, Ding Xue would spend the evenings with her aunt, and the rest of her time with Xu Qing gaining experience on the front lines. Ding Xue was smart. Though she had fought to get this chance to work with Xu Qing, she didn’t allow her personal feelings to show. And she repeatedly got him to agree to go on special missions.

Xu Qing knew that as a conclave disciple, Ding Xue had access to different missions. Conclave disciples got better rewards. Furthermore, their missions were usually less dangerous. Most of them could be finished without going out onto the battlefield. That said, conclave disciples were tied much more deeply to the sect. If ordinary disciples got into some irresolvable conflict with the sect, they could simply leave, and no one would care. But if something like that happened with a conclave disciple, they would be hunted down and killed. In other words, being a conclave disciple came with ups and downs.

Xu Qing wasn’t envious of them. And he was actually very pleased with the current arrangement. On a daily basis, he would take Ding Xue out to accomplish all sorts of random missions. They were things like transporting goods from one island to another, taking care of funerary arrangements after battles, or tracking casualties. None of them were very difficult, and none involved life-threatening danger. When they had free time, she would ask him about plants and vegetation, and would always show her respect for knowledge by offering spirit stones.

To Xu Qing, her payments of one or two hundred spirit stones didn’t seem as amazing as before, but as the saying went, piling up many grains of sand will make a pagoda. About a week later, the missions available to Ding Xue started getting more difficult. For example, she was tasked with finding Merfolk traitors or Seazombie infiltrators.

That said, though they were more difficult, they came straight from central command to her, so they weren’t extremely dangerous. The sect was quick to provide her with such missions, which made sense considering she was trying to fill out her résumé.

Ding Xue was obviously taking the matter very seriously. Even when the missions became dangerous, she didn’t hold back from fear of getting hurt. In fact, the more dangerous a mission was, the more eager she was to finish it. Of course, with Xu Qing watching over her, she always ended up more scared than hurt, and any dangerous situations were resolved.

However, that made Ding Xue a bit nervous. This wasn’t exactly how she had planned things out. That was especially true after she realized the month time-limit for the mission was approaching. One morning at dawn, she suddenly appeared in front of Xu Qing coughing up blood. Face pale, she staggered in place as if she might fall over at any moment.

Xu Qing stared at her in shock, not quite sure what to do. Examining her more closely, he saw that her cultivation base was in chaos. Her energy was clotting, blocking her meridians. And if it wasn’t fixed quickly, she could suffer serious injuries. Face pale, she said, “Elder Brother Xu, it’s my fault. I was in too much of a rush. I know I’m weak. I really just want to reach the great circle as quickly

as possible. Last night I experienced a mishap and ended up injuring myself. My aunt is out on the battlefield, so she can't help."

"Why don't you just rest for a few days," Xu Qing said. "You can finish more missions after you're better."

"No!" she blurted. Are you really telling me to go rest, you dolt! If I did that, then I would have hurt myself for nothing!

Chapter 167: The Obvious Social Situation

"Joining the Seven Sect Coalition is my dream!" Ding Xue said, her eyes full of determination. "I have everything I need except a complete résumé! I can't give up just because I made a little mistake! I accepted sixteen missions today, Elder Brother Xu. I only have average aptitude, so the only way to get ahead is to work hard. I might be hurt, but I'm not going to give up. Otherwise, what's the point of all the work I've put in so far? I can't let my aunt down. Elder Brother Xu, can you please help me finish my missions? Please??"

Toward the end, Ding Xue's voice trembled, until finally she gave a curtsying bow. However, she seemed so weak that she could barely stand, so Xu Qing stepped forward with his hand held out to support her. She collapsed into his arms, her eyelashes fluttering, panting slightly as a flush crept up her neck to her face.

Xu Qing didn't say anything. He could tell something strange was going on, but also couldn't think of a way to refuse her request. After all, Ding Xue really was hurt, and it looked serious. And so, he spent the day helping her complete all sixteen of her missions.

As for Ding Xue, though she was weak, she was feeling incredibly excited about how things were going. This was the result she had hoped for. The whole reason she had begged her aunt to assign Xu Qing as her dao protector was that she wanted to have time alone with him to forge deeper bonds. She also knew that winning him over was going to take time. The best strategy was to take her time and slowly get closer to him. That was why she had intentionally injured herself. Of course, she couldn't do this kind of thing all the time. Nor could she allow herself to seem desperate.

Therefore, the next day when she was feeling better, everything went back to normal. Over the following days, Ding Xue kept careful track of how much time was left for the mission. With great enthusiasm, she dragged Xu Qing from island to island doing all sorts of tasks.

About a week later, Ding Xue decided that it was time to move on to the second phase of her plan. She was confident that during this phase, she would be able to get to know Xu Qing much better. After all, she had been preparing all this for months.

Unfortunately, something happened that dampened her excitement. And that was an unexpected guest.

Zhao Zhongheng.

For some unknown reason, after Xu Qing reached Foundation Establishment, Zhao Zhongheng suddenly started making rapid progress in his cultivation. Right now, he was in the great circle of Qi Condensation, putting him very close to the point of attempting a Foundation Establishment breakthrough. Realistically speaking, he should have been preparing to go into seclusion to prepare for that breakthrough.

Except after he heard about what was going on with Xu Qing and Ding Xue, he decided he would participate in the war after all.

After arriving in the Merfolk Isles, he ignored all sense of propriety and face, and went to find Ding Xue. And once he found her, he refused to leave her side.

