

## Timescape 61

### Chapter 61: A Beautiful Young Woman with an Umbrella

Xu Qing inspected the area, then picked up the dead cultivator's blood-soaked sack. After sprinkling Corpse-Ravaging Powder on the corpse, it dissolved into a bloody sludge that mingled with the rainwater.

After that, he went back to his dharmaboat. Inside, he opened the sack, then frowned when he realized it only contained a few miscellaneous items. There were no spirit stones or cultivation resources. There most certainly wasn't a dharmaboat. The only thing of note was a blood-colored jade slip and the man's identity medallion. Now that he was dead, the medallion had gone dark, making it impossible to see his merit point balance, or to transfer the balance away.

The person had to be alive to do that.

He must have his belongings hidden somewhere, Xu Qing thought. Unfortunately, due to his custom of striking to kill, it wasn't going to be possible to get the man's merit points.

Maybe next time I should try to maim first and kill after?

After thinking about it, he still felt it would be too risky to do that. Next, he examined the blood-colored jade slip, which caused his eyes to glitter.

It's a hit list? It looked similar to the bounty list from the sect, except this list was obviously distributed by an individual. It listed a whole series of disciples from Seven Blood Eyes, and next to each name was a monetary value. Shockingly, one of the names on the list was Xu Qing. It also listed his scavenger nickname, as well as a bounty of 50 spirit stones.

Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior!

Xu Qing's eyes shone with cold light. The patriarch was the only person who knew his information and could put up a bounty of 50 spirit stones for him. The man had obviously tracked him down and knew he was now in Seven Blood Eyes.

It made sense. Although Antlerville was a city owned by Seven Blood Eyes, the Golden Vajra Warrior Sect obviously had connections there, so finding out where Xu Qing went wouldn't have been very hard.

The fact that he figured it out so quickly seems to indicate that he has connections in the sect. But it's against sect rules for outside Foundation Establishment cultivators to kill our disciples, so he had to put out a bounty on me!

After studying the blood-colored jade slip a bit more to figure out how to use it, he chose to just 'continue' with the mission to 'kill Xu Qing.'

I need to speed up my cultivation so that I can finally get rid of Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior!

Four days passed in which the rain did not let up.

On the third day, it became a massive tempest that kicked up huge waves in the entire port. However, the capital city's spell formation kept things in control. Despite the shocking winds, the port held strong.

On the fifth day, the unrelenting winds finally started to die down.

At dawn, Xu Qing looked up to see a leaden, overcast sky weighing down over the city. At that point, he organized his medicinal pills and stepped out of his dharmaboat. On the shore, he felt the wind and rain, and inhaled the scent of the ocean. Within it, there was still a faint hint of blood. During the four days in which the storm raged, the Violent Crimes Division didn't shut down. For the most part, their work involved searching for clues about Night Dove. However, thanks to the storm, they now had an additional task.

Hunting for murderers.

When storms hit Seven Blood Eyes, most sect departments ceased operation. And because most cultivators stayed indoors... the robberies and murders that happened in the shadows became even more widespread.

During those four days, the Violent Crimes Division received reports of more than eighty disciples being killed in the Port District. And seven victims were actually members of the Violent Crimes Division. As for how many people were killed in the other six districts, that information wasn't known publicly either, but it surely wasn't a small number.

It was hard to run an investigation in the rain. Besides, Seven Blood Eyes was used to this kind of thing happening, and didn't pay much attention to it. The Violent Crimes Division only ran cursory investigations, then dropped the cases.

There was even a member of Unit Six who died, yet no one batted an eyelid.

Xu Qing managed to ask the Captain about the old innkeeper from Plankspring Way. He was told that the man wasn't human. What was more, he had connections to the First Peak, which gave him the right to reside permanently in the city. Normally speaking, the innkeeper kept his head down. Though it was known he would occasionally give shelter to villains, in order to give face to the First Peak, the Violent Crimes Division usually looked the other way when he was involved, as long as nothing outrageous happened.

This was the first time Xu Qing came to realize that humans weren't the only intelligent species in the world. There were actually many others. However, to date he had only ever laid eyes on one nonhuman: the innkeeper. For now, he didn't think too much about it.

After attending morning roll call at the Violent Crimes Division, Xu Qing opened his umbrella and started walking down the street. He was planning to head to the medicine shop and try to sell the white boluses he'd concocted recently. He also wanted to buy more medicinal plants. However, because of the large amount of white boluses he was carrying, his guard was fully up.

Perhaps because the rain had started to die down, the streets were a lot more crowded than usual. Because of that, it took a bit longer to safely make his way to the shop he frequented. There weren't many people in the shop. However, there was one familiar face: Zhou Qingpeng, who had been in his group when he officially joined the sect.

Zhou Qingpeng glanced his way and hesitated briefly, but didn't seem to recognize him. It was little surprise, considering that on the day of the assessment, Xu Qing had been dressed like a filth-covered scavenger.

Xu Qing didn't say anything to Zhou Qingpeng. Off to the side, the old shopkeeper smiled. He was familiar with Xu Qing by now, and knew that despite not being a Second Peak disciple, he was knowledgeable regarding medicinal plants.

“You came just in time,” the old shopkeeper said. “I have something special to show you today.”

With that, he pulled out a mysterious-looking bag, which he opened to reveal the corpses of what appeared to be five bugs, blue in color and completely dried up. They were vicious-looking, with long mandibles, numerous spikes, and natural striations on their backs that resembled ghost faces. Each ghost face was different. One was crying, one was laughing, one was angry, and so-on. Especially noteworthy were their tails, which had mouths on the ends, filled with countless razor-sharp teeth. They were dead and withered, yet they looked just as astonishingly vicious as they had in life.

“Ghostlonging horseshoe crabs!” Xu Qing murmured in surprise. Hurrying closer, he looked closely at the ghostlonging horseshoe crabs, which he remembered Grandmaster Bai talking about in a lecture. They came from the deep seafloor, and were rarely seen on land. In the broadest sense, they were considered poisonous bugs. Their blood was blue, and highly poisonous. However, when combined in the right ratio with other ingredients, it became an incredibly wondrous medicine.

Off to the side, Zhou Qingpeng, who was browsing through the medicinal pills, glanced over.

“So, you recognize them,” the shopkeeper said with a smile. Yet again, his estimation of Xu Qing improved. Even many disciples from the Second Peak wouldn’t be able to identify a rare poison bug like this. And more than ever, the shopkeeper was curious how this handsome young man had learned so much about the dao of medicine.

“How much are you selling them for?” Xu Qing asked, inwardly excited.

“I wouldn’t dare sell them,” the shopkeeper replied, clearing his throat. Putting the ghostlonging horseshoe crabs away, he noted the longing with which Xu Qing gazed at the bag. Grinning, the old man continued, “My boss tasked me with finding those things, and it took a lot of sweat and blood. They were delivered earlier today, and the boss will be by later to get them. If I dared to sell them.... Well, anyway, I just wanted to show them to you. After all, they’re extremely rare.”

Xu Qing felt a bit disappointed as he looked away from the sack with the ghostlonging horseshoe crabs in them. However, he didn’t immediately take out his white boluses. He waited until Zhou Qingpeng had paid for his purchases and left. Only then did Xu Qing take out his sack and put it on the counter.

“I’m not here to buy plants,” Xu Qing said. “I want to sell pills.”

“Hmm?” The shopkeeper’s eyes turned serious as he opened the bag and looked at the content. Then his expression turned into one of surprise. “So many white boluses!”

He didn't immediately inspect them. Instead, he washed his hands and then put on a pair of gloves. After making sure Xu Qing noticed that the gloves were spotless, he started taking the pills out of the bag.

After placing them all out on the counter, the old man looked even more astounded than before. There were over 500 of them, each one smooth and round. And the medicinal aroma they exuded filled the entire shop. Many customers noticed the scent, causing Xu Qing to frown and instinctively let his hand slip down next to his sack, where his iron skewer lay.

After thoroughly inspecting the pills, the shopkeeper felt profoundly taken aback. Looking closely at the young man in front of him, he realized that he didn't just have a very outstanding understanding of plants and vegetation, he was also exceedingly skilled at concocting pills. These pills were of the highest quality. What was more, the old man could tell that each pill was the result of single-session concocting successes. They weren't a refined version of a previously deficient batch. Every single pill was pure white and naturally lustrous, indicating the presence of natural medicinal oils.

Skill like this was a rarity even among Second Peak disciples. After taking inventory, the shopkeeper muttered for a moment then said, "How about 10 spirit stones?"

Xu Qing was familiar with prices in the city, and knew that a white bolus usually sold for thirty spirit coins. And one spirit stone was equal to 1,000 spirit coins. After thinking about it, he agreed.

The shopkeeper quickly took out the spirit stones and gave them to Xu Qing, then started organizing the medicinal pills to put into storage.

Xu Qing looked around one more time at the customers in the shop, then turned to leave.

As he did, a young woman appeared at the entrance of the shop. She exuded a strong medicinal aroma. She looked to be only seventeen or eighteen, carried a white umbrella, and was wearing a pale orange daoist robe!

In Seven Blood Eyes, the Offmountain disciples from the various mountain peaks wore gray daoist robes. Only conclave disciples wore colored garments. For example, conclave disciples from the Seventh Peak wore pale violet. In other words, daoist robes like this indicated a very high level of rank.

Xu Qing noted the garment and stepped aside to let her pass, taking the opportunity to examine her a bit more closely.

Beneath the white umbrella, she had long raven-black hair that cascaded down her shoulders, and bangs that fell diagonally across her face, just above her eyes. She had long eyelashes, and eyes that glistened. On her, the pale orange daoist robe almost looked like a beautiful gown. With her slender waist and spectacular beauty, she almost didn't seem to belong in the human world. That was especially true when the wind blew, causing her hair to drift aside, revealing skin as fair and smooth as jade.

The young woman noticed Xu Qing, and instead of acting arrogantly as one might expect of a conclave disciple, she smiled and indicated that he could walk out before she entered.

Nodding, he looked away from her and departed. After he was gone, the young woman entered the shop, and her perfume filled the air.

The shopkeeper immediately ran over, his expression very deferential as he said, "Boss, you're here! You didn't need to come in person, ma'am. I could have sent them to you."

"You don't have to be so formal, Uncle Peng," she said with a smile. "I got tired of concocting pills on the mountain peak. I needed to get out and clear my head." [1]

"Of course, of course," the shopkeeper said, acting as deferential as before. "Do what you have to do."

Together they walked to the counter, whereupon the shopkeeper took out the sack with the ghostlonging horseshoe crabs, which he handed to her.

The young woman shook her head helplessly at the shopkeeper's insistence on being respectful. Taking the sack, she was about to leave when she noticed the white boluses on the counter, which the shopkeeper hadn't finished organizing.

"Hmm?" she murmured. Picking up one of the white boluses, she gently squeezed it, then held it closer to examine it. Her eyes flickered with surprise.

Seeing her do this, the shopkeeper carefully asked, "Boss... is something wrong with that pill?"

"There's no problem at all," she said. Putting the pill close to her nose, she inhaled. "The quality is spectacular. You don't see pills like this very often."

Hearing this, the shopkeeper looked even more astonished than before.

"Boss, you're a conclave disciple from the Second Peak. Your dao of alchemy makes you like someone chosen by heaven. Ma'am, are you really saying that these pills have a rare level of purity? Even high-quality white boluses are still just white boluses."

The young woman laughed. "You're right, Uncle Peng. White boluses are indeed nothing but white boluses. Although it's great to have a high quality version, you can get the same effect by just consuming a few more low quality pills. No, what interests me is that whoever concocted this pill is obviously very skilled."

She seemed very intrigued as she continued to study the pill. Then she had the shopkeeper take out the entire lot of pills for her to study one at a time. As she did, her expression of astonishment increased.

"Each one is the same. And there are so many! Based on the temperature of the pills, they were concocted in batches, with the most recent batch finished yesterday. This person's ability to craft medicinal liquids has reached a superb level. Every batch is exactly the same!"

Eventually, she had the shopkeeper pack all of the white boluses up so she could take them away to study further.

Before leaving, something occurred to her, and she stopped and said, "Uncle Peng, where did you get these white boluses from?"

“Some disciple from one of the other peaks. He left just now. You walked right past him.” As he spoke the words, he looked outside the shop, but Xu Qing was nowhere to be seen.

The young woman thought back to the handsome young man she passed when entering the shop. She nodded.

“Uncle Peng, if he comes back to sell more pills, please buy them all and don’t put them up for sale. I want them for myself.”

Hearing this, the shopkeeper was more surprised than ever. “Of course,” he said, his curiosity about Xu Qing continuing to grow.

## Chapter 62: A Ladies' Man

After leaving the medicine shop, Xu Qing headed back toward Harbor 79. In the Violent Crimes Division, attendance at morning roll call was mandatory. After that, you would leave to go on patrol. However, unless there was a big mission, there was usually a lot of free time. And thus, Xu Qing would often go back to his berth to work on his cultivation. As usual, he walked along the side of the road, where he could stick to the shadows.

