

## Timescape 51

### Chapter 51: A Boat for Life

The evening sun cast its light on a small path that ran up the mountain. The sunlight looked like a fine, golden gauze laid over little stone steps, and made everything seem holy. Walking up the steps was like walking on sunshine and heading into gloriousness. On either side of the path were leafy, flowering plants. The mountain wind carried the aroma of flowers and soil, which combined with damp sea air to fill a person's heart and mind. There were also many trees, within which echoed the melodious sound of singing birds, as if they had specifically composed music for anyone who walked this path, including the current group of people.

There were five people, including the round-faced cultivator in the lead, his hands clasped behind his back as he introduced the sect to Xu Qing and the others.

“Since all of you have successfully become members of Seven Blood Eyes, allow me to explain a bit about the sect. Actually, from my perspective, Seven Blood Eyes isn't even a sect. It just calls itself a sect, when in fact, it's a very profitable business!”

The four new disciples were all shocked to hear this.

Including Xu Qing, the group was made up of Zhou Qingpeng, Li Zimei, and another young woman named Xu Xiaohui. She wore her hair in a ponytail, and had ordinary clothes. Obviously she wasn't from a rich family, but neither was she a scavenger. She was probably from a small city somewhere.

She'd tried to make some conversation with Xu Qing, but that wasn't his forte, and besides, he didn't like people getting too close to him, so he just nodded in response to her. Eventually, she'd shifted to trying to cozy up to Zhou Qingpeng.

Zhou Qingpeng had a warm, affable smile, quite the opposite of the taciturn Xu Qing. Because of that, he and Xu Xiaohui got along well immediately, and conversed in low tones here and there as they walked along.

Li Zimei seemed reserved and cautious, perhaps to the point of feeling inferior, so she brought up the rear, and also kept her distance from everyone else.

Zhou Qingpeng took the initiative to include both Xu Qing and Li Zimei in the conversation, and was very friendly with them. As a result, Li Zimei soon warmed up to everyone else.

The mountain breeze stirred everyone's hair as they walked along and the round-faced cultivator continued to introduce the sect.

“Seven Blood Eyes is divided into two parts that we call Onpeak and Offpeak. They're really two completely different worlds. As for you four, you're... Offpeak disciples. Only Foundation Establishment cultivators qualify for Onpeak life. They also get a split of the profit generated by Seven Blood Eyes.

“Offpeak disciples live in a world of cruelty and bitterness. They have to struggle to survive. Because of that, Offpeak disciples long to eventually be promoted to the Onpeak world. Do you know how many people live in the Offpeak capital city?”

The round-faced cultivator looked at the young men and women following him. None of them volunteered an answer.

“3,000,000 people!” he said, holding up three fingers. “Most of the population is made up of ordinary citizens, but it also includes the low-ranking disciples from the various peaks. As of now, that includes you.

“Like everyone else, you need to abide by the rules of Seven Blood Eyes. Those rules are actually simple. All Offpeak people, including common citizens and disciples, have to pay thirty merit points per day to live in the city. Thirty spirit coins are also acceptable. They’ll be deducted from your identity medallion every day, as you already experienced earlier. If your balance is ever negative, you’ll be expelled from Seven Blood Eyes. That goes for both ordinary citizens and disciples. If you refuse to leave, then within two hours, you’ll be killed by the spell formation.”

Xu Qing looked just as surprised as everyone else to learn this. Even Zhou Qingpeng looked a bit fearful.

“Of course, that’s just the base fee. You have to figure out your own food and lodging. It’s survival of the fittest. Things in our capital city are very expensive, and most expensive of all are the cultivation resources.”

Xu Qing didn’t say anything in response to this information, and the other three new disciples seemed shaken.

After a moment, Xu Xiaohui hesitantly asked, “Since that’s the case, why do so many ordinary citizens want to live here? Thirty spirit coins a day is... one spirit stone a month. That’s too expensive. Furthermore, if we as disciples have to pay the same merit point fee, then what exactly is the benefit of being a disciple?”

The round-faced cultivator looked at Xu Xiaohui.

“It’s not cheap to teleport here. So, by default, the people who do come here are skilled and resourceful. They come because they want the best. In the capital city, we keep everyone safe. Disciples are not allowed to wantonly slaughter innocent people, and what’s more... the spell formation keeps out mutagen and extends one’s lifespan.

“Compared to life outside, where the mutagen is everywhere, and beasts and outlaws run amok, our capital city is naturally a place most people only dream of coming to.

“As for the benefit of being a disciple?

“First, only disciples get access to cultivation resources. Other people aren’t allowed to buy them. Furthermore, it’s against the rules to resell cultivation resources outside. Do that, and you’ll be executed.

“Second, only disciples who cultivate Seven Blood Eyes techniques can, after reaching Foundation Establishment, get the right to live Onpeak and also get a split of the profits. You four need to work hard going forward. By the way, though the sect prohibits disciples from killing each other, every month... there are a lot of disciples who mysteriously go missing. The sect basically turns a blind eye to it. They figure it's like putting venomous bugs in a jar and letting them fight it out. Casualties are to be expected.

“If a Foundation Establishment cultivator from outside the sect comes to cause problems for our Qi Condensation disciples, that person will be immediately punished for violating the rules. That said, Seven Blood Eyes doesn't pay attention to outside Qi Condensation cultivators.”

The round-faced cultivator gave them a meaningful smile.

Hearing this, Xu Qing breathed a sigh of relief, as that was one of the main reasons he'd come to Seven Blood Eyes.

Off to the side, Li Zimei hesitantly asked another question. “Given all of this, how does the sect create a sense of belonging among the disciples here? What's the unifying force?”

The round-faced cultivator laughed heartily.

“Unifying force? What exactly do you mean by unifying force? Friendship is a type of unity. As is gratefulness. And reverence. But none of those are very reliable. In the brutal, chaotic world we live in, the only thing that provides a true sense of belonging, and the only true unifying force, is profit!

“Only Seven Blood Eyes disciples can use our techniques to break through to Foundation Establishment, and get the right to be Onpeak disciples. Once they do, they get a share of the sect's profits.

“By the way, Seven Blood Eyes' monthly profit is public information. It comes from residency fees, the sale of cultivation resources, and commerce in the port. Daily income amounts to about 500,000,000 spirit coins. Convert that, and it comes out to 500,000 spirit stones. Do the math, and you can see that the monthly profit comes out to 15,000,000 spirit stones.

“The profit is split between members based on the level of their cultivation base. Of course, some is withheld for sect expenditures, but the rest is given out to the Foundation Establishment disciples and any with a higher cultivation base than that. The higher your cultivation base, the bigger the split you get. An early Foundation Establishment disciple will get about 5,000 spirit stones a month. If you're in Gold Core, you'll get about 10,000.

“That’s why I said that Seven Blood Eyes is more like a business. Onpeak disciples in the Foundation Establishment level are like investors in a business. For every day they’re around, they earn a day of profit!

“Now let me ask you. If you had a business out in the world, and someone came along and tried to rob you, wouldn’t you fight back?”

The round-faced cultivator’s words caused Xu Qing’s eyes to shine with profound light. At this point, he had a good understanding of how Seven Blood Eyes worked.

And maybe it was true that in a chaotic world, the only true unifying force... was as this man said. Profit.

Li Zimei didn’t have any further questions.

The round-faced cultivator chuckled, then continued to walk, while basically repeating the same general information, that they lived in a chaotic world, and that profit was the only thing that remained constant. At one point, he pointed down the mountain peak.

“Let me explain a bit about the prosperity of Seven Blood Eyes. See that over there? That’s the biggest port in South Phoenix. Ships come and go through it every day. That includes trading vessels from the outside and sect disciples from the Seventh Peak, heading out to the sea to go on missions. Of course, our peak controls the port.

“Because of that, ships... are very important to the cultivation of Seventh Peak disciples. We call them dharmaboats.”

Following the line of the round-faced cultivator’s finger, he looked down into the port, which was currently bathed in the evening sunlight. Within the port were numerous horseshoe shaped harbors, each with a sluice gate and a towering lighthouse. There were over a hundred of them, and they were huge, with each one having room for many, many ships.

From this distance, Xu Qing could see that different harbors were different colors. About half of them were white, and were filled mostly with huge trading ships. The other part of the port had violet harbors. From what he could see, the ships in the violet section were small and numerous.

“The white part is for outsiders,” explained the round-faced cultivator. “The violet part is where Seventh Peak disciples live. All of the ships there are the dharmaboats I mentioned!

“Our dharmaboats are famous throughout South Phoenix. They’re like the heart and soul of Seventh Peak cultivation.

“Your dharmaboat is essentially your mansion grotto and your mount, all at the same time. More than that, they’re like your fighting partner, and also something you absolutely need to acquire the resources you require. You can treat your dharmaboat like... a magical treasure!” [2]

In response to his words, Li Zimei and Xu Xiaohui's eyes went wide. Obviously, they knew all about magical treasures. Zhou Qingpeng also looked down at the ships below, his eyes shining with anticipation.

Xu Qing reacted similarly. He knew how rare and expensive magical treasures were. Then he looked down at the densely packed ships in the violet section of the port, and suddenly wondered if calling them 'rare' was accurate.

"Of course, they're not really magical treasures," the round-faced cultivator continued. "But Seventh Peak dharmaboats can be upgraded. As your cultivation base increases, you can refine them, and eventually, you really could turn yours into a magical treasure.

"In any case, all new Seventh Peak disciples long to have a dharmaboat. Unfortunately, even a brand new dharmaboat costs 100,000 merit points, or a hundred spirit stones.

"Furthermore, only disciples with dharmaboats are allowed to work and live in the port. As for disciples who don't have a dharmaboat, they have to earn enough money to buy one. If they can't save up enough to pay for a dharmaboat within three years, then they'll have their cultivation base crippled, and they'll be expelled.

"The reason for this is that the techniques of the Seventh Peak are all related to the sea, and require a dharmaboat to cultivate. They have spirit convergence formations built into them that saves effort and leads to better results in cultivation. Oh, by the way, the techniques are free for disciples."

The round-faced cultivator's explanation filled Xu Qing not only with the strong desire to get a dharmaboat, but also helped him understand what the Seventh Peak was all about.

Only by focusing on the dharmaboat and the cultivation base can someone on the Seventh Peak reach Foundation Establishment. That's the key to survival! I absolutely have to get a dharmaboat!

By this point in the introduction, the group was about halfway up the mountain. This was where their identity medallions would be fully activated, and they would get their cultivation technique and daoist robe. There was only one type of daoist robe, and it was gray. That was the uniform all Offpeak disciples in Seven Blood Eyes wore, regardless of which peak they were from.

Activating the identity medallion cost 1,000 merit points. After that, the identity medallion would keep track of a disciple's information, including their merit points. It could also be used for communication.

When Xu Qing got his daoist robe, he sensed spirit power fluctuations coming from it, which was when he realized it was definitely an extraordinary item. The fabric was soft, but wouldn't wrinkle easily. If a daoist robe like this were sold outside the sect, it would be very expensive.

Li Zimei and Xu Qing both seemed equally impressed with the daoist robe. As for Xu Xiaohui, she seemed to want to follow Zhou Qingpeng's lead.

Zhou Qingpeng looked at the round-faced cultivator and the senior members of the sect distributing the items, and quietly said, "Seniors, I want to buy a dharmaboat."

The round-faced cultivator smiled. As for the individual distributing their new items, he was an emaciated old man who looked at Zhou Qingpeng and coolly said, "100,000 merit points. Or a hundred spirit stones."

Li Zimei and Xu Xiaohui inhaled sharply upon hearing this. To both of them, a hundred spirit stones was a level of wealth they could only dream of right now.

As for Zhou Qingpeng, he hurried forward and pulled out a golden piece of paper currency which he offered respectfully with both hands.

"A spirit note from the Second Peak? That'll work." The old man took the note, then handed Zhou Qingpeng a violet brocade box. He looked at the other three new disciples. "Anyone else want to buy anything?" [3]

Li Zimei and Xu Xiaohui looked down. As for Xu Qing, he thought for a moment, then steeled himself, stepped forward, and took a hundred spirit stones out of his sack.

The old man didn't say anything in particular. As he took out another brocade box, Li Zimei and Xu Xiaohui looked on enviously. Zhou Qingpeng merely glanced at him out of the corner of his eye.

Xu Qing took the box and opened it. Inside were two items: a jade slip and a transparent bottle.

The bottle was unusual. It could fit in his palm, and contained a liquid that seemed like it might be seawater. Floating on that water was a small boat with a black canopy! [4]

It was completely black, and simplistic in its design. However, all of the planks that made up the boat were covered in magical symbols. And despite being inside the bottle, the boat exuded an extraordinary pressure. In fact, whether it was the bottle itself or the little boat inside, both seemed to be worth a lot more than a hundred spirit stones. As for the jade slip, it contained all the information about the boat.

"Alright," said the round-faced cultivator, "you can head back down the peak now. Remember, neither our techniques nor dharmaboats can be distributed to outsiders. Do that... and the consequences will be severe."

"Xu Xiaohui and Li Zimei, I hope the two of you can work hard going forward, and eventually save up enough to get a dharmaboat. Zhou Qingpeng and Xu Qing, your identity medallions contain all the information about your current assignments. You can see yourselves down the mountain."

The four new disciples clasped hands to the round-faced cultivator, then turned to leave. However, before Xu Qing could even take a step, the round-faced cultivator called out to him.

"Xu Qing."

As the others left, Xu Qing turned back around respectfully.

"You're strong for a low-level cultivator," the round-faced cultivator continued. "You're obviously in the seventh level of body refinement, yet can produce energy and blood

projections like someone in the great circle. It's clear you're talented, and are probably toward the top of the pack amongst low-level cultivators. I wouldn't be surprised if you could easily kill rogue cultivators in the ninth or even tenth level.

"However, body cultivation is simplistic. It gives you speed, strength, and recovery power. But it's not considered a great dao.

"To cultivators, the true great dao is the cultivation of magic! I suggest that, going forward, you focus more on magical cultivation. Your spirit power and magical techniques are too weak. If you encounter rogue cultivators, you'll be fine. But face a disciple from one of the great sects, and you'll be in trouble!"

Hearing this, Xu Qing felt shaken.

"Furthermore, I'm not sure where you come from, but I bet you lived in constant danger. Because of that, you've developed some instinctual habits."

"Habits?" Xu Qing asked, not sure what he meant.

"Given how well you performed in the assessment, I'm going to give you some advice. When you were walking up the peak just now, you rarely moved your right hand. And your right index and middle finger seemed to be in a constant state of readiness. I'm willing to bet that, in your sack, you have some hidden weapons ready to throw out at any time. Maybe some needles or flying daggers."

Xu Qing's expression turned serious. This was the first time someone had ever seen through him so easily.

Smiling broadly, the man continued, "I suggest that you don't let this habit become so second-nature. If you do, people will notice, and you'll end up in trouble. Don't give off clues. Hide your ruthlessness behind a gentle appearance, like a needle concealed in silk."

