

Timescape 41

Chapter 41: Nets Above and Snares Below

Xu Qing sped through the wilderness for two days. An ordinary person who tried to keep going for that long would quickly fall into exhaustion. But with Xu Qing's powers of recovery, that wasn't something he had to worry about. In fact, he felt limber and warmed up.

It didn't take long for him to notice that there were people looking for him. They wore the same robes that the camp owner and other Golden Vajra Warrior Sect cultivators had worn. By exercising care, he was able to avoid them.

About a day out from Antlerville, he reached a fork in the road.

If he went left, he would reach the city he'd lived in for six years. Of course, it was now a forbidden region, covered with darkness that was visible even from a great distance. If he picked the road leading to the right, he would be heading to Antlerville.

Standing there, Xu Qing looked in the direction of the forbidden region for a few breaths of time. Then he turned to head toward Antlerville. However, before he could start moving, his expression flickered, and he ducked into a thicket on the side of the road. Eyes narrowed, he looked up into the sky. Up above, a golden streak of light screamed past.

From this distance, all he could see was the bright, golden light. He wasn't able to make out the figure within it. But the spirit power fluctuations were more intense than the camp owner. Xu Qing was shocked.

This pressure surpasses the camp owner's....

Then the beam of light disappeared into the distance, and Xu Qing took a deep breath. However, his eyes flickered with hesitation. During the past two days, he had encountered three groups of cultivators from the Golden Vajra Warrior Sect. He had avoided all of them, and yet, none had seemed particularly threatening to him.

If I keep going this way, I'll reach Antlerville.

On the one hand, no one knew he had that identity medallion, so no one would be able to use that information to guess that he wanted to get to Antlerville. But he had another advantage; given that he didn't have to worry about the mutagen in forbidden regions, he could stay in a forbidden region for long periods of time without any problem.

Heading to Anterville would have its advantages as long as he moved quickly enough that the Golden Vajra Warrior Sect didn't realize what was going on. If he could reach it in time, he could teleport away before they knew what was happening. But the downside was that if they spotted him on the road, they would realize where he was going, and then he would be in big trouble. The advantage of going to the forbidden region was that he could buy time.

Once the Golden Vajra Warrior Sect got tired, then he would have an additional advantage, and would have a much better chance of reaching Antlerville safely. In the meantime, if he ran into danger he would always be able to retreat further into the forbidden region.

Two options to pick from....

As he weighed the pros and cons, the golden beam of light suddenly appeared again up in the sky, moving at incredible speed.

Seeing that, Xu Qing frowned. Remaining unmoving in his hiding spot, he watched the light as it flew closer and closer.

Eventually, he was able to spot a middle-aged cultivator in the light. He had a paper talisman on his right leg, which emanated spirit power fluctuations that apparently allowed the man to fly. In front of him was another paper talisman, which was the source of the golden light. Within that constantly flickering light, it was possible to make out a shadowy form. As Xu Qing looked, he suddenly realized that it was one of the camp guards he had killed outside the camp owner's mansion. It seemed they were using his soul as a sort of hunting dog to sniff out prey. The middle-aged cultivator slowed down, looking around the area before shifting directions and continuing his search.

Xu Qing's heart was pounding.

A talisman treasure!

Although he wasn't exactly sure what that paper talisman did, he could guess.

They're using someone I killed to sense me and identify my position? Thankfully, the range doesn't seem to be very large.

Xu Qing suddenly felt a profound sense of understanding regarding the spectacular things that magical techniques could do. After spending a short time further considering the pros and cons, he made his decision.

I can't keep going to Antlerville. It'll take an entire day, and my chances of being discovered during that time are too great. And if they do find me, I won't have anywhere to hide.

Turning, he sped in the direction of the forbidden region. His current plan was to hide out there for a short time while deciding what to do next. He had only been moving for the time it takes an incense stick to burn when the golden light appeared in the sky again, this time behind him. He quickly found a hiding spot, then looked back. The golden light seemed to be locked onto his position, and was accelerating. Even worse, there was a stream of sword light that sped out in front at even greater speed.

Xu Qing's expression flickered slightly, and he burst out of hiding and started moving at top speed.

The moment he started moving, rumbling echoed out and the sword light slammed into the spot where he'd been hiding, sending soil exploding out in all directions.

Meanwhile, the golden light continued to approach. Then he heard a cold snort.

"You little whoreson. I finally found you. So this is where you were hiding!"

The golden light got closer and closer, and within it, the middle-aged man became more clearly visible. He had a square jaw and wore a long golden robe. He looked average in both height and facial features, but had prominent eyebrows. Beneath those eyebrows, his eyes glittered with sinister killing intent as he looked in Xu Qing's direction.

Just as he did, Xu Qing suddenly stamped his right foot down and jumped straight up into the air toward the man.

The cultivator sneered. The first time he'd passed by earlier, the search talisman had reacted strangely, and thus, he'd returned for a closer look. Now, just as he had a lock on his target, Xu Qing jumped up toward him.

Just as Xu Qing reached the maximum height his momentum would allow, and right before he started falling back down, the middle-aged cultivator extended his right hand.

A tempest appeared around him, and he waved his finger. Instantly, the tempest fell, surrounding Xu Qing with whipping winds.

A boom could be heard as he slammed into the ground. Then he started racing toward the forbidden region.

The cultivator made to chase, but then a glittering light shot from Xu Qing, resolving to a dagger. The cultivator's eyes narrowed as he twisted out of the way to avoid it.

"Useless!" he yelled.

Xu Qing looked up but didn't say anything in response. He just pushed forward with greater speed. He could already tell that he wasn't a match for this person. Maybe if the man couldn't fly, then he could rely on his powers of regeneration to keep him going through serious injury and eventually kill him.

But as long as the enemy could fly, Xu Qing couldn't do much. When one person was in the air, and the other was stuck on the ground, the latter was at a huge disadvantage.

As Xu Qing pushed forward with all the speed he could muster, the golden-robed cultivator pulled out the transmission slip he had to contact his patriarch. At the same time, he sped after Xu Qing, performing incantation gestures to unleash beams of magical light.

As a grand elder in the ninth level of Qi Condensation, he had abundant spirit power and plenty of magical techniques to use. From a distance, it was possible to see numerous wind blades and fireballs smashing into the ground. Even when Xu Qing managed to dodge the attacks, he would still get hit with shockwaves and debris. Already, blood was oozing out of the corners of his mouth.

Laughing coldly, the cultivator said, "The patriarch is too cautious. I don't need his help. I can kill you all by myself!"

Despite his bravado, and even though Xu Qing already looked bedraggled, the grand elder didn't land on the ground. He stayed in the air, performing a double-handed incantation gesture that sent a windstorm down toward the ground.

Killing intent glittered in Xu Qing eyes; being hammered at in such a passive position made his desire to kill even stronger.

However, he also knew that though he was only dealing with one person at the moment, the enemy could surely contact his sect for backup. So Xu Qing kept speeding toward the forbidden region. If more people from the Golden Vajra Warrior Sect showed up, especially the patriarch the man had just mentioned, Xu Qing knew he would be in great danger.

Because the man stayed high in the air, Xu Qing couldn't counterattack, nor did he have any way to lure the man down.

This guy is too cautious. I can't keep waiting.

A violet glow flickered in Xu Qing's eyes as the tempest descended. When the winds hit him, a violet-colored saber suddenly appeared above his head. Xu Qing coughed up blood as the winds injured him, but at the same time, he dropped his arm. The heavenly saber appeared once again, slashing downward.

The cultivator in mid-air suddenly felt an intense sensation of deadly crisis, and his face fell. Backing up, he tapped into all the power of the flight talisman to gain altitude. Just as he did, a shocking rumble echoed out as the image of a saber slashed through the air right below him.

If he had reacted just a bit too slowly, or if he had been flying lower, then he knew he would have been slashed by that attack. He had evaded death, yet didn't get out unscathed. His left foot was hit, slicing a huge, bloody wound into it.

Intense pain pulsed through him, causing his killing intent to skyrocket. At the same time, his vigilance grew. There was no doubt that, without his flight talisman, that shocking saber would have hit him straight on, and even if it didn't kill him, it would definitely have seriously injured him.

The patriarch was right! The Kid fights dirty!

Down on the ground, Xu Qing wiped the blood from his mouth and stared up coldly at his enemy and his injured left foot. He wished he had done something slightly different that resulted in the man being dead, but there wasn't time to think about that now. Turning, he sped toward the forbidden region.

Gritting his teeth against the pain, the grand elder bandaged his wound and looked at Xu Qing, his killing intent raging. Then he hesitated for a brief moment before deciding not to give chase. Instead, he flew higher to gain altitude, then unleashed some magical attacks to try to interfere with Xu Qing's progress.

He wasn't going to take action personally at this point. His life was a lot more important to him than accomplishing a task for the sect. And if Xu Qing was dead set on entering the forbidden region, he wasn't going to stop him.

Once the patriarch shows up, the boy is dead!

Because he wasn't willing to get too close, his magical techniques didn't cause much problem for Xu Qing. What was more, Xu Qing was already recovering. As he moved, he picked up speed. Before long, he dashed into the forbidden region.

Outside, the cultivator hovered in midair trying to decide if he should follow inside. Before he could, something like the crackle of thunder reached his ear from behind, and he looked over his shoulder to see two people approaching.

In the front was a man with red on his robe, and white hair whipping around him, making him seem threatening without being angry. In the air behind him was the spectral image of a golden vajra warrior, surrounding the man with whipping winds. This was none other than Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior.

Behind him was the other grand elder. Reinforcements had arrived.

Chapter 42: Faceless Woman in White

Xu Qing, who had just stepped into the forbidden region, looked back and saw what was happening. His pupils constricted as an intense sensation of deadly crisis filled him. He even started trembling physically. Of course, it was all because... of the tall, burly old man in the red robe.

Foundation Establishment!

That was the main thing Xu Qing was thinking about. The immense pressure he felt caused him to tremble even a great distance away. It was truly stupefying.

This man's identity was self-evident. He was the patriarch of the Golden Vajra Warrior Sect. The image of the golden vajra warrior behind him was especially noteworthy. It was like a heavenly warrior that caused Xu Qing's eyes to sting when merely looking at it. It reminded him of his days in the slums when he caught sight of Qi Condensation cultivators from a distance. However, the sensation vastly surpassed that.

What was more, when looking at the patriarch, he felt like the man had somehow locked onto his position. Even after closing his eyes, an image of the man seemed burned into his mind. Worse, that image brought pain with it, causing Xu Qing to feel like his head was aching.

In some ways, this correlated to a mental attack. That said, because of Xu Qing's experience struggling with control over his shadow, he was familiar with such sensations. Furthermore, after practicing the saber strike from the god-like statue, he had grown mentally resilient, so the pain wasn't too much to deal with. Looking away from the patriarch, he started picking up speed.

As he ran through the forbidden region, he pulled a handful of his black boluses out and threw them behind him.

When they hit the ground, they exploded. Once the outer surface formed from seven-leaf clover sap vanished, the interior of black medicinal powder spread out, then turned into vortexes that attracted the surrounding mutagen.

Because he'd thrown about a dozen pills, it looked like a huge tide of mutagen rushing from all directions to the convergence point.

The grand elder who'd been about to rush into the forbidden region suddenly stopped and frowned. Not sure what was happening, he didn't dare proceed.

Though the black boluses were the result of Xu Qing's failed experiment to create white boluses, he was loath to waste them. However, in the heat of this moment, it seemed the perfect thing to do.

As Xu Qing fled, the mutagen behind him turned into an astonishing storm. Rumbling sounds filled the area, until the distant beams of light grew near.

Upon reaching the edge of the forbidden region, Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior's eyes flickered with killing intent, and instead of stopping to look around, he shot straight inside.

The two grand elders gritted their teeth and followed. They shot right through the convergence of mutagen, but when they came out the other side, what was waiting for them was a large cloud of poison gas.

"Patriarch," cried the grand elder with the injured foot, "this little punk fights dirty!"

Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior snorted coldly, then exhaled sharply, creating a blast of wind that spread out and dissipated the poison gas. At the same time, he grabbed the two grand elders, then continued after the fleeing Xu Qing.

It was already evening, and darkness approached. Everything was getting cold, and the mutagen was strong. Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior wouldn't have any problem continuing onward with flight, but the grand elders didn't have that luxury. That was especially true of the injured one.

Thus, Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior coldly said, "You two catch up. I'm going to nab the Kid!"