Because of the big storm, there were many traders and sect disciples who hadn’t been able to bring their ships and boats back into the port, and were stuck out on the open sea. But the storm was over, and though it was still raining, there was a lot more traffic on the water.

As Xu Qing walked along, he thought about medicinal pills and cultivation.

The base cost of concocting a white bolus is about three spirit coins. If I keep this up, I should be able to make significant profit. He patted his sack with the spirit stones he had earned from selling his white boluses.

Cultivation is ridiculously expensive. If I want to keep progressing as quickly as I have so far, I need to use at least one spirit stone per day. I also have to worry about the fee for my berth. What’s more, it’s going to be very expensive to upgrade my dharmaboat.

He sighed inwardly, and wished he hadn’t killed that man so decisively the other night. He really lost a big opportunity by not taking his merit points.

Then he started considering tracking down some wanted criminals, or maybe even taking a trip into a forbidden region. Otherwise, he would never save up the funds needed to upgrade his dharmaboat.

Everything in this capital city was expensive, and most expensive of all were the cultivation resources. Most of the common citizens could afford the cost of living, but didn’t qualify to buy cultivation resources. And even if they did, they definitely wouldn’t throw their money away blithely.

As for Seven Blood Eyes disciples, the daily living fee of thirty spirit coins wasn’t much to worry about. What really fueled all the infighting and slaughter were cultivation resources. Anyone who wanted to progress had to either accept missions and leave the sect, or stay within it and resort to murder and theft. There were no other options.

The only ones who had it slightly better off were the Onpeak conclave disciples, though they didn't get a share of the sect's profits.

Over the past few days, Xu Qing had learned a lot more about Seven Blood Eyes, and had a much better understanding of the conclave disciples. They were people who had acquired an identity medallion of a certain color associated with a given mountain peak.

For instance, the Seventh Peak had violet identity medallions.

Anyone with an identity medallion like that could live Onpeak. They would also get pale-colored garments of the same color. Xu Qing had seen disciples on the street like that, for instance the young man with the pale violet daoist robe, and the young woman with the pale orange daoist robe.  
[1]

They were usually children of senior members of the various mountain peaks, and when they went shopping in the city, they usually got a fifty-percent discount compared to Offpeak disciples. Perhaps because of that, the sect forbade them from reselling items for profit, and any who violated that rule would be expelled.

There was no fairness to the differences between conclave disciples and Offpeak disciples. However, that was just how destiny worked. People on the mountain peaks who had dark-colored daoist robes were Foundation Establishment cultivators or higher. They surpassed the conclave disciples, and had the right to share in the sect's profits.

I need to think of a way to make money....

As he pondered these matters, the noise of a commotion interrupted his thoughts. Looking up, he saw a large group of disciples gathered on the shore nearby, apparently waiting for something. Many Seventh Peak disciples were coming out of their dharmaboats to see what was happening. And as Xu Qing stood there, he heard the sounds of scrambling from behind him as over a hundred Seventh Peak disciples rushed over to join the crowd.

Upon finding a place to stand, they looked out at the main entrance of the port with expressions of excitement and anticipation.

Curious about what was happening, he looked in the same direction, and before long, caught sight of an enormous ship.

At the very least, it was about 500 meters long, maybe even close to 550. It was the color of gold, and looked very fancy as it glittered in the light of the setting sun. The prow of the ship was the huge statue of a spider with a human face. The human face had only one eye, which was made of a scintillating gemstone. From a distance, the ship looked like some gigantic beast slowly piercing through the water. Looming over the deck was a beautiful superstructure crafted from exquisite materials. And amongst the various parts of the superstructure were a host of guards. The ship made a loud thrumming noise as it got closer and closer to the bay.

"It's Third Highness."

"Third Highness is back!"

There were quite a few exclamations within the crowd.

Third Highness? Xu Qing watched curiously as the incomparably beautiful ship sailed into the bay.

As it neared, it brought with it the pungent aroma of the open sea. It also exuded an intense pressure that left the mind shaken.

Upon sensing that pressure, Xu Qing's pupils constricted. It filled him with a sense of profound crisis, similar to what he had sensed from the various terrifying entities he'd encountered in the jungle depths of the forbidden region.

Even more astonishing, as the ship neared, Xu Qing realized that in addition to the extravagant superstructure, and all the guards stationed there, the ship was also covered with countless glittering spikes. Any given spike was about three meters long, and covered with complex magical symbols that exuded a shockingly destructive power.

This was the most terrifying ship Xu Qing had seen to date.

In fact, there was no way he could fight against this ship. Just looking at it gave him a new understanding of the Seventh Peak's dharmaboats. As he stood there, shaken, he suddenly realized that the crowd was cheering respectfully, which caused him to look up at the main deck of the ship, where a group of people had emerged from one of the cabins.

In the lead was a tall, thin young man clad in a violet daoist robe!

Unlike the pale violet robe Xu Qing had spotted previously, this robe... was dark violet!! That dark color indicated that this young man had a very high status, and it caused Xu Qing's expression to harden. He knew... that this young man's cultivation base was at the Foundation Establishment level. And from the respectful words being uttered by the crowd, this young man... was not an ordinary Foundation Establishment disciple. That said, his face was a waxen yellow color, and he had dark circles under his eyes. He was extremely thin, and almost looked hung over. What was more, there was a lascivious gleam in his eyes.

As he walked to the front of the ship, Xu Qing noticed he wore a white cap embroidered with the character 禁, which meant 'forbidden.' Strangely, that embroidered character pulsed with an indescribable pressure.

The dark violet daoist robe he wore, a robe that could drive crowds of disciples into envious madness, was so voluminous that it flapped loudly in the wind, and made it seem like the young man might get knocked over at any moment. He seemed to realize how weak he was, so as he walked, he enjoyed the adoration of the crowd while simultaneously relying on the supportive arms of two cloaked young women on either side of him.

One of the young women held a crystal bottle with some sort of nutritious liquid inside that she put to his lips occasionally. The two young women had outstandingly beautiful facial features. Their eyes were green, and exuded an enticing charm that could worm its way into the hearts and minds of any human. Their long hair swayed in the sea breeze, which lifted their cloaks, revealing dramatic hourglass figures. Their curvaceous forms, combined with their pure beauty, would stir primordial urges in any man.

They were dressed outrageously, in sexy, revealing clothing that showed off pale white skin beneath. The garments were so sheer it seemed like the wind might blow them away. Because of their physical appearance, it was easy to overlook the fact that both young women had gills on the sides of their faces, just beneath their ears. As they walked along, they laughed bashfully as they allowed the young man to wrap his arms around them.



“Greetings, Third Highness!” the crowd roared respectfully.

As Xu Qing observed the young man, he got the distinct impression that, without the help of the two young women, he would fall over. It was strange to the point of seeming almost unbelievable.

When he looked closely at the two beautiful young women, his eyes narrowed as he experienced a clear sensation of danger. Quickly looking away from them, he noticed that, in addition to the guards on the deck of the ship, there was also a group of black-robed figures. Just like the young women, they had green eyes and gills on the sides of their faces. What was more, they all had extraordinary cultivation base fluctuations.

There was another young man on the ship who looked to be about the same age as Xu Qing. He was dressed in extravagant clothing, had menacing green eyes, and also had gills.

This was Xu Qing’s second time seeing people that looked mostly human, but were actually different. However, the other disciples around him didn’t seem surprised at all; apparently, nonhuman people weren’t actually very rare.

Xu Qing looked away and was about to leave when Third Highness suddenly said, “Even though we ran into a storm, it was still a profitable trip. And how could we not share some of our profits with all the Junior Brothers and Sisters who came here to receive us?”

As the words left his mouth, several servants on the ship waved their hands, causing a number of palm-sized scales to fly out to the people in the crowd.

Being present, Xu Qing grabbed one of them. It felt slippery and cold, and when he tried to squeeze it, it wouldn’t break. It was obvious the scale wasn’t an ordinary item. Now it made sense why so many people had gathered on the shore here.

If something like this happened every day, you wouldn’t need to work hard to make money.

Putting the scale away, he joined the rest of the crowd in offering thanks to the Third Highness.

As the calls of thanks rang out, the large ship entered its berth, Third Highness waved at the crowd of fellow disciples on the shore. And then, seemingly unconcerned with so many people watching, he slapped both young women on their rear end. The young women cried out coquettishly, and the emaciated Third Highness grinned. The gathered disciples averted their gazes; not a single one dared to stare at the two nonhuman girls while Third Highness was around.

Xu Qing didn’t think they were that attractive, but he did notice that the nonhuman young man behind them seemed to have a look of disdain on his face.

Meanwhile, Third Highness’s amorous eyes seemed completely focused on the girls, as if he didn’t care at all how the young man behind him was reacting.

“Wait for me here, my immortal beauties,” Third Highness said. “Don’t go off the ship unless absolutely necessary, otherwise Master will scold me.... Actually, I’m not even sure if Master is back yet. I’ll go take a look, and if he’s not back, then the three of us can have some fun later tonight.”

The two young women seemed pleased, and smiled at him flirtatiously. After some more back-and-forth with them, Third Highness cleared his throat, took the crystal bottle, and turned to the servants and guards.

“Unload all the cargo. Be careful and don’t open anything!”

In response to his words, the servants and guards started bringing out a host of large chests, all of which were sealed tightly, making it impossible to even guess what was inside.

“Make sure to keep a record of everything, including images. I prepared all this for Eldest Brother, who’s currently in seclusion. He’s very petty, so I’d better not hear about any of the cargo getting damaged.”

Chuckling, Third Highness clasped hands and bowed to the gathered disciples, then walked off the ship and headed toward the Seventh Peak.

The disciples backed up to make room for him, while simultaneously looking around with vigilance. At the same time, tensions seemed to build.

Everyone present had received one of those scales, and everyone had come prepared to keep it. But that didn’t stop malicious, greedy looks from appearing in the eyes of some of the disciples present. Just because you acquired a boon didn’t mean you could keep it.

People began backing away and then left. Some of the disciples were being eyed by others, but not Xu Qing. Because of how he’d killed Master Greencloud, he’d earned a bit of a reputation, and the disciples present were clearly hesitant to cause problems for him.

After looking around coldly, Xu Qing left, keeping his guard up all the way until he was back at his berth. He did his usual inspection to make sure the area was safe, then brought out his dharmaboat.

Meanwhile, he thought back to the Third Highness’ enormous ship.

The difference between the two watercraft was immense. After some thought, Xu Qing decided not to get on his dharmaboat and start working on his cultivation. Instead, he put the dharmaboat away and headed toward the shops run by disciples from the Sixth Peak.

It was time to upgrade his dharmaboat.

Upon finding an appropriate shop, he took out the scale he had just received, plus the fish bone Zhang San had given him. Then he handed over the payment, and waited for the result. He wouldn’t have to wait for long. According to the Sixth Peak disciple who’d taken his order, it would only require the time it takes an incense stick to burn.

While he waited, Xu Qing looked at the other items for sale in the shop. Most of them were materials from living creatures. And all of them were expensive. One thing that caught Xu Qing’s eye was a lizard skin. After asking the clerk, he found that it cost 150 spirit stones.

“So expensive!” he murmured. He’d been expecting it to cost a lot, as he knew that cultivation resources were expensive. But the list price was simply astonishing.

“It’s the skin of a sealizard in the fifth level of Qi Condensation,” the clerk explained. “And it’s completely intact, which is rare. It’s a great way to toughen up your boat.”

Xu Qing looked away from the lizard skin and scanned through some of the other items until he noticed a large heart, the size of a human head. Stored in a crystal bottle, it twitched and wriggled as though it still had some life left in it.

“That’s the heart of a dragonbeard. It’s not quite at the level required for a Foundation Establishment dharmaskiff, but it would make a great power source for a dharmaboat.”

Xu Qing asked how much it cost, and found that it was even more ridiculously expensive than the sealizard skin. In the end, materials taken from living creatures were all incredibly expensive.

After browsing through the shop, Xu Qing determined that his savings were absolutely insufficient. He sighed.

Around that time, the upgrade to his dharmaboat was finished. When the disciple handed him back his bottle, Xu Qing saw that the dharmaboat inside looked different. It was a bit larger, and now had totem designs on it that resembled the scale he’d acquired. Sending some spirit power into the bottle, he found that it wasn’t just the physical appearance that had changed. The dharmaboat was sturdier, having been upgraded by an entire level. Nodding in satisfaction, he offered thanks then headed back to the Port District to test out the boat on the water.

Back at his berth, he checked the area for safety, then took out the dharmaboat. Light glittered as the boat appeared. It was now densely covered with scale totems. It was over 20 meters long, perhaps close to 25, and was about three meters wide.

This version of his dharmaboat was much fiercer, and looked even more like a crocodile. That was especially true considering that the fish bone had been put into the crocodile figurehead, and caused gusts of wind to swirl around it. One could only imagine the speeds the boat would be capable of when that power was unleashed.

Xu Qing’s eyes glittered brightly.

If I had enough spirit stones and materials, I wonder what my dharmaboat would look like. I need to make money!