The man's smile didn't seem to contain anything threatening. It seemed like he was doing nothing more than offering a bit of advice to a new disciple. Maybe he even considered it a small investment in the future.

But his words caused chills to run down Xu Qing's spine. Taking a deep breath, he clasped hands and bowed deeply.

As he left, he thought about what he'd just heard, and then looked down at his right hand. Flexing his fingers, he tried to make himself look more natural. It took some effort to keep his fingers less rigid, but it started to work. However, if someone looked closely enough, they would see that, within the seemingly natural position of his fingers, was hidden something deeply threatening.

He kept practicing as he walked down the mountain.

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Far away from Seven Blood Eyes, in a random scavenger basecamp in the wilderness, Master Seventh crouched on a rooftop, looking down at a young man fighting a stray dog. The young man had dog blood all over his mouth, and a vicious expression on his face.

Master Seventh looked on approvingly. Next to him was his servant, who was currently looking at a jade slip.

“Master Seventh,” the servant said quietly, “the Kid reached Seven Blood Eyes.”

“The Kid?” Master Seventh said. “Who?”

The servant smiled wryly. “The young man who didn’t want to get his new clothes dirty when killing people. You put in a good word for him with Grandmaster Bai, and he started learning the dao of plants and vegetation. Later, I gave him a white identity medallion.”

Master Seventh nodded, and as he thought back to Xu Qing, his eyes gleamed with approval. “I remember now. He was that affectionate and faithful child.”

“Should I take any special measures to watch over him?” the servant asked.

Master Seventh waved his hand dismissively. “There’s no need. In this chaotic world, people who want to survive need to rely on their own strength. If he can get by on his own, then when he finally comes to me, I’ll reward him with some good fortune.” Master Seventh pointed down at the young man fighting the dog. “Between this young man and the Kid, which do you think more resembles a wolf pup?”

The servant looked down at the fighting young man, and smiled wryly. He had answered questions like this many, many times on their journey. Since encountering the Kid, they had found nine other children that Master Seventh took a liking to.

“They’re about the same,” the servant said.

Master Seventh looked over at the servant and laughed. “It was a kindness for me to recommend him to Grandmaster Bai, and then give him a white identity medallion. But that doesn’t mean I’ve picked him to be my apprentice. I don’t owe him anything. I gave him an opportunity, that’s all.

“I really do want a fourth apprentice. But remember, to get my third apprentice, I sent out over fifty white identity medallions. He was the only one who succeeded. You haven’t been with me for long, so you’re not used to my style.

“In fact, I have the feeling that giving out fifty medallions won’t be enough to find my fourth apprentice. It’ll probably take a hundred.

“Go give that child down there a white medallion. As before, keep the explanations to a minimum.” With that, Master Seventh turned and left.

## Chapter 52: Colleagues

The sun sank, and dusk approached. The light shining on the small mountain path gradually grew dimmer.



Xu Qing had his brocade box slung over his shoulder as he continued to contemplate what the round-faced cultivator had told him. He already felt he understood the basics of Seven Blood Eyes.

The capital city seemed like an orderly place, but was actually filled with hidden dangers. That was especially true at night, when vicious people came out in droves. Some people, in order to improve their chances of survival, were willing to bare their teeth to anyone who got too close. That wasn't the wrong choice to make.

Xu Qing didn't want to become mincemeat himself, so he decided he needed to find a dark corner somewhere to put the brocade box in his bag of holding without anyone being able to see the bag. He started walking more quickly. Before long, he was at the foot of the mountain, where he saw two people in gray daoist robes.

They were none other than Zhou Qingpeng and Xu Xiaohui.

Xu Xiaohui was pretty, and though her gray robe covered most of her figure, it was still possible to see some of her curves. Somehow, the gray robe made her even more alluring. Zhou Qingpeng had been handsome to begin with. With the gray robe, he seemed very elegant. And that made Xu Xiaohui even more starry-eyed. Although, it was hard to say if she was starry-eyed over Zhou Qingpeng, or over his dharmaboa.

Seeing Xu Qing approaching, Zhou Qingpeng laughed heartily and walked over to him.

"Xu Qing, you're finally down. I've been waiting for you."

Xu Qing's facial expression was the same as ever, but inside, he put his guard up. Instead of walking to meet Zhou Qingpeng, he kept his eyes on the young man's throat, and simultaneously shifted his right hand to the opening of his sack, so he could pull out his iron skewer if necessary.

"We're both from the Seventh Peak now," Zhou Qingpeng said, "and we joined the sect together. Since neither of us are very familiar with this place, I was thinking we should stick together as best we can. That way, if either of us run into trouble, we'll already have a friend we can call on. A connection." He seemed very sincere as he then clasped hands to Xu Qing.

Xu Qing relaxed a bit. He had to admit that what Zhou Qingpeng said made sense. So he nodded.

Zhou Qingpeng smiled and said a few more things. Seeing that Xu Qing wasn't inclined to be talkative, he stepped away to send a voice message with his identity medallion. Then he left with Xu Xiaohui.

After watching them disappear into the distance, Xu Qing looked down at his own identity medallion.

It can send voice messages?

Examining the medallion curiously, he sent some spirit power into it, and instantly saw a host of information.

Curious, he walked along while simultaneously continuing to study the medallion.

Once back in the city, he found a quiet alley where he put the brocade box in his bag of holding. He didn't change into the daoist robe, but rather, kept on his dirty old jerkin. During the daytime, when

the city was neat and orderly, being a scavenger would make him stick out. But at nighttime, it would make it easier to blend in. And he figured it might also help him avoid any bothersome confrontations. After all, scavengers were generally poor, so anyone who targeted him wouldn't be someone strong, and by extension, it meant he could handle them easily.

He also spent some time to make sure he knew all the functions of the identity medallion, for instance, how to send messages. His personal information was also stored in the medallion, including his work assignment.

I work in the Violent Crimes Division?

Although he wasn't sure what that job involved, just based on the name... it seemed dangerous.

According to the information, he needed to check in for work the next day. The medallion also told him the berth number for his black-canopied boat.

The sect automatically assigned berths to disciples with dharmaboats, and would extract a monthly fee for the spot. It costs 30,000 merit points per month, or thirty spirit stones. If you didn't pay the fee, you lost your spot.

Celestial #33 in Harbor 79?

Xu Qing looked in the direction of the water, then started moving cautiously through the night, doing his best to stay out of sight.

Eventually, dusk passed, and it was night. Most people in the city had closed and locked their doors for the night. During the day, the city was loud and bustling. Right now, it was very quiet.

As Xu Qing hurried along cloaked in darkness, he witnessed some of the dangers inherent to night in this city.

He saw people being robbed. He saw deadly fighting. He saw people fleeing for their lives. He saw the miserable result when fleeing people ran out of places to run.

Hidden in the darkness, he ignored all of that and kept moving, like a specter through the night.

Along the way, he spotted some gambling halls and brothels. They were well-lit, and offered a glimpse into another prosperous side to the city. Perhaps because Xu Qing was being so cautious and stealthy, he didn't run into any trouble. But occasionally, he sensed people watching him. The gazes were cold and full of ill intent, but when they noticed he was dressed as a scavenger, most of them just ignored him.

He raced through the city for two hours until he reached the Port District. There were over a hundred harbors, and he needed to find number 79 in the violet part.

Just as he was about to head out to find his harbor, he shrank back into the darkness of an alley and looked down the street.

At first, he could only hear footsteps. But shortly after, a group of cultivators in gray daoist robes appeared, moving along at top speed. They seemed somber and desolate, and radiated cold, sinister auras. Some of them stayed in the middle of the road, others inspected the surrounding buildings. Each of them had a badge on their robe, with the word Violent Crimes inscribed on it in the color of blood. Xu Qing observed these Seventh Peak disciples with narrowed eyes, noting their spirit power fluctuations and baleful aura.

Are these Violent Crimes Division constables?

They soon reached Xu Qing's hiding spot. There were quite a few people in this group, and they were all paying close attention to their surroundings. There was no way he could run away without them noticing.

And thus, it didn't take long before a young man with graceful, phoenix-like eyes spotted him and walked toward him. [1]

As he neared, his baleful aura reached Xu Qing. Xu Qing tensed at the sense of incredible danger. Even before the young man was close, his mere presence turned everything in the alley as cold as ice. Only someone who had done a lot of killing would have a baleful aura like this.

Xu Qing knew that if he bolted, the young man would definitely attack him. Therefore, he stood in place unmoving, though he did put his hand close to the black iron skewer.

"Identity medallion!" the young man said, looking Xu Qing up and down. His gaze lingered on Xu Qing's right hand.

A few other disciples approached, surrounding Xu Qing. They all had icy expressions; it was obvious that if he did anything wrong, they would attack him instantly.

Noticing that they were looking at his right hand, he told himself that he really did need to work on his habits. Looking around, he carefully got his identity medallion out and handed it over.

The young man looked at it, and his cold expression softened. Sounding surprised, he said, "Guess what, boys? He's a new recruit from the Seventh Peak, also assigned to the Violent Crimes Division! Alright, calm down everyone. You're going to scare our young friend to death before he even reports in for duty."

Most of the auras shrank back, although a few of the surrounding constables still kept their eyes on Xu Qing.

So they really are from the Violent Crimes Division.

Xu Qing sensed the energy fluctuations that had been locked onto him fade away. However, the young man with the phoenix-like eyes continued to examine him as he returned his identity medallion.

"You're a funny one, young friend. Get going. This place isn't safe at night."

Xu Qing nodded, took his identity medallion, and was about to walk off when a piercing, bloodcurdling scream rang out from a short distance away.

Xu Qing turned to look in that direction, his expression serious. Off in the distance, near a tall building, a shadowy figure stumbled out onto the air itself, coughing blood. This person's spirit power fluctuations were in chaos, but they were obviously in the Foundation Establishment level.

Pursuing him was a middle-aged man in a violet daoist robe, his expression threatening without being angry, and his spirit power fluctuations so intense that they were like a raging fire compared to the other man. Whistling through the air toward the first man, the fellow in the violet robe produced a long spear that he thrust forward viciously.

The air itself seemed to split, and a shockwave rolled out in all directions. Meanwhile, the spear erupted into flames, which formed a fire dragon that shot toward the fleeing, shadowy figure.

It was a dazzling sight.

The fire dragon moved with incredible speed, causing a piercing sound to ring out. When it hit the shadowy figure's torso, it pierced through him with a thump, then continued onward to slam into the street below. As it did, it sent a blast of wind in all directions. The shadowy figure had been killed with ruthless efficiency!

Xu Qing was shaken by the scene. From what he could sense, the shadowy figure that had just been killed was probably on the same level as Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior.

His spear had been incomparably strong. Xu Qing knew that if he had to fight someone like that, he would surely be killed.

The surrounding constables from the Violent Crimes Division looked very excited.

"It's the division director!"

"Let's go!"

Ignoring Xu Qing, they raced over to the scene of the fight.

Even after they were gone, Xu Qing still felt his mind reeling from watching that spear attack. Then he took a deep breath, and his eyes shone with anticipation.

I wonder when I'll be able to do something like that?

With one last glance in the direction the violet-robed man had disappeared to, Xu Qing turned and walked away.

Sensing that it wasn't a calm night, he hurried on his way. It took about an hour for him to find the horseshoe-shaped Harbor 79.

The Port District was different from the city proper. It was very dark, and though there were patrolling guards, they seemed unusually vigilant. Furthermore, they avoided anyone they saw. Clearly, their vigilance came because they were worried about getting hurt. They avoided Xu Qing as well.

Seeing this, Xu Qing's understanding of the level of danger in Seven Blood Eyes increased.

Nearing his assigned harbor, Xu Qing felt the humidity in the sea breeze, and could see the lapping waves.

There were other boats docked there, but they maintained distance from each other. Most were roughly the same size, although there were a variety of designs. However, examining them closely for a moment, Xu Qing realized that most of them resembled his own black-canopied boat. There were over two hundred of them.

That said, Harbor 79 was so big that the current set of boats docked there only took up about twenty percent of the entire available space. Some of the boats had lamps burning, but most were still and silent. He didn't see any disciples around. Apparently, everyone put their guard up when night fell.

Xu Qing sensed that the spirit power was strong here, but so was the mutagen. Apparently, it came in from the sea. The water was so dark that it was impossible to see the seafloor. That alone would make people uneasy. Who could possibly tell what dangers lurked down there? Glancing at the water, Xu Qing felt his hair standing on end, the same as it often had back in the forbidden regions.

Practicing cultivation here will lead to fast progress. Every moment of cultivation is like working on a grindstone....

With that, he hurried toward Celestial #33.

It was an out-of-the-way spot, without many other boats nearby.

After arriving, Xu Qing looked around the area, and after making sure he was alone, took out the brocade box, then the bottle. When he opened it, the little boat inside flew out to rest on the water. There was a loud thump, and then water rippled as the boat expanded until it was nine meters long.

It was pitch black, its planks covered with magical symbols that emanated a black glow, as well as extraordinary spirit power fluctuations. The black canopy seemed to be made of the hide of some sort of mutant beast. The scales on the hide were clearly visible.

It seemed very sturdy. There was a figurehead on the prow of the boat, depicting a large crocodile head, its gaping mouth full of razor-sharp teeth. It looked vicious, and radiated an air of brutality. From a distance, his little boat actually looked like a crocodile floating on the water.

### Chapter 53: Sea Cultivation

The moon shone, cloaking the giant crocodile in its light. From a distance, it almost looked like the boat was alive and doing breathing exercises, absorbing the quintessence of the moon. At the same time, the moonlight seemed to grow more intense as it flowed into the boat, then streamed out into the area.

Xu Qing just looked at it for a while.

Whether it was his time in the slums or his life in the scavenger basecamp, he had always had simple accommodations. The only exception was the house Sergeant Thunder had given him. As for this little canopy boat that looked like a crocodile, as it sparkled in the moonlight, it looked so impressive that Xu Qing couldn't help but kneel down and put his hand on it. It was cold, but clearly made of quality materials.

Most importantly...

"It's mine," he murmured. Then he prepared to step aboard, until a cold flicker ran through his eyes, and he stopped. He had suddenly sensed evil eyes gazing at him. Whoever it was, they were well hidden, and Xu Qing had no way of identifying their location. Remaining calm, he casually looked down at his hemp sandals.

They were old and tattered, caked with both mud and dried blood. Through the gaps in the material, he could see his dirty toes.

After some thought, he removed his sandals and stepped into the sea water, washing his feet until his fair skin was clearly visible. During the entire process, he remained completely calm. However, he was also observing his surroundings, and waiting for whoever was watching him to step out into

the open. The person seemed cautious, though, and remained hidden even when Xu Qing pretended to be lazy and off-guard.

Expression the same as ever, Xu Qing finally stepped into the boat and looked at the area under the canopy.

It wasn't very large. And it was simply furnished. There was a bed, a woven rush mat, and a washbasin. The area inside wasn't very tall. In fact, an average person wouldn't be able to stand up inside. But it was more than adequate for sitting.