When she got irritated at his presence, he quickly pulled out a mission jade slip. Using some unknown method, he had procured the same mission as her. And thus, she had no choice but to accept his presence.

Xu Qing didn't care. After all, it didn't have anything to do with him. What was more, after calculating the time that had passed, he realized that they were getting very close to the end of the month-long mission.

While Xu Qing stood off to the side, Ding Xue glared in irritation at Zhao Zhongheng

"If you want to come with us, Zhao Zhongheng, you have to agree to two things," she said. "First. You're not allowed to speak, from the beginning of the mission to the end! Second. You have to stay at least nine meters away from me. If you don't agree to those things, you can leave! If you do agree, you can stay!"

Zhao Zhongheng took a deep breath. Before coming, he'd assumed she would react like this. Looking at her beautiful face and curvaceous form, then at Xu Qing, who didn't seem to be paying attention to what they were talking about, his eyes flickered with unprecedented determination.

I don't care how high his cultivation base is. He can't measure up to my unswerving sincerity. Pursuing a woman isn't a fight, so a high cultivation level doesn't mean crap. My grandpa's cultivation base is even higher, and my grandmother kicked him to the curb! And Master Seventh lives alone on the Seventh Peak. That just proves that having a high cultivation base is useless!

My sincerity is the key to ultimate happiness. It's unstoppable! It's a reflection of heaven, and is a lesson for both gods and men alike! The eyes of the broken face above could never destroy it!

If pursuing women was only a matter of cultivation base, then the patriarch would have concubines galore! All the women in the sect would be his!

The more Zhao Zhongheng thought about it in this way, the more it made sense. Determination filled his eyes as he looked at the girl he had been in love with his entire life.

"Fine!" he said.

Ding Xue wasn't happy at all to have Zhao Zhongheng tagging along.

But it didn't make any difference to Xu Qing, even when he caught Zhao Zhongheng surreptitiously staring in the general direction of his forehead. That made Xu Qing curious, but he wasn't worried

too much about it. That was especially true considering that Zhao Zhongheng went out of his way to avoid doing anything to offend Xu Qing. Sometimes Xu Qing even forgot he was around.

A few days later when the three of them finished a random mission and were gathering after a night of rest, Xu Qing looked at Zhao Zhongheng with a very unusual expression.

And when Ding Xue saw Zhao Zhongheng, her jaw nearly dropped. She looked at Zhao Zhongheng's eyebrows, then looked at Xu Qing, and her expression turned even odder.

Only Zhao Zhongheng's expression remained the same as ever. Feeling very pleased with himself, he lifted his chin to give Xu Qing and Ding Xue a good view of his eyebrows.

Anyone present to observe what was happening would realize that Zhao Zhongheng's eyebrows now looked exactly like Xu Qing's. Whether it was how high they were on his face, how long they were, or their angle. Everything was the same.

Seeing that, Xu Qing now realized why Zhao Zhongheng had been glancing at his forehead over the past few days. He'd been looking at his eyebrows.

This guy has a screw loose, Xu Qing thought. Then he recalled what Elder Zhao had said about his grandson, and had to admit the old man was right. [1]

Ding Xue sighed. As far as she was concerned, Zhao Zhongheng was acting like he was possessed. Different eyebrows looked different on the faces of different people, and of course, Xu Qing's eyebrows looked much better on Xu Qing's face. She actually thought that Zhao Zhongheng's original eyebrows looked good, while the new ones just looked freakish. In fact, they looked like two peacock feathers stuck onto a wild chicken.

But Zhao Zhongheng clearly didn't think that. He looked quite pleased, and felt that he now stood out much more when Ding Xue looked his way. Next, he started eyeing Xu Qing's nose....

Xu Qing didn't say anything.

Over the next few days, the three of them got along well. However, Zhao Zhongheng's appearance continued to change slowly. However, it was very obvious what was happening, leaving Xu Qing speechless.

There was another change to Zhao Zhongheng that was even more surprising to Xu Qing. And that was... whenever Zhao Zhongheng gave gifts to Ding Xue, he gave her two of the same thing.

Ding Xue was also surprised by this.

When Zhao Zhongheng saw how Xu Qing and Ding Xue reacted to this new behavior, he was very happy. His most recent session of secluded cultivation had been very productive, as it resulted in this idea. When in love with someone, it was good to remember the common phrase, love for a person extends even to the crow on their roof.

He had devoted his life to pursuing Ding Xue, and therefore, he had to be patient. And that included being patient with whatever other passing travelers she encountered. Therefore, why would he possibly give her gifts in a way that didn't conform to the obvious social situation? If he was going to give gifts, he would give two! That way, she could give a gift to the passing traveler, but also have one for herself. And it would also highlight how different Zhao Zhongheng was. Zhao Zhongheng was really proud of how he'd thought all this through. [2]

Zhao Zhongheng's mood only seemed to improve. On one particular day after they opened a hidden tunnel filled with mutagen, and were waiting for the mutagen to dissipate, Zhao Zhongheng pulled two medicinal pill boxes out of his robe and handed them to Ding Xue.

When Ding Xue opened them, she looked surprised.

"Mutagen-Stripping Pills?" she said. "These are secret legacy pills from the Second Peak. They're not even allowed to sell them. Normally speaking, it's hard to lay eyes on one!"

Zhao Zhongheng smiled and nodded.

With an odd expression on her face, Ding Xue held the two boxes and looked at Xu Qing.