Tapping into his cultivation base, the patriarch threw his head back and roared. At the same time, the golden vajra warrior behind him started to grow taller, until it was ninety meters in height. Then the giant started running forward. Each stride took it the same distance as it was tall, and standing on its head was the patriarch.

Someone who couldn't tap into spirit power wouldn't be able to see the golden vajra warrior, so from a distance it would seem like the patriarch was floating through the air.

"The patriarch is so mighty!"

"The patriarch is going to bring this brat's corpse back sooner rather than later."

Both of the grand elders were visibly excited. As far as they were concerned, now that their patriarch was taking action personally, the Kid was going to die beyond the shadow of a doubt.

But then time started to go by. Two hours later, the two grand elders seemed less excited. Then they exchanged a bewildered glance, having long since lost sight of their patriarch. They really couldn't figure out how a mere body cultivator in the Qi Condensation level could be so fast and skilled that the patriarch hadn't dealt with him already. They were confused. But Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior was even more confused.

Far from the location of the two grand elders, the patriarch was glaring in frustration at the small figure speeding madly away from him in the distance. Although there was still a speed difference between the two, he had to admit that his target was very fast. Furthermore, every time he launched a fist strike with the power of the golden vajra warrior projection, a glittering field of light would appear around the young man to protect him.

There would be a boom, and then the glittering field of light would fill with cracks, but at the same time, his target would use the momentum to get further away.

As night fell, the mutagen got stronger. And it seemed to be even worse on the path the young man took. Everything behind him was completely frigid.

It caused even the patriarch to worry a bit, and forced him to circle around the coldness. In turn, that slowed him down, and made the chase take even longer.

"Dammit!" Xu Qing muttered. His face was pale and his eyes were bloodshot as he pushed forward with all the speed he could muster. His left hand was clenched so tightly into a fist that the blood vessels bulged on the back. It was a ghastly sight. Inside that hand was a scorpion tail.

Back when he fought Flamecrow, he still had a bit of that tail left. However, as this chase continued, the venom was slowly draining out. There wasn't much left. He knew it would only keep him going for a short time.

In his right hand was a paper talisman with barely visible calligraphy on it. That was the paper talisman he'd taken from Sergeant Thunder's nemesis. By now, the calligraphy was almost gone.

However, thanks to the incredible speed he'd been maintaining, he had already spotted the familiar city ruins in the distance.

Eventually, the boost from the scorpion tail faded, and Xu Qing finally started to slow down. Gritting his teeth, he made one final leap, sailing through the stark moonlight and landing on the city wall. This... was the place Xu Qing had been trying to reach.

He had no way to fight Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior or the two grand elders, and therefore, he had no choice but to find heavenly timing, earthly advantage, and human harmony!

Heavenly timing was the mutagen in the forbidden region.

Earthly advantage was the familiar terrain.

And human harmony was the grues in the city and the mutant beasts in the city magistrate's manor.

By using these advantages, he hoped to get out of the sticky situation he was in. Once in the ruins, his speed slowed down significantly. Then he heard a rumbling sound behind him, whereupon a huge fist pierced through the air and slammed into him.

RUMBLE!

The defensive barrier provided by the paper talisman shattered.

Blood sprayed out of Xu Qing's mouth as he tumbled forward, his internal organs quivering as they sustained serious damage. The pain caused his vision to swim, but he gritted his teeth and ran frantically forward through the familiar streets. Moments later, he disappeared into the ruins.

Not long after, the red-robed Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior appeared on the scene. His expression was cold as he rolled his right hand to loosen his wrist. The punch he had just launched from a distance had been blocked by a talisman treasure. However, he knew that not all the force had been rebuffed. And he was convinced that a mere Qi Condensation cultivator who was hit by that blow would either die or be severely injured.

The patriarch shot into the city. However, the moment he was inside, his face fell as his ears picked up on the sound of weeping.

Then, a sinister, cold aura drifted out from the street Xu Qing had just disappeared down.

On this dark night, within the sinister moonlight and icy cold, a woman appeared at the end of the street. Given how far away she was, she seemed small. But as she walked forward, she grew larger and larger, until she was taller than the surrounding buildings. Soon, she was fully thirty meters tall. She wore a white gown, had long black hair, and had... no facial features. Her face was completely empty, as if it didn't exist. However, her long garment had countless human faces on it, all of them weeping. The weeping sounds mixed together into a mournful sound that echoed in the area. Surrounded by that sound, the faceless woman in white slowly walked toward Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior.

As she neared, the weeping grew louder.

Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior sucked in a breath. Despite how valiant he was, his heart pounded. He knew what this woman was, and as that realization sank in, he felt a growing sense of reverence.

Without an ounce of hesitation, he turned and fled.

He didn't continue his pursuit of Xu Qing, but instead, chose a different avenue to go deeper into the city.

This brat is in the Qi Condensation level. He doesn't have much chance of surviving the dangers here. But I'm not going to rest easy until I can confirm he's dead. The patriarch's eyes shone with killing intent.

Based on his past experience, he knew that the Kid was someone that... if he didn't kill him right now, would return years later and slap him to death. With great care, Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior proceeded deeper into the city ruins.

There were two options: find his target alive, or recover his dead corpse.

Meanwhile, Xu Qing was back in his little cave that he had used as a hiding place in the past. Sitting there cross-legged, he breathed hard until he coughed up some clotted blood. Only then did some color return to his face.

Wiping the blood from his mouth, he looked grimly out the crack to the outside. Then he gritted his teeth and started doing breathing exercises with the Sea and Mountain Incantation.

Thanks to all the effort fleeing, as soon as he recovered, he found himself at a breakthrough point with his cultivation base.

I'm going to reach the seventh level of the Sea and Mountain Incantation! Without hesitation, he attempted the breakthrough.

In the sixth level, he could project the spectral image of a hobgoblin. At that point, he was able to kill the camp owner, who was in the eighth level of Qi Condensation. However, someone in the ninth level would be much more difficult to deal with. Because of that, he was eager to see what battle prowess he could attain in the seventh level.

My Sea and Mountain Incantation is uniquely incredible thanks to the blessing of the violet crystal!

Taking a deep breath, he endured the pain in his chest and continued with his breathing exercises.

Chapter 43: Complete Success with the Hobgoblin

The floor of Xu Qing's cave was covered with bird feathers, and the air swirled with impure vital energy. The pile of rocks and other miscellaneous items he'd used to block the entrance had long since been corroded by mutagen. There was a lot more dust built up as well. Now that this area was a forbidden region, scavengers had already been coming through to explore. However, this refuge was so well-hidden that no one had discovered it. The smell of dust and decay filled Xu Qing's nostrils, but he ignored it.

Sitting cross-legged, he cultivated the Sea and Mountain Incantation, building up enough momentum to attempt a breakthrough to the seventh level.

Outside, he heard the howls of the mutant beasts and the bone-chilling mourning of the grues. It caused a somewhat vacant expression to fill Xu Qing's face as he suddenly found himself back in the same spot from over half a year ago. He remembered the god's eyes opening, then the blood rain. It had been a real struggle for him to survive in the broken city after that.

After that, he buried such thoughts and focused on cultivation. As his cultivation base rotated, spirit power poured into him. Eventually, popping sounds rang out within him, growing louder and louder, until it was a roaring in his mind.

Black filth oozed out of his pores more and more as the moments passed. During the process, he felt his flesh and blood growing astonishingly stronger. His blood vessels swelled as he felt painful tearing sensations ripping through him. Even his bones creaked.

About two hours later, the roaring in his mind became like the constant crack of thunder. Then he opened his eyes, and violet light erupted from his pupils.

And then, the spectral hobgoblin appeared behind him.

This time... the hobgoblin looked different! It was an even deeper black color, and was burlier. Its head didn't have a single horn. Instead, it had two horns like an ox, except they spiraled, and had black sparks of lightning at their tips. Its face was more vicious, and when it opened its mouth, it seemed capable of devouring evil ghosts. Furthermore, it had sharp claws that, combined with its violet pupils, emanated a hair-raising brutality.

Powerful fluctuations rolled off of the spectral hobgoblin, apparently piercing through the surrounding stone of the cave.

It was a complete success with the spectral hobgoblin!

This was the development that would occur when pushing the Sea and Mountain Incantation to the perfect level. For most other people, this would indicate that he had reached the perfect level of body cultivation in Qi Condensation, and couldn't go any further. However, Xu Qing had reached this point at only the seventh level.

Of course, the transformations to his body were also significant. He was slightly taller, and the violet light in his eyes lasted for longer after the breakthrough.

As for his face....

In the sixth level of the Sea and Mountain Incantation, he had been incomparably fair and good-looking. But now, with the violet glint in his eyes, he could be considered almost enchanting were it not for the grime covering his face.

Of course, Xu Qing didn't care about that. He just cared about how much stronger he was getting.

Eventually, he looked down and slowly clenched his hands into fists, noticing the blood vessels bulging through his skin. The violet light in his eyes slowly faded, but he could clearly sense how powerful he was....

He was at least twice as strong as before!

Is this the power of a hobgoblin?

It was pitch black outside, and there was no light in the cave, but Xu Qing could actually see around him, though not to the extent of being able to see his shadow. That said, he could sense his shadow,

so after considering the matter, he made another attempt to control it. After the time it takes an incense stick to burn, an excited gleam appeared in his eyes.

He had much better control over his shadow now, to the point where he could even call it subtle. He could even take mutagen from the shadow and return it to his body. Of course, that wasn't a useful thing, but it proved that he was commanding increased control.

After taking everything into consideration, Xu Qing was certain that with his current level of battle prowess, he could defeat someone like the camp owner without relying on the statue's heavenly saber. All he would need would be a single punch... and if someone in the eighth level of Qi Condensation tried to meet the blow, their arm would explode.

Unfortunately, I'm not even close to being able to deal with Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior.

Xu Qing shook his head. Although he hadn't directly clashed with the patriarch, being forced to deal with his long-range fist attacks had been very illuminating.

Even if Xu Qing used his shadow to catch the man off guard, he knew that there was just no way he was strong enough to fight a Foundation Establishment expert.

That said, I should be able to kill those two fellows in the ninth level of Qi Condensation.

Eyes gleaming, he looked through the crack to the outside. The bizarre sounds of the grues continued to echo out, but they were off in the distance. The cave itself was quiet. Once again, Xu Qing felt like he was in the past, and he even instinctively took out his iron skewer as he tried to decide what to do next.

If he left the forbidden region, he felt confident that he could get to Antlerville.

However... he also didn't feel like simply running away. That much was evident from the killing intent flickering in his eyes.

If I don't kill some of these people, I'm always going to be worrying about potential calamity.

Narrowing his eyes, he envisioned his old map of the city. He knew the city well. Thinking about all the different streets, he remembered where certain mutant beasts slept, where the birds hid, and other details.

The city magistrate's manor! The coldness in his eyes grew more intense.

His main goal was going to be leaving the city ruins. But if he encountered any people from the Golden Vajra Warrior Sect, then he already knew how he would fight back. Sensing that the sounds outside were very distant, Xu Qing opened up the cave and slowly crawled out.

The cave opening was small and narrow, and Xu Qing was already taller and bigger than before, so it was a bit of a struggle. But his expression was the same as ever as he forced himself out. He got a few scrapes and cuts in the process, but they healed almost instantly.

After looking around vigilantly, he carefully started making his way through the ruins. This time, he moved with caution even greater than back in the jungle by the basecamp. After all, there were a lot more grues and mutant beasts to worry about at night time here.

Thankfully, he knew the general layout of the city. That, coupled with his speed, enabled him to avoid any dangers he came across.

In those cases when fleeing wasn't an option, he ended matters with a lightning-fast attack.

He continued through the mutagen for about two hours, and was nearing the edge of the city when he heard a distant rumbling sound. With eyes flashing like a lone wolf, he prowled through the city toward the noise. Soon after, he saw seven or eight mutant beasts pursuing two people.

They were none other than the grand elders from the Golden Vajra Warrior Sect.

A short time after the two saw Xu Qing and their patriarch disappear into the city, they followed.

However, given it was the middle of the night, they'd decided not to venture into the depths of the city, and had stayed near the edge.

Unfortunately, there were just too many grues and mutant beasts. Furthermore, the hiding place they had picked was a far cry from the bird cave Xu Qing had identified. Thus, it wasn't long before they were discovered. Not wanting to attract the attention of even more mutant beasts, they had simply fled, deciding to only start fighting if absolutely necessary.