Xu Qing examined the interior, but didn't go inside. Instead, he sat on the deck looking out at the waves, and feeling the sensation of the boat bobbing up and down. It was peaceful, and eventually, his eyes seemed to lose focus, as though his thoughts were drifting.

As he sat there, he recalled his struggle to survive in the slums. He thought about the little bedroom he holed up in, and how cold it was at night. In fact, during winter, the wind was so cold he'd often wondered if he would wake up the next day. It wasn't uncommon back then for people to freeze to death during the nights. That was why he feared the cold. Or maybe it wasn't that he feared the cold, just his memories of it.

As he sat quietly on the deck, he looked at the moon, and thought back to the first person he'd ever killed, years ago.

That person had been starving, and wanted to kill Xu Qing and eat him. A fight broke out, and though it was a huge struggle, Xu Qing managed to kill him first. Then he cut his head off and put it outside the door to his room. From then on, people looked at him differently.

As his boat bobbed up and down in the water, Xu Qing recalled that event, and thought, Should I do the same thing again?

He suddenly leaned backward, and a cold stream of light shot right in front of him.

Upon dodging the light, the faraway look in his eyes vanished. It had been an act the entire time, and now, the true coldness within him stabbed out.

"You finally showed yourself!" he growled. The water next to the boat erupted as a man shot out, heading directly toward Xu Qing, cold light glittering in his right hand.

It was a dagger, and even in the moonlight, it was possible to see that it was covered in poison.

Xu Qing quickly assessed his assailant. It was a fellow disciple in a gray daoist robe. He wore no face covering, so it was possible to see that he was about thirty years old. Though he was only in the fifth level of Qi Condensation, Xu Qing could sense that he was dangerous. The disciple had a vicious expression, and his eyes abounded with killing intent. He moved with incredible speed; in the blink of an eye, his dagger was closing in on Xu Qing's chest.

Xu Qing's eyes glittered coldly as he ignored the dagger and instead thrust out his right hand to grab the man's arm. Unleashing the power of his body cultivation, he lifted the man bodily into the air.

The man's eyes went wide with disbelief as Xu Qing then slammed him onto the deck of the boat.

A muffled thud rang out. At the same time, blood showered left and right as a gory tentacle erupted from the man's torso, splashing slime as it whipped toward Xu Qing. Shockingly, the tentacle's aura surpassed the fifth level of Qi Condensation, and was in the sixth.

Xu Qing's face remained expressionless as the spectral hobgoblin appeared behind him and crushed the tentacle.

Another boom rang out as the tentacle exploded.

Upon losing the tentacle, the cultivator coughed up a heap of blood, and his face turned ashen. He tried to struggle, but Xu Qing used his free hand to relieve the man of his dagger, then shove the weapon up to his throat. The cold dagger pierced the skin a bit; with only minimal effort, Xu Qing could slice the man's throat open.

The cultivator shivered, looking at Xu Qing with terror in his eyes.

"How did you hide yourself so well?" Xu Qing asked coldly. "And what was that tentacle?"

"It was an octopus arm I transplanted onto myself. It boosts battle prowess and covers my aura when I'm in the water. Lots of people in the sect graft mutant beast parts onto themselves. Look, Junior Brother, I can make all of this up to you. I don't have a lot of merit points, but I can take a mission tomorrow and—"

Xu Qing slashed him through the throat with the dagger.

The man's eyes went wide, but before he could scream, Xu Qing clamped his hand over his mouth. Meanwhile, blood poured out onto the deck of the dharmaboat.

After a few breaths of time, the man went still.

Xu Qing looked at the mess on the deck and frowned. Taking out some Corpse-Ravaging Powder, he sprinkled it on the corpse to dissolve it. During the entire time, no other disciples showed their faces in the area. Perhaps things like this were so common that nobody cared.

As the sea breeze caused the smell of salt and blood to fill the area, Xu Qing looked through the man's sack. It was completely empty.

He was after my dharmaboat.

Xu Qing suddenly thought back to how the round-faced cultivator had mentioned disciples mysteriously going missing all the time. Patting his iron skewer, he looked around with cold eyes, then took out the brocade box and pulled out the jade slip with the description of the boat. After studying it, he looked at the boat, his eyes glittering.

This boat... is spectacular. Extending his right hand, he smacked the deck and, following the instructions in the jade slip, sent spirit power pouring out. By doing so, he created a sealing mark which settled onto the deck.

The boat shuddered as though powering up.

Xu Qing then bit his finger and extracted a drop of blood, which he used to draw a simple magical symbol on the deck. As he did, the boat trembled, and at the same time, he felt his mind bonding with the boat. As the jade slip described, that was the boat acknowledging a new owner. Now, Xu Qing would be able to operate the boat by merely thinking about it, as if it were an extension of his body. He issued another thought, and a glowing defensive shield appeared, covering the craft from one end to the other. Only at that point did Xu Qing finally feel safe.

Looking back down at the jade slip, he reviewed all the information about the boat and committed it to memory.

Seven Blood Eyes dharmaboats really did have the capacity to grow with their owners.

Disciples could customize their speed, defenses, attack capabilities, and special functions. Those four things could be upgraded one at a time, or simultaneously. It depended on the whims and resources of the owner. The speed, defenses, and attack capabilities were easy to understand. As for the special functions, they referred to general magical techniques, as well as the ability of the boat to go underwater, to fly in the air, or change the form and appearance of the boat. In terms of the special functions, or the other three categories, the biggest determining factor in dealing with them was the material used for the upgrades.

In most cases, Seventh Peak disciples had two options when it came to the structure of their boat. The first was man-made materials.

By upgrading materials and to allow for higher-level spell formations, it was possible to make the boat tougher and more durable. Doing that required working with disciples from the Sixth Peak. Furthermore, developing the boat in that way often required dealing with limitations in human ingenuity. Still, it was an option many disciples picked.

It was also a relatively safe method. All one had to do was follow the general pattern that had been laid forth.

As for the second method.... You can use mutated organisms to alter the structure of the boat. Then you don't need spell formations created by people.

As the jade slip explained, mutated organisms had natural spell formations built into them.

Such spell formations with extraordinary natural functions were referred to as forbidden arrays. Mutant beasts were all built differently. They all had different forms, and different powers.

Both methods will require a lot of effort and resources.

As he reviewed the jade slip, Xu Qing had to admit that Seven Blood Eyes was a terrifying organization. After all, as a brand new disciple, all he had been able to purchase was a class-one boat.

The watercraft of the Seventh Peak were classified as either boats, skiffs, ships, or cruisers. Furthermore, each of those four types was divided into ten classes. The jade slip also indicated that there was something else beyond the cruiser-level.

It was called a dreadnaught.

Each level upgrade costs a lot of resources....

Xu Qing wasn't able to calculate the details, but based on what he could tell, it was a shocking level of wealth.

Putting down the jade slip, he sat there in a daze for a short time. Then he looked down at his sack and bag of holding. Unfortunately, he just didn't have enough in either of them.

I need to figure out a way to make money. I have one month before I have to pay rent on my berth. With that, he took out another jade slip and began to study it.



This slip contained information about the Seventh Peak technique, which he was forbidden from sharing with outsiders. It was called the Seaforming Scripture.

As an apex power in South Phoenix, Seven Blood Eyes had techniques that were very impressive in both their ability to extrude mutagen, and in how strong they made the practitioner. The techniques of other smaller groups and clans simply couldn't compare. In fact, two people with the same cultivation base, but with different techniques, could be as different as a firefly and a burning torch.

After studying it, Xu Qing inhaled deeply. Now he knew why the Seven Blood Eyes disciples he encountered seemed so dangerous despite having low cultivation bases.

The type of technique was everything.

For instance, the Seaforming Scripture had ten levels that corresponded to the ten levels of Qi Condensation. In order to cultivate the technique, one had to be near the sea. In fact, being out at sea was even better.

Each level involved absorbing the aura of the sea, then using it to cultivate a 30-meter-wide spirit sea. At the tenth level, which was the great circle, the spirit sea would reach 300 meters in size.

Disciples who cultivated the Seaforming Scripture would have spirit power that surpassed other cultivators by many times over. That, in turn, would allow them to utilize many more magical techniques in battle, and would naturally provide a huge boost to battle prowess. Even more miraculous, their spirit sea would have the aura of the Forbidden Sea in it. Thus, when they fought an opponent, they would naturally exude an intense mental pressure that would weaken the enemy.

In fact, in the Qi Condensation level, someone with the aura of the Forbidden Sea in their spirit sea would surpass anyone else in the same level.

The Sea and Mountain Incantation is a body cultivation technique. My spectral hobgoblin is already at the level of the great circle, making me like someone in the great circle of Qi Condensation. That said, when stacked up against other high-level techniques, that 'great circle' is actually rather weak.

On the other hand, because I have no mutagen in me, and because of the blessing of the violet crystal, my version of the seventh level of the Sea and Mountain Incantation is already able to unleash the spectral hobgoblin, which normally comes with the great circle. In other words I already have battle prowess as strong as the great circle.

In the final analysis, the Sea and Mountain Incantation can't compare at all to the Seaforming Scripture. One is body cultivation, the other is cultivation magic.

Yet again, Xu Qing thought back to what the round-faced cultivator had told him

A moment later, a look of determination appeared in Xu Qing's eyes. Furthermore, he noticed that the description of the Seaforming Scripture indicated that there wasn't an upper limit to the final size of the spirit sea.

People had different constitutions, and also, their levels of mutagen would be different.

The less mutagen one had, the larger the spirit sea could grow. According to the records kept by Seven Blood Eyes, the highest level ever attained by someone in the great circle of Qi Condensation was a fully sixty-year-cycle in the past, when someone had a spirit sea that was 810 meters. That person was none other than the current peaklord of the Seventh Peak.

Seeing that, Xu Qing's eyes hardened as he thought about the fact that he had no mutagen in him....

If I cultivate the Seaforming Scripture to the great circle, how big will my spirit sea become?

Intense anticipation built within Xu Qing. If mutagen continued to be no problem for him, then his upper limit would be determined by what his body could handle. And because he had terrifying powers of recovery, his endurance was naturally immense.

Xu Qing's eyes shone with unprecedented brightness.

Furthermore, it wasn't lost on him that the Seaforming Scripture wasn't about body refinement. His fight with the Golden Vajra Warrior Sect had left him with a deep understanding of the inherent flaws in pure body cultivation. Therefore, it was without the slightest hesitation that he committed all the details of the technique to memory, then closed his eyes and started cultivating it.

As he did, a wind kicked up around his boat, and the water rippled as spirit power infused with the aura of the Forbidden Sea, as well as mutagen, rushed in his direction. The defensive shield around his boat would block magical techniques, but it didn't stop pure spirit power. It poured in, entering his body through the pores in countless fine threads.

Because he didn't have any mutagen in him, the spirit power rushed through his meridians without any obstacles. He was like a dried-up sea sponge absorbing water; the spirit power simply poured inside, heading to his dantian region, where it slowly built up.

As he continued with his cultivation, he sensed that the Sea and Mountain Incantation was being stirred into action by the Seaforming Scripture. However, the meridians used by the two techniques were different, so he suppressed the Sea and Mountain Incantation.

However, the Sea and Mountain Incantation seemed to tremble with desire, so eventually he stopped suppressing it. Instantly, the Sea and Mountain Incantation surged into operation, causing the spirit power influx to dramatically increase.

As it converged in his dantian region, the spirit sea there began to expand.

That came as a big surprise to Xu Qing.

The two techniques seemed to be working together. The Sea and Mountain Incantation wasn't competing with the Seaforming Scripture, but rather, was helping it. Seeing no reason not to, Xu Qing let his energy and blood swell, causing the spectral hobgoblin to appear. The hobgoblin threw its head back and roared noiselessly, lifting its hands as if it were transporting a sea. As a result, the spirit power of the Forbidden Sea flowed with even more force.

To Xu Qing's shock, the spirit sea in his dantian region was already 30 meters from side to side.

He had already completed the first level of the Seaforming Scripture.

Then a tremor passed through him as, before he even realized what was going on, he moved to the second level. And then, the second level reached its own great circle.

This fast? Without the slightest hesitation, he moved on to the third level.

Inside of him, the spirit sea grew and grew. 63 meters. 66 meters. 69 meters....

As he continued, the spirit power outside his boat created a vortex. The wind whipped, and the waves grew so large that the guards on the shore looked over. They looked surprised.

“Which freakish disciple is working on their cultivation?”

“They’re absorbing spirit power at such a rapid rate....”

As they watched in shock, the vortex spun larger and larger, causing the surface of the bay to ripple even more wildly. Many of the boats were rocking up and down so much that the disciples inside looked out with cold frowns. However, their expressions quickly turned into those of surprise.

“What’s going on?”

The vortex kept growing!

Inside his boat, Xu Qing trembled as his spirit sea pushed past the 90-meter mark and reached 111.

And it kept going.

114. 117. 120!

Xu Qing opened his eyes, and they glittered with brilliant violet light.

“Seaforming Scripture. Fourth level!”

Chapter 54: Total Transformation

That night, Xu Qing cultivated the Seaforming Scripture, achieving multiple breakthroughs and eventually reaching the fourth level.

It was a somewhat ridiculous progress speed, and it caused all the surrounding Seventh Peak disciples to be shocked. That said, Seventh Peak disciples were known for keeping their true abilities hidden. Therefore, after realizing that Xu Qing’s boat was new to the area, indicating he was a newly promoted disciple, most of them went back into their own boats and didn’t pay any further attention. Of course, in reality, they were all making inquiries trying to find out more information about who this new disciple was.

It was when the sun finally peeked over the horizon in the morning, casting its light over the sea, that Xu Qing opened his eyes. Violet light spilled out, and it lasted for a few dozen breaths of time before fading away. It left behind a look of shock.

As the night had progressed, Xu Qing’s progress slowed, and he only made one more breakthrough, leaving him in the fifth level of the Seaforming Scripture.

Even still, that level of progress surpassed anything he could have predicted would happen.

The Sea and Mountain Incantation worked together with the Seaforming Scripture.... he thought incredulously.

He looked different compared to the day before. The sharp angles on his face were now a bit softer, and there was something about him that seemed purer. That was the aura brought by the Seaforming Scripture.

Upon sensing the 150-meter spirit sea within him, Xu Qing thought back to the saying associated with the Sea and Mountain Incantation.

Goblins can move mountains, hobgoblins can transport seas.

However, based on his analysis, he was fairly certain his astounding progress had less to do with the Sea and Mountain Incantation, and more to do with the complete lack of mutagen in his meridians. He was like a well-forged receptacle; it simply didn't make sense to compare him to someone who had just started practicing cultivation.

It was only logical that he blasted through the early stages because of the large amounts of spirit power pouring into him. That also explained why he had slowed down during the last half of the night. There were limits to what that well-forged receptacle could hold.

That said, I did achieve one more breakthrough. There's a limit to my speed, but I should still be able to advance relatively quickly.