"Elder Brother Xu Qing," she said, "thank you for helping me on my missions over the past few days. And also, thank you for all the information about plants and vegetation. I have the feeling a pill like this won't be of much use to you. But it's rare. Maybe studying it will give you some new insights." Smiling sweetly, she offered the medicinal pill to Xu Qing. "Also, Elder Brother, you took good care of Zhao Zhongheng over the past few days. Consider this a reward for that."

Xu Qing thought about it and realized her reasoning made sense. He took the pill. Zhao Zhongheng struggled to keep his breathing steady, forced a smile onto his face, and gave Xu Qing a nod of agreement.

Xu Qing looked at the pill and was about to put it away, when suddenly his expression flickered and he looked at the hidden tunnel. Walking over to the tunnel mouth, he said, "You two get back."

In response, Ding Xue immediately flew backward, as did Zhao Zhongheng. Meanwhile, Xu Qing stared at the tunnel mouth, his eyes narrowed. The tunnel entrance was located beneath a collapsed building. Obviously, the area had been recently excavated and set up as some sort of safehouse. There were magical symbols everywhere, though none were still working. Most likely, they had been set up to keep the tunnel hidden.

The tunnel wasn't large; it was made to accommodate a single person crawling through it. Now that the tunnel entrance had been cleared, the cold air inside mixed with the hot, humid air outside and created a fine mist. That mist contained strong mutagen levels, plus a bit of zombie poison.

Xu Qing's guard was up. This was a mission Ding Xue had picked to search for Seazombies hiding throughout the Merfolk Isles. So far they had searched a few locations but hadn't found any Seazombies. Now they were in a town on Nethervault Island, where Ding Xue was using a special magical device to sense unusual mutagen fluctuations. That was what had led them here.

Xu Qing had no qualms about their search method. Based on his experience killing Seazombies, he knew that even if there were some of them hiding in the Merfolk Isles, a Qi Condensation cultivator like Ding Xue wouldn't be able to find them. Not even her special magical device would help much. Unless a Seazombie intentionally revealed themselves, it would be an easy matter for them to hide their aura indefinitely.

From what Xu Qing could tell, the sect had prepared missions like this for Qi Condensation cultivators so that they could understand how war worked. In reality, there was almost no danger involved.

Moments ago, after Ding Xue opened the tunnel, the strong mutagen coming out of it had alerted Xu Qing to the fact that something strange was going on.

Don't tell me Ding Xue really found a Seazombie.

Eyes flashing, Xu Qing tossed some poison powder into the tunnel, and also neutralized the zombie poison. However, that was when he realized that the zombie poison had long since broken down and become ineffective. As he stood there taking stock of the situation, a weak voice echoed out from inside the tunnel.

“Daddy, come home....”

It sounded like the plea of a young boy, filled with longing. In fact, as it reached Xu Qing's ears, it seemed so realistic he wondered if there might actually be a boy in the tunnel.

As Xu Qing's pupils constricted, Ding Xue and Zhao Zhongheng also heard the voice, and their expressions flickered.

“Is it a grue?” Zhao Zhongheng asked, breathing heavily.

Chapter 168: Anxious Patriarch

Ding Xue immediately took out her identity medallion and looked at Xu Qing. At his signal, she would send a voice message requesting help. But Xu Qing didn't say anything. Instead, he listened. A short while later, the voice again spoke out in the tunnel, saying exactly the same thing.

“Daddy, come home....”

The voice seemed full of longing and deep emotion. As it echoed out of the tunnel, it seemed to be calling out to anyone nearby who could hear it. It was so clear and distinct it was possible to visualize the boy uttering the words.

After further consideration, Xu Qing determined that there were no dangerous fluctuations in the tunnel. Also, he didn't sense the frigid cold of grues. However, just to be safe, he ignited his life flame and entered the profound radiance state. Despite the fact that the month time-limit for the mission was almost up, this was his first time entering the profound radiance state in the presence of Ding Xue. So far, none of the dangers they had faced required it.

As his energy erupted, Ding Xue and Zhao Zhongheng gasped and instinctively backed away, shielding their eyes from the painful light.

Ding Xue had it a bit better off. Though she had to close her eyes, she felt more excited than astonished. As for Zhao Zhongheng, his expression flickered; he had been mentally prepared for this moment, but now that it was here, felt like he was going to collapse from disappointment.

Who says standing in the light makes you a hero? I have true sincerity on my side. I'm different from everyone else!

Xu Qing had no idea what Ding Xue and Zhao Zhongheng were thinking, nor did he care. Now that his profound radiance state was active, he didn't hesitate to go right into the tunnel. He moved at

top speed, shooting down the tunnel, causing explosive popping sounds to ring out as he did. At the same time, he confirmed that the mutagen and zombie poison in the place really was fading away. It was almost like it was dead. As he pondered that, he burst out the other end of the tunnel like a lightning bolt.

He found himself in a simple room that was obviously constructed as a hiding place.

There was a Seazombie huddled in the corner who looked like an old human man. He was dead. He had a number of ghastly wounds on him, and his dantian region was a mass of shredded flesh. That was obviously the fatal blow that had killed him, as it seemed to pierce all the way through his body. This corpse was obviously the source of the mutagen and the zombie poison. Although the Seazombie was dead, he still emitted some faint fluctuations.

After looking him over, Xu Qing determined that, at the very least, he had possessed one life flame. The Seazombie had obviously sustained mortal wounds in the fighting, but had still climbed down into this hiding spot. Unfortunately for him, he never had a chance to escape, nor did he have any way to recover from his wounds. It seemed doubtful that he'd been dead for very long, which was why there was still mutagen in the tunnel when they opened it.