Because of that cautious approach, and also their incredible strength, they had been able to deal with everything thus far. In fact, they were just on the point of being able to shake off the group of mutant beasts chasing them. However, that was when a cold streak of light suddenly shot toward them.

It shot like an arrow through the night, heading straight toward the grand elder in the lead position.

This was not the man who had clashed with Xu Qing earlier, but instead, was the one who had shown up later with Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior. Face falling, he quickly performed a double-handed incantation gesture, causing an ice shield to rumble out around him. He also had a personal defensive barrier as well.

The cold light moved with astonishing power, and it pierced through the ice defense, then stabbed into the defensive barrier.

Spirit power fluctuations rolled out as cracks spread across the defensive barrier. However, it held strong. That was when the grand elder realized that he had been attacked with a black iron skewer!

Pupils constricting, the grand elder looked over his shoulder at his companion, but by then it was too late.

At the same moment as the first attack, a shadowy figure lunged out of an alley, becoming like a black lightning bolt that shot toward the other grand elder.

That shadowy figure was none other than Xu Qing.

The attack with the skewer had been a feint, as his true goal was to take out the grand elder with the injured left foot.

Xu Qing moved with explosive speed, vastly superior to his limits with the sixth level of the Sea and Mountain Incantation. The wind screamed as, in the blink of an eye, he was right next to the injured grand elder.

The grand elder was injured, had to deal with strong mutagen, and couldn't fly anymore. Because of that, he had a harder time moving than his companion did. When he realized the danger he faced, his eyes went wide, and a feeling of deadly crisis rose up in his heart. He dodged backward, but

there was no way Xu Qing was going to let him get away that easily. Jumping into the air, Xu Qing clenched his right hand into a fist and unleashed a punch.

Whether in terms of speed or strength, Xu Qing filled the blow with everything he had. As he struck out, the vicious spectral hobgoblin appeared behind him, roaring noiselessly as its power focused on Xu Qing's fist.

Cracking sounds echoed out, and the air exploded from the immense force as the man's defensive barrier shattered like glass, and Xu Qing's fist landed on his chest.

A huge boom echoed through the stillness of the city.

The grand elder coughed up blood like mad as his chest caved in and his organs were shattered. Then he flew backward like a kite with its string cut. He was in the ninth level of Qi Condensation, but his face was a mask of terror. Meanwhile, the flight talisman on his right leg glittered, and the power of flight swept through him, causing him to jerk up into the air.

However, that was when another cold light shot toward him. This time it was a long sword that, in the briefest of moments, slashed directly through his right leg. Blood sprayed everywhere, accompanied by a miserable shriek as the flight talisman was cut away along with his leg.

Before the leg could fall to the ground, Xu Qing stamped his foot and launched himself into the air. As he did, the spot he had just occupied was filled with a host of wind blades shot by the other grand elder.

Xu Qing didn't even look behind himself; he stayed completely focused on the despairing grand elder as he tumbled down.

Xu Qing launched another punch, and the spectral hobgoblin roared.

This time, the blow landed on the grand elder's head. A thump rang out as the man quivered for a moment. Then his head exploded, sending blood everywhere as he died!

The moment his corpse hit the ground, the pursuing mutant beasts pounced on it and tore it to pieces.

Not slowing down a bit, Xu Qing grabbed the flight talisman off the severed leg, turned, and shot toward the surviving grand elder.

Xu Qing licked his lips, looking like a wolf as he closed in.

"Die!"

Chapter 44: Cause and Effect

The grand elder died a horrible death, and as his final scream echoed through the city, Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior noticed. As a Foundation Establishment cultivator, he had acute senses, and immediately looked up when he noticed the sound. Expression grim, he jumped into the air and started moving in the direction of the sound.

Although there were dangerous creatures around, given his level, he had nothing to fear as long as he didn't encounter either a grue or an entire horde of mutant beasts. Not even the strong mutagen was much to worry about for him. Given the level of his cultivation base, he could stay in these ruins for as long as a month without any difficulty.

After confirming he was heading in the right direction, the patriarch let loose a loud cry backed with the power of his cultivation base, ensuring that even someone a great distance away could hear him.

“Keep that brat busy until I get there!”

As the words echoed out, he shot forward with explosive speed, making him look like a shooting star.

Meanwhile, back on the field of the battle, the surviving grand elder was backing away from the incoming Xu Qing. He had heard his patriarch’s orders, but at the same time, didn’t want to end up dead.

He didn’t care if he ended up berated by the patriarch. Xu Qing’s baleful aura was too intense, and he fought too ruthlessly.

Therefore, the grand elder fell back at top speed, adding in the benefits of the flight talisman to move back hundreds of meters in the blink of an eye.

Xu Qing’s eyes narrowed as he also heard Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior’s words. However, he didn’t stop chasing the grand elder. Scooping up his iron skewer along the way, he prepared to use his newly acquired flight talisman. Just before he did, though, his expression flickered, and then he turned and shot back in the opposite direction.

Upon seeing this, a look of shock appeared on the fleeing grand elder’s face. Then he sensed a wave of sinister coldness before realizing that an enormous figure was right next to him.

It was a gigantic woman with no facial features and long black hair, wearing a flowing white garment. The countless faces on her garment wept mournfully, filling the area with a gruish aura, and causing the moon above to turn the color of blood.

From a distance, the grand elder looked like an ant in front of her. Because of the countless weeping faces, the grand elder trembled violently, and his expression turned to one of sorrow as he, too, began to weep. His eyes shone with immense terror, as if the weeping was beyond his control.

Then his weeping merged with the weeping of the faces on the dress, until they seemed united. White energy then seeped out of the grand elder’s eyes, ears, nose, and mouth, flowing into the faceless woman’s dress. A moment later....

The grand elder was a desiccated corpse that toppled to the ground, completely devoid of energy.

At the same time, a new face appeared on the woman’s dress. It was the grand elder’s face! Though there was no expression on the face, as soon as it appeared on the white garment, it began weeping.

Xu Qing saw this happening, as did Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior, and both were shaken.

Xu Qing took a deep breath, suppressed his shock, and picked up speed as he fled into the ruins.

In contrast, the newly arrived Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior was so shocked his scalp tingled and he felt rooted in place.

And that was because the faceless woman in white was heading in his direction.

The patriarch knew that, when facing an entity like this, one shouldn’t make sudden moves. Someone who did so would end up like the grand elder from moments before. Therefore, he suppressed his terror and stood in place as the faceless woman slowly moved past him and off into

the distance. Only then did he breathe a sigh of relief. At the same time, he felt that something strange was going on.

Running into a grue twice is strange. Why do I have this feeling... it has something to do with that brat? He really does fight dirty!

Looking in the direction Xu Qing had fled, the patriarch felt more than ever that he had to exterminate him. Gritting teeth, he flew after him.

The night echoed with roars that filled every corner of the ruins, along with the sounds of chewing, weeping, and laughter. Beneath the moonlight, the crumbled ruins seemed more demonic and grisly than ever.

As Xu Qing sped along, although he was familiar with the city night, he was still fearful of all the strange, grisly sounds. He also felt like he was the subject of countless malevolent gazes that sent frigid coldness into his body. Even as that cold feeling grew more intense, Xu Qing passed the spot where, months before, he had set an ambush for a vulture. And that was when his pupils constricted....

A short distance away, he saw the broken-down horse cart. Before, there had been a blood-soaked rabbit doll hanging from the axle. But it was in a different position now. It was now sitting on the cart itself, its back to Xu Qing so that he couldn't see its face.

Scalp tingling, Xu Qing fled.

Shortly after, Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior arrived in the same spot. Looking around, he spotted the cart, as well as the blood-soaked rabbit. Which was now facing him.

The eyes embedded in its face were dark, and the doll seemed grisly to the extreme. And it was looking at the patriarch very eerily.

The patriarch's pupils constricted and his hair stood on end. Stopping in place for a moment, he then crept away slowly before exhaling softly and continuing on his way. [1]

He didn't get too close to Xu Qing. The patriarch was convinced Xu Qing used all sorts of evil tricks, including the ability to make mutagen stronger. Therefore, the patriarch didn't want to approach him and directly attack. Instead, he decided to watch from a distance and wait until daylight to make a move.

For a Foundation Establishment cultivator to be so cautious in dealing with a Qi Condensation cultivator would result in a huge loss of face if word got out. But given the circumstances, the patriarch wanted to play it safe.

Slowing down a bit, he kept trailing Xu Qing from a distance.

Xu Qing sensed what was happening. He had already been preparing how to fight back, including getting his shadow ready to take action, and making sure his black boluses were ready to throw out.

He had felt confident that, though he couldn't unleash any fatal attacks, he could at least inflict some damage. And though he would be seriously injured in the clash, he should be able to escape. What was more, the added element of injury would help sell the next phase of his plan.

But despite being a Foundation Establishment expert, Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior was being extremely cautious, in turn causing Xu Qing to be more cautious. Despite the fact that the man was

keeping his distance, Xu Qing still wanted to go through with his trap, so he kept moving at top speed toward the city magistrate's manor.

It was located in the very middle of the city, where the mutagen was stronger than anywhere else. Yet for some reason, there were fewer mutant beasts there.

As Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior observed what Xu Qing was doing, his expression flickered, and a sensation of danger filled him.

As Xu Qing fled, the patriarch looked at a nearby fallen building and suddenly stopped in place. In fact, not only did he not continue chasing, he actually backed up.

This went completely beyond what Xu Qing had planned for. Just when he was only a few hundred meters from the city magistrate's manor, Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior suddenly retreated?

It's too late to change plans now! Gritting his teeth, Xu Qing suddenly threw out a large quantity of black boluses.

In fact, in the interests of achieving his goal, he threw out half of his entire collection.

When they exploded, they created a massive vortex that caused waves of mutagen to rush forth, rippling the air, twisting everything, and making it impossible to see anything clearly.

The level of mutagen at play was astonishing.

The retreating Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior was shocked, but more than that, puzzled, as Xu Qing was right in the middle of all the mutagen.

Forgetting the danger of the mutagen itself, this event would surely attract mutant beasts and grues, which would kill Xu Qing for sure. It almost seemed like he was committing suicide.

As the patriarch wondered what was going on, a few hundred meters away in the city magistrate's manor, an intense rumbling shook everything in the area, followed by a terrifying roar. The ground trembled, and the blood-colored moon in the sky grew blurry.

The patriarch was visibly shocked, and the sensation of deadly crisis within him grew more intense than ever. Backing up even faster, he looked toward the sound and saw numerous shadowy figures flying out of the mansion. They were incredibly gaunt, with wings of black flame, and a stupefying level of mutagen on them that caused everything around them to ripple and distort. The shocked patriarch's face went pale, and he gasped as the entire city magistrate's manor collapsed in on itself, leaving behind a huge hole in the ground.

Crawling out of that hole was a gaunt, three-hundred-meter-tall figure, roaring to the heavens. It seemed as slender as a tree, and actually was more than three hundred meters tall, as it was only halfway out of the crater. It waved its arms, and its ten fingers became long vines, some of which stabbed into the ground. Using the vines, the gaunt figure began pulling itself further out of the hole.

"What the hell is this freaking thing??" the patriarch blurted in his shock. Looking astonished beyond reason, he turned and fled at top speed.

Then his heart filled with even more madness as he realized that the winged creatures that had originally been attracted to the strong mutagen had for some reason emerged from that area and were now howling as they flew toward him!

“What’s going on here?? Where’s Kid??”

The patriarch’s eyes went wide as he realized that, no matter how fast he fled, they were going to catch up. Having no other choice, he turned and unleashed an attack.

The flying figures exploded, but strangely, they recovered after only a short moment, and kept coming. What was more, the terrifying entity further back had almost climbed out of the giant hole in the ground.

As Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior dealt with the maddeningly deadly situation, it was a short distance away, just beyond the area of strong mutagen, where Xu Qing had found a crevice in a wall, and was in hiding.

From that position of safety, he watched events play out.

Back when he had been exploring the city, he discovered more than one location where birds had roosted. And this crevice was one of them! When he’d found the cultivation technique in the city magistrate’s manor, and been severely injured in the process, he ended up hiding here to evade the mutant beasts chasing him. [2]

That said, it was too close to the city magistrate’s manor for him to choose it as a long-term camping site.