Chapter 63: Hardworking Xu Qing

Cultivation required resources. That was truer than ever after the arrival of the broken god’s face, which caused all living things to be tainted by mutagen. That made it even harder to acquire resources, and made it such that bloodshed was almost always involved.

A thoughtful expression could be seen in Xu Qing’s eyes. He needed spirit stones and physical ingredients. Lots of them. So many that not even concocting white boluses would be enough.

My monthly salary in the Violent Crimes Division is three spirit stones. The white boluses... can bring in 20 spirit stones a month if I work hard. That means I can currently rely on 23 spirit stones per month.

He frowned.

If he wanted rapid cultivation progress, he needed one spirit stone per day. And if he wanted to buy materials from the Sixth Peak disciples’ shop, then he had to deal with prices that were dozens of spirit stones at the minimum.

My berth costs 30 spirit stones a month. Therefore, I need an income of at least 60 spirit stones a month. But that would only be enough to keep things going as they are. If I want to upgrade my dharmaboat, I need even more.

With such thoughts on his mind, he opened his bag of holding and looked inside. He currently had 20 spirit stones left, which was the bounty he'd earned from the Violent Crimes Division after killing Master Greencloud.

There are three main ways I can get more spirit stones. The first would be to go exploring the forbidden regions. The second would be bounty hunting. And the last would be to go to sea and harvest materials myself.

The first method was the wheelhouse of the First Peak. That meant that if you wanted to go into the nearby forbidden regions, you had to get a First Peak guide. Such guides obviously charged for their services.

The third method, going out on the open sea to hunt for materials, was probably the most suitable. Unfortunately, it didn't just require a high cultivation base, it also required a suitable dharmaboat. Without a sufficiently strong dharmaboat, one could go out to sea and never come back.

Xu Qing felt his cultivation base was high enough, but his dharmaboat level was just too low. And to upgrade it, he needed more spirit stones and materials. It was something of a catch-22.

The fastest method is going to be bounty hunting. Either that or start killing fellow disciples. Then, once I get both my dharmaboat and cultivation base high enough, I can go out onto the open sea. At that point, I'll get so much momentum going I'll be unstoppable!

Xu Qing's eyes shone. As far as he was concerned, it would be much preferable to go after bounties than to kill fellow disciples who hadn't done anything to provoke him. Therefore, after making a decision, he sat down cross-legged in his second-class dharmaboat, put a spirit stone into the spirit convergence formation, and started his cultivation.

Before much time had passed in his cultivation routine, he opened his eyes and took out his identity medallion. A new voice message had just come in.

"Junior Brother Xu Qing, it's me, Zhou Qingpeng. Was that you I saw at the medicine shop? You've changed a lot! It took me a while to figure out who you were. I could tell you were interested in those ghostlonging horseshoe crabs. My clan runs a medicinal ingredient business, so if you need something like that, I can make some arrangements to get them for you. It'll be expensive though."

After listening to the message, Xu Qing thought about it for a moment. It seemed Zhou Qingpeng wanted to earn some spirit stones. At the same time, Xu Qing really was interested in getting some ghostlonging horseshoe crabs to use in his poison research. After some thought, he agreed to the proposal.

Time passed. Six days went by in a flash.

During that time, Xu Qing checked in at the Violent Crimes Division every morning, making sure to get an updated bounty list when he did. He also had his informant start digging around for information. However... there were a lot of people in the Violent Crimes Division who wanted to

make money by hunting bounties. Because of that, everyone kept their information to themselves. What little information Xu Qing did end up getting usually turned out to be outdated and useless. After a while, Xu Qing realized he needed to change his strategy.

Meanwhile, a new disciple joined the Violent Crimes Division.

This person had an impressive background, and was not in the same bureau as Xu Qing. Nor was this person an ordinary member of a unit. Instead, he was immediately appointed as the captain of Earth Bureau Unit Three. Apparently, he had some tricks up his sleeve, as it only took him two days to whip the more than twenty members of the unit into complete subservience. Clearly this person was formidable in some way.

Each of the four bureaus in the Violent Crimes Division had different directors, and though they would work together on big cases, most of the time they went their own ways. As a result, there usually wasn't friction between the different bureaus. Normally speaking, the fact that Earth Bureau Unit Three got a new captain usually wouldn't cause any waves. However, the appointment of this new captain did indeed cause some waves.

And that was because... this new captain wasn't human.

Xu Qing caught sight of him from a distance, and immediately recognized him. He was the very same young man who had been standing behind Third Highness the other day. Xu Qing had noted the look of disdain in his eyes when seeing the Third Highness dealing with the two nonhuman young women.

It didn't take long for the disciples in the Violent Crimes Division to dig up information about his background. Xu Qing learned from other members of Unit Six that this young man was one of the Merfolk.

Merfolk weren't human, but they were allies of Seven Blood Eyes and traded with the sect. According to the rumors, this newly appointed captain had a high status even among the Merfolk. After coming to the capital city with Third Highness, he had officially joined Seven Blood Eyes, and then been assigned to the Violent Crimes Division.

Xu Qing had come up with his own theories about who the Third Highness was, and after asking some fellow members of Unit Six, he confirmed that he was right. The other disciples were more than happy to share all of the details.

The peaklord of the Seventh Peak had three successor apprentices, two men and one woman. Each of those three individuals was like a crown prince or senior princess in a royal court. A single word from them would cause countless disciples from the Seventh Peak to bow their heads in deference. Actually, most anyone in the entire Seven Blood Eyes would react similarly. They were essentially in the succession line of Seven Blood Eyes in general.

The peaklord of Seventh Peak was extremely talented, and was famous throughout the continent of South Phoenix. He had shocking battle prowess, and was extremely influential. Anyone listed as his successor would be high in the succession list of Seven Blood Eyes.

Among those three, the highest ranking one was the grand highness, who was said to be in seclusion trying to break through a cultivation bottleneck. He hadn't been seen in public for years. However, all the talk Xu Qing heard was about how mysterious and deadly he was. When he was in Foundation Establishment he had killed numerous enemies in the same level as himself, and had

slaughtered entire tribes of non-humans in battle. When it came to the ranking of all successor apprentices in Seven Blood Eyes, the grand highness was listed as second.

As the disciples discussed this matter, the Captain sat off to the side eating an apple. When he finally cut in, he explained everything in a single sentence. "People like that aren't exactly thirsting for blood at all times, but if you piss them off, you'll get killed."

Xu Qing felt fully convinced that the Captain was right.

When Second Highness was mentioned, the other members of the unit all looked reverential. In contrast to the mysterious grand highness who few people had ever seen, the second highness went out in public all the time. In fact, she often went for strolls in the Port District. She had a strong personality, was very decisive, and had a reputation for being aggressive. In fact, her temper was such that she even caused trouble for the elders of the Seventh Peak.

"She's sick in the head, I tell you," the Captain muttered.

The most popular of the peaklord's apprentices was Third Highness. He was inclined to give in to passion, but had no other weaknesses. He often smiled, didn't act arrogant toward other disciples, and was very generous. When other disciples asked him for help, he did his best to resolve their issues. What was more, he had a good relationship with the nonhumans out on the sea. In fact, many disciples called him the Seventh Peak's top foreign ambassador. And most disciples admired his romantic flair.

The Captain, munching on his apple, seemed inclined to offer his own assessment. But in the end, he couldn't think of anything to add, so he just kept eating the apple, a smile on his face.

Xu Qing listened as the discussion continued between the other members of the unit, but didn't pay very close attention. Whether it was the young Merfolk captain, or the three successor apprentices from the Seventh Peak, they didn't have much to do with him. What was most important to him at the moment was the bounty list, and his new method of tracking down the targets on the list.

And that was: to trust chance rather than show the initiative.

On this particular day, Xu Qing had the night shift. It was dark and windy, with only a hint of moonlight. The wind carried the humidity of the sea into every corner of the city, as if to bear witness to whatever sinister acts took place during the night.

The gambling halls and brothels had opened their doors, and people streamed in and out of them. Occasionally, it was possible to see people clad in black from head to toe, vaulting over walls and speeding across the rooftops. From time to time, spirit power fluctuations would erupt from an alleyway, as if demons, devils, and ghosts had come to the human world along with the light of the moon.

However, there was one person who walked along and caused everything to go still and quiet in his presence. Only after he passed by did things turn lively again.

Of course, it was Xu Qing.

Ever since he had dragged Master Greencloud's corpse halfway across the city, his night-time patrols were always like this. It was virtually impossible to keep secrets in the capital city. Master Greencloud had been in the ninth level of Qi Condensation, and even though he was from a small sect, it was no small accomplishment to not only capture him, but kill him in such a vicious way.

Not only that, but Xu Qing had stood toe to toe with the innkeeper on Plankspring Way. All of that went to show that this new addition to the Violent Crimes Division was someone that shouldn't be trifled with.

Actually, that was one reason why Xu Qing hadn't run into any of the criminals on the bounty list. He wasn't worried. He had a new method in mind, and therefore, he stalked through the shadows of the city until he was at Plankspring Way. Blending into the darkness beneath the eaves of a building across the street, he started watching the inn.

Having found no clues, and no information about anyone on the bounty list, he'd decided to simply wait for opportunities to come to him.

Xu Qing was a patient person, and didn't mind waiting. He'd considered that waiting outside the inn might offend the old innkeeper. However, spirit stones were more important right now. Besides, Xu Qing was certain that if it came to a fight, his battle prowess was sufficient enough that he could hold his own.

Time passed. Four hours later... just before dawn, a figure appeared off in the distance, speeding silently toward the inn.

He was an emaciated middle-aged man with small eyes and a long beard. Given his pointed chin, his beard made him look strange, almost like a rat. His small eyes flickered with vigilance as he approached. The closer he got to the inn, the more visibly he relaxed.

Seven Blood Eyes' capital city is such a wonderful place. That's especially true of these inns that stay open at night. According to their rules, they're safe havens, no matter what. It's so wonderful. Although, they're too freaking expensive. It costs 80 for a day. 160 for two days. It doubles every day.... If I stay a few more days, I'll have to clear out a small town to get enough money to pay. The only downside is that those small townfolk scream loudly and don't have much savings to take.

By this point, the emaciated man was only about six meters from the inn's entrance, and was about to leap the final distance.

That was when a cold wind hit him from behind, accompanied by an icy voice.

"Daoist Rat?"

The emaciated man's pupils constricted, and all the hair on his body stood on end. Without the slightest hesitation, he waved his right hand behind him, sending a powder flying into the air. Then he shot forward with all the speed he could muster.

Unfortunately for him, he was too slow. In almost the exact same moment that he threw his hand out behind him, a dagger slashed through his throat! Blood sprayed everywhere as the man fell to the ground, twitching and gasping in shock.

Behind him was Xu Qing, his face completely expressionless. That poison powder was completely ineffective when used against him. Ignoring the dying Daoist Rat, Xu Qing looked up at the tavern to see the old innkeeper standing there looking very dour.

"This is Daoist Rat, originally from the Church of Departure," Xu Qing said, reciting the details from the bounty list. "He's skilled in the use of drugs that cause confusion and changes in temperament. He slaughters mortal citizens for pleasure, and had a

15 spirit stone bounty put on his head by the Violet Lands half a year ago. He's wanted throughout all of South Phoenix."

"You don't need to recite the description," the old man said grimly. "I know there's a bounty out for him."

Without another word, Xu Qing cut off Daoist Rat's head, put it in a bag, and then kicked the headless corpse. A thump rang out as the body landed in front of the tavern's open door.

"He didn't step into the tavern," Xu Qing said, "so I haven't broken any of your rules. Don't worry, you don't need to pay for the corpse. Consider it a gift from me."

With that, Xu Qing backed up a few steps, and when he was sure he was a safe distance away, carried Daoist Rat's head off.

I still need to make 45 spirit stones this month....

Chapter 64: Coo. Coooo.

Killing intent flickered in the old innkeeper's eyes as he watched Xu Qing leaving. However, he didn't make a single move, and eventually, Xu Qing disappeared around a distant street corner. Only then did the killing intent gradually dissipate. At that point, the head of a huge anaconda dropped down from the rafters, making cooing sounds that made it seem like it was speaking.

"Why didn't I kill him?" The old man rolled his eyes. "The young fellow fights dirty. Plus he seems dangerous. I have the feeling that unless I used a trump card—"

"Coo. Coooo."

"You're the piece of trash!" the old man snapped. "Your whole family is trash! Eat, eat, eat. All you freaking do is eat! Fine. Go ahead and eat."

The anaconda struck, its jaws clamping onto the corpse of Daoist Rat. Swallowing the body, the snake slowly retreated into the rafters.

Meanwhile, Xu Qing headed through the night back to the Violent Crimes Division. After turning in Daoist Rat's head, he pocketed the 15 spirit stone bounty, then headed through the dawn light toward a little shop run by some common citizens. There, he had a bowl of soymilk and some flatbread. At the urging of the shopkeeper, he decided to splurge a bit, and bought three eggs. After finishing the eggs, he went back to his dharmaboat. [1]

He had earned more than just the 15 spirit stone bounty. He also had Daoist Rat's sack, which contained one spirit stone and some miscellaneous items. Based on what he knew of prices in the Port District, Xu Qing was confident he could sell those items for three spirit stones.