Xu Qing left the profound radiance state.

This Seazombie's facial expression was different from other Seazombies Xu Qing had encountered. Though his skin was rotting, it couldn't hide the bewilderment he had experienced before dying.

What was more, his hands were tightly clasped around a small bronze bottle. It was as if, in the moments before dying, that bottle had been the most important thing to him. It was an old, battered bottle, opened, and the voice Xu Qing had heard was coming out of it.

"Daddy, come home...."

The voice spoke softly, yet was full of longing and emotion.

As this old Seazombie lay dying, he had opened this bottle and listened to those words repeating over and over again. Apparently, it was the voice of a relative....

Xu Qing looked at the bottle, then studied his surroundings further to make sure there was nothing dangerous around. Around then, he heard footsteps behind him.

Zhao Zhongheng and Ding Xue had come through the tunnel after coming to the conclusion there was nothing dangerous inside. Ding Xue had been most anxious, and had hurried through the tunnel first. Zhao Zhongheng had had no choice but to follow.

Upon seeing Xu Qing standing there, Ding Xue breathed a sigh of relief. Then she looked around and noticed the bottle.

"That's a recording bottle," she said in surprise. There were many things that ordinary cultivators wouldn't recognize that she knew a lot about. Seeing Xu Qing glance at her, she quickly continued, "Recording bottles are ancient items that you don't see very often. To some people, they're literally priceless, while other people think they're useless. They only have one function. They can capture sound. Afterward, you can open the bottle and hear whatever sound you captured."

“The sound quality is perfect, just like the original. That’s the amazing thing about them. However, the recording doesn’t last long once you start listening to it. After a while, it fades away, and then you need to capture a new sound.”

Looking at the bottle clasped tightly in the Seazombie’s hand, something suddenly seemed to click in her mind. “Seazombies can come from different species. The special method used to resurrect and zombify them removes most of their memories, leaving them with only scraps of their old life. However, those memory scraps don’t do them any good. After being resurrected and zombified, they become brutal and ruthless. Their connection to their previous life is severed, and in most cases, they have no physical object to connect them to the past.

“But if this bottle belonged to him, then maybe this Seazombie was different. If the bottle tied him to the past, then he must have been reluctant to part with it. Perhaps it was his obsession. As for the voice in the bottle, maybe it was his son. Although, I guess it doesn’t matter what his life was like before. In the end, he ended up as a Seazombie.”

Ding Xue didn’t speak with a lot of conviction, as she couldn’t be sure if any of her conjectures were true. After she finished speaking, she looked at Xu Qing.

“It doesn’t matter now,” he said, shaking his head. He waved his hand, and the bottle flew to him. The voice from the bottle was very weak now, and a moment later, it spoke one last time and then went silent.

Ding Xue exchanged a glance with Zhao Zhongheng. Any other person who she looked at that way wouldn’t understand the meaning behind the look. But Zhao Zhongheng understood. He immediately walked over to the Seazombie, searched him, and found a bag of holding.

Then the three of them left through the tunnel.

As for the bottle, Xu Qing closed it and stashed it with his belongings.

Ding Xue notified the sect of the hiding spot they’d found, which meant she could mark the mission as completed. As for the bag of holding, it didn’t contain much. There were a few random items, but no magical devices or jade talismans.

There were a few hundred spirit stones, three or four spirit notes, and nothing else. Perhaps this Seazombie had been poor, or perhaps he kept his riches stored somewhere else.

Xu Qing didn’t need any of it, and was happy to just keep the bottle. He had no idea if he would ever find a use for such an item, but it seemed marvelous and he had the feeling it could come in useful.

Zhao Zhongheng and Ding Xue were both from rich families, so the contents of the bag of holding weren’t very impressive. However, they split them evenly anyway. After all, profit was profit. Now that the location of the hiding spot had been reported, the sect would send other disciples to handle any follow-up matters.

With that, Xu Qing’s month-long mission ended.

Of course, Ding Xue was very depressed that Zhao Zhongheng had shown up and ruined everything. As Xu Qing was taking his leave, she hurried over to him.

“Elder Brother Xu, the front lines are dangerous. You have to be careful. Remember, put safety first. My cultivation base is weak, so there’s nothing I can give you to help. But I’ll talk with my aunt and make sure she looks out for you. If you run into any situation you can’t deal with, you get in touch with her immediately, okay?”

“Oh, another thing, Elder Brother Xu. Thanks for all of your help. I’m going to work really hard to learn everything I can about plants and vegetation, and then join the Seven Sect Coalition. When that time comes, Elder Brother, maybe I can help you out with plants and vegetation.”

Looking very earnest, she said one final thing. “Truth be told, the Second Peak’s dao of plants and vegetation isn’t that great. I’m definitely going to surpass the Second Peak disciples eventually.”

“Many thanks,” Xu Qing said. “Take care of yourself. And keep up the good work.”

The truth was that he was a bit touched by her words. She sounded very sincere. During the month he had worked with her, he could tell that she’d had something on her mind that she never talked about. But overall, she was a good person. Also, she was enthusiastic about learning new things, which he very much approved of. He hadn’t had much of a chance to interact with the Second Peak, so he had no way of knowing if her assessment of their dao of plants and vegetation was correct, but it seemed possible. Clapping hands to her, he turned and left.

She watched reluctantly as he disappeared. Then she turned and glared at Zhao Zhongheng briefly before snorting coldly and leaving the Merfolk Isles. She knew full well that the danger on the front lines was too great, and her cultivation base was too low.