When the eyes of the god above opened, and catastrophe began, all types of living beings were wiped out. The only type that weren’t affected... were birds, for some unknown reason. And they instinctively were able to find safe hiding places. Although such locations weren’t absolutely without risk, the chances of grues or mutant beasts discovering them were small.

Of course, that was all comparatively speaking. Were it not for Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior being present, hiding in this place would have meant certain death in the circumstances.

Seeing Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior in such bad condition, and also seeing the gigantic figure climbing out of the ground, Xu Qing took in a deep breath. Then he gritted his teeth, charged out into the open, and tossed about a dozen black boluses in the direction of the fleeing patriarch.

When they exploded, the mutagen in the area became even more shockingly dense. At the same time, the explosion seemed to surpass a limit of some sort. All of a sudden, the countless malevolent gazes that had locked onto Xu Qing after he emerged from the crevice... shifted to look at a different subject. They were now looking at that influx of mutagen. And they weren’t the only ones. Other grues and mutant beasts in the city all looked in the same direction.

Then, they started moving!

A howl of rage erupted from Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior’s mouth. Xu Qing, looking over his shoulder as he fled, saw the grues and mutant beasts rushing toward the intense mutagen.

The patriarch also wanted to flee, but was being harried by the winged figures, making it impossible for him to do much. At that moment, his anxiety grew deeper, and his rage toward Xu Qing more intense.

Xu Qing sped down a nearby road, getting further away from the city magistrate’s manor and heading toward the edge of the city. But then... a wave of intense, sinister coldness hit him.

He heard weeping from up ahead, and then the faceless woman in white appeared. One moment, she was far away. The next, the gruish woman was right in front of him. She moved with such incredible speed that there was no way he could flee. As the coldness covered him, his mind went blank, almost as if it had been frozen in place.

The countless faces covering the woman's garment wept mournfully, the sound piercing into Xu Qing's mind. They created fluctuations that stirred his emotions, and it seemed like he might start weeping at any moment.

But then... some of the faces on the faceless woman's dress suddenly stopped weeping and looked at Xu Qing with blank expressions. A moment passed, and unexpectedly, they smiled and opened their mouths as if they were speaking. However, he heard no sound. More and more faces ceased weeping, until finally... more than half had smiled warmly at Xu Qing and spoken to him, though he couldn't hear a single thing they were saying.

All he could do was stare dumbstruck at the scene. Before he could make heads or tails of it, the faceless woman moved past him, and the weeping continued....

Eventually, Xu Qing felt he could move again. Struggling to breathe, he looked over his shoulder at the faceless woman. In the darkness of night, her white dress seemed like a beacon of flame....

For some reason, the faces that smiled at him... seemed very familiar.

As if he knew them....

And that was especially true of one face in particular. He had carried that person on his back to be cremated, and had told him to rest in peace. It was... the old man from the medicine shop.

Xu Qing stood there quietly looking at the figure, until a look of understanding appeared on his face. Clasp hands, he bowed deeply and whispered, "Thank you."

And that was the same thing the smiling faces had said moments ago.

"Thank you."

Chapter 45: Seeking Revenge over the Smallest Grievance

The arrival of the god's broken face was like the Awakening of Insects, which affected all living things, and forced them to change. It changed the world into a colder and more brutal place. [1]

The forbidden regions were convergences of that coldness, but right now... as Xu Qing watched the figure in white, he suddenly thought back to what Sergeant Thunder mentioned about their first meeting.

"Do you know why I took you with me when we left that city? When I saw you cremating all those bodies, with the fire shining on you, it seemed like... you had brought a bit of warmth and kindness into this brutal world."

Just like Sergeant Thunder back then, Xu Qing felt like he sensed a bit of warmth right now. It came from the faceless woman in white, and from the numerous smiling faces that had thanked him. It came... from the humanity that this brutal world couldn't take away.

Eventually, Xu Qing again clasped hands and bowed deeply.

Then he turned back in the direction of the city wall and started moving.

Apparently, he had thrown out so many black boluses that he pushed the mutagen in that part of the city beyond the brink, making it like a bright torch on a dark night. Perhaps it was a matter of cause and effect. Regardless, he didn't encounter much danger at all as he sped toward the outskirts of the city.

Once outside, he looked back into the city, and could hear the roars and screams echoing through the darkness.

I wonder when I'll be back... he thought. Then he hopped off the city wall and sped away into the night. In order to maximize his speed, he put his new flight talisman on his leg, then poured spirit power into it. He instantly shot up into the air.

Sailing along with the wind against his face was a new feeling, as was the incredible speed he was capable of. This was his first time flying. He looked down at the world speeding by below, a somewhat dazed expression on his face.

So this is what it feels like to be a bird flying in the air.

Having reached the seventh level of the Sea and Mountain Incantation, he had perfect control over his body, and thus quickly acclimated to flying. Combined with his natural speed and power, he was able to soar for long periods before dropping back down. And he could thrust his fists behind him to gain added bursts of speed.

From a distance, he looked like a beam of light speeding through the air of the forbidden region. Any other person would have been forced to worry about mutagen, but not him.

It didn't take long before he saw the boundary of the forbidden region. Bursting through it, he entered the outside world, and felt the warm breeze against his face. It quickly drove out the cold of the forbidden region.

Hovering in the air, Xu Qing looked thoughtfully toward Antlerville, and then shifted to look in a different direction.

After living in the scavenger basecamp for half a year, Xu Qing had picked up quite a bit of knowledge. For instance, he had learned the names of many places and locations in the area, and knew the general location of the Golden Vajra Warrior Sect headquarters.

It wasn't yet sunrise, and the moon didn't do much to illuminate the darkness, but he could still make out mountains in the distance.

Hovering there, he looked back and forth between Antlerville and the Golden Vajra Warrior Sect headquarters.

"I'm not going to let this go," he murmured.

He wasn't sure what would happen with Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior in the ruins, but he doubted the man was going to perish. However, he would probably end up severely injured, and it didn't seem likely that he would extricate himself any time soon.

Xu Qing knew that if he went toward Antlerville immediately, he would reach it without any problems. But he just couldn't make himself do that.

After thinking about it more, his eyes shone with cold light as he tapped into the power of the flight talisman to head... toward the Golden Vajra Warrior Sect.

Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior was in a bad situation, and two of the sect's grand elders were dead. The sect itself was in a state of unprecedented weakness, so now would be the best time to strike a deadly blow.

This was Xu Qing's personality.

Any other person would probably have chosen this moment to flee. But Xu Qing had learned from a young age that potential calamities needed to be eradicated as quickly as possible. Even if this specific potential calamity couldn't be dealt with fully, he could at least inflict some pain on his enemy. And enough pain could turn into a deterrent. That was the law of the slums, and that was the law of the scavengers. Whether or not that was the law of the chaotic world in general, Xu Qing wasn't sure. But that was his law.

He wasn't convinced that killing two grand elders would be enough of a deterrent.

Xu Qing sped along, and as the sun rose over the horizon he caught sight of his destination.

The headquarters of the Golden Vajra Warrior Sect!

It consisted of numerous buildings on a mountain. As the sun shone on the grand hall atop the mountain, it looked incredibly inspiring and beautiful. However, most of the sect cultivators were out searching for Xu Qing right now. There was only a small group of disciples left behind to stand guard, and only a few of them were visible this early in the morning.

They all had arrogant looks on their faces, as though they represented a paramount figure in all creation. Leading into the sect was an arched bridge, where five disciples stood chatting and laughing.

Their conversation revolved around how their patriarch had gone out to look for some child. From the tone of their conversation, it was obvious they thought this whole thing was a big fuss over a minor issue.

Further inside, some disciples sat cross-legged in their quarters, doing breathing exercises.

The sect leader was in the grand hall, flipping through some accounting records for the local cities and scavenger basecamps. Similar to the disciples outside, he wasn't convinced the patriarch even needed to be outside the sect.

It's just some scavenger. He might be skilled, but our two grand elders can handle him easily. There's no reason for the patriarch himself to have gotten involved. Now the sect is completely empty.

The sect leader shook his head. His opinion didn't really matter, as there was no way anyone would defy the patriarch.

As all members in the sect sat around not doing much, no one noticed Xu Qing high above the sect, looking down coldly.

After first checking the direction of the wind, he circled around the sect until it was downwind of him. He also determined the speed of the wind.

Face completely expressionless, he took out a large amount of poison powder and scattered it. In that one moment, he threw out about eighty percent of all of his poison powder reserves.

As the different powders mixed, they created an astonishing combination of poisons that drifted into the sect with the wind. Instead of taking any further action, he watched and waited. It didn't take much time before the wind turned brown, and then black. Xu Qing's eyes flickered coldly.

That should do it.

The black wind finally attracted the attention of the cultivators in the sect. The first to notice it were the disciples chatting on the bridge. The entire group looked up in astonishment and shock.

"Hey, what's that?"

The black wind passed through a tree, which instantly withered. The disciples' faces fell.

"Poison!!"

As the cry rang out, other disciples in the sect heard, and they rushed out into the open to try to drive away the poison wind.

That was when Xu Qing suddenly appeared, like a bolt of lightning that shot toward the sect headquarters.

As the cultivators of the Golden Vajra Warrior Sect reacted with shock and fury, and as warning bells clanged inside the sect, Xu Qing landed on the ground halfway up the mountain.

A boom rang out, and cracks spread out from his feet as he looked up with killing intent at the shocked enemy cultivators. Then he attacked!

A huge boom echoed out.

As he moved with shocking speed, screams filled the air, and corpses fell to the ground. Although the majority of the disciples were out of the sect, that still left plenty behind to fight. Soon, enraged shouts filled the air, and more figures were rushing toward Xu Qing.

"An ambush!"

"Dammit! I can't believe someone is actually launching a surprise attack on us!"

"Kill him!!"

Meanwhile, in the grand hall, the sect leader realized something was happening, and strode out furiously. When he saw the chaos, and the poison wind, he shouted, "All disciples, consume anti-poison pills and drive this poison wind away!"

Then he glared down toward the area halfway down the mountain where the rumbling sounds came from. Eyes cold, he rushed in that direction.

However, Xu Qing wasn't fighting the sect disciples there. Instead, he was moving away at top speed and throwing black boluses behind him.

Some exploded when contacting the ground, others exploded in midair. All of them created vortexes of mutagen. It was like the mutagen in the area was alive as it converged rapidly on the mountain

“Mutagen!!”

The disciples who had been about to charge in that direction saw what was happening and instinctively backed up. Some were close to the vortexes, and the sudden increase in mutagen caused their skin to start turning greenish-black.

“This is outrageous!!” the sect leader shouted as he arrived from the grand hall.

Cultivation base fluctuations that surpassed the perfect level of Qi Condensation rolled out. This was a level of strength beyond the grand elders Xu Qing had killed, and was second only to the patriarch of the sect.

The sect leader’s golden robe fluttered around him, and grim killing intent pulsed on his face. However, when he saw Xu Qing, a scavenger, and a very young one at that, a tremor passed through him. He had no need to guess who this person was.

“It’s you!”

As the realization hit him, his heart pounded.

Chapter 46: Razing the Golden Vajra Warrior Sect

“What are you doing here?”

The sect leader glared at Xu Qing, his heart pounding with shock. Actually, he wasn’t sure if he could believe his eyes. But the young man in front of him wore a black jerkin, had wild and messy hair, and was covered in grime. What was more, his jerkin was deeply stained with blood and carried a baleful aura.

His messy hair and the grime on his face made it difficult to clearly see his facial features. But when the poison wind lifted the hair from his face, it was impossible to miss his indescribably cold eyes.

The moment the sect leader made eye contact, he felt a frigid coldness filling his heart.

Having seen Xu Qing’s portrait, the moment the sect leader laid eyes on him, he recalled his scavenger moniker.

“You’re the Kid!!”

He was well aware that the sect patriarch as well as two grand elders were out chasing this very person, as were a whole host of sect disciples. But now... the patriarch and grand elders had yet to return, and the boy they were chasing had unexpectedly shown up at their front door.

Fear welled up in the sect leader, but there was no time to think about the matter at the moment. He instantly started an incantation gesture, causing a rushing wind to spring up and drive away the poison. At the same time, the wind swelled into a wave of air that shot toward Xu Qing.

Xu Qing assessed the situation coldly. Ignoring the sect leader, he simply jumped out of the way of the attack, then sped off in another direction, continuing to throw out black boluses.

As booms echoed out, the sect leader felt the bizarre effects of the black boluses, and his face fell. Stamping his foot, he shot after Xu Qing.