"This is definitely a good way to make money." With that, he started working on his cultivation.

The day passed, and soon it was nighttime. That was when Xu Qing opened his eyes. He had another night shift, and yet, as the moon climbed, he headed back in the direction of Plankspring Way. Since waiting for opportunities seemed to be profitable, he was going to make the same gamble as the night before.



After arriving, he walked around a bit, then stationed himself in the same spot as before, keeping his eyes on the inn from the shadows. This time, it didn't take long for someone to appear. However, it wasn't a wanted criminal, but rather, the old innkeeper. He walked right out of the inn and up to Xu Qing, his expression grim.

"Did you really think I wouldn't do something if you came back to cause trouble, young fellow?"

"No," Xu Qing said calmly.

"You..." the old man growled. For a moment, he seemed to be at a loss for words, until he gritted his teeth and said, "What exactly are you planning to do? Come lurk around here day after day?"

Xu Qing said nothing for a few breaths' worth of time. Then he looked at the man and said, "I need to make money."

"Yeah? So do I!" Tentacles began to burrow out from within the old man's eyes, and his forehead split. At the same time, a cold and sinister aura spread out from him. "If you keep this up, there won't be a single customer who dares come to my inn. You've already caused business to drop." Glaring at Xu Qing, the old man continued, "Therefore. You will leave this place. Now!"

Xu Qing thought about it and realized what the old man said made sense. If he kept waiting for criminals in this spot, then soon people wouldn't dare to come around. Nodding, he walked a bit further down the street and found a new hiding place.

The old man had assumed Xu Qing was leaving the area. Instead, he simply switched hiding spots. This caused veins to bulge on his skin, and he nearly laughed out loud with rage. Instead, he said nothing as his forehead continued to split, until his entire head separated into two parts. Where his head had once been was now a mass of red, like blood, and shockingly, it was full of fleshy, bloody tentacles.

The ghastly tentacles writhed as the man then stalked toward Xu Qing.

As terrifying fluctuations rolled out in all directions, the anaconda stuck its head out, while at the same time, numerous ropes appeared and slowly amassed around Xu Qing.

Xu Qing's eyes narrowed as he looked at the old man walking toward him.

"This is a public street," Xu Qing said, "not your inn. I abide by your house rules and won't cause problems for anyone inside. But it would be completely unreasonable to expect me to leave them alone after they left. Don't tell me that your room fee includes the guarantee of safety in public?"

Xu Qing looked at the old man. From what he could sense, the man seemed to be reasonable, so he expected a reasonable answer.

The old man stopped walking. "It does include a guarantee of safety. You have a problem with that?"

Xu Qing thought about it for a moment, then took out a sum of what appeared to be 200 spirit coins, and handed them over.

The old man stared in shock.

“Since you guarantee safety,” Xu Qing said, sounding very serious, “I’d like to book two nights in one of your rooms. Now you’re in charge of keeping me safe.”

The old man stared at the spirit coins, then looked back up at Xu Qing. After a long moment passed, he let loose a frustrated sigh. The two halves of his head stitched back together, and he looked at Xu Qing with a helpless expression.

Some distance away in the inn, the anaconda suddenly said, “Coo. Coooo....”

“Shut up!” the old man snapped, looking angrily at the snake. “I know what he said makes sense!”

As it turned out, the old man was a reasonable person. Everything Xu Qing said made sense, and the old man... couldn’t find a way to argue with him. Xu Qing hadn’t broken any of his house rules, and had also paid a fee of spirit coins. If the old man stuck to what he’d said previously, then he did have to guarantee his safety....

Thus, the old man could only stand there feeling increasingly helpless.

He looked at Xu Qing.

Xu Qing looked back.

After glaring at each other for a short time, the old man sighed. “How about I give you information about two people on the bounty list? It should be enough for you to track them down. In exchange, you stay away from here.”

The old man took out a jade slip, imprinted it with some information, and then handed it to Xu Qing. Keeping the spirit coins, he turned and walked back to his inn without so much as glancing over his shoulder.

As he left, the ropes in the area vanished. As for the anaconda, it nodded at Xu Qing as if in greeting, then disappeared.

Looking at the jade slip, Xu Qing saw two addresses, as well as the names of two criminals. After committing the information to memory, Xu Qing took the time to remove some undetectable powder from the walls next to him, and scattered some poison-neutralizing powder on the ground.

After, he walked back to his previous hiding spot. Waving his right hand, he neutralized the poison powder he’d left on the ground and in the air. Finally, when all traces of his presence had been removed, he plucked seven or eight weeds from the ground. Those weeds wouldn’t survive anyway, thanks to having been coated with five different types of poison.

Earlier, he had made sure that both of his hiding spots had all sorts of poison powders set up around them.

The old man was infected with thirty-seven types of poison, but didn’t present any symptoms at all....

Xu Qing looked at the inn through narrowed eyes before finally turning to leave.

After he was gone, the old innkeeper's calm expression disappeared. Looking anxious, he quickly started rummaging through his collection of medicinal pills. After consuming about ten different types of poison-negating pills, he quickly performed an incantation gesture, causing the sack Xu Qing had given him to burst into flames.

The spirit coins inside vanished.

"This young fellow is so ruthless! He covered the whole street in poison! And he even poisoned the spirit coins he gave me!" The truth was that there were two reasons he had agreed to compromise with Xu Qing. The first was that Xu Qing really had made sense. The second was that... the old man had been just about to lose control of the poison that had seeped throughout his body. Actually, the latter was the more important of the two reasons.

"He's so young, yet this is how he acts.... Once he grows up, he's definitely going to be a fiendish killer among humans."

From the rafters, the anaconda made some cooing sounds.

"You like him?" the old man asked. "Yeah, he likes you too. Didn't you notice? The first time he saw you, he was looking at you. Specifically, the area where your gallbladder is." The old man chuckled coldly.

The cooing sounds stopped.

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As the night grew deeper, Xu Qing sped through the streets. There was no way he would take the old man's information at face value. After some thought, he took out his identity medallion to send a voice message to someone in particular. Then he continued on his way.

The first location was somewhat remote. After arriving, Xu Qing staked out the place for a time. Eventually, he determined that though someone had been staying here in the past, they were no longer around.

With that, he went to the second location. This place was a bustling gambling hall. Finding a spot across the street under the eaves of a building, he observed the place coldly. According to the information in the old man's jade slip, there was a criminal named Sun Dewang who had recently come ashore and was spending time at this gambling hall. He wasn't human, and was in the ninth level of Qi Condensation. He spent most of his time on the Forbidden Sea engaged in piracy and related activity. He was quite well known, and had connections to a group called the Sea Ghosts. They were actually one of the most active groups of pirates on the open seas. The bounty on Sun Dewang's head was quite high, being 40 spirit stones. And it was offered by a group of about a dozen merchant ships. It was obvious how vicious of a character Sun Dewang was.

Because of that, Xu Qing wasn't going to take action casually. After watching the place for about an hour, he saw all sorts of people go in and out, and was able to overhear many of them conversing.

The patrons included poor people, rich people, people who were high-spirited and full of mettle, and others who were despondent and bitter.

Even after confirming that there were no high-level spirit power fluctuations in the area, Xu Qing decided to stay outside.

About four hours later, when the sun was coming up, he finally spotted his target.

Sun Dewang was a fat man in a brocade garment, who looked like a rich old landlord. As he emerged from the gambling hall, he barely took two or three steps before looking directly at Xu Qing hiding in the shadows. His eyes narrowed with alarm.

Advancing directly toward Xu Qing, he growled, "What a rotten day. I lost all my freaking money gambling, and now some damn bounty hunter thinks he's going to get my head? How dare some pitiful runt in the seventh level of Qi Condensation come after me. Are you tired of living? Get ready to bleed!"

As the light of dawn spread, Xu Qing's eyes glittered coldly, and he shot into the open.

Chapter 65: A Secret Worth 100 Spirit Stones

A moment later, two people clashed outside the gambling hall.

Xu Qing tapped into both the Sea and Mountain Incantation and the Seaforming Scripture, giving him both incredible speed and immense strength.

When his fist slammed into Sun Dewang, the man's face fell. He had misjudged the situation, and as soon as he clashed with Xu Qing, he sensed the terrifying strength within him. He immediately fell back, and yet, compared to Xu Qing, Sun Dewang was almost slow. In the blink of an eye, Xu Qing landed another fist on the man's belly. A thump rang out as the man shivered. However, this time he didn't fall back. Instead, his skin expanded toward Xu Qing as if he didn't contain any innards. The man was like an octopus, stretching out in all directions to bind Xu Qing.

Xu Qing frowned as, all of a sudden, a host of water droplets appeared around him, creating something like the shape of an arrowhead as it pierced through the stretched skin.

A moment later, a vicious-looking figure shot backward from within the skin. He was humanoid, but covered with sticky fluid; he had green hair and a body covered in scales. His eyes shone with brutality, and he had a mouthful of sharp fangs, plus a forked tongue. Glaring at Xu Qing, he didn't make any further attacks, but instead, prepared to flee.

Staring back coldly, Xu Qing waved his hand, causing a screen of water to pop up in the nonhuman Sun Dewang's path, making it impossible for him to escape.

"Looking to die!?" Sun Dewang growled. Throwing both of his hands out in front of him, he summoned a mass of black energy that became a host of vengeful souls, screaming shrilly as they shot toward Xu Qing.

Xu Qing remained expressionless as his own energy and blood spread out. As a result, the vengeful souls screamed as they were dispersed. Then Xu Qing strode onward to the cultivator, reaching out with his right hand to grab him.

Sun Dewang was panting, and his eyes shone with madness. In that moment of critical danger, all of the scales that covered him suddenly fell off, turning into a host of blades that shot toward Xu Qing like a tornado. Having accomplished that, the man didn't flee, but instead surged with brutality as he lunged toward Xu Qing's neck with claws outstretched.

“Die!”

A fraction of a second later, Sun Dewang's eyes went wide with disbelief.

Xu Qing had completely ignored the tornado of scales, and had smashed through them like a hammer crushing an ice cube. Reaching out, he clamped his hand down onto Sun Dewang's arm.

A cracking sound rang out as Xu Qing twisted his wrist and broke the arm. Getting closer, he slammed his forehead viciously into his opponent's face, provoking a scream. Sun Dewang tried to back up, but Xu Qing had too tight of a grip. It was like an iron pincer that caused the nonhuman to gasp with astonishment.

“Fellow Daoist, I'm—”

Before the man could finish speaking, Xu Qing calmly grabbed the man's own clawed hand and shoved it deeply into his forehead. The sound of bone cracking and flesh tearing rang out. The cultivator let loose a bloodcurdling scream of despair, and his eyes shone with terror. However, his body structure was different from that of a human, and thus, it wasn't a fatal blow.

That said, it was still a grievous injury. As blood poured out, Sun Dewang's energy rapidly began to fade. Xu Qing grabbed him by the neck, and he lapsed into unconsciousness. Then, he was like little more than a corpse as Xu Qing dragged him away.

The gambling hall was silent. Even the guards outside were trembling. The fight between Xu Qing and Sun Dewang had been intense, but it had ended very quickly thanks to Xu Qing's vicious attacks. And when they realized who that nonhuman cultivator was, they were even more fearful, and even more convinced of how terrifying Xu Qing was.

In that tense atmosphere, Xu Qing was walking off. Then he suddenly stopped in place and turned his head.

Some distance away, a person was approaching from a shadowy street. As the newcomer neared, he reached the lamplight, and it became clear that he was wearing a pale violet daoist robe.

Xu Qing's pupils constricted.

It was a young man with long black hair and extraordinary facial features. He was tall and thin, with a haughty expression. And of course, his daoist robe made it obvious the high position he held. He emanated the fluctuations of the Seaforming Scripture and the eighth level of Qi Condensation, causing his entire person to be surrounded by a host of water droplets. And all of them seemed to be locked onto Xu Qing.

“Which bureau of the Violent Crimes Division are you from? Give that nonhuman to me, and I'll pretend I didn't see any of this.” His words were cold, and spoken with much authority.

Xu Qing didn't respond. He looked at the young man, whom he remembered seeing when he went with the Captain on patrol for the first time. He had seen this disciple from a distance, and remembered thinking he looked like the child of a god, descended to the mortal world.

Obviously, he was a conclave disciple from the Seventh Peak.

Xu Qing frowned. Although he had taken some precautions in case further fighting ensued, given this was a conclave disciple, he wouldn't be able to use them. That said, there were 40 spirit stones at stake here. As far as Xu Qing was concerned, that sum was worth getting into a conflict with a conclave disciple.

Before he could say anything further, a cold voice spoke from behind the disciple in the pale violet robe.

"Conclave disciples are impressive. They're even willing to interfere with law enforcement matters right in the presence of the Violent Crimes Division."

The disciple in pale violet spun around, and Xu Qing looked over.

From some distance away sauntered the Captain, eating an apple as he walked.

The disciple in pale violet looked surprised, as did Xu Qing. Although, it wasn't that Xu Qing was surprised to see the Captain, per se, more that he was surprised he'd chosen this moment to show his face.