As Zhao Zhongheng watched her go, the determination never left his eyes. He was still confident that he had the right outlook.

Cultivation base isn’t important. My sincerity and genuineness will win out over everything. That Xu Qing has a high cultivation base. But he just said goodbye and left without looking back. I’m not like that. I’ll always stay with you, my Elder Sister.

With such thoughts on his mind, Zhao Zhongheng took a deep breath and followed Ding Xue, ignoring how irritated she seemed.

Xu Qing did not leave the Merfolk Isles. Thanks to the mission with Ding Xue, he now had three entropic teleportation talismans, as well as a dharmic decree from the vice-peaklord, which meant that he could decline to participate in the frontline war effort without even needing to submit an application. He could even do that while in the middle of a mission.

In other words, he could go back to the sect headquarters any time he wanted. That said, he could still support the war, just not necessarily on the front lines. If he did that, his kill count and contributions to the war effort wouldn’t suffer. In other words, it gave him a lot of freedom of choice.

Not even Gold Core elders could issue dharmic decrees like this. Only someone similar to a peaklord had that authority. Xu Qing was well aware that the vice-peaklord had given him this gift at the behest of Ding Xue.

It's a big favor. I'll definitely repay Ding Xue later on.

Having made that decision, Xu Qing took out his identity medallion and started looking through the missions again.

He didn't plan to go back to the sect immediately. Thanks to wasting a whole month as Ding Xue's dao protector, his standings in the war rankings had dropped below seventy. That said, he didn't think it would be hard to climb back up. He wanted to be in the top fifty to earn the right to summon a projection of the sect's magical treasure.

Going forward, he once again immersed himself in taking one mission after another. He would kill Seazombies, absorb their souls, and sometimes bolster his kill count with his shadow.

Eventually, he rose above the sixtieth rank, which meant he was very close to being in the top fifty. One day when he had just turned in a mission and was about to select a new one, his expression flickered and he looked down toward his feet.

Then his eyes glittered, and then he burst into motion and headed to a remote area. There, he calmly said, "What do you want to say?"

Moments ago, he had detected fluctuations of emotion coming from his shadow. It took some struggle, but his shadow conveyed to him, "Upgrade... quiet... safe... breakthrough...."

Xu Qing's pupils constricted.

During this whole war with the Seazombies, his shadow had proved very helpful. After consuming many Seazombies, it was now on the verge of a breakthrough. Xu Qing was actually looking forward to that.

After forming his life flame, both the shadow and Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior had fallen behind. That said, he was still on guard against both of them, especially the shadow.

As the shadow conveyed that message to him, the black iron skewer shivered, and then the patriarch said, "Milord, your humble servant needs to report that he is also close to a breakthrough. I also need a quiet, safe place to do so. However, because of cultivating spirit automaton techniques, and also some other random things, my breakthrough will be different. It will provoke Soul-Cleansing Heavenly Lightning!! Once I break through, I'll have something similar to the profound radiance state. I'll be almost unstoppable!"

Although the patriarch's words were spoken with utmost confidence, he was actually feeling extremely anxious. He wasn't exactly on the breakthrough point, yet felt that he couldn't wait any longer. After all, if the shadow broke through before him, then given his current state, he would rank second between the two of them. In other words, he would be of little value or interest to Xu Qing. And if that happened, then he had the feeling it wouldn't be long before he became cannon fodder. So he decided to put everything on the line.

Xu Qing looked at the iron skewer, then the shadow. He had already made his decision.

Chapter 169: Fighting for Position!

The top fifty cultivators in Seven Blood Eyes' battle rankings would get the right to summon a projection of the sect's magical treasure. The thought excited Xu Qing. He had never even seen a magical treasure before, but had heard astonishing stories about them. After all, in the entire Seven Blood Eyes sect, there was only one magical treasure. Xu Qing was curious why there were so many rumors about magical treasures, and also wanted to know what the Seven Blood Eyes' magical treasure looked like, and what it did.

That said, right now, Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior and the shadow both were about to reach breakthroughs. He didn't want simple curiosity to interfere with that. He knew without any doubt which of the two was most important.

Even if magical treasures were incredibly powerful, the prize was a single use of the projection of that magical treasure. In contrast, upgrading the shadow and the patriarch would permanently boost his battle prowess.

Therefore, Xu Qing unhesitatingly dropped the mission he had been considering, and used the dharmic decree from Ding Xue's aunt. Even as Seven Blood Eyes seemed to be making a lot of headway in the fighting, he chose to leave the battlefield.

I need to find some safe, remote island somewhere. A place where the patriarch and the shadow can break through without worrying about being interrupted.

Of great concern was the fact that Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior mentioned dealing with tribulation lightning.

After some thought, he used a teleportation portal to head in the opposite direction of the fighting. Specifically, he teleported to a location very far away, where a nonhuman species called the Hornsanders lived.

The Hornsanders were allies of Seven Blood Eyes. They were generally kind and peaceful, and had benefited from the protection of the sect for over a hundred years thanks to a crafting ingredient they produced called seagliter, and also their skill in puppet creation.

The Hornsanders were a strange people; they looked exactly the same as humans, except they were about as tall as an average person's hand. To them, humans were like giants. Their ancestral land was a lilliputian kingdom. However, to make it easier to welcome friends from other species, they had built an ordinary-sized city not far from their teleportation portal.