However, Xu Qing wasn't interested in fighting him. He dodged again, then used the flight talisman for speed, continuing to meander through the sect. As a result, the sect leader was also forced to use a flight talisman.

From a distance, it was possible to see the sect leader chasing Xu Qing, sending out attacks that caused explosions left and right.

Xu Qing threw out another black bolus, which exploded, and then he threw out another.

"Dammit!" the sect leader raged. He wanted to do something to stop Xu Qing, but they were both using flight talismans with the same top speed, so the sect leader couldn't catch up.

Before long, the constant explosions of black boluses ensured that the entire Golden Vajra Warrior Sect was filled with vortexes, and shocking levels of mutagen were rushing toward it from all sides. In fact, it almost resembled a forbidden region.

By the time Xu Qing ran out of pills, the entire sect... was one massive vortex. As the vortex spun, and the mutagen rushed in, the sky was obscured. The mutagen became something like a roiling fog that filled the entire area. Howls and screams rang out from within the fog, as the disciples therein were overwhelmed with astonishment.

Furthermore, there just weren't enough disciples to deal with the poison wind, and therefore, the poison powder circulated and became part of the fog.

In all corners of the sect, plants and vegetation withered and died, and even rocks started hissing and melting.

Agonized shrieks could be heard everywhere.

The Golden Vajra Warrior Sect was in a really bad state. The combination of the mutagen and the poison was simply terrifying.

Furthermore, it all happened in the space of a hundred breaths of time, so quickly that nobody could possibly react fast enough.

The sect was in such chaos that many disciples were tripping over each other to flee. The poison-negating pills they'd taken weren't strong enough to deal with the poison, so blood oozed out of their eyes, ears, nose, and mouth as they screamed piteously.

Some tried to go into hiding, but it didn't do any good.

Echoing over everything were the enraged shouts of the sect leader as he chased Xu Qing.

As the sect descended into absolute madness, Xu Qing sped up and then disappeared in a flash. As the search for him continued, a flicker of fire suddenly appeared within the fog. Those who could see it felt their scalps tingling in shock. The sect leader was astonished, and was forced to abandon his pursuit to lead disciples to put out the fire.

Unfortunately... there wasn't just one fire. Flames flickered in numerous locations, and quickly spread into a massive conflagration.

"Kid!!" the sect leader howled, his voice thrumming with hatred. Unfortunately, there was no time to search for Xu Qing, as he was wrapped up dealing with the fires.

Meanwhile, Xu Qing was visiting one beautiful sect building after another. He would go inside, rifle around and take any valuables he found, then set the place on fire before moving on. He kept a very quick pace.

At a certain point, he noticed a building far more extravagant and beautiful than the others. There also happened to be a plaque above the door, inscribed with the name of the building.

Treasure Pavilion?

Eyes narrowing, Xu Qing clenched his hand into a fist and launched a blow at the door. The door of the Treasure Pavilion shattered, and poison gas rushed inside. Xu Qing followed, and looked around to see that the walls were covered in shelves. Arrayed on those shelves were all sorts of medicinal pills, spirit coins, and prized treasures.

As Xu Qing looked around, his heart started pounding. He quickly started grabbing everything he could.

Just before he was about to leave, he noticed that the poison gas was seeping into a part of the wall that normally wasn't visible. Looking closer, he saw the very faint outline of a door.

Xu Qing's eyebrows shot up. Stepping forward, he kicked the door. The outline of the door became more obvious as a result, but it didn't break. Making a faint expression of surprise, Xu Qing clenched his hand into a fist. Cracking sounds rang out from within him, and the spectral hobgoblin appeared. Roaring soundlessly, it combined its fist with his, and he unleashed another blow.

Another boom rang out, and the door collapsed, revealing a hidden room behind it.

There was only one thing inside the room: a cloth bag the size of his palm.

Shocked, he reached out to grab it.

However, in that very moment, numerous beams of light erupted from the bag, shooting down to form a symbol on the ground. Then, the complicated symbol glittered as it projected a host of wind blades around the bag.

Xu Qing pulled his hand back and took a close look at the wind blades and the bag they protected. It seemed obvious that this was some sort of precious item.

What is this thing?

Frowning at the spirit power fluctuations that came off of it, he finally snorted coldly, took out a black bolus, and crushed it.

Mutagen rushed into the area, filling the secret room. The symbol on the ground glittered, but wasn't able to defend against the corrosion caused by the mutagen. It dimmed, then cracking sounds could be heard as the symbol was destroyed.

Without any hesitation, Xu Qing grabbed the cloth bag, then turned and fled.

Outside, he looked around at the chaos in the Golden Vajra Warrior Sect, including the howls of grief, the mutagen, the poison gas, and the fires raging. The flight talisman glittered as he flew into the sky, his facial expression as cold as ever.

He knew full well that he'd only gained an advantage in his sneak attack because the patriarch wasn't in the sect. The longer he stayed around, the more dangerous things would get.

His goal had been to show up, kill as many people as possible, destroy as much of the headquarters as he could, and steal anything he could get his hands on. Having accomplished those things, he decided to make his getaway.

However, that was when a howl of rage echoed out, and the disheveled sect leader flew toward him and attacked.

Xu Qing's eyes flickered with killing intent as he unleashed the power of the seventh level of the Sea and Mountain Incantation. The spectral hobgoblin appeared, and he launched a punch at the incoming sect leader.

A boom echoed out, and the sect leader was shoved backward. Then, just as he was about to press the attack, he saw a violet saber forming behind Xu Qing. The heavenly saber slashed down, directly toward the sect leader.

Looking shocked, the sect leader fell back into the poison wind and the mutagen fog, with the violet saber following him.

Xu Qing didn't continue the attack. Eyes flashing, he backed up, then turned into a beam of light that shot away at high speed.

Before he could make his way off into the distance, though, seven figures emerged from the fog and launched vicious attacks.

The immense power of the attacks shattered the air where Xu Qing had just been hovering, causing massive rumbling sounds to echo out. This seemed to be a strength similar to the Foundation Establishment level!

If Xu Qing chose to engage instead of dodge, he would have been hit directly by the attack.

These seven figures were old men whose faces were now pale, with blood oozing out of their mouths. The attack they had just launched was a combination move accomplished by means of a secret magic. Right now, they were eyeing Xu Qing and trying to decide whether or not to chase him.

"Dharma Protectors!" the sect leader said. "Don't give chase!" The sect leader staggered out of the fog. One of his arms had been severed, and the stump was dripping blood. His face was ashen, and it looked like he could hardly stay on his feet. "That criminal is too cautious. I can't believe he didn't press the attack against me earlier. Right now our priority is to clear the poison wind and mutagen from the sect. Then we wait for the patriarch to return!"

The sect leader was feeling very frustrated. He had intentionally sustained injury in the hopes of luring Xu Qing into a fight. In the end, he failed.

Meanwhile, the seven dharma protectors kept their mouths shut. Some of them helped the sect leader, while the other stared blankly at the chaos in the sect, then sighed and hurried forward to help.

Slowly but sure, the day passed.

By the time evening came, the sect was mostly clear of poison and mutagen. As for the former, it mostly came down to the disciples' wind-type magical techniques. As for the latter... they had to destroy masses of spirit coins and use the resulting pure spirit power to dilute the mutagen.

It was a huge loss.

The sect headquarters... was in shambles. Even the grand hall atop the mountain was in ruins, and most of the buildings were collapsed or damaged by fire. Restoring things to their former glory was going to be expensive. Even worse, every surviving disciple was polluted with high levels of mutagen. Most were greenish-black from head to toe, and purifying them would take massive amounts of white boluses and dustpurging pills.

The sect leader and the dharma protectors were irritated and exhausted when, off in the distance, a beam of light appeared.

Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior had returned.

He was in bad shape. He had numerous wounds, his hair was disheveled, and he looked furious. After fighting his way out of the forbidden region, he had already promised that he would pay any price to see the Kid dead.

Then he spotted the sect headquarters in the distance, and he gaped in astonishment before speeding forward and looked down at the ruins.

When the disciples saw their patriarch, they wept.

“Patriarch....”

“Patriarch, when you were gone, the Kid came and ran rampant in the sect. Lots of disciples were killed or injured.”

“Patriarch, that goddamn criminal cleared out our Treasure Pavilion! And what he didn't take, he polluted with mutagen!”

“Patriarch, the Kid has no humanity! So many disciples are poisoned, and we can't dispel the poison!”

Only the sect leader and dharma protectors didn't join in.

As the wails of the disciples filled the air, Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior looked at his destroyed sect, the injured disciples, the sect leader with his severed arm, and the injured dharma protectors. The patriarch slowly started trembling. His face went from ashen white to burning red, and finally, to a livid green color. Staggering in place, he coughed up a massive mouthful of blood.

Panting, he clenched his hands tightly into fists, and his eyes became so bloodshot he looked like he was ready to eat someone alive. Throwing his head back, he howled, “I'm going to kill you!”

His voice echoed like thunder, but it didn't quite reach all the way to the teleportation portal in the city of Antlerville.

Xu Qing stood there in line at the massive portal. The portal itself was constructed atop an octagonal altar, and was covered with complex magical symbols. Every time it activated, brilliant, colorful light rose high into the sky. The portal guards all had extraordinary cultivation bases, and

they kept cold eyes on everyone in the line. Based on their disposition, it seemed they were ready to instantly slaughter anyone who acted out of line.

Eventually, everyone in front of Xu Qing teleported away, and he was next in line.

He walked up to the altar and into the middle of all the complex magical symbols. Then he looked out at the surrounding lands that had been his home for all these years. The setting sun cast gentle light over the lands. The breeze in the seventh month was warm, causing his hair to sway as he looked around.

He looked in the direction of the city ruins. He looked in the direction of the scavenger basecamp. Finally, he looked coldly in the direction of the Golden Vajra Warrior Sect.

“This isn’t over,” he murmured. His eyes glittered coldly as the teleportation portal activated, and brilliant light rose high, washing over him until he disappeared.

A moment later, the light vanished, and Xu Qing was nowhere to be seen.

Chapter 47: Seven Blood Eyes

It was the eighth month, the Limit of Heat. The scorching sun infused the wind with heat, which spread out to warm the lands. However, the solar terms were changing, making it obvious that the heat of summer was waning. Eventually, it would have no choice but to watch helplessly as the geese returned and the crows migrated back to their normal haunts. Then, it would wait until the new solar term, White Dew. [1]

Compared to the people who lived beneath it, the sun had a much easier time seeing the island below, surrounded by the Sea of Endlessness.

After all, the continent of South Phoenix was really just an island. It had an elliptical shape, and was divided in half by a mountain range that ran diagonally from north to south like a crouching dragon. They were called the Mountains of Truth. The part of the island west of the mountains made up about seventy percent of the continent, and was the largest forbidden region. In fact, it bore the name Forbidden by the Phoenix. It was filled with sinister jungles that covered many ancient ruins, as well as drifting fog, numerous mutant beasts, countless grues, and very strong mutagen. As for the land east of the mountains, it took up about thirty percent of the continent, and was where humankind resided. There happened to be a very unique location there. That was the spot where the northern part of the Mountains of Truth made contact with the sea.

This location had Forbidden by the Phoenix to the west, human lands to the east, the Sea of Endlessness to the north, and a branch of the Mountains of Truth to the south.

The topography created the largest port in South Phoenix, where huge cargo ships sailed in and out constantly. Some came from other islands to trade, while others came from... the Revered Ancient mainland.

Being such a strategic point, it was obvious that a powerful organization would want to control the area. And as such, it made sense that this was where Seven Blood Eyes kept their headquarters.

From a distance, it was possible to see that the city attached to the port was divided into seven sections, with one part being the Port District. Overall, it was an astonishingly beautiful and powerful-looking city.

This place was the capital city of Seven Blood Eyes.

Next to it were seven peaks that were the northern terminus of the Mountains of Truth. Atop each peak was a 300-meter stone statue of an eye. Each eye was a different color, but they all seemed to look out with sharp gazes. Whether it was day or night, those eyes never closed, and in fact, they formed a grand spell formation that covered the area. The seven eyes looked out over the lands like the eyes of a massive beast, awe-inspiring and cold, such that anyone who looked at them felt shaken to the core.

That was the origin of the sect's name, Seven Blood Eyes.

In fact, the sect headquarters was made up of the capital city and those seven mountain peaks. The tallest were the Seventh Peak, which was next to the port, and the First Peak. They were like two giants looking out over South Phoenix and casting fear into the hearts of all.