As he pondered everything, his eyes shone. He hadn't just made progress with the Seaforming Scripture during the night. He had also made some advancement in the Sea and Mountain Incantation.

He was now very close to the eighth level.

Most importantly, each level of the Seaforming Scripture came with magical techniques. Looking down at his right hand, Xu Qing sent forth a thought, and watched as a drop of seawater suddenly formed on his palm. In the blink of an eye, it became a ball of water as large as a human head. Then it transformed into the shape of a flying dagger, then a shield, and then a bird.

The ball of water continued to transform, the amount of water changing depending on what item it formed. Each one was a different weight, and had a different level of power.

Within the jade slip for the technique, there were over a hundred different transformations between all ten levels. They all emanated a frigid coldness as well as the aura of the Forbidden Sea, which would be very intimidating to enemy opponents. But they weren't just intimidating, they were downright mighty.

The ball of water had so much explosive power in it that he could easily overwhelm any of the scavengers he'd met in the fifth level of Qi Condensation. Based on what Xu Qing could tell, it would take no more than forty of these balls of water to kill the old version of himself in battle.

And right now, with this 150-meter spirit sea, he could create fifty balls of water. When you added in all the transformations, that was a level of power that, even now, could be deadly if someone used it against him, though he would certainly last longer in such a fight than the old version of himself.

Perhaps it was a bit exaggerated, but he had already cultivated the Sea and Mountain Incantation to seventy percent completion, yet he was already as strong as someone in the tenth level of that technique.

In other words, an ordinary person who cultivated the Sea and Mountain Incantation to the tenth level would still have trouble killing a Seventh Peak disciple who'd cultivated the Seaforming Scripture to the fifth level.

This gave Xu Qing an even greater appreciation for Seven Blood Eyes, as well as the fighting abilities of Seventh Peak disciples.

Rogue cultivators aren't even remotely on the same level as disciples from a sect. Right now, it would only take the new me a few minutes to kill the old version of me.

Although his cultivation base had not grown significantly, his battle prowess had increased a lot. In fact, he felt almost like he was walking a different path than before.

As the dawn sun filtered into his boat, it made his shadow clearly visible on the deck. He looked down at it.

During his night of cultivation, his shadow had absorbed all of the mutagen he had taken into himself. The shadow looked even darker than before, and when you looked at it closely, it resembled a deep abyss.

As Xu Qing stared, the shadow's arms moved. Then it flexed its fingers before forming a fist, then went back and forth between those two postures. It could also shrink and stretch rapidly in very gruish fashion. After a moment, a wave of exhaustion swept through Xu Qing, but he recovered almost instantly.

After that second phase of the assessment, and my breakthroughs with the Seaforming Scripture, my control over my shadow is increasing dramatically.

With that, Xu Qing looked out at the sun in the sky.

Then he slowly got to his feet, arranged his belongings, and took out his daoist robe. Putting it on the table, he straightened out the folds. Waving his hand, he formed a drop of water, then turned it into a sphere, and finally, transformed it into a mirror. Looking at himself, he saw a delicate and even pretty face, dashing and charming. His skin was smudged, but his eyes glittered like bright stars. After examining himself, a look of determination appeared on his face, and he took off his scavenger clothes, revealing the impressive physique he had developed with the Sea and Mountain Incantation.

Waving his hand at the mirror, he pulled it toward him, while simultaneously transforming it into a rushing stream of water vapor. As it washed over him, it removed all the muck and grime, creating a pool of dirty water at his feet.

It was the first time in about seven years that he had thoroughly washed.

The reason was that his environment had changed. In the slums and the scavenger basecamp, being dirty made him look like everyone else. But here, that look would attract unwanted attention. After what happened on his dharmaboat the previous night, he knew that people would have a hard time believing that he was poor.

He let the water run down his face and hair, revealing his fair skin.

After all the filth was gone, he opened his eyes.

The sun shone through the canopy of his boat, landing on his hair and face, and it seemed to remember him with longing, as if it hoped to never leave him. It felt a bit uncomfortable to Xu Qing, so he backed up into the shadows.

His hair was long and black. He looked like he was about sixteen or seventeen, with dramatically angled eyebrows, black eyes, thin lips and a strong profile. He was tall and slender, like a young eagle that wanted to spread its wings in the night.

He seemed cold, lonely, and intimidating, but at the same time, had a bit of the immaturity of a young person. However, that only served to make him more dashing.

After looking at his hands for a moment, he took the gray daoist robe and started putting on the various pieces, starting with the inner garment. He put on the shoes provided by the sect, then put on the outer part of the robe. Then he summoned another ball of water to clean the bloodstains off the deck of his boat. When he finally stepped out into the open, he looked like a completely different person. He was like a gem that had been covered with dirt, but finally cleansed.

Quite a few of the patrolling guards looked over at him in surprise.

His eyes narrowed at the unfamiliar sensation of the sun shining directly onto his skin. However, he soon opened his eyes wide, realizing that he had to get used to it quickly.

After a while, he took a deep breath and stepped off of his boat. Waving his hand, he sucked the boat back into the bottle and then walked off.

Later today, he had to report in to the Violent Crimes Division.

He also wanted to find a medicine shop in the Port District, as he needed to buy some medicinal plants to make white boluses and poison powder. After all, he had long since run out of ingredients.

Despite how early it was, the port was already busy. Both trader ships and Seventh Peak disciples sailed in and out of the various harbors, creating a very bustling atmosphere. Many shops had already opened their doors, and the pedestrians were hurrying to and fro.

Xu Qing's physical appearance attracted many eyes. That said, to cultivators, good looks were like a mask. And thus, most people simply glanced at him then looked away.

Xu Qing felt like he was getting used to this place. However, he still preferred to stick to the shadows. As he headed toward the Violent Crimes Division, he looked around to see what shops were open. He saw places that sold weapons and places that specialized in spell formations.

Thanks to the information in the dharmaboat jade slip, he knew that not all disciples could personally upgrade their own boats. Most of them would collect the materials required, then take them to shops run by disciples from the Fifth or Sixth Peak to do the work.

After browsing some of the shops, Xu Qing asked around to determine the exact location of the Violent Crimes Division.

Before long, he found himself in front of a very large building complex. The front gate reminded him of the city magistrate's manor, but inside, it was a lot bigger. There were dozens of smaller structures inside, and of course, the entire place radiated an intense pressure. The entire complex was pitch black. On either side of the front gate were vicious stone statues that looked like rakshasa demons. [1]

The area around the front gate was icy cold, such that passing pedestrians made sure to avoid it.

There were two young cultivators in gray robes attending the front gate, one male and one female. Both seemed to be in their twenties, and were very good looking. They lounged next to the gate, yawning as if they needed sleep. When Xu Qing approached, they looked up at him.

Xu Qing kept a neutral expression on his face as he approached, stopping a short distance away to clasp hands and bow.

"Disciple Xu Qing from the Seventh Peak, reporting for duty."

“A newbie?” the young man said, his eyes glittering as he looked Xu Qing up and down. Sensing the extraordinary fluctuations rolling off of Xu Qing, he was about to continue talking when the female disciple pushed him aside and walked right up to Xu Qing.

Flashing a pretty smile, she said, “What business do you have here, little Junior Brother?”

“He said he’s reporting for duty,” the young man said with a deadpan smile. “Why are you asking him what he’s doing here?”

The girl ignored him as she continued to look at Xu Qing.

Xu Qing instinctively took a few steps back. He didn’t like being very close to people, and what was more, he wanted to observe these two for a moment. Most of all, he needed to get a good look at their throats.

#### Chapter 55: An Unusual Captain

After realizing that both of these people seemed to be in the sixth level of Qi Condensation, Xu Qing determined that they weren’t a huge threat. Given his current level of battle prowess, he could kill them if it came down to that. As a result, he felt a bit more relaxed.

Sensing Xu Qing’s eyes on him, the young man rubbed his nose and then tried to make himself look a bit more imposing. There was something about this newbie that was different from ordinary newbies.

The female cultivator seemed to sense the same thing. Her eyes narrowing in curiosity, she licked her lips and said to the young man, “You keep an eye on the gate. I’ll take this little junior brother inside.”

Then, a beautiful smile appeared on her face as she beckoned at Xu Qing to follow her into the Violent Crimes Division.

“Come with me, little Junior Brother.”

“Thank you,” Xu Qing said.

The young man simply nodded. So, the tramp is trying to get a new boy toy? Well, this brat might seem different than the usual new recruits, but I’d be surprised if he lasts three months in the Violent Crimes Division.

Upon entering the complex, Xu Qing kept some distance between himself and the young woman. Walking through the main courtyard, he saw a host of other disciples clad, like himself, in gray robes.

At the minimum, they had cultivation bases in the fifth or sixth level of Qi Condensation. But there was no shortage of people in the seventh or eighth level. Some seemed cold and detached, others warm and gentle. Some reeked of blood, others walked around with their arms full of ordinary office supplies.

Taking it all in, he didn’t see anything that made the place seem like one cohesive department. What was more, everyone seemed to keep their distance from each other. Walking along silently, Xu Qing

glanced at the throat of each passing cultivator and tried to judge whether or not his current level of battle prowess was enough to kill them. That was simply instinct by now.

Before long, he felt the need to keep his guard up more than ever. That was because he had trouble finding people he knew he could kill, and saw quite a few who seemed extremely threatening.

Simultaneously, he was paying attention to the layout of the place, and was starting to get an idea of its general structure.

Suddenly, the young woman leading him turned around and took a step toward him.

“Little Junior Brother, why do you seem so fond of looking at other people’s throats?”

As the words left her mouth, she reached out to touch his chest. But then, her expression flickered, and she lunged backward, while simultaneously taking out a generic antidote pill that she consumed. Then she looked at Xu Qing, her expression serious.

“I don’t like people getting too close to me,” Xu Qing said, looking at her calmly.

She gave him a deep look, nodded, and then abandoned her previous plans for him. By now, she realized that there was a lot more to this new recruit than met the eye.

“Interesting,” she said. “Someone like you should be able to last a long time in the Violent Crimes Division.”

With that, she continued leading him. And this time, he didn’t need to maintain distance between the two of them. She took the initiative to stay away from him. Nor did she attempt any more conversation. After taking him past seven or eight buildings, and through a number of different pathways, she stopped in front of a very large hall. Its exterior was pitch black, which created a stark contrast to the sunshine outside.

Looking very serious, she raised her voice and said, “Director, we have a new recruit reporting for duty. His name is Xu Qing.”

Xu Qing kept a similar serious expression on his face as he stood there with his head bowed.

Deep inside the grand hall, two bright lights appeared, like burning lamps. They were eyes, and their gaze pierced out of the hall and landed on Xu Qing.

Feeling the gaze land on him, Xu Qing shivered at the sense of immense pressure. It was like whoever was in that hall was a vicious beast whose mere presence could suffocate a person. Xu Qing’s hair stood on end, and he had trouble breathing. Without even thinking about it, his right hand inched to his side, and he tensed in preparation to take action.

Thankfully, the gaze retracted, whereupon Xu Qing breathed a sigh of relief. Then, he sensed an immense force wrap around the identity medallion in his left hand and pull it away.

With a whoosh, it disappeared into the hall.

He knew he couldn’t have fought back against that level of force. In fact, he had the feeling that if the force wrapped around him and not his identity medallion, then he would be inside that hall right now. Beads of sweat broke out on his forehead.

A moment later, a cold voice echoed out from inside. “Go report in to Celestial Bureau, Unit Six.”



Along with the words, his identity medallion flew back out from within the hall, along with some sort of badge. Xu Qing reached up to catch the medallion and badge. When they hit his hand, he felt so much force behind them that his torso swayed backward, and he was forced to put one foot back to steady himself.

His reaction caused the eyes in the hall to brighten momentarily. However, no words accompanied them. Then the eyes closed.

When the female disciple saw Xu Qing simply catch the medallion and badge, her pupils constricted.

He's more cautious than many old timers in the sect. And he's so strong.... She blinked a few times. Before, she'd sensed that Xu Qing was someone she shouldn't provoke, and had thus decided to keep her distance from him. But now she changed her mind. This was a person she should make friends with.

"Junior Brother Xu Qing, I'm very familiar with Unit Six. I'll take you there." She also made a gesture to him indicating that he should put on the badge.

Xu Qing took a deep breath, put the badge on, then clasped hands and bowed in the direction of the grand hall. He also offered thanks to the young woman.

Xu Qing was young, but he had years of experience in life, and had long since learned to read people. He could guess the reason why this female disciple's attitude had suddenly changed. His judgment was correct. As the girl led him along, she provided a self-introduction.

"Junior Brother, I'm Xu Yanhong, from Earth Bureau, Unit Nine. By chance, I was assigned to watch duty at the main gate today. I guess it's just destiny that the two of us met." [1]

As Xu Yanhong led him through the Violent Crimes Division, she pointed out different buildings and explained what they were.

"That's the deputy director's office. It extends to that building as well."

"Elder Sister Xu," he asked, "how many deputy directors are there in the Violent Crimes Division?"

Upon hearing Xu Qing call her Elder Sister, the girl smiled and went into an explanation. "There's one director and four deputy directors. They lead the four bureaus of Heaven, Earth, Celestial, and Terrestrial. Each bureau has nine street units. You're assigned to Celestial Bureau, Unit Six. You actually got lucky. The deputy director of Celestial Bureau spends most of his time in seclusion, so you won't see him often. In other words, you'll be able to relax a bit." [2]

Eventually, she had led Xu Qing to the Celestial Bureau, which was in the southwestern part of the Violent Crimes Division compound. There were a few dozen buildings there, with numerous cultivators about, hustling and bustling.

The bureaus maintained a high level of security, and thus Xu Yanhong didn't go inside. Before sending him through the entrance, she gave him her contact information, then bid him farewell.

Stepping inside, he quickly found the captain of Unit Six.

It wasn't his first time seeing him. He was the very same young man who had given Xu Qing such a threatening feeling of danger the previous night. Once again, Xu Qing felt his guard going up.

The young man saw Xu Qing, looked him up and down, and immediately recognized him. He didn't seem very surprised to see him.

Intrigued, Xu Qing quietly backed up a few steps.

"I talked to the director today," said the captain, "and asked him to assign you to me. I honestly had no idea that dirty face of yours would clean up so well. You look completely different compared to last night."

His guard going up further, Xu Qing said, "Well met..."

"Captain. You can just call me Captain." Smiling enigmatically, he continued, "So... you aren't surprised I wanted you in my unit?"

"No, I'm surprised," Xu Qing said.

"If you're surprised," the Captain replied quizzically, "why are you acting so calm?"

Xu Qing had to admit that what the Captain said made sense, so after some thought, he plastered a surprised expression onto his face.

"..." A moment passed, then the Captain continued, "The reason I asked for you to be assigned to my unit is that we've lost a few constables over the past few days. We're short-staffed, and we have some important assignments coming up." As he spoke, the Captain kept his eyes on Xu Qing.