By the time Xu Qing materialized on the Hornsander's teleportation portal, it was already dusk. The afterglow of the setting sun cast burning red light through the sky, while the black water had a violet hue to it. Everything seemed mysterious and profound. It was rare to find harmonious and peaceful places like this on the Forbidden Sea. And considering that Xu Qing had just come from a war zone, and pulsed with a baleful aura, he didn't seem to fit in.

Looking up, he saw numerous small cities off in the distance. Within them, countless Hornsanders bustled about, sometimes singing as they went about their tasks. He even saw some very tiny children playing in the sand. That said, he also detected the auras of quite a few powerful experts.

Hornsanders were very small, but that didn't mean Xu Qing looked down on them. He had read the file about them back in the Violent Crimes Division, and knew that though they were normally peaceful, when they did fight, they revealed astonishing fighting prowess. What was more, they were experts in the dao of puppetry.

Stepping off of the teleportation portal and looking around, he saw that there were a total of eight puppets seated cross-legged in the area. The puppets were human-sized, and were made of a combination of metal and wood. Their faces were pitch black, and they had gemstones for eyes. They didn't emanate any spirit power fluctuations, making them seem like they were dead.

As he looked them over, one of the puppet's gemstone eyes lit up. Then clicking sounds filled the air as the puppet got to its feet, clasped hands and bowed.

"Welcome to Hornsander territory, esteemed guest from Seven Blood Eyes. How can we help you?"

Xu Qing looked more closely at the puppet. Despite the fact that it had just spoken, he still didn't sense any spirit power fluctuations coming off of it. He was very curious about that, but at the same time, didn't feel it was appropriate to pry.

"I'm just passing through," he said gruffly. "I'm heading to a sea district not far from here. Do you have sea charts for sale?"

"Why would an esteemed guest from Seven Blood Eyes need to spend money on something like that?" The puppet extended its right hand, and a grain of sand appeared there. It waved its hand, and the sand shot toward Xu Qing.

He caught it, whereupon his expression flickered with surprise. The tiny grain of sand was actually just like a jade slip filled with information. Sending some dharma force into it, he saw a very detailed sea chart.

After offering his thanks, he took a final glance at the peaceful Hornsanders, then flew up into the air and headed out over the Forbidden Sea.

Moving at top speed, he disappeared within moments. After he was gone, the other seven puppets looked up in the direction he'd left. Then they began to project messages to each other.

After they were certain that he was gone, they relaxed, bowed their heads again, and then remained in place unmoving.

The night passed. The next day at dawn, the light of day spread through the dome of heaven.

Xu Qing could be seen, speeding along under the burning sun, not having slowed down a bit.

He chose not to use his dharmaskiff, as it would attract more attention. As he sped along, he searched for his destination as described on the sea chart, which was an abandoned mining island.

According to the sea chart, a vein of spirit ore had been discovered there a hundred years ago, and thus the island became very important to the Hornsanders. However, after mining it for a full sixty-year-cycle, the mine went dry, and the island was abandoned. The spirit power wasn't very strong there, while the mutagen was. Though there were some plants and vegetation growing, most of them were aggressive in nature. Given that there was nothing of value inside or outside of the island, few people ever went there. There were many islands like this on the Forbidden Sea.

Upon finding it, Xu Qing examined it from the air. After determining that it was a suitable location for the shadow and the patriarch to break through, he landed on the island. The first thing he did was wave his hand to send poison powder drifting out everywhere. Instantly, all the plants and vegetation that had been stirring in his direction to attack him withered and died. Ignoring them, he headed toward the actual mine, which took a bit of time to find.

Despite the fact that the morning sun was bright outside, the interior of the mine was pitch black. Furthermore, it was filled with strong mutagen and a frigid energy. Black ice surrounded the exterior of the mine, and there were no plants anywhere. Apparently the black ice was poisonous.

To most cultivators, this would not be a suitable location to practice cultivation. But as far as Xu Qing's shadow was concerned, it was more than satisfactory. In fact, as the sun cast his shadow down, it seemed to have a hard time not stretching forward into the mine.

After checking around again to make sure there were no dangers, he broke off a piece of black ice to examine.

It had an astonishing frigid energy, as well as strong mutagen. In fact, as soon as he touched it, that mutagen poured into Xu Qing, only to be immediately absorbed by his shadow.

"Well isn't this stuff interesting," he murmured. Squatting down, he tried to collect some of the ice. Unfortunately, as soon as he broke off a piece, it would release all its mutagen and become useless. Shrugging, he entered the mine.

"Be careful, milord," the patriarch said. "As the saying goes, a wealthy person should never sit under the eaves, lest a falling tile crack him on the head. You really need to be cautious about your own safety. Allow me to scout ahead." With that, he took control of the iron skewer and flew into the mine. A short time later, he reported, "Milord, there's nothing out of the ordinary here."

The shadow, who had been focused on absorbing the black ice, shivered and stretched out into the mine, then sent out fluctuations to similarly indicate that it was safe to proceed.

Xu Qing was actually pleased to see the patriarch and the shadow contending with each other, but kept his expression neutral. After lacing the entrance with poison, he entered the mine. The mutagen inside was clearly stronger, and the frigid energy more intense. Everything was completely dark, so he sent more dharma force into his eyes to see more clearly. There was a huge tunnel leading deeper into the mine, and the walls were covered with the signs of excavation. Without any hesitation, Xu Qing ignited his life lamp.

In the blink of an eye, brilliant flames exploded out all over him. The indistinct shape of a black umbrella became visible, protecting his soul, while volcanic fluctuations rolled out within him. Xu Qing blurred into motion as he started checking the entire mine for danger. Although he felt generally safe, until he explored every corner of the place, he couldn't rest at ease. Thus, the flames of his profound radiance state swept through the mine.