Although humans occupied thirty percent of South Phoenix, their lands were still full of many dangers. The wilderness was full of mutagen, and many mutant beasts and vicious outlaws lurked there.

Though the mutant beasts weren't as fierce as those in the forbidden regions, they were still dangerous enough that any humans who left their cities would need to fear for their lives. As for the outlaws, given there was no law and order in the wilderness, encountering them could be worse than dying.

Therefore, most humans longed for nothing more than to live in a city.

And Seven Blood Eyes' capital city was the grandest city in all of South Phoenix. It was a bustling place protected by the Seven Blood Eyes Formation, which kept out the mutagen and thus improved the lifespans of everyone who lived inside.

That was why so many people dreamed of joining Seven Blood Eyes. Many people longed to become a member, and those who became members never wanted to leave. However... the capital city had a lot of very strict rules.

And there was a proverbial whip hanging over the heads of everyone who lived in the city.

The name of that whip: survival of the fittest.

In the city center by the port, three enormous teleportation portals were constantly being opened and closed. They were organized like the character 品, and people streamed in and out of them nonstop.

At one point, one of the teleportation portals flared to life, and a young man appeared. He wore a dark jerkin, baggy pants, and hemp sandals. He was covered in dried bloodstains, had wild, unkempt hair, and his face was smudged with grime. However, his eyes sparkled like stars.

As he stepped out of the portal, he heard the bustle of people and the crash of waves. The wind was humid and warm, causing him to immediately feel sticky. They were all new sensations to this young man, who was of course Xu Qing, just having arrived from Antlerville.

I'm here....

Having just experienced teleportation, Xu Qing's head hurt a bit, and he rubbed the bridge of his nose. He didn't linger on the portal, but stepped off and looked around.

Everything was operating in an orderly fashion.

Guards in black suits of armor patrolled the area. The teleportation portals all had long lines snaking away from them, filled with men and women with packed bags of all sizes. There were also caravans present. All of these people looked hopeful, as though they longed to settle down in the city. These teleportation portals weren't cheap, which made their hope burn even hotter.

Xu Qing examined his surroundings as he joined the line that led to the exit.

Unlike the Antlerville portals, one had to pass an inspection before being allowed out. As he waited, Xu Qing looked outside and saw the vast, dark sea beyond. In another direction were the mountains, which were particularly conspicuous in the evening sun. That was especially true of the seven statues of the eyes, which sent out fluctuations that stretched high into the sky, and made the area above the statues swirl like a vortex. Within that vortex, the swirling clouds seemed to conceal some massive, rare beast that would occasionally release a holy growl.

The scene left Xu Qing feeling shaken.

Eventually, the person in front of him in line passed inspection, got their jade entry slip, and headed into the city. It was his turn, so he breathed a sigh of relief and focused on the inspection.

“Present your travel permit and explain the purpose of your visit.”

There was a desk in front of Xu Qing, behind which sat a young man and woman. The young man was handsome and wore a gray robe, but had his eyes closed as if he were sleeping. He emanated intense spirit power fluctuations. The young woman also wore a gray daoist robe, and looked to be only seventeen or eighteen years old. She was pretty, with fair skin and glittering eyes that a person could easily become lost in.

The person who had just spoken was the girl. Looking up at Xu Qing, she seemed completely oblivious to the grime that covered him. Apparently, she had seen plenty of scavengers like him. After speaking to him, she pulled out a jade slip to record the information he gave. From what Xu Qing could sense, her spirit power fluctuations weren't very intense, yet for some reason, he felt a sense of danger in her presence.

Even still, he was certain that in a battle to the death, he could kill her. Calmly reaching into his sack, he pulled out his identity medallion and handed it to her.

“Hmm?” Looking surprised, she took the medallion, inspected it, then handed it back to Xu Qing. As she did, her eyes were no longer as cold as before, and in fact, she looked at him with a meaningful expression. “I had no idea you were a new junior brother here to join the sect. I hope you... enjoy your stay in Seven Blood Eyes.”

Xu Qing was a bit puzzled by her wording, but he took the identity medallion and then glanced at the jade slip, which he had expected her to give him as his entry pass.

“You don't need a jade slip for merit points like ordinary people,” she explained. “You can just use your identity medallion. That medallion also qualifies you to enter the

city. However, let me remind you that you must take the entrance assessment as soon as possible. And try to acclimate to life in Seven Blood Eyes as quickly as you can....”

Having said that, she ignored him.

Wrapped up in his thoughts, Xu Qing left the inspection area. As he did, he couldn't help but notice the envious looks of the people behind him in line. Ducking his head down, he looked at the identity medallion and hurried away.

After he was gone, the young man behind the desk opened his eyes and smiled.

“Since when did you become so friendly?” he asked. “You offered kind words to a newcomer, and gave him some advice?”

“Because he had an identity medallion from the Seventh Peak, just like me,” she replied coolly. “It was only white, but you never know what will happen in the future. It doesn't take any merit points to say something nice and offer some advice. If he rises to prominence eventually, today might just count as a lucky encounter for me.”

“Next,” she said, beckoning at the next person in line.

“Come on, there's no way he has a good future ahead of him,” the young man said. “He's obviously a scavenger. For him, getting a white medallion isn't going to be some stroke of good fortune. Who knows if he'll even pass the entry assessment? Besides, how will he even afford the thirty spirit coin living fee, and all the expensive cultivation resources he'll need? I bet he doesn't last two months. Either he'll be expelled, or poof—” the young man made a fist, then snapped it open wide “—he'll just disappear.”

He spoke softly enough that there was no way for Xu Qing to hear him.

After all, Xu Qing was already some distance away in the city. As he walked along, he felt more and more shocked. This place was incredibly prosperous and bustling. Any given building he saw was vastly more luxurious and beautiful than the old city magistrate's manor.

Blue-gray tiles were everywhere, as were vibrant green plants. Everything looked very neat and clean.

There were people in every direction he looked, and their clothes were all clean. Most of them wore silk, and he saw almost nobody in hemp clothing. At the same time, everyone had indifferent expressions as they hurried on their way.

As the evening grew darker, he noticed colorful lamps and lanterns of all varieties. The light they cast made the streets as bright as day. Surprisingly, the buildings on either side of the street were very quiet.

Off in the distance, he noticed a narrow canal, within which was a small boat. On the boat was a young woman in a daoist robe, her face covered with a veil. She was tossing some medicinal pills into the water, where a host of fish circled, occasionally jumping out and creating ripples in the

water. He saw some boys jumping into the water as well, struggling with the fish to get the pills. It was a really strange sight.

Nothing seemed familiar to Xu Qing, so he kept his guard up. This city seemed nothing like the scavenger basecamp, but at the same time, it wasn't like the small city whose slums he had lived in.

However, there was one similarity....

Xu Qing caught a faint, familiar scent in the air. It wasn't easy to detect, but he had honed his sense of smell in both the slums and scavenger basecamp, and had detected this smell often in both places. It was the scent of blood. After noticing it, Xu Qing looked around with increased vigilance.

He didn't walk down the middle of the street. Instead, he stuck to the shadowy areas to the side. That was his custom.

His plan was to find an inn where he could rest. The smell of blood made him want to stay off the street, and he had no interest in investigating where the smell came from. Right now, his priority was to pass the entry assessment, officially join Seven Blood Eyes, and make sure he didn't have to worry about the Golden Vajra Warrior Sect chasing him down.

As the evening light faded into darkness, Xu Qing continued to look around for a suitable place to stay. Darkness grew deeper, the city became quiet, and pedestrians walked faster to reach their destinations.

Lamplight shone from the buildings, but all doors were closed tight, and there was no sound. Most of the businesses were the same, and the few that still had doors open didn't have any customers inside.

By the time the sun finally set, the streets were completely empty.

Xu Qing's eyes narrowed, and he hurried on looking for an inn.

After about the time it takes an incense stick to burn, he finally spotted one up ahead, and was about to head toward it when a shadowy figure emerged from a nearby alley, with eight burly men in hot pursuit, vicious grins on their faces.

"Trying to run? Where do you plan to run to?"

"It's been a long time since we've met someone brazen enough to steal merit points from one of our marks!"

Xu Qing saw that the person being pursued was a woman, apparently injured. She stumbled as she ran, and her hair was in disarray, but a vicious expression was on her face.

Xu Qing looked away. This matter had nothing to do with him, so he simply continued on to the inn.

However, upon seeing Xu Qing, the young woman's eyes glittered, and she suddenly yelled, "Hey, you have the merit points now! What are you standing around for? Run!"

Xu Qing glared coldly at the woman, wondering if she really thought her clumsy trick would work.

When he looked at her, she shivered subconsciously as a sensation of icy cold swept through her. In fact, the sensation of danger she got from Xu Qing surpassed that from her pursuers. She suddenly

had a very bad feeling, but she couldn't take her words back now, so she gritted her teeth and kept running.

Chapter 48: Buy Corpses?

The sea wind stirred Xu Qing's hair and caused his baggy pants to ripple. He seemed like an unsheathed blade as he stood there with cold eyes watching the woman rush off in another direction. He hesitated. He didn't want his first act in the city to be a killing, so he looked away and continued toward the inn. However, as the saying went, the tree may wish for quiet, but the wind will not subside.

As the sea breeze hit the shore, it seemed a fight was brewing.

Among the eight burly men chasing the woman, one had a vicious scar on his face. He seemed to be the leader. Seeing what was happening, he laughed coldly and said, "I don't care what's going on here. Grab that boy for me. He has the fluctuations of the sixth or seventh level of body refinement, so he's probably got some merit points!"

His underlings split up, some of them running to grab the woman, and the others heading toward Xu Qing.

Xu Qing frowned as he sized up the situation. The four men coming after him were all cultivators, and they seemed to be in the sixth level of Qi Condensation. From the look of it, they focused on body refinement.

He really didn't want his first act in the city to be a killing, so he backed away from them and growled, "I don't know her."

"It doesn't matter, whoreson! It's bad luck for you either way!"

One of the burly men laughed coldly and launched a fist strike. The other three also prepared attacks, with one of them pulling out a blade. The moonlight shining on the weapon made it obvious it was coated in poison.

There were some people in the world who loved to dance in front of the gates of hell. Xu Qing had hoped to avoid a fight, but since these people were coming at him with killing intent, he had no choice. Without a word, he stopped in place and retreated no further.

Then he lunged forward as fast as lightning, moving past his attacker's fist and putting his left hand on the man's forehead. The speed with which he moved was nothing short of astonishing.

A popping sound rang out. There was no scream. Xu Qing was already as strong as the great circle of body refinement, and thus, his movement caused the man's head to instantly explode. Blood and gore rained down in a mist as Xu Qing walked forward, his expression calm. Bypassing the blade held by the next opponent, Xu Qing used his shoulder to strike a blow.

The blade wielder's torso shattered.

Next, Xu Qing launched ranged fist attacks at the two remaining men.

They tried to retreat, but the pulse of the attack moved through the air and slammed into them, caving in their chests and causing blood to erupt from their mouths. They fell to the ground, dead.

In the space of two breaths of time, Xu Qing had killed all four men.

The sight of this caused the other four men to stop and stare at Xu Qing with their jaws hanging open.

“M-mis... misunderstanding... we....” stammered the leader. Gone was his arrogant attitude from before, and he was literally shaking. Seeing the cold look in Xu Qing’s eyes, he stumbled backward, his mind reeling.

As he did, Xu Qing started moving.

A moment later, the other three men in the group coughed up mouthfuls of blood as gaping holes appeared in their temples. They toppled over, dead.

Walking past them, Xu Qing wiped the blood from his hands and then went after the fleeing leader.

When Xu Qing killed, he made sure to wipe out any and all potential calamities.

In a flash, he was right in front of the man, whereupon he raised his hand. Before he could drop it, though, the man started babbling.

“Fellow Daoist, I work for the Night King. Don’t do anything rash....”

Xu Qing’s hand stopped moving, and he looked at the ashen-faced, trembling man. “Are you a Seven Blood Eyes disciple?”

Looking surprised, the man replied, “Not Seven Blood Eyes, but—“

Before he could finish, Xu Qing’s hand dropped onto the man’s skull. A thump rang out, and blood sprayed.

Xu Qing bent down and searched the corpse. Then he looked off into the night. Not being familiar with the layout of the city, he didn’t bother trying to find the fleeing woman, who was long gone. However, he would remember what she looked like.