Xu Qing hadn't trusted the information given to him by the old innkeeper from Plankspring Way. In the Seven Blood Eyes capital city, where everyone harbored evil intentions, it seemed more likely the old man had given him information as a means to lend someone a knife and have them do his dirty work for him.

After all, a gambling hall like this would certainly be backed by some important people. That was why, on the way here, Xu Qing had sent a message to the Captain, offering him half of the reward if he showed up to help in a tricky situation. Of course, he would give the spirit stones regardless of whether or not a tricky situation arose. The first bit of information had been a bust, so the Captain never showed up. But even though the second clue drew out a conclave disciple, Xu Qing hadn't expected the Captain to do anything.

The Captain noticed Xu Qing's surprise. Taking another bite of his apple, he blinked a few times, then looked at the uncomfortable-looking disciple in pale violet.

"According to section three of the Violent Crimes Division's policies and procedures, anyone who interferes with a public servant's execution of the law will be punished severely. This is a wanted criminal, and we're executing the law. We're also public servants. So the question is... are you interfering?"

The Captain smiled at the disciple in pale violet.

The Captain was obviously wearing an ordinary gray daoist robe. But his words were spoken with such authority that the conclave disciple looked very uncomfortable. In fact, it seemed almost like he and the Captain had switched statuses.

Xu Qing was more than a little shocked.

The truth was that the conclave disciple was feeling very anxious. Sun Dewang had plied him with plenty of gifts, and besides, he owned this gambling hall, and normally wouldn't allow someone to harm one of his customers. But this was the Captain from Celestial Bureau Unit Six, and even this conclave disciple was a bit afraid of him. In fact, he remembered that about two years ago, a different conclave disciple had gotten into an argument with the Captain. And not long after that... the conclave disciple went missing.

That thought put him more on guard, and at the same time, made him even more nervous. Even more telling, no one on the mountain peak had looked into the matter. In fact, nobody even talked about it. To this day, no one was sure what really happened.

Normally speaking, if a conclave disciple went missing, that was a huge deal in Seven Blood Eyes. But on that occasion... nobody seemed to care.

After some thought, the conclave disciple snorted coldly, flicked his sleeve, and walked off.

The dramatic scene was very surprising to Xu Qing, and created a lot of questions in his heart about the Captain.

"My spirit stones?" the Captain said, smiling.

Without a word, Xu Qing gave him 20 spirit stones.

The Captain looked pleased to take the stones. Then he glanced at the conclave disciple walking away in the distance.

"That's Zhao Zhongheng. He's mostly an idiot. If it weren't for his grandfather being an elder on the Seventh Peak, he would have been killed long ago. I'm honestly surprised he's stuck around as a conclave disciple. That said, I heard his grandfather actually sent him off the mountain to a management position in the Dispatch Division. I guess he wants him to get some real world experience." [1]

As he spoke, the Captain started walking back in the direction of the Violent Crimes Division, and Xu Qing followed. Along the way, Xu Qing looked at the Captain out of the corner of his eye several times, but didn't ask any questions. As they got closer to the Violent Crimes Division, the Captain looked at him, seemingly surprised.

"You little punk," he said. "You really know how to hold your tongue! Aren't you going to ask what makes me formidable enough to make a conclave disciple back down?"

"Okay, what is it?" Xu Qing asked.

The Captain looked back at him, seemingly a bit disappointed. "You already took the fun out of it... Ah, whatever. Since you're in my unit, I'll tell you. Two years ago, I offended a conclave disciple, and was planning to flee Seven Blood Eyes. However, you'll never guess what happened." The Captain couldn't hold back from laughing. "That disciple got unlucky and died at sea. The sect investigated and found it was just an accident, though they never determined all the details. In any case, after that, a rumor spread among the Onpeak conclave disciples... that I was responsible. Ever since then, they all avoid me."

Grinning, the Captain looked at Xu Qing.

Xu Qing nodded back at him.

“You actually believe me?” the Captain asked, sounding surprised.

“Nope,” Xu Qing said, shaking his head.

“Then why did you nod...?”

Xu Qing didn't answer.

The Captain sighed, and felt more than ever that Xu Qing had taken all the fun out of the conversation.

Shortly thereafter, as they approached the main gate of the Violent Crimes Division, the Captain lowered his voice and said, “The truth is that I did kill him. That's my big secret, Xu Qing. And it's worth... er, 100 spirit stones!”

The Captain looked at Xu Qing, blinking.

Xu Qing did not give him 100 spirit stones.

The Captain sighed, muttered a few more things, and then made Xu Qing promise to pay him 100 spirit stones later. Finally, he stretched a bit and headed toward the Celestial Bureau.

Xu Qing rubbed the bridge of his nose as he watched the Captain leave, feeling a bit irritated at being forced to owe the man 100 spirit stones. Finally, he sighed. The reason he hadn't asked any questions on the way back was that he'd sensed some killing intent on the Captain. The Captain's cultivation base seemed to be in the ninth or even tenth level of Qi Condensation. But Xu Qing got the sense the Captain's true battle prowess was actually beyond that level. What was more, that killing intent didn't fade away until after Xu Qing agreed to owe him the spirit stones.

Feeling a bit calmer now, Xu Qing looked in the direction of Plankspring Way, his eyes glowing coldly.

A moment later, he headed into the Violent Crimes Division to get the bounty for Sun Dewang. Before leaving, he passed a few spirit coins to the disciple in charge of handing out the bounties, and asked him about Zhao Zhongheng.

Taking the spirit coins with a wooden smile, the disciple explained what he knew to Xu Qing. The story was basically the same as what the Captain had told him, although the Captain's version was more detailed. Afterward, Xu Qing thanked the disciple and left.

On the way back to his berth in the harbor, Xu Qing thought back to the events of the night.

The Captain is strong. And ruthless. But he treats me differently. Why? What does he want?

Back at his berth, Xu Qing felt more of a need than ever to be on guard. Once inside his dharmaboat, he pulled out an old bamboo slip that he had clearly had with him for a long time. There were a number of names carved on it, none of which had been scratched off. One of the names was Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior.

Using his iron skewer, he carved a new name on the slip: Plankspring Way Innkeeper.



After that, he carved The Captain. Then he thought about it for a moment, and added a question mark after the Captain. He'd put the Captain's name there because of the killing intent he sensed on him. The question mark was because that killing intent had been dispelled by 100 spirit stones.

After that, Xu Qing resolved not to worry about the Captain's secrets, nor to pry into them. Next, he took out Sun Dewang's sack, which he opened and examined. As he did, he thought back to what the man had said after stepping out of the gambling hall. His sack was basically empty. There were some random things of no value, and that was it. Frowning, Xu Qing tossed the sack to the side and sat down cross-legged to start his cultivation.

Days passed. After earning those 20 spirit stones, he chose not to go back to Plankspring Way. However, given how the old innkeeper had obviously used him, he had already started planning how to kill him. It was going to be difficult, and therefore Xu Qing decided that he would do nothing to beat the grass to startle the snake.

Most of his focus was spent on cultivation, as well as on using spirit stones to upgrade his dharmaboat.

In fact, he had upgraded it by two entire classes. It was now a class-four dharmaboat. It looked very different from the original. It was much bigger, and instead of being covered with scale totems, it was actually covered with real scales. As the boat floated on the water, it looked like a real crocodile, pulsing with a brutal and violent aura. What was more, the crocodile's head seemed like it was alive, with its eyes glittering.

That was because Xu Qing had purchased two solid rock discs to serve as eyes, which increased the overall defenses of the boat.

What had once been a simple canopy was now a real cabin with a door, which made him feel even safer when he was inside.

Class-four dharmaboats weren't something that everyone in the port had. Although Xu Qing had upgraded it with low-level materials, in Harbor 79, it was still fairly eye-catching. There was nothing he could do about that. He could have asked the shop to mask the effects of the upgrades, but that would reduce their effectiveness. All he could do was keep his guard fully up.

Thankfully, he was used to doing that. It was simply a part of his life.

Now that he was upgrading his dharmaboat, his plan of going out onto the open sea was closer to becoming a reality. All in all, he felt a lot of anticipation. Granted, it was expensive to upgrade the boat, but it was worth it.

There were never any repercussions from Zhao Zhongheng. It seemed the Captain had really cowed him.

Meanwhile, the Violent Crimes Division publicly reined in their efforts to hunt down members of Night Dove. However, the truth was that things were very tense behind closed doors. From what Xu Qing could guess, there was a big trap being set up for Night Dove, and it would be sprung soon.

Two days later, after Xu Qing was off duty, but before he had left the division, he received notice that no one was allowed to go home, and everyone should wait with their units for instructions. All identity medallions and transmission jade slips were locked down.

From that, Xu Qing could guess that the trap was going to be sprung that very night. He was right. About two hours later, as the sun set, the Captain appeared.

“The Division has decided that the Night Dove trap will be sprung tonight in all seven districts. Over the past few days, we’ve confirmed that there are seventeen hideouts in the Port District. All units from the four divisions of Heaven, Earth, Celestial, and Terrestrial will be working together tonight.”

Smiling at Xu Qing, he continued, “Xu Qing, the location you reported some time ago was indeed a hideout. And that’s exactly where we’re headed tonight, along with Earth Bureau, Unit Three.” His expression turned serious. “The hideout we’re raiding has two people in the great circle of Qi Condensation, four in the ninth level of Qi Condensation, seven in the eighth level. And in terms of people lower than that, there are about twenty-five.

“The division is taking this matter very seriously. Any unit that takes out a hideout chief will get a reward of 10 spirit stones per unit member. And the person who lands the killing blow will get 80 spirit stones!

“In addition to that, every additional Night Dove operative that you kill will earn you 10 spirit stones. Brothers, the time has come to earn some tidy profits!”

This information caused Xu Qing’s pupils to constrict. If he wanted to get his dharmaboat from a class four to a class six, then he needed to purchase a lot of materials. If he chose low-level materials, he would need dozens of spirit stones. But he had his heart set on mid-level materials, which meant he would need something more like 80 spirit stones. In terms of high-level materials, he hadn’t even bothered thinking about that.

Given how hard he had worked to earn spirit stones lately, the new information from the Captain caused Xu Qing’s eyes to glitter brightly.

Chapter 66: Trying to Take Credit for My Work?

The rewards up for grabs during this mission were spectacular. That alone showed how much the leadership of Seven Blood Eyes detested Night Dove.

It wasn’t just Xu Qing who was deeply struck. It was all of Unit Six. Everyone stood there with shining eyes, chuckling and licking their lips. Some even had expressions of open desire. To disciples in Seven Blood Eyes, cultivation resources were everything.

Just about everyone in Unit Six would spend time hunting bounties to make extra cash. Large-scale operations didn’t come along very often, and thus, everyone realized that if things went well, the immediate future would be filled with days of plenty.

“Captain, when do we start?”

“Yeah. Let’s do this!”

Upon hearing the anxious exclamations of the unit, the Captain laughed. Taking a bite of apple, he produced a handful of jade slips which he passed out.

“Our goal isn’t very big. The two hideout chiefs in the great circle of Qi Condensation. We have to take out those two. Once we reach the hideout, I’ll sneak in to kill the first. The rest of you find the other and surround him. If you can kill him, fine. If you can’t, then at least buy enough time for me to show up. I really hope that everyone is alive at the end of this operation. Now, let’s head out!”

The entire Violent Crimes Division was on the move.

As the moon shone down onto the division headquarters, countless figures emerged, speeding off in different directions into the city. They moved quickly, emanating somber and desolate auras. The streams of people looked almost like tentacles stretching out, as though the Violent Crimes Division were some primordial beast that had just awakened and was ready to rain fury down on its enemies. Every criminal in the city was shocked.

As Xu Qing sped along with Unit Six, his eyes shone with anticipation. Whatever unit kills a hideout chief will get 10 spirit stones per constable. That means if Unit Six kills two of them... we’ll get 20 spirit stones each!

He had already read through the jade slip the Captain had passed out. It contained detailed information about everyone holed up in the hideout. That included a physical description and their preferred techniques. Obviously, the division had worked hard in recent days to run a very thorough investigation into Night Dove.

No one spoke. They simply followed the Captain, moving faster and faster, their killing intent growing stronger.

There had been absolutely no advance warning that the Violent Crimes Division was going to run an operation this night. Because of that, everyone they passed in the darkness was absolutely shaken to the core, and immediately ran into hiding. The brothels and gambling halls, which were usually bustling places, went completely silent. Their doors shut, and everyone inside waited with hearts pounding. Every criminal in the city knew full well that with the Violent Crimes Division on the move like this...

Blood would run in the streets!

Countless people would lose their lives. It would be like a lightning bolt from the sky, cleansing the city of unhealthy yin elements!

Many of the inns in the city chose to keep their doors closed, and that included the one on Plankspring Way...

As Unit Six passed by that very street, Xu Qing caught a glimpse of the old innkeeper through the window. Their eyes met for a moment.