Upon hearing that constables had died, Xu Qing's heart sank a bit. However, he didn't jump in with any questions, and instead kept his eyes on the Captain and waited for more details.

Seeing Xu Qing react this way, the Captain smiled broadly.

"Excellent. You seem a lot stronger than past new recruits. Xu Qing, you're the first person to show up today, and you're not familiar with how things work. How about this? I'll take you on patrol with me. Along the way, I'll tell you all about your duties in the Violent Crimes Division."

Captain was a swift and decisive person who struck like lightning and moved like the wind. Not bothering to mention who else was in the unit, he took Xu Qing out to the street.

As they walked slowly through the crowd, the Captain would occasionally call out greetings to shop owners. He seemed warm and kind, but Xu Qing hadn't forgotten the dangerous look in his eyes from the night before. He certainly had not seemed very warm and kind then. Because of that, Xu Qing kept as much distance as he could.

From what Xu Qing could tell, the Captain's cultivation base was somewhere in the ninth or tenth level of Qi Condensation. In Seven Blood Eyes, disciples of that caliber were far superior to the old version of Xu Qing.

“You don’t need to be so stiff,” the Captain said. “Around here, you need to practice having two dispositions. If you don’t, you won’t survive long.”

After thinking about the words, Xu Qing realized they made sense, so he tried hard to make himself seem a bit more relaxed. However, after all the things he’d been through during the past seven years, it wasn’t very easy.

“Forget it for now,” the Captain said, laughing. “You’ll figure it out eventually.” Stopping to buy a few apples, he thought, I recruited a real freak, didn’t I?

Seeing that the Captain didn’t offer him an apple, Xu Qing bought two for himself.

“Okay, let me explain what the Seventh Peak Violent Crimes Division does. Basically, we have one responsibility. And that’s to kill people.” Walking along, the Captain noticed a homeless person on the side of the road. He tossed two spirit coins to the man, who caught them and offered thanks.

Xu Qing noted that the homeless person wasn’t a cultivator. Then, he thought about what the Captain had just said, and asked, “You kill violent criminals?”

The Captain took a bite out of an apple, swallowed it, and seemed to relish the sweet flavor. Then he said, “The Patrol Division protects common citizens from illegal behavior of both disciples and criminal elements, and makes sure they can pay their bills and taxes. In a word, they maintain law and order. But when they run into situations that they can’t handle, the Violent Crimes Division steps in. For instance, if they encounter outlaws or murderous cultivators.

“Because of that, the Violent Crimes Division always goes on dangerous missions with a high casualty rate. Unit Six has gone through a lot of new recruits lately. Some died on missions, others were assassinated. Going forward, you need to be very careful.

“There are upsides to being in the Violent Crimes Division. The pay’s good. And we’re the only division that gets to hand over wanted criminals and keep the bounty.” With that, the Captain took another bite of apple.

Xu Qing looked at the apple for a moment, then asked, “After you kill someone, do you get to keep their belongings?”

“Hmm?” The Captain looked back at Xu Qing and saw the serious look on his face. He smiled. “Interesting. You’re the first new recruit to ever ask that question at this point in the introduction. Well, let me explain. If you single-handedly kill an outlaw or murderer, then you get to keep everything. If it’s part of a team effort, then it gets split up. By the way, in this city, there are some people who, if you see them, you should simply walk the other way.”

As he spoke the words, he pointed across the street to a young man wearing a pale violet daoist robe, walking through the crowds with an arrogant look on his face. When he stepped into one of the shops, the shopkeeper called out a respectful greeting. Everyone on the street who saw the color

of his daoist robe looked at him with expressions of reverence, and most of them bowed their heads. Even the constables from the Patrol Division did the same thing. It was almost like he was the child of a god strolling through the mortal world, a being that no one dared to look at directly.

Xu Qing's pupils constricted.

"Remember this," the Captain continued. "In the Seven Blood Eyes capital city, people who wear dark daoist robes, and people who wear pale daoist robes like that, should never be provoked. The former... are senior-ranked Onpeak Foundation Establishment disciples. The latter are Onpeak conclave disciples. Conclave disciples aren't in Foundation Establishment, but they lead charmed lives nonetheless.

"When it comes to people like you and me, a hundred could die and the sect wouldn't care. But if a single conclave disciple dies, it's a major event."

Xu Qing looked over at the distant Seventh Peak.

"Jealous?" the Captain said. "Just stay alive and keep working on your cultivation. Once you reach Foundation Establishment, even the conclave disciples will have to bow their heads to you." He took another bite of apple.

"By the way, I should probably remind you that sect rules prohibit gray-robed disciples from fighting and killing each other. But those are just the rules as written. Fighting and killing actually happens all the time. You just need to figure out a good way to dispose of the bodies. Honestly, the best way is to take their merit points and spirit stones, and then, because their balance is at zero, the spell formation will take care of them..." Chewing his apple, the Captain gestured with his chin and said, "Like him."

Xu Qing looked over to see a young man in a gray robe, covered in wounds and gasping for breath, his eyes burning with rage and indignation.

His lips were busted and his limbs broken, making it impossible for him to speak or even walk. His identity medallion lay on his chest, and even from a distance it was possible to see that his merit point balance was at zero.

Even as Xu Qing looked at him, a black beam of light shot down from above and incinerated the young man out of existence, leaving behind only a bit of drifting ash.

Xu Qing's pupils constricted. However, the passersby seemed to take the event as a matter of course, and most didn't even look over. They just hurried along, cold and detached.

"That fellow made a practice of robbing and killing fellow disciples. It was to be expected that he'd end up like that eventually." The Captain smiled and was about to keep talking when, all of a sudden, his expression turned serious, and he looked further down the street.

Xu Qing followed his gaze, and noticed that, further down in an alley, were mutagen fluctuations.

He and the Captain were on a busy street, but that alley looked shadowy and dark, and most people seemed to be avoiding it.

The Captain sighed. "I can't believe this is happening in broad daylight. Wait here for a moment, Junior Brother."

With that, the Captain finished his apple as he walked over to the alley.

Xu Qing watched as the Captain then disappeared into the alley. About ten breaths of time later, he emerged, eating another apple, but smelling like blood.

Xu Qing eyed the alley.

"Some poor idiot who had transplanted mutant beast body parts onto himself ran into a problem and started mutating. I urge you not to do anything like that. It can boost your cultivation base, but will ultimately cause no end of trouble for you." With a broad smile and an innocent expression, he led Xu Qing onward down the street.

Xu Qing nodded and then followed silently. The man he'd killed the night before also had transplanted mutant beast body parts. Before, Xu Qing didn't even know it was possible to do that.

Seeing the Captain enjoying the sweet apples, Xu Qing finally took a bite out of one that he'd bought. It really was very sweet.

And thus, the two of them strolled through the city, enjoying apples. The Captain ate quickly, Xu Qing ate slowly. Eventually, the Captain ran out of apples, and looked over at the second apple Xu Qing had bought. Xu Qing looked back at him and took a bite out of the second apple. The Captain rubbed his nose and pulled a tangerine out of his sack.

"Let me tell you about our current mission. We have one main goal for now, and that's to capture members of Night Dove."

"Night Dove?" Xu Qing said.

"They're a massive criminal enterprise that operates all over South Phoenix. They specialize in kidnapping children and cultivators and selling them to be living treasures. Normally speaking, they carry out their vile business outside of our borders. But nowadays they've expanded operations into Seven Blood Eyes territory. The populace is on edge, and if things keep going as they are, the Onpeak bigshots are going to see a dip in profit. And they won't be happy about that.

"What you saw last night was our director killing one of the Night Dove leaders. It was a joint operation with the Violent Crimes Divisions from all seven districts, the goal being to devastate their base of operations here."

Xu Qing's eyes glittered coldly as he thought back to the caravan leader he'd killed back in the basecamp. Eyes narrowing, he nodded.

The Captain was a smart person, and could guess what the look in Xu Qing's eyes meant. However, he didn't ask any questions. Instead, he continued to lead him through the city and explain things.

At a certain point, Xu Qing noticed a homeless child at the side of the road, and thinking back to what the Captain had done earlier, he tossed the boy a spirit coin.

The Captain blinked a few times, then looked at Xu Qing with an enigmatic smile and said, "Oh, you already have informants in the city?"

Xu Qing didn't say anything in response. However, he was surprised to realize the reason behind the Captain's action before. At the same time, he almost felt like he'd been pranked.

Eventually, as the sun started to set, they reached the harbor. As they walked past an area filled with piles of cargo, a gruff voice rang out.

"Say one more thing, and I'll rip your jaw off your face."

Xu Qing looked over and saw that, squatting next to a huge pile of cargo, was a Seventh Peak disciple. He was middle-aged, and didn't seem out of the ordinary in any way. In fact, he seemed like an honest, good-natured person.

However, he was the one who had just spoken.

In front of him was an old man in expensive clothing. He looked angry, and had apparently been arguing with the Seventh Peak disciple.

"Whose jaw are you going to rip off, huh, Zhang San?" said the Captain, finishing a tangerine and then taking a pear out. He took a bite. [3]

When the old man saw the Captain, his expression flickered and he hurried away. Meanwhile, the Seventh Peak disciple looked around with a silly smile on his face. After calling out a greeting to the Captain, he looked at Xu Qing with the same smile.

"This is our latest addition to the Violent Crimes Division, Xu Qing," the Captain said. Then he pointed at the middle-aged disciple and said, "This is Zhang San. He used to be in Violent Crimes Division, but turned out to be a big coward so he transferred to the Transportation Division. Don't be fooled by his friendly appearance. He's killed so many pirates and rogue cultivators that there's hardly enough room around here to pile them up." He gestured at the piles of cargo by way of comparison.

Xu Qing's guard went up. What was most intriguing was that he didn't sense any powerful fluctuations on this Zhang San. If what the Captain said was true, then there must be something very unusual about him.

"Come on, those are just rumors," Zhang San said, rubbing his hands together. "I killed a few small-time crooks, that's all. Ai. I still feel bad about that down to this day." All the while, the silly smile never left his face.

From what Xu Qing could tell, there wasn't an ounce of remorse on the man's face.

"Junior Brother Xu Qing, don't listen to the Captain's nonsense. You have to watch out for yourself." With that, he stood and offered a small bone to Xu Qing. "Here, take this. A gift to mark the day we met."

## Chapter 56: A New Recruit in the Violent Crimes Division

The bone was bright red, shaped like a hook, palm-sized, and glittered with a strange light. Upon examining it closely, one would see that the surface had a complex set of natural markings on it. The markings seemed to absorb spirit power from the surroundings automatically, causing wind to swirl around Zhang San's palm as he held it out.

"An immortal bone from a winged fish?" the Captain said, taking another bite of pear. "Put that thing in your dharmaboat spell formation and it'll provide a big boost to your speed. Not bad at all!" Squatting down next to Zhang San, he smiled, nudged him with his shoulder and continued, "What are you being so generous for today, you little punk?"

"How else could I welcome Junior Brother Xu Qing?" Zhang San answered innocently.

Xu Qing didn't accept the gift, but instead looked at the Captain for an indication of what to do. He had the feeling that Zhang San wasn't doing this for Xu Qing himself, but rather, for the Captain.

Seeing Xu Qing's reaction, the Captain smiled. "Take it. He's giving it to you in the hopes that you won't come around here arresting people very often."

Hearing this, Xu Qing turned back to Zhang San, who looked back with his silly smile.

Xu Qing nodded, took the fish bone and examined it curiously, then put it in his sack.

Then, imitating the Captain, he squatted down, though he kept a bit of distance between himself and the other two. [1]

Seeing this, Zhang San's smile widened.

"Anything unusual going on lately, Zhang San?" the Captain asked. Having finished eating the pear, he pulled a peach out and took a bite.

Xu Qing looked intently at Zhang San, waiting to hear his answer.

Instead of answering immediately, Zhang San produced a pipe, took a puff, and then tapped it on the ground. Ash tumbled out, forming into the image of a face, along with a line of characters.

"There's a new face over by the south docks," he said.

The Captain looked thoughtfully at the ashes on the ground, then clasped Zhang San's shoulder and smiled at Xu Qing. "You can head home, little Junior Brother. You're off duty now. Don't be late tomorrow morning."

Xu Qing could tell that the two men wanted to talk in private, so he nodded, clasped hands to both men, then turned and left. The orange light of the setting sun shone on his gray daoist robe as he departed.

When he was gone, the Captain smiled. "What do you think of the new recruit? You really are acting more generously than usual today."

"Where did you find him? The first thing the brat did was look at my throat. How could I not be generous with someone like that?"

The Captain laughed heartily.

“What are you laughing for?” Zhang San said, rubbing his neck awkwardly. “What kind of person do you think makes it a habit of going around studying throats?”

“The kind of person who slits them,” the Captain said. He finished his peach, produced a second peach, and took a bite. “The little punk is good looking, but he has a very strong baleful aura. He tried to hide it, but I can still sense it. And then there are his eyes....”

Zhang San’s expression was now somber as he puffed his pipe.

“Did you notice that?” the Captain went on. “They’re the eyes of someone who seeks revenge over the smallest grievance. I bet he has his own set of principles, and won’t think twice to kill anyone who violates them.... A person like him will work out great for you as long as you treat him well. Treat him badly, and you’ll get bit. He’s killed a lot of people. I get a sense of danger just looking at him. If I met him out on the open sea, I’d be very careful not to provoke him. I don’t want to die, after all.”

Zhang San looked at the Captain. “This new junior brother is indeed very interesting.”

The Captain eyed Xu Qing as he made his way off into the distance, looking pleased at Zhang San’s final assessment.

Zhang San sighed helplessly, and reminded himself that the Captain was a real freak who always had numerous tricks up his sleeve.

As the Captain and Zhang San chatted, Xu Qing reached the far end of the harbor. The sky was starting to get dark, and the streets were emptying. Most shops were closed. Eventually, Xu Qing reached his berth, but he didn’t immediately take out his dharmaboat. First, he looked around carefully.

Someone had come hoping to kill him yesterday, so he wanted to check the area thoroughly. He even sprinkled some poison powder onto the water. When he was satisfied it was safe, he put his dharmaboat onto the water and stepped on board.

Only after the defensive shield was up did he truly feel safe.

With that, he sat down cross-legged. However, instead of starting his cultivation routine, he mentally reviewed the events of the day. He had a hard time getting a read on the Captain. But based on their conversation, Xu Qing’s intuition was telling him the man was sincere. Meanwhile, he got the feeling Zhang San was hiding something. And it seemed like he feared Xu Qing.

Then Xu Qing thought back to the gray-robed disciple who had been robbed of merit points, crippled, and then had to look up in despair as he was wiped out of existence.

Everything he had seen and heard only reinforced his realization that this capital city was a brutal place for disciples. Nothing was as simple as it seemed, and you couldn’t ever trust what you saw on the surface.



If you took either the Captain or Zhang San and dropped them into a scavenger basecamp, they could toy with the scavengers with ease, and probably massacre them in the blink of an eye. In fact, as far as Xu Qing was concerned, Seven Blood Eyes as a whole was like a forbidden region. And because of that, he had to focus on getting stronger through cultivation.