Looking at the corpses in the street, he was trying to decide what to do with them when he suddenly turned in the direction of the inn and tensed in preparation for a fight.

Standing just outside the door of the inn was an old man who had appeared there moments ago. He wore the robe of an innkeeper, had a hunched back, and the sallow skin of his face had age spots. He looked somewhat sickly. Seeing Xu Qing looking at him, he flashed a smile full of yellow teeth.

“Interested in selling those corpses, boy? I see eight of them. I’ll give you ten spirit coins a piece.”

Xu Qing was taken aback. This was the first time he had ever heard of someone buying corpses. Instead of answering the old man, he looked back and started sprinkling Corpse-Ravaging Powder on the corpses.

The old man just shook his head. “Ah, what a pity. Recently killed corpses are the freshest.”

When Xu Qing was done, he looked back at the inn and wondered if he should really stay there.

Seeing his hesitation, the old man smiled. “I can tell you’re new around here. I’m the only place open right now. Everywhere else is closed. It’ll cost you 80 spirit coins or 80 merit points. We offer fair prices to all.”

“Merit points?” Xu Qing said. He had heard the woman at the teleportation portal check station mention the same thing.

The old man grinned. “You really are new here, aren’t you? You’ll learn more about merit points later. Suffice it to say, they’re worth the same as spirit coins.”

Xu Qing frowned. Everything here was so strange. Spirit coins and merit points were worth the same. Corpses could be sold. And rooms were expensive.

“Don’t be stingy, now!” the old man said with an insincere smile. “Nights in this city are anything but peaceful, and all the other inns are closed by now. Plus, I only have two rooms left.”

Xu Qing looked up at the sky to determine the time, then turned back to the old man. As he considered what to do, he noticed a shadowy figure suddenly rush toward the inn entrance, trailing blood as he ran.

It was a cultivator. Without a word to the old man, he handed over a bag of spirit coins and then disappeared into the inn.

“Now I only have one room left,” the old man said, patting the bag.

Xu Qing decided to just pay for a room. After handing over the spirit coins, he went inside to a room on the second floor. Before going inside, he looked over the balcony at the old man, who was now smoking a pipe behind the main counter.

“What do you buy corpses for?” Xu Qing asked.

The old man looked up at him and smiled. “I have a pet that loves to eat them. Sadly, you didn’t want to sell. But if you have more corpses to sell later on, let me know. I’ll give you a good price.”

With a final look at the old man, Xu Qing entered the room. After inspecting everything for safety, he opened the window and looked out into the night.

The city was dark, but the moon hung high in the sky, covering the city in a veil of gauzy light. Off in the distance, he heard the cry of the sea birds, and the crash of the waves. There were lighthouses casting beams of light out over the water, and he could just barely make out huge ships floating in the port.

Seeing all this, he thought back to what the young woman at the teleportation portal had said. Now more than ever, he felt like this city was a deep pool of water filled with hidden dangers. He now knew where the smell of blood came from. In fact, he had just added to it. Actually, other than the nice buildings and clean surroundings, this place wasn’t very different from the other places he’d lived.

This really is a world of chaos.

Right now, his biggest priority was the entry assessment.

I shouldn’t have trouble passing the assessment, but I should still make sure I’m ready. And I should plan what to do afterward. I still have to worry about Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior. He’s the biggest threat to me now. I have to get stronger as fast as possible so that I can kill him.

Such thoughts occupied his mind as the night grew deeper. He did not hear the sound of mutant beasts or grues, but the wind carried with it the faint sound of shouting and raucous laughter, making the darkness seem alive with humanity.

Xu Qing ignored all that and took out the small cloth bag he'd taken from the Golden Vajra Warrior Sect. He had examined it briefly while on the road, and had been shocked. The bag seemed small, being only the size of his palm. However, it opened into a different space, which contained enough room to fit a small table. Xu Qing had heard of items like this back in the scavenger basecamp. They were called bags of holding. Whether in the slums or the basecamp, items like this were incredibly rare and valuable. In fact, you couldn't even buy them.

Losing this bag of holding was going to be a huge blow to the Golden Vajra Warrior Sect. And that wasn't to mention that it contained a medicinal pill bottle. In that bottle were over thirty dustpurging pills.

And even more amazing than that, Xu Qing found 111... spirit stones!

Xu Qing had never seen spirit stones before, but one time at dinner, Sergeant Thunder had talked about them. They were rarer than spirit coins, such that one spirit stone was worth 1,000 spirit coins. They contained immense spirit power, and could even be used for cultivation purposes if necessary. Even one spirit stone was incredibly precious.

Compared to the bag of holding and the spirit stones, all the other things he took from the Golden Vajra Warrior Sect weren't worth mentioning.

After examining everything, Xu Qing put them in order. One thing was certain: he was rich. From the time he was small until now, he had never possessed such wealth.

If I pass the entry assessment, then this should be enough to keep me going in the city for a while, and further my cultivation.... With that, he closed his eyes to start his daily cultivation routine.

Regardless of where he ended up, or how the entry assessment went, Xu Qing had to keep furthering his cultivation. That was the foundation of everything, and the best way to make sure he stayed alive. In the chaotic world he lived in, even things that seemed as certain as the sun rising and setting... could change at any time.

Anything was possible.

The only thing that didn't change was that the weak were the prey of the strong.

Furthermore... in Xu Qing's experience, the more people there were in a place, the more danger there was. After all, people had treacherous hearts that were often hard to read. And that was truer than ever in this dangerous and mysterious capital city of Seven Blood Eyes.

To Xu Qing, this place might as well be a forbidden region.

Just a different type than those from before.

Chapter 49: Godly Blood

The night passed.

The morning light wasn't as intense as it was during midday, but it still shone aggressively through the window and into Xu Qing's room. The sunlight didn't seem to care whether anyone was willing

or not. Unless you hid in the shadows, it would find its way down and shine on you. And it was warm enough to wake a sleeping person.

Xu Qing slowly opened his eyes. He looked at the window, soaked in the sunshine for a bit, and once his blood was pumping, he got up. After doing some stretches to warm up, he opened the door, carefully peered outside, then walked out.

The city was completely different during the daytime compared to night. Food carts sold breakfast items, as did many of the shops. People slowly filled the streets, just as detached and in a hurry as the day before. Everyone moved around as if they had a lot of pressure to deal with on a daily basis. Occasionally, he could hear the sound of children reading books in class, echoing out from behind the walls of some of the buildings. That, at least, gave the impression of an ordinary pace of life.

As Xu Qing walked along, he thought back to one of the medicinal plants Grandmaster Bai had lectured about. It was called a doublelife orchid, and it was a strange flower that contained an indivisible symbiosis of light and darkness.

Are all big cities like this?

Young people were in the crowd, buying food and moving at a faster pace than the adults.

Before long, he felt like he was getting used to the environment. After buying a simple breakfast, he started asking around about the entry assessment.

Apparently, the city residents were all familiar with the subject. Xu Qing quickly learned where to go, and found that he needed to arrive by noontime. For the rest of the morning, he spent time familiarizing himself with the layout of the capital city.

Given the time constraints, he got a general idea, but the city was too big for him to take in after only a few short hours. The city was probably ten thousand times as large as the scavenger basecamp, and what was more, there were areas only Seven Blood Eyes disciples were allowed to enter.

Eventually, he checked the time by looking at the sun in the sky, then headed toward the entry assessment. It was located at the southern edge of the city, in the foothills of the Mountains of Truth.

Further south from the city were the sects' seven mountain peaks. From a distance, it was possible to see paths that wound through the greenery to the top of the peaks.

The assessment area was a large square surrounded by a glittering shield of light that only people with identity medallions could pass through.

When Xu Qing arrived, he saw a few dozen people already present, most of them seventeen or eighteen years old. Some wore simple clothing, others were dressed in finery. Some were clean from head to toe, others were covered in grime like Xu Qing. They were all people with identity medallions who had come from near and far to participate in the assessment.

In the middle of the square stood three middle-aged cultivators who emanated spirit power fluctuations so terrifying that they surpassed Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior.

They chatted with each other as they waited for the assessment time to arrive, though they occasionally glanced at the gathering group of new arrivals.

Xu Qing assessed the scene cautiously.

He wasn't someone who liked to socialize, so he found a place off to the side where he could stand alone. There he waited and observed the other people here for the assessment. Most of them seemed to be preparing their cultivation bases.

One person stood out to him, a young man in a long, blue gown, with a fan in his hand. His clothing looked expensive, and he was handsome. Furthermore, his casual, approachable attitude had caused a small crowd to form around him.

"I can explain some basics for everybody," he said with a smile. "The capital city of Seven Blood Eyes has seven districts that correspond to the seven mountain peaks. Those seven peaks all specialize in different things, and have their own unique aspects.

"For example, the Seventh Peak governs the Port District, and is very powerful. They have unique cultivation techniques, so the disciples from there have astounding battle prowess. They also travel a lot, and have a special connection to the Forbidden Sea.

"The First Peak is often considered the outward-facing sword of the sect. Their members do a lot of training in Forbidden by the Phoenix, and are incomparably grim warrior cultivators. They seldom go out to sea, and prefer to live and die in the forbidden regions.

"Those two peaks are the flagships of Seven Blood Eyes, and they recruit a lot of disciples every year. That said, they have very strict requirements. You don't get to pick them, they pick you! Without a special identity medallion, you can't get into them. The other mountain peaks also have identity medallions, but the requirements aren't as strict. Depending on how well you do when you pass the assessment, you might be able to pick one of the Peaks, or they might pick you. The Sixth Peak specializes in equipment forging, the Fifth Peak in formations, the Fourth Peak in beast-taming, the Third Peak in magical techniques, and the Second Peak in the dao of alchemy.

"Regardless of which peak you select, you won't have the right to earn profit from Seven Blood Eyes until you're a Foundation Establishment cultivator. Before then, life is brutal, unless you become a conclave disciple.... In any case, you'll see what I mean after you pass the assessment."

All of the surrounding assessment-takers listened to his explanation, including Xu Qing. He took special note of the mention of brutality, and also profit. He fully understood the meaning of the first term, but when it came to the second, he had questions. However, now wasn't the time to ponder the issue.

At the moment, he was trying to decide which peak would be the best fit for him.

I'm pretty familiar with forbidden regions, he thought, and that made him wonder if the First Peak was the best one for him. That said, he wasn't sure what type of identity medallion he had.

As he thought about it, the sound of bells rang out from the seven peaks.

The three cultivators in the middle of the square stopped talking, and suddenly looked very solemn. The one in the middle glanced at the dozens of assessment-takers, and then said, "Silence!"

His voice didn't seem very loud, yet it crashed like thunder in the ears of the gathered crowd. The young man in blue stopped talking, and the other people all stood there looking nervous. Xu Qing, meanwhile, had a calm facial expression.

"It's time for the assessment," the cultivator continued. "There are three phases. If you pass all of them, you'll earn a thousand merit points. Take first place overall, and you'll receive an additional reward. The first phase of the assessment involves checking your mutagen levels!

"Before we begin, though, come up one at a time and hand us your identity medallion. State your surname and given name, and don't hide anything from us. If you violate any rules, you'll be punished severely!"

In response to the instructions, the young man in blue rolled his eyes and walked forward. After handing over his identity medallion, he raised his voice and said, "I'm Zhou Qingpeng. Greetings, Seniors." [1]

Hearing his loud, clear voice, the three middle-aged cultivators nodded in approval.

A second person walked up, then another, until six had already gone through the line. Finally, Xu Qing went up, respectfully handed over his identity medallion, and after a short moment of hesitation, said, "I'm Xu Qing. Greetings, Seniors."

It felt strange to Xu Qing, as it had been a long time since he told someone his real name. In fact, it was nearly seven years at this point.

Bowing his head, he backed away.

The three middle-aged cultivators looked over all the identity medallions, but didn't spare any more attention for the assessment-takers.

With the initial formalities out of the way, the first phase of the assessment began.

The first phase was simple. One of the middle-aged cultivators waved his hand, causing a three-meter-tall bluish stone to appear. It dropped onto the surface of the square with a thump, sending out a cloud of dust in all directions.

"Step up in the same order you just presented your identity medallions," he said. "Simply place your hand on the surface of the stone."

Zhou Qingpeng walked up first.

Xu Qing watched how he put his hand on the stone, and then noted how it glittered with light as a complex design appeared on its surface. Within that design were more than forty points of glowing light.