There were a lot of passages, but he moved so quickly that it only took a single incense stick's worth of time for him to cover everything. Other than some bats, he didn't see anything. The place was indeed safe.

Finally, he settled down cross-legged in the depths of the mine, and softly said, "Shadow, you can break through now."

Instantly, the shadow stretched out. Although it was still connected to Xu Qing, ninety-nine percent of it went off into the distance. There, where no one could see what it was doing, though Xu Qing could sense it, it started sucking in mutagen like mad. The mutagen became like a vortex, sweeping in from all corners of the mine. As it spun, it became a huge, rotating circle thirty meters across.

Within that circle, the shadow's 'body' melted, becoming a black, viscous substance upon whose surface bubbles constantly formed and popped. Each time a bubble burst, it would emit a hair-raising howl, as if to give evidence that some dramatic evolution was occurring.

Xu Qing's eyes shone with anticipation, but he kept his guard fully up. After all, his shadow had always been secretly sinister, and it was impossible to say whether or not it would rebel against him after it broke through. In fact, Xu Qing actually kept dharma force flowing into his violet crystal, just in case he needed to suppress the shadow.

Meanwhile, off to the side, Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior saw the shadow getting to work. And he noticed the Fiendish Xu's look of anticipation, as well as the way he almost seemed to be acting as a dharma protector. All of a sudden, a stabbing sensation of crisis and anxiety filled the patriarch.

He's acting as a dharma protector? The Fiendish Xu is obviously favoring the shadow now! Logically speaking, if the shadow breaks through, then I'm going to be at a big disadvantage. Even if I do break through later, I'll still be trailing behind. In the stories I've read, people who fall behind never catch up. Eventually, they hit rock bottom. I can't let that happen!

The patriarch shivered inwardly at that thought. To protect my position, and to make sure I don't become cannon fodder, I have to break through before the shadow. It's time to fight!

Having reached this point in his train of thought, the patriarch's eyes turned bloodshot, and with an incredibly serious voice, he said, "Milord, I beg thee to let me break through!"

Chapter 170: Lightning Spirit Body

Xu Qing was shocked. He looked at the patriarch, musing that the words he had just spoken sounded a bit odd.

"Are you sure?" he asked. Although he could sense that the patriarch's aura was stronger than before, and was even getting close to a critical juncture, it also seemed unstable. It definitely didn't seem like he was ready for a breakthrough.

“Your humble servant is absolutely certain,” the patriarch said loudly, glancing in the direction of the shadow.

Xu Qing had never been a spirit automaton, so he wasn't sure exactly what they looked like when on the verge of a breakthrough. After hearing the patriarch's words, he mulled over the matter for a bit.

The patriarch waited nervously while Xu Qing considered the matter. The patriarch was worried that Xu Qing cared about the shadow more than him, and would thus refuse his request. Thinking back to the countless ancient records he had read, he remembered one specific, very noteworthy scene. In that scene, the MC refused one of his pet's requests. For some reason, he fell in love with that feeling, and afterward, would refuse all of the pet's requests. Eventually, because of all those refusals, the pet ended up being turned into food.

Has the Fiendish Xu been thinking of using me as fuel for the Balefire Soulswallowing Scripture this entire time?

Although Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior was now only the remaining essence of a living being, in life he had always been a jabberer. But after becoming a spirit automaton, he spent most of his days living in fear, and had thus become more perceptive than before. He was convinced he was going to die, and that the Fiendish Xu was preparing to devour him.

Terrified that Xu Qing wasn't going to agree to his proposal, he loudly said, “Milord, I can't hold it any longer. Here I come....”

The patriarch erupted with power as he tried to force himself into a breakthrough. His eyes turned red and his heart filled with madness.

I have to break through before the shadow!

His soul shadow rose up from the black iron skewer and black clouds began to form within him. Then they clashed, and lightning shot from the clouds through the patriarch. Unable to hold back, he screamed and looked at Xu Qing in terror.

The patriarch cultivated an incomplete technique that allowed him to turn into a spirit automaton. It had a very unusual and impressive-sounding name, that being the Supreme Yin Lightning Spirit Transformation. He had never been able to determine where the technique came from, but presumably it was created by some almighty being who had been researching lightning spirits. By cultivating it to the point of initial success, one could transform oneself into a body of lightning.

The first part of the cultivation process required a certain amount of natural skill, as well as a stockpile of resources. The second part of the process required the tenacity to kill oneself and become a soul body. Then, by using the resources built up in the first part of the process, one could transform into a spirit automaton. And that was the beginning of the third part of the process, transforming into a body of lightning. Once one completed that final transformation, it was considered an initial success with the technique.

However, becoming a lightning spirit was different than starting out as a lightning spirit. And thus, the technique... did not describe any way of reaching the highest level of success.

Right now, Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior was risking his life to break through and transform into a lightning spirit, a painful process that involved clashing with clouds and dealing with lightning.

When the lightning passed through the soul body and provoked heavenly lightning, then it would baptize the soul.

Xu Qing inhaled sharply upon hearing the patriarch's anguished screams. Then he shifted some of his attention away from the shadow so he could watch both of them. Seeing the state the patriarch was in, Xu Qing had a bad feeling. He started to wonder what would happen to his iron skewer if the patriarch couldn't hold on, and ended up being destroyed.

The patriarch's screams didn't just attract Xu Qing's attention. The shadow in its black liquid form suddenly stopped forming bubbles for a moment, then started again, this time even faster than before.