He’s scared.... Xu Qing looked down at the badge on his gray daoist robe. On this night, at least, that robe and badge represented the grandeur of Seven Blood Eyes. Whatever snakes or dragons lurked in the city would be forced to bow their heads and shrink back in deference. And anyone who tried to interfere with this operation would be crushed out of existence.

Earlier, as the Captain was allocating different mission tasks, he had said, “Every place in existence has a mix of light and darkness. Our city is no exception. The sect treats us like venomous bugs in a

jar. They allow the darkness to proliferate. But there are two lines which cannot be crossed. One: you can't harm the ordinary citizens. Two: outside Foundation Establishment cultivators can't kill Qi Condensation disciples. Anyone who crosses one of those lines... will pay the price."

Although Xu Qing had known that from the beginning, the operation tonight was the first time he'd seen how domineering Seven Blood Eyes was when it came to enforcing those rules.

It took an hour for them to reach their destination.

The hideout was located in a sprawling manor. The moon hung in the sky over the dark lands below. The manor was lit with lamps, but in the darkness, they seemed like little more than flickering sparks.

As Unit Six approached, a few Violent Crimes Division constables emerged from hiding spots to meet them. They were the disciples assigned to surveillance. Upon seeing the Captain, they clasped hands in salute, then left.

"Follow the plan," the Captain said. "Let's go!"

Eyes shining, he slipped into the manor. Next, eight constables split off from the group to cut off all avenues of escape. The remaining dozen or so headed to predetermined spots to infiltrate the place.

Xu Qing was one of the infiltrators, and he moved with the speed and grace of a cat.

From a distance, the various constables of Unit Six looked like a huge hand, stretching toward the flickering lamp light, about to grab it.

Meanwhile, another group of disciples from the Violent Crimes Division appeared on the scene. It was none other than Earth Bureau Unit Three, led by the young Merfolk captain, and assigned to the same task as Unit Six. Upon arriving and seeing that Unit Six was already on the move, the young Merfolk captain waved his hand scornfully. A black, spherical object shot out, landing in the middle of the manor and then exploding loudly. His subordinates grinned viciously and they threw similar objects, resulting in more booms.

The explosions alerted the Night Dove operatives in the manor, and they ran out into the open ready to fight. In the blink of an eye, Unit Six's plan to quietly infiltrate the manor and take out the hideout chiefs was foiled.

Xu Qing frowned. Unit Three was obviously interfering with Unit Six on purpose. In fact, one of the exploding objects landed a short distance away from him. As the Night Dove cultivators scattered, fire started to spread, causing both flames and smoke to rage.

Soon, the haze of smoke became so thick it was hard to see. However, the sound of fighting, yelling, and explosions continued to fill the manor.

Eyes glittering coldly, Xu Qing ignored Unit Three and sped through the haze of smoke, his killing intent surging. His right hand shot out, and his dagger slashed through the throat of a Night Dove cultivator, a middle-aged man in the sixth level of Qi Condensation. As his blood sprayed out of his destroyed throat, terror filled the man's eyes.

Xu Qing took his sack and let the corpse drop to the ground. Speeding onward through the smoke, his dagger glittered as he closed in on another Night Dove cultivator. His dagger slashed through

the cultivator's neck, but his expression remained the same as ever. The body dropped, dead, whereupon Xu Qing took the sack and moved on to find a third target.

Events unfolded rapidly. After the time it takes an incense stick to burn, the sounds of screaming and explosions grew more intense. At a certain point, Xu Qing stopped in place, then leaped backward just in time to avoid a wind blade that shot past.

The wind brushed back his hair, revealing his wolf-like eyes. Dashing in the direction the wind blade came from, Xu Qing found two Violent Crimes Division constables, one from Unit Six, the other from Unit Three, working together to fight someone from Night Dove.

The Unit Three disciple didn't look happy to see Xu Qing. As for the Unit Six constable, he was sincerely delighted to see him. On this night, they were truly working together as a team.

"Xu Qing, this guy's in the eighth level of Qi Condensation!"

There were already two mangled corpses on the ground.

As for the Night Dove cultivator, when he saw Xu Qing coming, he backed up as if he planned to flee. He was too late. Xu Qing burst forward with explosive speed. To the shock of the Unit Six and Unit Three disciples, he closed the distance in the blink of an eye, appearing right in front of the Night Dove cultivator, his dagger slicing toward the man's throat. Blood sprayed everywhere as the Night Dove cultivator's head flew off of his shoulders, and the corpse fell to the ground.

The Unit Three constable's face looked ashen, and fear flickered in his eyes. He had seen strong people before, but it wasn't common to see someone who could kill an eighth-level opponent in one blow.

Not daring to stick around, the Unit Three disciple sped away. As for the Unit Six disciple, he took a deep breath. Feeling similarly shaken by Xu Qing's gaze, he clasped hands, bowed deeply, then disappeared into the smoke.

Xu Qing glanced at the three corpses on the ground. Leaning over to grab their sacks, he dumped their contents into his own bag, his face remaining expressionless the whole time. After taking the sack from the third corpse, Xu Qing brushed off his hands and was about to leave. However, that was when the dagger in his hand suddenly shot at high speed toward the corpse's forehead.

The speed was incredible, and the move came with completely no warning whatsoever. However, the corpse moved, sliding to the side so quickly that Xu Qing's dagger didn't hit anything.

The corpse floated into a standing position, and its eyes opened, revealing sinister coldness as it stared at Xu Qing.

"What gave me away?"

Xu Qing looked at the 'corpse' and replied, "I've seen a lot of mangled corpses. Your disguise wasn't realistic."

"Is that so? Well, I suppose that makes you unlucky." The 'corpse' rubbed its face, removing some of the blood and grime and revealing the features of a middle-aged man. Then he blurred into motion, heading toward Xu Qing and unleashed the power of the great circle of Qi Condensation.

This was one of the hideout chiefs, a cautious man who had hoped to disguise himself as a corpse and then slip away when the moment was right. Never could he have guessed that someone would see through his ruse. However, he was also ruthless. Knowing he didn't have a lot of time to work with, he attacked with full force. Spirit power fluctuations erupted from him, making nine flame serpents that rushed viciously toward Xu Qing. Every serpent was strong enough to rip apart someone in the ninth level, and as they circled around Xu Qing, he realized it was the highest level of power he had seen from anyone in the Qi Condensation level.

However, Xu Qing didn't provide much of a reaction. Waving his hand, he summoned countless droplets of water that thrummed with the energy of the Forbidden Sea. As soon as they appeared, the water droplets converged, creating the image of a crocodile. It was vicious and covered with countless scales, with a mouth full of razor-sharp teeth. Looking very lifelike, it roared and shot toward the nine flame serpents.

As they clashed, a boom rang out, and the extent of Xu Qing's Seaforming Scripture divine ability became manifest. In the initial clash alone, his crocodile devoured five of the flame serpents. And though four remained, it didn't seem the Seaforming Scripture would have trouble dealing with them.

Then, to the utter shock of this cultivator in the great circle of Qi Condensation, Xu Qing strode forward, his energy and blood surging to create a spectral hobgoblin. As it roared, Xu Qing shot forward like an arrow.

"You're not an ordinary Seven Blood Eyes disciple!!" The Night Dove chief's pupils constricted as he sensed immense danger. Shooting backward, he waved his hand to unleash the blue glowing light of a talisman treasure. Not bothering to see if it worked as expected, he turned and fled.

Unfortunately, he had used that blue talisman treasure a few too many times. Its light had faded, and the power it unleashed wasn't amazing. A blue ghost hand appeared, pulsing with a bit of the power of Foundation Establishment as it closed in on Xu Qing.

Xu Qing could sense that this talisman wasn't particularly amazing, but he still dodged out of the way. The hand followed him, making it impossible for him to chase the Night Dove chief. However, he didn't seem anxious about that. Stepping to the side, he merely glanced at the fleeing chief.

"The poison still hasn't kicked in," he said.

The Night Dove chief's face fell, and his heart started pounding. Of course, that only caused the poison to kick in faster. He suddenly coughed up a mouthful of black blood. At the same time, his face started turning greenish-black.

"Poison?"

He staggered as the poison exploded within him, causing his internal organs to melt. Eyes shining with madness, he used a secret magic, slamming both of his palms onto his chest. Flames burst out all over him as all the latent energy within him was unleashed to suppress the poison. A moment later, the greenish-black coloration on his face faded away.

Saving himself had come at great cost, and he looked visibly drained. However, there was only one thing on his mind at the moment: escaping with his life. With that, he started moving even faster than before.

At the same time, Xu Qing once again dodged an attack from the giant ghost hand. Then he started moving like a lightning bolt, heading right toward the hideout chief.

However, at almost the exact same instant, an intense sensation of deadly crisis filled him, and his expression flickered. Pupils constricting, he threw himself backward just in time to avoid a razor-sharp chakram, which emitted a piercing whistle as it whizzed through the air.

If he had reacted even a moment too late, it would have sliced right through him.

Flying through the night behind the chakram was a person who completely ignored Xu Qing and headed straight toward the Night Dove chief. It was... the sinister young Merfolk captain of Unit Three.

“Trying to take credit for my work?” Xu Qing said, his eyes turning very hard.

Chapter 67: Crossing the Line!

Whoever killed the hideout chief would get 80 spirit stones. And it went without saying that they would be credited with meritorious service for the sect. If Xu Qing hadn't encountered the hideout chief, and hadn't started fighting him, it wouldn't have been a big deal. But he had already seriously injured the man, and was about to lay hands on him. At that very moment, this Merfolk captain launched his own sneak attack, which was an obvious attempt to take credit for Xu Qing's work.

Xu Qing's eyes burned with killing intent.

However, because of the giant blue hand summoned by the talisman treasure, he didn't have time to do anything.

Just as the young merman was about to launch his final killing blow, Xu Qing performed an incantation gesture. Instantly, a host of water droplets rose around the merman, transforming into a jellyfish.

“What is this crap?” the young merman sneered, instantly summoning a defensive shield to block the jellyfish's attack. However, as soon as the jellyfish hit the shield, it shattered.

The young merman had obviously underestimated Xu Qing's jellyfish.

As the shield collapsed, the jellyfish once again turned into a host of water droplets, which then took on the shape of a huge net, locking the young merman in place. The merman frowned as his chance to nab the hideout chief vanished. In fact, the chief had already fled about nine meters away.

Xu Qing took advantage of that moment to burst into motion, while simultaneously allowing the huge hand to slam into him from behind.

BOOOOOM!

Blood sprayed out of Xu Qing's mouth. However, he used the momentum of the blast to pick up more speed, blazing past the merman and becoming a series of afterimages that closed in on the hideout chief.

As he neared, he lifted his right hand, within which glittered his black iron skewer.

Around then, the young merman broke free of his constraints. Eyes glittering coldly, he sneered and waved his hand, causing his chakram to streak past Xu Qing and toward the hideout chief.

In the blink of an eye, it was closing in on the target....

However, right in that critical moment, the iron skewer became a black streak that shot forth with even greater speed. It was like a black lightning bolt that screamed through the air, passing the chakram and stabbing into the back of the hideout chief's head, then emerging from his forehead! Then a scream rang out as the chakram arrived, slicing through the chief's neck and sending his head flying off in an explosion of blood. The man was dead!

Ignoring the chakram, Xu Qing dashed forward and grabbed the flying head. Then he spun and looked coldly at the very frustrated young merman.

Not waiting for Xu Qing to speak, the young merman gritted his teeth and growled, "Who the hell do you think you are to take credit for my work?"

Eyes blazing with killing intent, he reached out to grab the chakram as it flew back to him, and then took a step toward Xu Qing.

Xu Qing stood there with the hideout chief's head in his hand, his eyes burning with equally intense killing intent. He didn't say a word. He was already prepared to start fighting, and had even crushed a poison pill and dispersed it into the wind.

At the same time, his shadow stretched out. All the young merman had to do was take another step forward, and he would step right onto it. Once he did, the shadow would unleash a torrent of mutagen, and Xu Qing would attack.

Xu Qing was confident that, in the heat of the moment, he would be able to kill his opponent quickly. However, even as the young merman's foot moved through the air, and right before it stepped onto Xu Qing's shadow, a cold voice rang out from the surrounding haze of smoke.

"And who the hell do you think you are to take credit for Unit Six's work?"

The Captain strolled out from the haze, an apple in his hand. Behind him were about four additional constables from Unit Six, all of them holding severed heads. As for the Captain, he reeked of blood, and his eyes were so cold it seemed like they could freeze the air.

The young merman stopped moving. His foot did not touch the shadow. Instead, he slowly backed up, keeping his eyes on the surrounding Unit Six constables. A few breaths of time passed during which a few constables from Unit Three arrived.

The tension mounted, until finally the young merman laughed coldly. Looking at Xu Qing with raw killing intent, he said, "You can keep your life for now. But I'm not going to forget this."

Flicking his sleeve, he left, followed by the other constables from his unit.

Xu Qing's eyes revealed nothing about what he was thinking as he stood there quietly.

After the young merman was gone, the Captain smiled at Xu Qing, eyed the severed head he held, and said, "You did well." He offered Xu Qing an apple. "My treat."