That was especially true when he thought back to that young man in the pale violet daoist robe. He had such a noble status that everyone around him bowed in deference. It really reinforced Xu Qing's perception of how important social hierarchy was here.

He had seen that kind of thing from the time he was young, and he knew how it worked.

In his caution, he hadn't asked the Captain for details about the person who gave Xu Qing his identity medallion to begin with. If that person wanted to show his face, he would. If he didn't, he wouldn't. Xu Qing wasn't going to dig for details.

I really doubt it has anything to do with Grandmaster Bai. Closing his eyes, he started his cultivation routine.

Two hours later, when it was dark outside, Xu Qing opened his eyes. He looked hesitant.

His cultivation speed was much slower than the day before, and he had a good idea why.

If he likened himself to a vessel, then yesterday, he had been almost completely empty. Because of that, it hadn't taken much effort to absorb lots of spirit power. But now the vessel was much fuller. Therefore, he needed to improve his absorption ability in order to attract spirit power.

Looking down, he performed an incantation gesture with his right hand, then waved his finger at the deck off to the side.

Immediately, glittering light arose from gleaming lines, as a spell formation appeared.

As the spell formation began to operate, the spirit power on the outside of the boat stirred in his direction. This was why practicing cultivation on a dharmaboat led to quicker advancement.

After all, it was a 'spirit convergence' formation.

I need to improve the boat's power source.

The jade slip with information about the dharmaboat indicated that one couldn't just focus on upgrading the boat with better materials. You also had to upgrade the power source.

The power source was the core of the dharmaboat, like its heart. It determined how much power the boat had, and there was virtually no limit to how much it could be upgraded. It was also the most expensive aspect of upgrading.

All Seventh Peak disciples' dharmaboats started out with a single spirit convergence formation, which could slowly absorb surrounding spirit power and store it for backup use. If a disciple wasn't satisfied, they could feed spirit stones into the formation to make it stronger and improve the level of power. In addition to that, the hearts of certain large mutant beasts could be used as power sources. The greater the power in the heart, the greater the power of the formation. At the same time, the speed and other general properties of the boat would receive a boost. Without making the proper internal adjustments, it didn't matter what the external configuration was, it couldn't be fully utilized.

With these thoughts in mind, Xu Qing gritted his teeth, took out ten spirit stones, and put them onto the formation. A moment later, the spirit stones disappeared, and Xu Qing felt the dharmaboat shudder.

Brilliant shafts of light shot out of the spell formation, and the dharmaboat became like a vortex as dense spirit power rushed toward it from all directions.

Xu Qing immediately began his cultivation, and this time, progressed much more quickly. Around the time the sun rose, Xu Qing's eyes snapped open, and violet light spilled out of them.

“Seaforming Scripture. Sixth level!”

He took a deep breath as he sensed the 180-meter spirit sea within him. It was only thirty meters larger than before, but that small increase provided profound benefits. He had a much greater spirit power capacity, and even better, had access to many more transformations than before. He was also stronger.

At this rate, it won't take long before my Seaforming Scripture is at the same level as my Sea and Mountain Incantation. Xu Qing was pleased with the speed of his progress, but sighed at the resources he'd been forced to spend.

Over the course of the night, he had completely wiped out his collection of spirit stones.

Given that it was morning, Xu Qing straightened out his robe, then debarked his dharmaboat and headed to the Violent Crimes Division for his second day of work. His assignment was mandatory, but he got a salary. According to the information in his identity medallion, his remuneration was 3,000 merit points per month.

Because of that, he was taking it seriously. Not long after sunrise, he arrived at the Violent Crimes Division and went straight to the Celestial Bureau. There, he saw the Captain as well as some of the other Unit Six constables.

There were about twenty people in the unit, including both men and women. Everyone had their own look, but they all had extraordinary cultivation base fluctuations. As they looked at Xu Qing, most had cold expressions, and the majority seemed cautious of him.

Not being very sociable himself, Xu Qing stepped off to the side and waited quietly. The Captain casually ate an apple as he said, “Our mission today is to go out and look for members of Night Dove.

“Don't spend all your time focusing on the bounty list. I know the bounties are enticing, but right now our focus should be on Night Dove. If you uncover any clues, don't beat the grass and startle the snake. Come back here and report the matter. The division will arrange for a comprehensive investigation. Now, get to work!”

The constables of Unit Six dispersed. This time, the Captain didn't take Xu Qing with him. Instead, he gave him a jade slip with a bounty list, then sent him off on his own. Xu Qing had no problem with this arrangement. Before long, he was out of the Violent Crimes Division, patrolling through the city while simultaneously examining the bounty list.

Since he wasn't sure of the best route to patrol, he did the same as they'd done the day before, and headed toward the Port District. He kept his guard up, and took off his Violent Crimes Division

badge. Most of the time, he kept to the shadows and other locations where he wouldn't attract notice.

As he looked at the bustling crowds and busy shops, he came to an even deeper understanding of how prosperous this city was.

At a certain point, he noticed a vendor selling candied fruit on a stick. Thinking back to when he was young and always wanted to have candied fruit, he stepped over to buy a skewer. After inspecting them to make sure they were safe, he bought one and continued on his way. [2]

After studying the bounty list, he realized why the Captain had reminded Unit Six not to focus too much on bounty hunting. The bounties for capturing such criminals started at ten spirit stones and went up into the hundreds.

Several hours later, as noon approached, he was still working on his skewer of candied fruit when he suddenly stopped walking and looked down the crowded street.

Threading her way skillfully through the crowd was a slender, good-looking young woman in a coarse garment. As Xu Qing watched, she picked the pockets of two passersby. She seemed very confident in her skills, and even smiled smugly as she placed the stolen goods in her own sack.

Her smile lasted until she spotted Xu Qing looking at her from down the street, his face completely expressionless. Face flushing with embarrassment, she was about to walk away when she realized that Xu Qing was walking straight toward her.

She looked cautious, and obviously didn't recognize Xu Qing, but could tell that she was in danger, and quickly backed up to melt into the crowd.

Xu Qing, meanwhile, had already recognized her.

This woman was the same one who had tried to get her pursuers to shift attention to him on the street the other night. That was Xu Qing's first night in the city, and also the first time he killed someone here.

Xu Qing quickly finished the last piece of candied fruit and then suddenly threw the bamboo skewer, which shot like a bolt of lightning toward the woman.

When the woman saw how fast he was, her face fell. She had no time to react, and no chance to disappear into the crowd. The bamboo skewer pierced the woman's right foot, and with a thump, she fell to the ground. She screamed, but the passersby didn't want to get involved and quickly fled.

At the same time, Xu Qing's cold voice reached the trembling young woman's ears.

"Scream again, and I'll rip your jaw off your face."

As it turned out, Xu Qing had a good memory, and was also skilled at imitating others....

#### Chapter 57: Take a Spirit Coin

Xu Qing was still irritated about what happened that night. He had wanted to avoid killing anyone on his first day in Seven Blood Eyes, but this woman had dragged him into her issue. If he had been someone else with a weaker cultivation base and lower battle prowess, then he would probably have been killed.

That was why he struck like lightning.

As soon as the woman heard his words, she snapped her mouth shut and lay there trembling. Of course, she knew full well what advantages women had. Most men would feel pity for a terrified woman, and therefore, she did her best to make herself seem completely beside herself with fear.

Meanwhile, Xu Qing, still chomping on his last candied fruit, walked toward her, while making sure to keep an eye out in case the woman was working with a partner. Before he even got close, the crowd had vacated the area around the woman.

There were a few people in the area who had cultivation bases, and seemed inclined to help the pitiable woman. But when they saw Xu Qing and sensed his extraordinary energy, they ducked their heads and left.

As Xu Qing approached, the woman, whose foot was still impaled to the ground, trembled as hard as she could. She was even sweating profusely. However, it was at that moment that something clicked, and she realized who Xu Qing was.

On the very night she tried to set him up, his cold eyes and ruthless manner made it obvious that she'd gotten tangled up with a terrifying person. Ever since then, she'd been in hiding, and hadn't stepped foot outside. It was only today that she decided the matter must have blown over. Most likely, the terrifying person she'd dragged into her affair was some criminal figure from out of town, who wouldn't possibly show his face during the day.

That was why she'd finally come out. It had seemed impossibly unlikely that she would actually run into that very person. And even if she did run into him, she was confident that she could simply run away from him. After all, she was an ordinary citizen, and the Patrol Division kept the peace. According to the rules of the city, she shouldn't be in any danger. But as Xu Qing approached and squatted in front of her, she suddenly realized that the Patrol Division wasn't anywhere to be seen, and she started to wonder if she was about to die. The only thing she could do was tremble harder and make herself seem more terrified, hoping to buy enough time that someone would come to her aid.

"Cut the act," Xu Qing said, reaching down and pulling the bamboo skewer out of her foot.

The pain, and the fact that he had seen through her act, caused the woman's eyes to grow wide with real terror. Realizing how close he was, she considered one final option, and her right fist twitched. However, she just didn't dare to toss out the poison powder she held there.

Around then, the sound of a whistle pierced the air as a team of cultivators from the Patrol Division appeared down the street and started racing in their direction.

Hope finally flickered in the woman's eyes.

However, when Xu Qing flashed his Violent Crimes Division badge to the Patrol Division cultivators, they turned and left.

Finally, the hope in the woman's eyes was replaced with despair.

Trembling, she stammered, "I'm s-sorry about what happened before. I can make it up to you. I... I have information about a wanted criminal!"

She didn't bother trying to haggle with him about how much she owed. Given the years she'd spent operating in the night, she knew that a person this strong could easily kill her. She was in no place to negotiate, and therefore, cooperation was the only option.

Not waiting for Xu Qing to say anything in response, she quickly continued, "I'm talking about Master Greencloud, who was recently expelled from the Spirit Cloud Sect. For the past few days, he's been staying at a place on Plankspring Way. It's the same inn where you and I ran into each other last time."

"Wanted criminal?" Xu Qing glanced down at the jade slip with the bounty list, and didn't have to look long before finding Master Greencloud's name. The reward for his capture was twenty spirit stones.

"Also," the woman continued, "I heard that the Violent Crimes Division has been investigating Night Dove lately. I know where one of their hideouts is." Knowing how much danger she was in, and hoping to save her own life, she went on to explain all the details about the hideout.

After hearing everything, Xu Qing looked at her, then thought back to the captain's informant. Taking out a spirit coin, he held it out to her. "If you have more information like this, come back here and wait for me to find you."

The woman stared in shock, and even hesitated for a moment. She knew full well what kind of arrangement she was getting herself into. Gritting her teeth, she nodded and took the spirit coin. Then she got up and hobbled away as quickly as she could.

After she disappeared into the crowd, Xu Qing stood up. He didn't bother to check into whether or not the woman's information about the Night Dove hideout was accurate. He would simply report the information and let the division handle the further investigation.

By the time he finished his patrol, the sun was sinking toward the horizon. At that point, he headed back to the inn where he'd spent his first night in the city.

Despite being daytime, the inn was open, although it seemed mostly empty.

Xu Qing eyed the place from a distance, thinking back to the grish old man who ran it. Never the one to take action blindly, he simply watched the inn for a bit, then headed back to the Violent Crimes Division to deliver the information about the hideout. After that, he was off duty.

It was possible that the woman from earlier had no intention of being his informant, and would simply disappear. To Xu Qing, it didn't matter. And that was because the coin he gave her... had poison on it, and she would need the antidote within three days.

Back at the division, he saw some other Unit Six constables, but they were all cold and detached, and didn't say anything to him. There was one middle-aged constable who offered him a smile and invited him to go drinking.

In Seven Blood Eyes, where killing was prohibited, yet people fought and robbed each other left and right, a sudden invitation like this seemed suspicious. So Xu Qing politely turned down the invitation.

Today was a special day, and he didn't want to kill anyone. He wanted to be alone.

What was more, he had one more stop: a medicine shop.

There were some special medicinal plants he needed to concoct white boluses, and if he succeeded in making the pills, he could sell them. He had almost run out of poisons and black boluses, and needed to replenish his stock. And what was more, he had some ideas for more types of poisons that he wanted to experiment with.

Consulting his mental map of the city, he went to a medicine shop he'd noticed earlier. It was a big shop, and had a lot of customers, all of them wearing gray daoist robes. Medicinal pills and similar items were things disciples from all the different mountain peaks needed. When Xu Qing entered the shop, his delicate, almost pretty face attracted some attention. However, after glancing at him, the disciples looked away.

Meanwhile, Xu Qing looked around at the people inside the shop, then walked over to the counter.

The old shopkeeper was at the counter, as well as a customer, a pudgy young man in a gray daoist robe. His robe was almost too tight for him, making him look like a bulging ball. He had fair skin and freckles, and looked like he was sixteen or seventeen years old. He was currently yawning as he put the medicinal plants he'd purchased into a big sack hanging from his shoulder.

From the haphazard way he put everything into his bag, Xu Qing could tell that he didn't know anything about medicinal plants. There were some plants that shouldn't be stored together, but this young man was just throwing everything in randomly.

As he neared, Xu Qing heard the pudgy young man talking in a dissatisfied tone. "Shopkeeper, this isn't much of a haul. Why so few plants?"

"You come every day and clear everything out! Come back tomorrow. The big boss has a new shipment coming in." The shopkeeper was obviously familiar with the young man. After handing over all the plants, the shopkeeper noticed Xu Qing. "Hello there, Junior Brother. What medicinal items are you looking for?"

"I need ten-year-old mothbone flowers, living," Xu Qing said calmly. "Thirty stalks of goldwing leaf. Ten stalks of cleversprite branch, prepped for use. A bunch of seven-leaf clovers, any vintage. And a hundred stalks of goldbutton weed. Also, rhino-fire blossoms with the roots attached, as well as some condensing spirit leaves. I need ten each, with white-colored roots." After some thought, Xu Qing mentioned a few types of venom and poisonous plants, then concluded with. "Do you happen to have any rotcloud mud or blackgem thorns?"

The shopkeeper stared at Xu Qing for a moment. Most customers who came to this shop were disciples buying pills. Occasionally, people would come in to buy medicinal plants, but they were usually disciples from the Second Peak. Either that, or people like this pudgy young disciple who didn't know much about medicinal plants. He didn't see many people like Xu Qing, who were so articulate, yet unfamiliar, and obviously not from the Second Peak.

What was more, the shopkeeper knew that most of the ingredients Xu Qing had mentioned were required for white boluses. After a moment, he said, "We have all of that. It'll cost you 380 spirit

coins. Er, actually, we don't have condensing spirit leaves. Our last hundred were just purchased by this fellow here." He pointed at the pudgy young disciple. "We'll have more tomorrow."

Xu Qing nodded. Although the condensing spirit leaves were important, he could wait for a day. The asking price was reasonable. Assuming his concocting efforts went well, he would be able to make over a hundred white boluses, plus a lot of poison powder.