And thus, the shadow and the patriarch went crazy competing with each other. The clouds within the patriarch clashed with greater intensity, and lightning bolts built up within his soul body. As they filled him, it reached the point where the patriarch felt like he might collapse. At that point, a bolt of lightning finally found a way out through the top of his head.

After that, massive amounts of lightning erupted from that opening, spreading out to cover the patriarch. At the same time, his energy and aura began to skyrocket.

When that happened, the patriarch breathed an internal sigh of relief. The process had not been easy. But then he thought about the baptism to come, and his heart again filled with anguish. He knew full well that the breakthrough process was dangerous, and that if he failed, he would be wiped out of existence. Back when he was a living person, he would definitely not have done anything like this.

That aspect of his personality was one reason why he had been slow in opening his dharma apertures. He had come across many opportunities to speed things up, but they all involved risking his life. And therefore in the end, he had just gritted his teeth and slowed down. Right now, he was tempted to do the same thing.

But then he looked at the shadow in its inky pool of black, and how something seemed to be rising up from within it! It wasn't a bubble. Instead, there was something taking shape in that swampy mass. It was something struggling to get to its feet, and as it did, an aura that surpassed Qi Condensation roiled out from it. As that aura grew stronger, it got closer and closer to the Foundation Establishment level. And it didn't seem like it would stop any time soon.

The shadow was obviously reaching a critical point in the breakthrough process, and was going to succeed at any moment. Expression turning vicious, the patriarch glared at the inky mass.

Eyes turning even more bloodshot, he shouted, "Bring on the lightning!"

As the words left his mouth, the sky outside filled with dark clouds and rumbling sounds. Then a huge lightning bolt formed and smashed down in a zigzag shape toward the island.

The lightning bolt smashed into the dirt overhead, piercing down into the mine until it hit Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior viciously on the head. A tremor passed through him as massive amounts of lightning coursed into him. Then it merged with the lightning he had been producing, and it began to converge in an astonishing fashion. Meanwhile, the patriarch screamed as his body grew transparent, like it might collapse into nothing.

The shadow seemed shocked, but kept struggling to reach its next form as it rose from the black liquid. In fact, it seemed to be going all out.

Xu Qing was visibly moved. He looked at the shadow, then at the patriarch, and a strange expression appeared on his face. However, he didn't say anything.

Enough time passed for an incense stick to burn.

The patriarch continued to howl as more and more lightning built up. Finally, he let loose a scream as all the lightning was sucked through the top of his head and into his body. When that happened, he shivered. It was now visible to the naked eyes that his entire body was being transformed by the lightning, down to his soul body. Gradually, the patriarch looked over at the black iron skewer, and inhaled deeply. The skewer flew over and he sucked it in; inside him, it was assailed by countless lightning bolts. It was like he was an automaton furnace, the lightning of heaven and earth was a hammer, and his soul body was the flame, all of it being used to reforge the iron skewer.

With every crash of the lightning, the patriarch trembled. However, each blast also refined the iron skewer, and also added magical symbols of lightning onto it. The skewer was also trembling as much as the patriarch. However, the patriarch didn't give up. Lightning smashed into the skewer ten times. Twenty times. Thirty times. Forty times.

The skewer grew darker and sharper, and the lightning symbols grew brighter until even Xu Qing felt them stinging his eyes. Finally, after striking the skewer with forty-nine bolts of lightning, the patriarch had reached his limit, and he spat out the iron skewer. The skewer had forty-nine lightning symbols flickering on it; its aura surpassed Qi Condensation and seemed unusually strong even for a Foundation Establishment aura.

Once its aura erupted out, the patriarch could again be seen inside. But this time, his body had transformed significantly. Although his features were the same as before, he glittered with endless bolts of lightning, and he was semitransparent. It seemed that he had transformed into a lightning body. The lightning bolts didn't hurt him, as they were now part of him. And he pulsed with such a violent aura that Xu Qing felt like he was in front of someone with a life flame.

Also, Xu Qing sensed terrifying fluctuations coming from the lightning symbols on the skewer. Furthermore, the skewer wasn't in combat readiness; he could only imagine how powerful it would be when its power was unleashed in full. It could probably fight someone with two life flames.

The reason for all this was partly because the patriarch had started out in Foundation Establishment. The rest was because of the technique he cultivated. That combination, plus everything he had stockpiled, led to an amazing breakthrough.

The patriarch was feeling very strong, and also very excited, especially considering how much effort he had expended. However, he hadn't forgotten that Xu Qing had some of his life essence spirit, and thus prepared some words that he was sure would please Xu Qing.

"I've finally lived up to your expectations, milord! Your humble servant—"

At that exact moment, the shadow in the dark liquid seemed to become profoundly stimulated, and the figure rising up within it roared. The shadow was transforming! It didn't look like it had before. Instead, it looked like a great tree rising out of the ground in front of Xu Qing and Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior. Branches and leaves spread out rapidly from it, and upon them grew numerous fruits.

Then the fruits burst open to reveal a host of crimson eyes. There were over a hundred of them, and as they opened, they all focused on Xu Qing. Each and every one of those eyes emanated a fierce and vicious feeling. Then a ghastly mouth opened up on the trunk of the tree, filled with countless razor-sharp teeth. And from that mouth came a bizarre sound that seemed vaguely familiar to Xu Qing.

C-c-crunch. C-c-c-c-crunch. C-crunch.

It sounded like the grinding of teeth. [1]