Xu Qing accepted the apple and took a bite. It was sweet, but also tasted like blood. Xu Qing swallowed, then looked at the young merman off in the distance.

The constables of Unit Six were all very excited.

“The Captain killed one hideout chief, and Xu Qing killed the other! We’re gonna be rich!”

“20 spirit stones is just the beginning. Our bet paid off!”

“Xu Qing, let us help you with all those severed heads. It’s easy to tell which ones you killed. They all have their throats slashed.”

Normally speaking, the constables were all cold and detached. But right now, they were genuinely happy. It really felt like being part of a team. The Captain looked pleased, and had seemingly forgotten about the constables that had fallen in the fighting. Waving his hand, he said, “Let’s withdraw!”

Carrying their spoils of battle, they left the manor and went through the night back toward the Violent Crimes Division. All Unit Six constables looked at Xu Qing with newfound respect.

It wasn’t just any person who could kill a hideout chief the way the Captain did. And not just anyone would dare to argue with another unit’s captain over getting credit.

As for who tried to steal credit from whom, it didn’t matter. The fact that Xu Qing ended up prevailing showed how strong he was.

As usual, Xu Qing was walking toward the back of the group. However, at a certain point, the Captain slowed down until he was walking next to Xu Qing. In his hand was a blue talisman treasure, which was the same talisman the Night Dove chief had used to unleash the giant ghost hand. Now that the chief was dead, that talisman was considered a battle trophy. Although it was tattered, it could probably be used one or two more times.

“Take it. You earned it.”

Xu Qing was a bit surprised, but he took it. Then he looked over and saw the Captain looking at him with a profound look in his eye.

“Did I show up a bit too early just now?” the Captain asked.

Xu Qing didn’t respond.

“There were too many people around,” the Captain continued. “Not just people from the Violent Crimes Division. There were also nonhuman dharma protectors. I’m not saying you can’t kill him. But the Merfolk are indeed allies. That said, they have a rebellious streak. I heard that a few years ago, they were planning an armed uprising. The Onpeak folks found out about it, and used the Great Competition to crush them. But in the end, allies are allies. You have to think twice before moving against them openly.”

“I’m not sure what that fish is up to, but I do know that he occasionally shakes his dharma protectors and goes off on his own...” The Captain smiled broadly as he trailed off.

Xu Qing put the talisman away, then took out two pears from his sack. One of them, he gave to the Captain, who looked surprised. Taking a bite from the other pear, Xu Qing asked, “Captain, do nonhumans have a different body structure than us humans?”

“There are some differences. For example, let’s talk about poisons. There are some poisons that humans can’t deal with, but don’t work on nonhumans. And the opposite is true. There are some substances that are powerful medicines to us humans, but will kill a nonhuman.”

The two of them exchanged a glance, but said nothing further.

As Xu Qing walked along, something cold stirred within his eyes. There was one line that he maintained, and if anyone crossed that line, he would think of a way to kill them, no matter what. Even if he wasn’t strong enough, or had no way to actually kill that person. Until they died, the matter would be like a fish bone stuck in his throat.

Anyone who threatened his life... crossed the line.

It was like that in the slums. It was like that in the scavenger basecamp. And it was like that in Seven Blood Eyes.

The only difference was that he had to be a lot more careful here. He had to find the right opportunity to strike a deadly blow.

The young merman had crossed the line in a way even worse than the tavernkeeper from Plankspring Way. In fact, the young merman was on about the same level as Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior.

Therefore, Xu Qing had to think of a way to kill him. As soon as possible.

After Unit Six got back to the Violent Crimes Division and the operation was officially concluded, everyone dispersed. However, Xu Qing didn’t go back to his dharmaboat. Instead, he hid nearby and waited.

About two hours later, he caught sight of the young merman.

However, he wasn’t alone. And as Xu Qing observed cautiously, he realized that the strongest of the energy fluctuations surrounding the group were in the Foundation Establishment level. Xu Qing’s guard went up further.

At the same time, there was no sign that the young merman had been poisoned.

Xu Qing was certain he had released the poison, so it confirmed what the Captain said. The young merman also had powerful people protecting him, so Xu Qing didn’t get near him. After confirming the general direction he left in, Xu Qing departed.

That night, the trap set for Night Dove by the Seventh Peak was sprung, and it was a complete success. Seventeen hideouts in the Port District were all vanquished, and any groups working with Night Dove were similarly exterminated.

Some of the assistant directors even joined in on the action. Many of Night Dove's powerful experts were killed. It was the same in the other districts of the city.

Nearly 2,000 members of Night Dove died. And when it came to accomplice organizations, there were even more deaths. The heads of the leaders were hung on the city walls the next day, and the gory image shook the region.

Casualties in the Violent Crimes Division weren't low. Three hundred disciples died. Two of them were the young man and woman Xu Qing had met on the day he first reported for duty. [1]

But overall, it was a resounding success. The purging caused the city to calm down a bit in the following days. Even the infighting among disciples eased up.

When the rewards were distributed, Xu Qing ended up with 138 spirit stones, which was an unprecedented level of wealth. Of course, it made him even more on guard against greedy interlopers. If anyone tried to rob him, then he would kill them.

With so many spirit stones, Xu Qing started thinking that the materials he had previously thought to be so amazing actually weren't very good quality. And then he started thinking about what better materials he could purchase for his dharmaboat.

During the two days that passed after the operation, Xu Qing kept his eye on the young merman. He followed him on a number of occasions, but the dharma protectors were always with him. Xu Qing never had an opportunity to make a move.

Thankfully, he was a patient person.

On the afternoon of the third day, he had the day off and was working on his cultivation in his dharmaboat when someone sent him a message. It was an invitation. And the person who sent it was none other than Zhou Qingpeng, one of the disciples in his group when he officially became a disciple of the Seventh Peak.

"Junior Brother Xu Qing, I finally got those ghostlonging horseshoe crabs. Not many. Only two. But that's better than nothing. I was thinking that our little group that joined the sect together have drifted apart. So I invited Li Zimei and Xu Xiaohui to dinner tonight. Why don't you join us? I'll bring the ghostlonging horseshoe crabs to give to you."

The message seemed sincere.

As Xu Qing thought about it, he considered how the young merman hadn't been affected by his poison, and realized that the ghostlonging horseshoe crabs would probably come in very handy. After checking his work schedule to confirm he didn't have a night shift, he replied to the message saying that he would come. Then he continued with his cultivation.

Before long, it was evening. Xu Qing opened his eyes and calculated the time, then left his dharmaboat and headed to the restaurant to meet Zhou Qingpeng.

It was a fairly famous place located in an expensive-looking two-story building not far from the port. Xu Qing had never gone inside, but he had seen it in the commercial registry list in the Violent Crimes Division. Based on that, he knew that the restaurant was owned by the Coastguard Division.

The Coastguard Division was very different from the Violent Crimes Division. They were actually more similar to the Patrol Division, except they patrolled the sea and not the land.

Nearing the restaurant, Xu Qing looked around cautiously before entering. A waiter noticed Xu Qing immediately, and called out a warm greeting. When Xu Qing said he was meeting friends in one of the private rooms, the waiter led him up to the second floor. [2]

The room Zhou Qingpeng had reserved was in the very back, and was not open to the public. Only Seven Blood Eyes disciples could use it.

Nearing the room, Xu Qing heard the sound of Zhou Qingpeng and the others laughing and chatting.

“Elder Brother Zhou, this is my first time here. I’ve heard it’s really hard to get a reservation, and in fact, they don’t even let ordinary disciples book private rooms. They have three specialty dishes, right? Supposedly, they’re all really beneficial for your cultivation base.”

“Nah, it was easy to get a reservation. This place is owned by the Coastguard Division, and since I’m a disciple from there, it’s simple for me to book a spot. If you ever want a reservation, Xiaohui, you just let me know. I’ll handle it for you.”

“Aw, thanks, Elder Brother Zhou! Cheers!”

The waiter opened the door to the private room, and Xu Qing looked inside to see a table spread with all sorts of dishes. Three people were already seated around it. There were two women and a man. The young man was obviously Zhou Qingpeng, who beamed as he held his glass of alcohol up to the charming Xu Xiaohui, who was offering him a toast. Last was Li Zimei, who looked just as reserved and cautious as she had in the past. In fact, she even seemed somewhat nervous. When Xu Qing appeared, the two young women looked at him in surprise.

“And... who are you, Elder Brother?” Xu Xiaohui asked, her eyes shining. She had obviously taken note of Xu Qing’s good looks and intense spirit power fluctuations.

Zhou Qingpeng grinned and got to his feet, but didn’t say anything.

It was actually Li Zimei who, after looking at Xu Qing for a moment, hesitantly asked, “Is that you... Elder Brother Xu Qing?”

As it turned out, she recognized him at first glance.

## Chapter 68: Everyone Has Difficulties

In response to Li Zimei’s softly spoken words, Xu Xiaohui’s eyes went wide, and she looked closer at Xu Qing. It was little wonder she didn’t recognize him. In her memory, Xu Qing was covered in filth and grime.

But the person who had just stepped into the private dining room was tall and slender, with long black hair that flowed past his shoulders. There was something indescribably elegant about him, and of course, his face was nothing short of entrancingly handsome, like something from a sculpture. Almost pretty. He had dashing, angular eyebrows over cold, profound eyes. Combined with his spirit power fluctuations, he was the type of person no one would dare to underestimate.

“It’s me,” he said with a nod.

A flush crept up Xu Xiaohui’s face, and she quickly took a drink from her raised cup to mask her shock.

Meanwhile, Zhou Qingpeng burst out laughing as he hurried forward to formally receive Xu Qing.

“Junior Brother Xu Qing, please, have a seat.”

Xu Qing clasped hands in greeting, then sat down. Usually, other disciples in the sect seemed cold and brutal to him. But in the presence of these three, he felt warmth.

That said, all of them had clearly changed during their time in the sect. Zhou Qingpeng seemed to radiate happiness, but Xu Qing could see the exhaustion he tried to hide in his eyes. What was more, there was something about him that made it obvious he had gone through some trying times, and had grown up as a result.

Xu Qing couldn’t put his finger on what exactly was different about Xu Xiaohui. But he felt like she had somehow come to resemble the women in the feathered tents back in the scavenger basecamp.

Li Zimei seemed to have changed the least. She was still cautious, and seemed to lack self-esteem. There was more vigilance in her gaze than before, as though she wouldn’t let her guard down no matter who she was around.

Time slipped by slowly but surely as they chatted. Xu Qing didn’t say much, but the atmosphere was homey, and even he warmed up to the conversation a bit. This small group had not been in the sect long enough to become completely cold to each other.

Most of the conversation was between Zhou Qingpeng and Xu Xiaohui. Li Zimei was like Xu Qing, and didn’t say much. And when she occasionally looked at Xu Qing, her lack of self-esteem really showed.

Eventually, after Zhou Qingpeng had downed a few drinks, he sighed and said, “I knew a bit about this sect before joining it. But actually being a member comes with a very different feeling. In Seven Blood Eyes... it’s not easy to live a good life. If you slip up even once, you’ll end up dead.

“The rest of you probably feel the same, right...? Oh, by the way, you never mentioned which department you got assigned to, Junior Brother Xu Qing. I got sent to the Coastguard Division. Xiaohui has some skills, which is why she already managed to buy a dharmaboat. She was assigned to the Dispatch Division.”

Off to the side Xu Xiaohui smiled and nodded, though there was something complex about her smile that Xu Qing couldn’t quite read into.

“I’m in the Violent Crimes Division,” he said softly. He still wasn’t used to this environment. It seemed the complete opposite of the cold and brutal world outside.

“Violent Crimes Division?” Xu Xiaohui said, her eyes lighting up.

Even Li Zimei looked envious. Although she wasn’t dressed like a grimy scavenger, she still wore the clothes of a commoner, and was inclined to avert her gaze from others. It wasn’t lost on her that

she was the only one out of the group of four that didn't have a dharmaboat. Sitting there, she felt like she was under a lot of pressure.

"Wow, you're in the Violent Crimes Division?" Zhou Qingpeng said. "I heard your division was involved in a big event a few days ago. The heads of a bunch of Night Dove leaders were hung from the city walls afterward. There must have been thousands of them! Everyone was talking about it. Hey, Junior Brother Xu Qing, I haven't forgotten how strong your projection of energy and blood was during the entrance assessment. Does that mean you were a part of the Violent Crimes Division operation the other night?"

Zhou Qingpeng looked quite excited. When he ran into Xu Qing a few days before, he had sensed Xu Qing's spirit power fluctuations, and had realized he'd gotten stronger. Now he was curious to find out more.

When Xu Qing didn't respond immediately, Zhou Qingpeng quickly continued, "Although, a large-scale operation like that was probably really dangerous. I know you excel at body cultivation, Junior Brother Xu Qing, but magical techniques are what really count. Since you're new to the sect, staying alive and furthering your cultivation are the most important things. I'm sure you'll have other opportunities in the future to show what you're made of."

Xu Qing could tell that Zhou Qingpeng was picking his words carefully so as not to say something offensive. Truth be told, Xu Qing got a good feeling from these three. They all seemed genuine, without malicious intentions. That was the main reason he'd agreed to come, other than the ghostlonging horseshoe crab.