Just as he was about to hand over the money, the pudgy young man looked over at him and said, "Condensing spirit leaves? Do you need these things too? What are they good for? I've asked the shopkeeper a bunch of times, but he won't tell me."

The shopkeeper sighed. "If I spent time answering all of your countless questions, I wouldn't have time to attend to any of the other customers!"

Xu Qing looked at the pudgy young man and thought about himself in the past, thirsting for knowledge.

"There are two main uses for condensing spirit leaves," he said. "First, they can be a catalyzing agent when used with other plants, allowing you to guide the resulting variations in the mixture. Second, they're great for moisturizing the skin."

A look of enlightenment suddenly appeared on the pudgy young man's face. Then he pulled out a handful of condensing spirit leaves, about seven or eight in total, and handed them to Xu Qing.

"Thank you, Brother. Here, take these." With that, the young man shouldered his bag and walked out, looking very pleased. It seemed that, to him, giving away free medicinal plants to people was something of little consequence.

Xu Qing was taken aback, and wanted to decline the offer, but before he could, the pudgy young man was walking away, pulling out his identity medallion to send a voice message to someone.

Meanwhile, the shopkeeper chuckled. "The fat kid is Huang Yan from the Seventh Peak. He's a prodigy when it comes to pursuing love. I'm not sure which girl he's obsessed with, but he's been coming here for seven or eight years to buy medicinal plants for her. In fact, he's spent so much money he could be my boss. In any case, the kid isn't as simple as he seems. People who stick out from the crowd usually die early, but he's been around for years."

Xu Qing looked at Huang Yan walking off into the distance. Not making conversation with the shopkeeper, he purchased his medicinal plants and then left.

Back at his berth, he did his usual inspection and then got into his dharmaboat. After activating the defenses, he breathed a sigh of relief. He felt a sense of security inside the dharmaboat that was impossible to feel while outside.

Taking out his new plants, he arranged them according to their type, then thought of the pill formula for white boluses. Despite never having all the ingredients to make white boluses, he hadn't forgotten the mixture ratios. And now that he had everything ready, he didn't waste any time in attempting to concoct the pill again.

Time passed, and soon, it was late in the night.

Chapter 58: A Birthday Alone

As the wind blew, rippling the water, the little boat creaked, bobbing up and down, creating gray froth.

Inside the boat, Xu Qing was completely focused on his pill concocting. One by one, he took out the medicinal plants he needed, either plucking off the leaves, extracting the sap, or removing stamens before carefully putting them into the stone bowl. As he worked, more and more medicinal liquid built up.

After confirming the mix ratio and making some final adjustments, he added the seven-leaf clover. And then, at just around midnight, he carefully added the sap of the condensing spirit leaf into the black liquid. Hissing and popping sounds rang out, and a green smoke rose up that he brushed away. Then the medicinal liquid in the stone bowl turned white and semisolid. At the same time, it glowed faintly.

He had succeeded!

After a final inspection, he took the liquid out and rolled it into the shape of a large pill. Putting it down to dry, he looked at it, his eyes glowing with satisfaction.

I finally made a white bolus!

All of a sudden, he thought back to Grandmaster Bai's lectures in the scavenger basecamp.

Today was a special day, and because of that, such memories caused his mood to become unusually tranquil. A moment later, he sighed and looked out into the darkness outside the boat.

The moon hung in the sky, its reflection visible on the rippling surface of the water. Everything was quiet, except for the faint sea breeze, humid and cold, causing his hair to sway gently.

Grandmaster Bai should be back in the Violet Lands by now. I wonder where Crucifix and Graceful Raptor ended up....

Does Sergeant Thunder's grave have weeds growing on it already?

I still haven't found any lifespan flowers.

He was used to being alone, and was also used to adapting to new situations. But in the end, he was still a kid. Sitting there quietly, he thought back to the place he'd once lived in the scavenger basecamp, and that familiar old man who loved eating snake meat. He'd often listened to him talking about the latest gossip in the camp, while enjoying a smoke and a drink.

The memories were vivid.

Xu Qing looked down.

That scholar back in the slums once said that when you start thinking about the past, it means you're growing up....

Xu Qing took out a jug of alcohol he'd purchased while on patrol earlier. Looking back up at the bright moon, he raised up the jug respectfully, then took a drink.

From a distance, it was possible to see a young man alone on a boat, drinking respectfully with the moon.



The alcohol in the capital city was stronger than in the basecamp. It burned when it went down, becoming like a fire in his belly that spread out to fill his entire body. After taking a drink, he took a moment to breathe before drinking again.

I wish Sergeant Thunder's soul a good journey in heaven.

I wish Grandmaster Bai health and longevity.

And I wish myself... a happy birthday.

He took another drink.

Today was special because it was his birthday.

Xu Qing seemed like he was sixteen, but in reality he was only fifteen. Given how much he'd grown, he was a lot more experienced than someone the same age as him.

This year, just like so many years in the past, he spent his birthday alone. The only difference was that this time, he had some alcohol.

Taking another drink from the jug, he thought about his family. He could still remember them. However, the memories were hazy, no matter how hard he tried to recall the details. It hurt inside. He didn't want the memories to be hazy, but... there were some things you just couldn't change.

Time passed.

"Are you all... doing well?" he murmured, his head bowed.

The wind blew, brushing against his hair and face. It was cold, and it gradually pulled him out of his memories, and caused his eyes to harden. Again, his facial expression went back to its usual cold and detached state.

Keep on living. As long as I stay alive, then I'll have a chance to see Dad and Mom again. And that... would be amazing. Therefore, I have to get stronger!

He looked up, and the moonlight shone down on him. He seemed like a lone wolf staring off into the distance.

Then, he settled down cross-legged to start his cultivation routine.

Time passed.

After his birthday, he settled into a routine. For days, he went on patrol during the day, and worked on pill concocting and cultivation in the evenings.

Even by using spirit stones to speed up his cultivation of the Seaforming Scripture, progress was still a bit slow. It took several days to go from the sixth level into the seventh.

He knew that his speed would continue to slow going forward, although compared to other people he would still be astonishingly fast.

Once in the seventh level, Xu Qing could tell that his battle prowess was vastly superior to before. In fact, he was completely and utterly confident that if he had to fight the version of himself that had just arrived at Seven Blood Eyes, he would kill him in thirty breaths of time or less.

Although he was still a far cry from being a match for Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior, Xu Qing was confident he could at least hold his own for a time in such a fight.

Once I'm a bit stronger, I'm going to go back and kill Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior!

He would feel uneasy until the day he accomplished that. Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior surely knew how Seven Blood Eyes operated, and wouldn't try to kill him in the sect. But he could lend someone a knife and have them do his dirty work for him.

Xu Qing knew he had to improve his cultivation base and get rid of that threat once and for all.

He had done a lot more research into dharmaboats, and had read the jade slip instructions thoroughly. What was more, he had practiced enough that he had complete control over the operation of the boat.

For now, he'd decided that the first thing he needed to focus on was the hull. He would upgrade his dharmaboat by means of improving its hull and defenses. That would prevent the boat from being damaged, and would thus ensure that he didn't need to worry about making repairs. What was more, Seven Blood Eyes was a place where you always had to worry about being ambushed. The dharmaboat was the most secure and safe location, a place where he needed privacy to rest, concoct pills, and work on cultivation. Because of that, he needed the boat to have adequate defenses.

As the days passed, Xu Qing concocted quite a few white and black boluses. Furthermore, he created some more poison powders. As he concocted pills, he paid very close attention to everything that happened, thus improving his understanding of plants and vegetation. After every concocting session, he would carefully organize his leftover plants. Thus, the interior of his dharmaboat eventually became packed with all sorts of ingredients.

Because of the dense population in the city, he didn't think it was a good idea to experiment with new poison concoctions. However, he did start building up a good collection of ingredients to do so.

Next time he got a chance to leave the city, he would find a safe place for some experimentation.

He got more and more familiar with working in the Violent Crimes Division. The entire division was still focused on tracking down members of Night Dove, with new information coming in on a daily basis.

Xu Qing had the feeling it wouldn't be long before the division tightened the net and took action.

On one particular day when Xu Qing was supposed to be on night duty, he submitted an application to switch shifts with someone. All constables in Violent Crimes had to go on night patrol at some point, although those shifts were a lot more dangerous. His application was approved, and thus, as the sky grew dark, Xu Qing straightened his clothing, put some poison powder packets into his sleeves, strapped his daggers and iron skewer into place, and then walked out of his dharmaboat.

Darkness was already driving away the evening light, and a light rain ensured that the sky wasn't even visible.

Xu Qing slipped into the darkness, blending into the rain and the shadows. As the rain splattered onto him, and the cold wind hit him, he took in a deep breath.

The rain drove away any heat that remained in the city, but it couldn't get rid of that unique smell the city had. Xu Qing sped along, splashing through the puddles formed by the rain. As the splashes rippled out, they looked like flowers. In fact, it seemed like each step he took formed lotuses beneath his feet.

The night grew deeper, and the rain fell harder. Xu Qing sped by alleyways and closed-up shops. He saw people fighting in the streets, but avoided them.

Eventually, he reached Plankspring Way. Staying beneath the eaves of a building across the street, he watched the inn through the rain. It was only a few days ago that he had learned that the wanted criminal Master Greencloud was staying in this place.

According to the information in the bounty list, he'd come from a small sect in the Violet Lands called the Spirit Cloud Sect. The man was in the ninth level of Qi Condensation, and was vicious, merciless, and given to lust. After killing some female disciples in his sect, he fled. During the process, he had pillaged numerous villages, raping and killing to his heart's content.

Originally, Xu Qing hadn't been inclined to go arrest him. He had no beef with the man. In the brutal, chaotic world they lived in, everyone lived in their own way, and Xu Qing wasn't inclined to go around sticking his nose in the affairs of others.

But Master Greencloud had made a mistake.

Xu Qing had been expecting his informant to come back two days after their initial meeting to ask for the antidote to the poison he'd given her. Except, she never showed up. The next day, Xu Qing had gone looking for her. The city was a windy place, but that couldn't drive away the unique scent of the poison powder he'd used. Therefore, it wasn't hard for him to track down her residence. Inside, he saw signs of a struggle, and then traces of the poison powder going in a different direction. He'd followed it to this inn. After waiting outside for a time, he saw a person enter the inn, covered in that very same poison powder.

It was none other than Master Greencloud from the bounty list.

Therefore, Xu Qing had requested time off so that he could come here.

That woman was his informant, and therefore, this was now his matter.

#### Chapter 59: A Lonely Figure on a Rainy Night

As time passed, the rain fell harder. The howl of the wind sounded like weeping as it swept through the capital city of Seven Blood Eyes. In every street and alley, it met the embrace of the rain. And eventually it landed on Plankspring Way, and Xu Qing. It hit the surrounding roof tiles in a staccato patter, while the wind caused Xu Qing's robes to flap.

However, as he stood beneath the eaves of the building, he didn't seem to even notice the wind. He was a part of the shadows, like a skilled hunter, completely unmoving as he stared coldly across the street. He was patient, his breath rate low as he waited.

Two hours passed.

Lights in the houses throughout the city were slowly extinguished, until the city was pitch black and silent but for the sound of the storm. That was when a shadowy figure stuck its head out of the inn. It was a middle-aged cultivator in a long red robe. He was clearly well-built, with broad shoulders and an intimidating presence. He was none other than Master Greencloud. His spirit power fluctuations were extraordinary, like those of the ninth level of Qi Condensation. He was very strong.

However, that level of strength would only be impressive in a small sect or organization. This was Seven Blood Eyes territory. Disciples here had unique techniques that gave them an unusually strong foundation. Furthermore, the ruthless atmosphere of this sect made it such that an ordinary disciple of Seven Blood Eyes who was in the seventh level of Qi Condensation would be able to crush someone from a smaller sect who was in the ninth level.

Because of that, Master Greencloud acted with great caution while here. Remaining inside the inn, he looked out to make sure the coast was clear, then took a single step outside. After taking that single step, he blurred into a run. However, after going only five steps, his expression flickered as though he'd sensed some extreme threat in the area. He hadn't seen Xu Qing, but trusting his senses, he spun back toward the inn.

Xu Qing frowned. He'd originally planned to let the man run a bit farther before making a move. But seeing what was happening, Xu Qing's eyes glittered coldly and he started moving. He was like a bolt of lightning piercing through the rainwater.

Something like a thunderclap rang out as, from Xu Qing's perspective, the rain slowed to a crawl.

Master Greencloud's face fell as he saw Xu Qing and realized the terrifying speed he was capable of. Also, he could sense the aura of the Forbidden Sea on him, which created such an intense pressure that his own spirit power became sluggish. Instantly, his heart pounded with a profound sensation of deadly crisis.

Eyes turning crimson, he bit down on the tip of his tongue to unleash a secret magic. Tapping into his cultivation base, he shot forward with even greater speed toward the door of the inn.

As all of this happened, an old man inside the inn smoked a pipe and watched Xu Qing through the haze of smoke.

Master Greencloud's eyes were completely bloodshot as he reached a spot so close to the inn that he was only half a step from reaching the interior. Just as his right foot was about to span the gap, a dark blur bursting with the spirit power of the Forbidden Sea pierced through Master Greencloud's defenses and stabbed into his right calf.

It moved with such speed and power that Master Greencloud instinctively let loose a bloodcurdling scream.

His right foot was now incapable of stepping into the inn. What was more, he was knocked to the side, where he staggered backward as a second dark blur raced toward him. It was a dagger that flew with shocking speed to stab into Master Greencloud's left arm.

Thump!

Terrifying spirit power exploded into him, shattering his meridians and blood vessels as he was knocked down and pinned face-first to the ground. He was now within arm's reach of the inn's front door. Screaming, blue veins bulging out on his forehead, he struggled to pull the dagger out of his arm and crawl into the inn. But he was too slow.

Xu Qing arrived and stamped his foot down onto the man's back. The immense force in his foot caused cracking sounds to ring out as Master Greencloud's spine shattered. More pain coursed through him violently, causing his screams to turn even more bloodcurdling.

Inside the inn, the old man took his pipe out of his mouth. At the same time, a very dangerous aura erupted from him as he looked out coldly at Xu Qing.

“Are you going to break my house rules?”

His eyes had turned yellow, and writhing tentacles wriggled out from their depths. At the same time, his forehead split open, as if something shocking and ghastly existed inside of him.

A strange sound could be heard inside the inn as a massive anaconda appeared, its body as thick as three people put together. Lowering down from the rafters of the inn, it looked at Xu Qing, radiating an icy and bloodthirsty air.

In addition to that, a horde of centipedes burrowed out from the ground, all of them pitch black and obviously extremely venomous, and ready to attack at any moment. Finally, piercing auras emerged from the rooms in the inn, forming ropes that locked onto Xu Qing and encircled him. The ropes almost seemed alive, as if, at any moment, it could bind Xu Qing before he could react. They were permeated with a boundless aura of death, as if they had killed far too many people to even count.

Everything present was focused on Xu Qing.