“Forty-two,” said one of the middle-aged cultivators, nodding. “Not bad. You pass.”

Zhou Qingpeng looked pleased as he backed up to watch everyone else take their turn. As the testing proceeded, Xu Qing soon realized what was happening. The higher the number, the more mutagen one had in one’s body. And anyone with a number higher than one hundred was told they didn’t meet the standard.

I bet I don’t have any in me, Xu Qing thought, his eyes narrowing. Given that this was his first day, he didn’t want to make a big scene that made him the center of attention. That just wasn’t how he did things.

That said, if he didn’t do well enough on this assessment, it could affect his future prospects in the sect. So after a while, he glanced down at his shadow and carefully tapped into the mutagen it had stored within it.

As he did that, he heard exclamations of surprise around him.

“Thirty-four! Outstanding!” The middle-aged cultivator sounded shocked at this. Xu Qing looked up and saw a young woman about the same age as himself standing in front of the bluish stone. She was dressed similar to him, had a grime-covered face, and seemed to be a scavenger. She looked so nervous she wasn’t willing to meet anyone’s eyes, but she clasped hands respectfully to the officiating cultivator and hurried back into line.

I think her name was Li Zimei. [2]

Looking away from her, he walked up to the stone and put his hand on it. The light glittered, and the symbol appeared, then glowing dots started to pop up.

The middle-aged cultivator glanced at him and nodded. “Forty-three. Very good. You pass.”

Xu Qing pulled his hand away and walked back in line. Once he released control of his shadow, the mutagen that had seeped into his body was sucked back out again.

Forty-three wasn’t amazing, but it was good enough as far as Xu Qing was concerned.

He was right. Of the over sixty assessment-takers, only nineteen had a number less than fifty. And there were twenty who surpassed a hundred. Those twenty had somber, ashen faces.

“The final assessment score is a combination of all three phases,” said another of the middle-aged cultivators, a man with a long face, a somber air, and a hoarse voice. “The next phase tests the strength of your will. Everyone sit down cross-legged.”

The assessment-takers complied, Xu Qing included. Looking up at the long-faced cultivator, he tried to guess what a test of will would be like.

The long-faced cultivator waved his hand, and a small silver bottle appeared in his fingers, inscribed with numerous magical symbols. It looked ancient, and at the same time, gave the sense that it contained something very special. With the bottle out in the open, the other two test officiators stood by somberly.

“Inside this bottle is a drop of blood that has been diluted countless times over. When the blood is in the open, it will unleash a wave of might. If you can’t handle it, bite your tongue to draw blood and give up.”

With that, he opened the bottle and poured the contents onto the bluish stone.

Xu Qing looked closely as a drop of viscous, golden liquid emerged. When the golden liquid touched the stone, brilliant light shot up, golden in color, accompanied by a roar that seemed to emanate from ancient times.

All of a sudden, the image of an enormous eye appeared.

A host of tentacles erupted from the eye, but along with that grisly sight came a feeling of utter holiness. It was like the god above gazing down coldly at all living things.

The assessment-takers sitting there cross-legged felt their minds reel as heavenly lightning was exploding in their head. Then they trembled as if they had lost control of their own bodies, and were being ripped out of themselves. They began to shiver in the depths of their souls, while at the same time, they felt an instinctual sense of immense fear. Madness rose up in their heart, and many hovered on the verge of losing their minds. Almost instantly, three people coughed up blood and collapsed, screaming.

Zhou Qingpeng and Li Zimei looked pale in the face, and were trembling visibly. They even had blood leaking out of their eyes and noses.

Xu Qing was unique. Though he was also shaking, he was also profoundly shocked because... this eye seemed familiar to him!

Back when the eyes of the god above opened, Xu Qing had looked up, and had felt a sense of might... exactly the same as this!

Chapter 50: Seventh Peak

One difference was that the god’s face had eyes with pupils that resembled crucifixes, while this illusory eye had a vertical pupil. What was more, compared to what he’d felt when the city he lived in was turned into a forbidden region, the current sense of might was like a firefly compared to the sun.

It had to be because of how much the drop of blood in the bottle had been diluted. If it had been a pure drop of blood, the mightiness would have been terrifying.

But even then, that level of might would have been as different from the open eyes of the god above as heaven was from earth.

Regardless, Xu Qing was shaken to the core. Only part of that was the physical reaction, though. The rest came from how this event was changing his view of the world.

Don’t tell me Seven Blood Eyes has actually extracted blood from the god above? No, that’s impossible.... The feeling I get is roughly the same, but one is very different from the other. Does that mean that... there are other god-like beings alive in this world?

That conjecture caused Xu Qing to suddenly want to learn much, much more about the world around him.

The rumbling continued, and more people coughed up blood. About half of them couldn't hold out, and collapsed into unconsciousness, whereupon the long-faced cultivator took them away.

Eventually, only three other people were left. One of them was Zhou Qingpeng, another was Li Zimei, and third was a young man who, though he wasn't dressed like a scavenger, wore simple clothes that indicated he came from a small city. Finally, that third young man couldn't take it any longer, and gave up.

Now, there were only three remaining, including Xu Qing. If he wanted to, he could put on an act during this test of will, to make himself seem weaker than he was. But in the face of this cold god, he didn't want to.

He refused to yield. He stared into the eye, his muscles tensed, his heart pounding, his will pushing against the eye.

I survived under the gaze of the broken god face. So how could I possibly yield to a bit of watered-down blood like this?

Xu Qing's eyes were bloodshot, and he was shaking from head to toe. His blood screamed at him, but after his harsh tempering in the slums, and his training in the forbidden region, his will had become strong, and he held firm.

Eventually, he was the only one left standing, which left the rest of the assessment-takers shocked as they watched.

Even the long-faced cultivator and his two companions were visibly surprised. After all, Xu Qing had been holding on for a long time. In the months since this specific assessment had been administered, Xu Qing was one of only three people who had lasted this long.

"I wonder if he'll get past the final wave."

"Nobody's succeeded at that so far this year."

As the cultivators shared these words, the melting of the golden liquid passed the halfway point. However... as it was about to fade away completely, the illusory eye twitched, and then seemed to stare intently at Xu Qing.

Terrifying pressure converged on him, as though this god demanded that he yield. Mountain-toppling, sea-draining force crushed down on him. He shook, and his head slowly began to bow, as though forced by the pressure.

Seeing this, the three assessment officiators looked surprised, and closely observed what was happening.

As Xu Qing's head bowed, he shook harder, and then slowly lifted his chin. Veins bulged on his forehead, but his eyes were as cold and unyielding as those of a wolf.

Staring at the illusory eye, he tapped into the seventh level of the Sea and Mountain Incantation, forcing power to erupt from within him and form the spectral hobgoblin. It was many meters tall, with pitch black skin, twin, spiraling horns, violet eyes, and a gaping red mouth. Glaring at the eye, it unleashed a soundless roar.

ROAR!!

Xu Qing also roared at the illusory eye.

As he did, a tremor passed through him, as though his mind had been struck with a hammer. Blood sprayed out of his mouth, and the hobgoblin disappeared. However, the eye also faded away into nothing.

It was over.

Xu Qing panted for breath, and his head ached, but he struggled to his feet, wiped the blood from his mouth, then clasped hands and bowed to the three officiators. Then he walked back into line.

The spectators were looking at Xu Qing as if he were some sort of freak, and all of them had expressions of utter disbelief on their faces.

“Was that... a projection of energy and blood?” someone said. “That’s what you see at the great circle of body refinement. It’s the same as the great circle of Qi Condensation!”

Numerous gasps could be heard.

Xu Qing simply stood there with his eyes closed as the pain in his head slowly dissipated. At the same time, he felt stronger than before. It was like when metal was pounded over and over again, turning it into something sharper and stronger.

This second phase of the assessment... had brought good fortune to Xu Qing. He had acquired something as rare as phoenix feathers or qilin horns. [1]

It was actually a shock to him. He could tell that his perceptions had grown sharper, and his will, tougher. Of course, the latter was impossible to test out, so he wasn’t absolutely sure if he was right.

“Excellent!” said the long-faced cultivator, looking at Xu Qing with an approving nod. “You’re Xu Qing, right? Since you endured the final wave of might from the second phase, you’ll experience an increase in psychic power. Consider the blood of a godly entity as a grindstone that can sharpen your will to incomparable levels!”

“Godly entity?” Xu Qing asked, looking at the long-faced cultivator.

The man didn’t offer any explanation, but instead looked away and launched into the third phase of assessments.

The final officiator was the third cultivator. He had a round face with small eyes that glittered sharply. Walking out in front of his companions, he said, “The third phase is combat, in which you’ll fight illusory versions of mutant beasts.”

The round-faced cultivator pointed at Xu Qing.

“You, Xu Qing, won’t need to participate. Evidently, you’ve practiced body refinement to the point of unleashing a projection of energy and blood. In other words, you have battle prowess equivalent to the great circle. There’s no point in you participating in the third phase, so you are officially the first person to pass the assessment.”

The other assessment-takers looked at Xu Qing enviously, but none of them offered any words of complaint.

“Many thanks, Senior,” Xu Qing said, clasping hands and bowing deeply. He wasn’t a big talker, but when he was shown favor, he would respond with courtesy.

The third phase began. While the others participated, Xu Qing sat down cross-legged to settle his psyche. By the time the third phase was over, he was mostly recovered.

Based on what he could sense, it seemed to him like his perception and awareness were twice as good as before. As of now, he could observe things such as the way the breeze stirred the grass. This development caused his heart to beat with excitement.

The grindstone of will worked wonders.... Once I’m done here, I need to go test my level of control over my shadow. I bet it’s improved.

After the third phase of the assessment was over, and everyone was back in their original positions, Xu Qing stood and joined them. Some distance away, the officiators were making their final decisions.

It’s too bad the First Peak requires a special identity medallion, Xu Qing thought, looking at his own medallion and wondering where he would end up.

A moment later, the results were announced. Of the sixty participants, a small group didn’t meet the qualifications. They were told that, having failed to become members of Seven Blood Eyes, they had two hours to leave the sect. If they stayed longer, the sect’s spell formation would automatically kill them.

When Xu Qing heard that, his pupils constricted. Meanwhile, the people who had failed looked both frightened and dejected.

But then another option was presented to them. If they had enough spirit stones to buy merit points, they could stay in the city and live as ordinary citizens. All it cost was thirty merit points per day. The disciples who passed the assessment had to pay the same fee, but they also earned the privilege of being able to buy cultivation resources from the sect. Xu Qing was a bit confused by how all this worked, but assumed he would figure it out later.

After this, the long-faced cultivator announced the Peak assignments.

“Zhen Han. First Peak.

“Zhao Chungang. Third Peak.

“Zhou Qingpeng. Seventh Peak.”

There were five people assigned to the first peak, three to the seventh, and the rest of the five peaks got about six or seven each.

As the man announced the names, Xu Qing quietly waited to hear his own assignment.

“Xu Qing. Seventh Peak.”

After announcing Xu Qing’s assignment, the long-faced cultivator looked at the group of young men and women and said, “Those of you who passed the assessment will be rewarded with a thousand merit points. As for Xu Qing, who took first place, he will receive ten thousand merit points.”

When Xu Qing heard that, he sucked in a breath. Just getting to the Seventh Peak was a good thing, but getting that much wealth as a reward was quite a shock.

Doing some quick mental math, he determined that since merit points were worth the same as spirit coins, his ten thousand merit points were worth ten thousand spirit coins. And if you converted the spirit coins, it meant he had ten spirit stones.

That's so much!

The long-faced cultivator produced a jade slip and made some adjustments to it. A moment later, Xu Qing felt his identity medallion vibrating. Looking down, he saw the ancient character for 'ten thousand' appear on its surface.

However, a moment later, it changed into nine thousand, nine hundred, and ninety-nine. It was missing one!

Xu Qing's pupils constricted.

The other disciples who had passed the assessment also looked at their identity medallion, and many of them looked rueful. A moment later, the long-faced cultivator started taking away the disciples in small groups.

Meanwhile, the round-faced cultivator approached Xu Qing, glanced at his identity medallion, and then smiled faintly. "Ignore that for the time being. I'll explain everything later."

With that, he gathered the other disciples who were now assigned to the Seventh Peak. Then he led them toward the mountain itself.

"Let's go," he said. "I'm going to take you to visit the headquarters of the Seventh Peak. Cherish this opportunity, it could well be the only time you ever go up the mountain!"