He stood there at the door, his foot planted firmly on the back of the screaming Master Greencloud. Then he looked up at the old man.

Their eyes met.

Xu Qing didn't seem to notice the mutant beasts, or the powerful auras locked onto him, or the ropes. Instead, he just looked at the old man.

As he did, a figure appeared behind him, a hobgoblin like a pitch-black evil ghost, just waiting to attack. As the Sea and Mountain Incantation thrummed to life within him, every bit of his flesh and blood seemed to ready for explosive action. It was the same with the Seaforming Scripture. All of the rainwater around him stopped in midair, then began to slowly rotate around him in response to the call of his internal spirit sea.

It seemed he was ready to unleash lethal arts at any moment. His poisons were ready, and his shadow, though silent and undetectable, had already slid inside the inn and was just in front of the gruish old man's feet.

Especially noteworthy was how the rainwater that flowed above Xu Qing seemed to reveal the outline of an illusory saber. It was barely visible, but it contained impressive might. And though it seemed restrained at the moment, it was capable of sending that heavenly saber slashing down into the earth.

Xu Qing narrowed his eyes. He didn't seem shaken by the tentacles in the old man's eyes, or the way his forehead was about to open up. He could tell the innkeeper was strong, but at the same time, couldn't simply back down.

Expression calm, he said, “I haven't stepped inside, therefore, I haven't broken your house rules.”

The old man's eyes glittered with an unusual light as he looked at Xu Qing for a long moment, then smiled. “I suppose you're right.”

All of the auras that had been locked onto Xu Qing vanished. The anaconda slid back up into the roof beams and the centipedes rustled back into the ground.

The ropes also vanished. A moment later, there was nothing there. Only the old man remained, though the tentacles and the split in his forehead were gone, and he looked just like he had before. He was now an old man smoking a pipe.

“Want to sell the corpse?”

Xu Qing shook his head. Grabbing the trembling Master Greencloud by the hair, he looked down and said, “Where’s the woman you kidnapped two days ago?”

Master Greencloud’s hair was disheveled, he was covered in blood, and looked to be in very bad shape. But even as he trembled, it seemed he was going to make it clear he wouldn’t talk... by spitting in Xu Qing’s face.

Before he could, Xu Qing released his hair, allowing his head to drop back down to the ground. Then he patted his head gently.

A moment later, a scream rang out as Xu Qing grabbed Master Greencloud’s right arm and shattered the bones within. Then he did the same with his other arm. Master Greencloud shook from the pain, and screamed uncontrollably. Xu Qing’s expression remained placid. Looking Master Greencloud up and down, he then clenched his hand into a fist and punched the man’s dantian region, crushing his cultivation base. Now that the man wasn’t a threat, Xu Qing stepped over to retrieve his dagger and iron skewer. Finally, he grabbed Master Greencloud’s foot and dragged him away.

The streak of blood left behind was quickly diluted by the rain. But as Master Greencloud felt his wounded flesh scraping against the ground, he screamed even more shrilly.

And thus, Xu Qing walked away, leaving behind a quickly vanishing trail of blood behind him.

Seeing this, the old man’s pupils constricted, and he murmured, “This kid is certainly ruthless enough....”

The screaming Master Greencloud didn’t go unnoticed by people creeping through the darkness of night. When they saw him, they were deeply shaken, and of course, were struck even more profoundly by the expressionless young man dragging him along.

There were some disciples on patrol who, upon hearing the screaming, rushed to investigate. But when they recognized Master Greencloud, they looked in shock to identify who it was that was dragging him through the streets.

Master Greencloud might only be from a small sect, but he was still in the ninth level of Qi Condensation. Yet Xu Qing had not only captured him alive, but had inflicted serious torment in the process. Nobody would dare to mess with a person who could do that.

This fight was going to earn Xu Qing some prestige in the city.

Master Greencloud was strong-willed, and held out for almost two hours before giving in. Just before passing out, he gave Xu Qing the information he sought; the location of the informant that he’d kidnapped.

As it turned out, Master Greencloud had groomed that woman as a personal spy. What was more, he had no idea she’d sold him out to Xu Qing. However, he had a custom of only keeping his spies around for a limited time before getting rid of them.

Sadly for that woman, her turn had come.

After confirming the address, Xu Qing went there and looked around for traps. Once inside, he found himself in a secret subterranean dungeon that stank of evil. There he found his informant, barely breathing.

She didn't have the spirit coin Xu Qing had given her, and though she still bore the faint scent of his poison powder, this location was sealed to the outside, which was why he'd been unable to find her. She wasn't dead, but on her left and right were rotting corpses of both men and women. They had died horribly and in torment. What was more, there was a spell formation on the ground; apparently their deaths were part of some sort of ritual.

Seemingly sensing Xu Qing's presence, his informant opened her eyes. And when she saw the unconscious Master Greencloud, a wave of strength rose up within her. Lunging forward like a wild animal, she tore a chunk of flesh out of the man's shoulder. Waking up, he screamed, but she just kept biting and ripping out chunks of flesh.

Eventually, when Master Greencloud was a mass of mangled flesh, she stopped, panting. Then she looked up at Xu Qing, who stood there expressionless off to the side.

He looked tall and handsome in his gray robe, but there was also something cold and grim about him that she couldn't quite pin down. And the aura he exuded left her slightly breathless.

The madness on her face faded, and as she calmed down, she became docile and meek. She even started shaking. Then, she seemed to recall something, and got to her feet and started looking around.

Eventually, she found a jade slip. Getting onto her knees in front of Xu Qing in an almost worshipful posture, she offered him the jade slip with both hands.

He took it and examined the contents. It described a spell formation that, upon being activated, would bestow unfathomable power. In order to activate the formation, it needed to be fed the emotions of living beings. Things like happiness, anger, sorrow, and joy.

Xu Qing looked around at the miserable conditions within the dungeon, then turned to drag Master Greencloud's corpse away. Just before leaving, he said, "Going forward, I hope you work hard as my informant."

He also tossed her a spirit coin and an antidote pill.

She took them and watched Xu Qing leave. And deep in her soul, she agreed to his demands.

Dawn was just around the corner as Xu Qing took out a black umbrella and started dragging Master Greencloud's corpse through the streets. [1]

The dark clouds in the sky seemed to mirror his mood. Eventually, he dropped the corpse off at the Violent Crimes Division, to the shock of his colleagues. By that time, the sun was visible in the sky, and he could also see the face of the god above. Determination appeared in his eyes.

In this brutal, chaotic world, you have to get strong. That's the only way... to avoid becoming meat on a chopping block!

Chapter 60: Invitation Only

Thunder crashed!

The boom echoed out through heaven and earth as the clouds roiled. It sounded like there were invading gods launching attacks from above. Sometimes the thunder came as muffled booms. In other cases, it sounded like a string of explosions that dragged the citizens of the city out of their deepest dreams. Lightning pierced through the sky, ripping apart the darkness of night. It was almost like the sun, obscured by the dark clouds, had a fleeting chance to illuminate the human world below.

At dawn, the rain came down harder.

The wind grew in intensity, like a howling giant whose cries reached the most distant corners of the city. It almost vied with the thunder.

A figure walked along the street holding a black umbrella, barely visible thanks to the sheets of rain.

Rainwater smacked loudly into the umbrella, and seemingly in defiance of the obstacle, ran in rivulets down the sides. Only by struggling to fall to the ground below could the drops of water reunite with their companions on the street. That reunion caused ripples of water to spread out, cleaning the streets of the blood that had been shed during the night. However, it couldn't wipe away the brutality of the crimes that had been committed.

"Everyone has evil in their heart. It's just that the chaotic world we live in makes it easier for people to release it."

That was something Sergeant Thunder had said once during dinner. Xu Qing had to admit it made sense.

The rain grew fiercer. The thunder boomed. And as the storm raged, Xu Qing's thoughts grew calm. Without realizing where he was going, he ended up back at Harbor 79, where the water seemed to be boiling. Like usual, Xu Qing inspected the area, then took out his dharmaboat.

Once inside, he activated the defenses, and as the boat rocked up and down, he sat down cross-legged under the canopy.

The boat's defenses blocked the rain, and Xu Qing had long since grown accustomed to the motion of the boat on the water. In contrast to the rocking boat, and the rain and wind outside, Xu Qing felt completely calm as he started concocting some pills.

In recent days, Xu Qing had consistently purchased medicinal plants to concoct white boluses, black boluses, and poison powders. Similar to his laboratory back in the forbidden region, he had created a latticework of cabinets within which were packed with all sorts of vital yang and unhealthy yin medicinal plants.

I still need to find a good place to experiment with concocting poisons. After examining the cabinets, Xu Qing made a grasping gesture, causing several plants to fly toward him. As the storm raged, he continued his concocting work.

Time passed. It rained all day, heavier and heavier, until it was a true, raging storm.

Waves surged into the port, causing countless boats and ships to rock violently. Thankfully, the dharmaboats were generally safe once their defenses were activated. From a distance, they looked like a host of fallen leaves bobbing on the surface of the water.



Because of the storm, there were no visiting trading ships entering the port, nor did anyone leave. Most of the sect departments closed for business, with many of the disciples staying in their residences. The Seven Blood Eyes port largely shut down during the shocking storm.

However, the slaughter on the streets... continued.

As night fell on the second day, and the wind and rain seemed to get even worse, Xu Qing sat in his dharmaboat. His eyes suddenly opened as a sense of profound danger rose up within him. That danger wasn't because of the nasty weather, but rather, came from the shore just next to his dharmaboat.

Despite the rain and wind, he was able to detect the odor of poison powder. It came from some powders he had deposited in the area to act as an early warning system. If anyone got close to his dharmaboat, they would have to step through that powder. Then, if they stepped onto his boat without his permission, other poison gasses on his boat would mix with the powder to create something fatally poisonous. Furthermore, his psychic power, which had enabled him to take first place in the entry assessment, had advanced by leaps and bounds thanks to his cultivation of the Seaforming Scripture. His sensory abilities were far beyond the level of his peers.

Thanks to these two lines of defense, he knew that someone... had approached his dharmaboat and was now standing outside.

Eyes glittering coldly, he didn't wait inside the boat. Instead, he stepped out onto the open deck and looked through the defenses to the outside world.

The dense rain and wind was interspersed by the flash of lightning, which illuminated someone standing on the shore wearing a woven rush raincoat and carrying a jug of alcohol. [1]

He was looking at Xu Qing.

Xu Qing looked back.

A moment passed, and then the man lifted up his wide conical hat to reveal the smiling face of a middle-aged man.

"Junior Brother Xu, you don't need to be so overly cautious. It's me! I went out to buy some alcohol, and was passing by, so I figured I'd ask if you'd like to have a few drinks together. How could it not be a wonderful thing to drink together in wretched weather like this?"

This man was a fellow constable from the Violent Crimes Division, and was actually in the same unit as Xu Qing. He was the same person who had invited him out drinking previously.

Xu Qing said nothing. He just stared coldly at the man.

This caused the man to chuckle helplessly. "Well, never mind. In this damnable sect, it's hard to trust anybody. All I can say is that I don't have any ill intentions. I just want to make friends, Junior Brother Xu. Lots of members of our unit have had drinks with me, but if you're not interested, I'll take my leave."

Shaking his head, he turned to go.

But that was when Xu Qing said, "Alright. Step aboard."

The man stopped walking and looked back curiously at Xu Qing. He looked at his boat, and a deep glimmer of light passed through his eyes. Then he shook his head.

“Forget about it. I’m not interested in forcing the issue.”

Then he started walking a bit faster. However, he’d only taken five or six steps when a high-pitched whistling sound erupted out as a dagger shot toward him with spectacular speed.

He immediately jumped out of the way, his face falling as he looked at Xu Qing leaping out of his dharmaboat, his iron skewer in hand.

“Junior Brother Xu, what are you doing?”

His pupils constricted as he realized Xu Qing was rushing right toward him. Quickly performing an incantation gesture, he caused the raindrops in the area to turn into arrows that shot toward Xu Qing. However, before they got close, Xu Qing waved his hand, and the raindrop arrows shivered, then shifted directions and shot toward the middle-aged constable.

The constable was shocked by this, and as a sense of profound crisis rose up in him, he bit the tip of his tongue and spat out a mouthful of blood. It instantly expanded into a blood mist that blocked the incoming rainwater arrows. Meanwhile, he started moving backward as if to flee.

But he wasn’t quick enough. He had misjudged Xu Qing’s cultivation base. In the blink of an eye, Xu Qing shot toward him, his iron skewer shining like a lightning bolt as it closed in on the man’s head.

It radiated a coldness that could pierce bones.

The constable’s eyes turned bloodshot, and he howled as he unleashed the full extent of his cultivation base. A glittering defensive shield sprang up, while a vicious-looking mouth appeared on his chest, ripping through his garments and unleashing a piercing shriek in Xu Qing’s direction.

The man’s defenses shattered, but the sound waves erupting from the mouth on his chest managed to slow down the iron skewer. Taking advantage of that extra time, the man threw the jug of alcohol at Xu Qing, turned, and fled at top speed.

Halfway to Xu Qing, the jug shattered, revealing that it didn’t contain alcohol, but rather, a viscous poison liquid. As it splattered, it began to corrode everything it touched. Even the defenses of the dharmaboat began to melt.

Xu Qing’s eyes glittered coldly. He had suspected from the beginning that something fishy was going on, but couldn’t be sure. But given the weather, and the fact that this constable had shown up under such strange circumstances, Xu Qing decided to act first. Killing intent glittered in his eyes as he looked at the fleeing man. He didn’t give chase. He just reached out and made a vicious grasping gesture.

Inside of him, the Seaforming Scripture roared to life.

In response, the surrounding rain shivered, then flew through the air madly and converged in the area surrounding the middle-aged constable. There, they transformed into a huge hand that clasped around him. His eyes went wide with astonishment, and he struggled to free himself, but failed.

RUMBLE!

The man was suspended in midair, his face ashen as death, his eyes filling with terror. He was just opening his mouth to say something when Xu Qing arrived and slashed his throat open with his dagger.

The force of the blow sent the man's head flying off his shoulders.

As blood sprayed everywhere, the huge mouth in the constable's chest bulged out and tried to bite Xu Qing's hand.

Xu Qing's Sea and Mountain Incantation surged, and the spectral hobgoblin appeared, howling noiselessly. At the same time, the hand of rainwater smashed down toward the ground.

A boom rang out as the man's headless corpse was smashed into a paste, and the mouth was crushed. Afterward, Xu Qing stood in place, breathing hard.

The battle had ended quickly. But the truth was that this man's cultivation base was extraordinary, and his battle prowess shocking. In fact, it was about the same as Xu Qing's before he entered the city.

Not even Master Greencloud would have been a match for this man. After all, people who cultivated the Seaforming Scripture had battle prowess that surpassed small organizations by a wide margin.

Xu Qing looked around to see if his dead foe had any companions in the area. But because of the wind and rain, the port was pitch black, and was only illuminated by the occasional bolt of lightning.