In response to Zhou Qingpeng, Xu Qing nodded, but didn't offer any further explanation.

"The Seventh Peak's Violent Crimes Division is just like the Coastguard Division," Zhou Qingpeng went on. "We both have a lot of fierce people as members. Oh, hey, Junior Brother Xu Qing, I heard someone say that in that big operation the other night, there was one disciple who really stood out.

"I'm pretty sure he's in the Celestial Bureau. I forget his name, but people are saying he killed a hideout chief who was in the great circle of Qi Condensation. He was the only one in the entire operation who did something like that and wasn't a captain. For him to kill someone that strong means his Seaforming Scripture is probably at the peak level. Meritorious service of that sort is definitely going to earn him a promotion."

Zhou Qingpeng's eyes were full of admiration. At this point, he wasn't digging for information. He really was just feeling envious. As far as he was concerned, the story he'd just told couldn't possibly have anything to do with Xu Qing. Xu Qing was strong in body cultivation, and could perform energy and blood projections, but after Zhou Qingpeng started cultivating the Seaforming Scripture, he realized it was strong enough that using it to kill body cultivators would be an easy thing. And of course, the Violent Crimes Division was full of many powerful experts.

Although he had sensed the spirit power fluctuations of the Seaforming Scripture on Xu Qing when they ran into each other at the medicine shop, it didn't even occur to him that Xu Qing could possibly stand out among all the other experts in the Violent Crimes Division.

"I heard about that too," Xu Xiaohui said, carefully serving some food to Xu Qing and Zhou Qingpeng. "Everyone was talking about it a few days ago. The fellow you just mentioned is in Celestial Bureau Unit Six."

It was absolutely true that disciples from all of the departments in the Seventh Peak had been talking about the trap the Violent Crimes Division had sprung on Night Dove. And everyone had been talking about the outstanding figures who played key roles in the operation.

Xu Qing was actually surprised by this. He had been completely focused on trying to find an opportunity to kill that young merman, and hadn't been paying attention to much else. This was his first time encountering the sect's rumor mill, and it was also his first time hearing anything about promotions.

"Well, it doesn't have anything to do with us four," Zhou Qingpeng sighed. "To people like us... just staying alive is the most important thing."

As he spoke, he gingerly rubbed his thigh, where he had a wound that wasn't quite healed yet. Looking over at Xu Qing, who still wasn't saying much, he said, "Junior Brother Xu Qing, you shouldn't be so reclusive. It's a personality trait that you need to change. You should learn how to be more flexible. For instance, give some gifts to your boss. Do that, and you'll get someone to watch your back. It'll up your chances of survival."

Xu Qing just nodded. He wasn't good with words, and wasn't sure how to respond to Zhou Qingpeng. As the meal continued, he spent most of his time listening and not talking. As for Zhou Qingpeng, he seemed to be reverting to his old self before he joined the sect. Chatting and laughing, he often raised his drink for toasts.

Eventually, when Zhou Qingpeng was obviously a bit drunk, he started bragging a bit about his accomplishments.

For example, he said that he had a good relationship with his boss in the Coastguard Division, and then he went on to talk about some of the friends he had made at work. He explained about some of the important connections he'd made, and then told Xu Xiaohui that he would help her expand her social network.

On several occasions, he reminded Xu Qing to work on his personality traits. He also told Li Zimei that the Coastguard Division had some odd jobs that needed to be handled, and that he would recommend her.

"My boss promised me that as long as I score well on my next review, he'll recommend me to Elder Brother Ding Xiaohai. You know Elder Brother Ding, right? People call him the number one Qi Condensation cultivator on the Seventh Peak." [1]

Zhou Qingpeng seemed very pleased with himself, and Xu Xiaohui offered plenty of flattering words in response to his bragging. Xu Qing even smiled and offered a toast to Zhou Qingpeng. The atmosphere in the room was only getting warmer and friendlier.

Xu Qing had no dislike of Zhou Qingpeng. After all, everyone had their own style of living. The fact that Xu Xiaohui already had a dharmaboat went to show that she must have some skills of her own. As for Li Zimei, though she wasn't a big talker, Xu Qing had noted how quickly she recognized him, which meant she had keen powers of observation.

They ate and drank together for about two hours.

It was dark outside, and Zhou Qingpeng was even more drunk than before. Finally, it came time to part ways. Zhou Qingpeng handed over the ghostlonging horseshoe crabs, and when Xu Qing tried to pay for them, he waved his hand dismissively.

"Business is good for my clan. Consider the crabs a gift between friends."

Xu Qing looked at the ghostlonging horseshoe crabs in the bag, and then at the sincere look on Zhou Qingpeng's face. After some thought, he decided not to force money on Zhou Qingpeng. Instead, he simply clasped hands and offered thanks.

They left the private room, walked out of the restaurant, and stood outside the entrance. Looking at Xu Qing, Zhou Qingpeng smiled and said, "All three of you should come visit me whenever you can. And I'll do the same. We all joined the sect at the same time, so we should keep in touch. At the very least, we can have a few people to trust in this cold, indifferent organization. Maybe that'll be the key to us making some progress. Say, Junior Brother Xu Qing, I'm in the Ground Bureau of the Coastguard Division. What bureau of the Violent Crimes Division are you in?"

"The Celestial Bureau."

Xu Qing's response seemed to sober Zhou Qingpeng up a bit. Xu Xiaohui also seemed surprised.

"Celestial Bureau?" Zhou Qingpeng exclaimed. "Hey, that's the same bureau as the famous fellow from the operation the other night. He was in Unit Six. Which unit are you in, Junior Brother Xu Qing?"

Xu Qing looked at Zhou Qingpeng and Xu Xiaohui, then over at Li Zimei. He hesitated.

"I'm also in Unit Six...."

Zhou Qingpeng's eyes went wide. Looking flabbergasted, he said, "You're in the same unit as that famous guy? Hold on, wasn't he also surnamed Xu...?"

Even Xu Xiaohui, who seemed to be the last in the group to pick up on things, suddenly realized the implication.

"There are usually twenty people in a unit..." Zhou Qingpeng muttered. At this point he was completely sober.

Li Zimei also looked shaken. However, back when she first saw Xu Qing enter the room, her acute senses had detected the scent of blood and gore.

Everything went quiet for a long moment. Then Zhou Qingpeng threw his head back, laughed, and clasped hands to Xu Qing as if to mask his surprise. Xu Xiaohui had a dazed expression on her face, and looked like she wanted to say something to Xu Qing, but ultimately decided not to.

Soon the group parted ways.



As for Zhou Qingpeng, after he was alone, he shivered briefly, and then his eyes shone with incredulity. Taking out his identity medallion, he sent a message to someone he knew, asking how many people surnamed Xu were in Celestial Bureau Unit Six....

Xu Qing watched everyone go, then turned to leave. However, after taking only a few steps, he sensed something unusual, and looked back in the direction of the restaurant.

A petite figure stood at the entrance, nodding over and over again while discussing something with one of the waiters. The waiter looked irritated.

“I know you’re a sect disciple. That doesn’t mean you can cause trouble whenever you want. Your group finished eating and we cleared the room. And now you’re asking to take the leftovers with you?”

The petite figure was Li Zimei. She had gone back hoping to get the leftover food, but hearing the waiter’s explanation, she now looked embarrassed.

Xu Qing walked over. As he neared, Li Zimei sensed his approach, and turned to look at him, her face bright red. Then her face went pale, and she started trembling from embarrassment.

“You shouldn’t have cleared the room so quickly,” Xu Qing said to the waiter.

The waiter looked at him. He had seen many disciples come to this restaurant, and could sense that Xu Qing was the type that wasn’t worth trifling with. His attitude became very respectful.

“You’re right, we shouldn’t have.” He hurried back into the restaurant and then came out shortly thereafter with a to-go package that he handed to Li Zimei.

Li Zimei mumbled a thanks, then stood there awkwardly. The reason she’d left and then come back was that she didn’t want any of the others to see her asking for leftovers. Now, her feelings of shame caused her to gnaw her lip so bad it started to bleed.

“Don’t worry about it,” Xu Qing said. “There’s no need to waste food. When I was young, I ate a lot of food that people had left to be thrown away. Sometimes I had to fight with others just to get those leftovers.”

Li Zimei looked at Xu Qing and opened her mouth to speak, except she couldn’t think of what to say. As the wind blew, the moonlight shone down, revealing a deep scar that ran along her neck, normally covered by her hair.

Looking at her, Xu Qing was reminded of the little girl back in the scavenger camp. What was more, he could detect the strong aura of mutagen on Li Zimei.

Disciples who didn’t have dharmaboats usually didn’t have a very big income. But that was only compared to disciples who did have a dharmaboat.

When compared to the common citizens, even disciples with a low income were still considered fairly well-off. Considering that, Li Zimei shouldn’t be in this condition. The only explanation as to why she would be so frugal was if she was saving every last merit point to eventually buy a dharmaboat.

After a moment, Xu Qing took out a few of the white boluses he had concocted. He put them in Li Zimei's hands.

"Keep up the good work. I look forward to the day when you can get that dharmaboat."

With that, he turned and walked off.

Xu Qing knew that no matter how much he helped Li Zimei, in the end, what would truly determine her fate was her own choices.

Li Zimei stared at Xu Qing as he left. Then she looked down at the white boluses, and a deep warmth rose up in her heart. In fact, it was such a cold world, and the sect was such a brutal place, that this was the first time she had felt such warmth. After a very long moment, she looked up, and there was deep gratitude in her eyes. She was thankful for the white boluses, but even more than that, she was thankful for the words of encouragement. She had her pride, and because of that, she didn't like people pitying her. In fact, she rejected all expressions of sympathy. But right now, she needed encouragement.

"Thank you," she murmured. "I'm going to get that dharmaboat!"

Chapter 69: Fair and Just

Time passed, and soon, the tenth month was half gone.

It should have been Cold Dew, but because Seven Blood Eyes was located next to the sea, the days were still hot. [1]

It was only after the sun set that the wind turned cold. It was the same with the sea, as if the sinister cold on the seafloor would follow the moonlight up into the world above, and eventually fill cultivators with the malicious iciness of winter. As the wind blew, moonlight spilled over the Port District and the bluish limestone that paved the streets.

The light of the moon also fell on Xu Qing, who was on his way back to his berth after a long day of work. He walked tall and straight in his gray robe, his long hair swaying around him. From a distance, he looked like a lonely figure under the moon in a scroll painting.

However, the frigid wind made him feel very cold. What was truly cold was not his body, though, but his memories of life in the slums. It was like a scorch mark on a painting. Even if ink was used to cover up that scorch mark, and no one noticed it... the scorch mark was still there. As the frigid wind blew, Xu Qing started walking a bit more quickly.

Half a month had passed since his reunion dinner with Zhou Qingpeng and the others. During that time, he reported in for duty regularly at the Violent Crimes Division, just like before. The promotion Zhou Qingpeng had mentioned never happened, but Xu Qing didn't care about that. As far as he was concerned, cultivation was the most important thing right now.

His Seaforming Scripture was at the peak of the seventh level, not far from the breakthrough point. He was in a similar position with the Sea and Mountain Incantation, being close to the eighth level.

It filled Xu Qing with anticipation.

Given his current battle prowess, once he broke into the eighth level with both techniques, he could absolutely crush the version of himself that existed before coming to Seven Blood Eyes. Although being in the eighth level wouldn't make him strong enough to defeat Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior in a fair fight, if he used his shadow and laid an ambush, he would at least be able to hold his own for a time.

"Soon..." he murmured, his eyes narrowed. Right now, he urgently needed to kill both Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior and that young merman.

When it came to the former, he knew that he just needed to wait for a bit longer, until he was stronger. As for the latter, he continued to seek the right opportunity.

Unfortunately, despite shadowing the young merman almost every day for the past half-month, the dharma protectors never left his side, making it impossible to make a move. On one occasion, the merman did as the Captain had mentioned, and went off on his own. But he used some special item to mask his presence, making it impossible to follow him.

Xu Qing continued to search patiently, but to no avail. After that incident, he came to the conclusion he should try to plant something on the merman to make it easy to track him.

Going forward, I should do the same with any opponent I have to deal with like this.

He would treat this new challenge just like he'd handled the old challenge of dealing with corpses.

Eventually, he reached his berth in Harbor 79. On his way back, he didn't become the subject of any malicious gazes, nor did anyone cause any trouble for him. He hadn't been in Seven Blood Eyes for very long, but he had already carved out a reputation for himself. Because of that, few people dared to target him.

He took out his dharmaboat, and the moment it appeared, it smacked down onto the water with a splash, sending waves out in all directions.

The boat was very impressive now, being more than 60 meters long and nine meters wide. It was pitch black in the moonlight, emanating a black glow from its scaly surface. With the vicious crocodile head on the prow, it really did look like a gigantic crocodile. The open mouth had countless razor-sharp teeth in it, and its eyes glowed with a mysterious, intimidating light. If one looked closely, it was possible to see that there was an outer layer of scales, beneath which were more scales. The boat had a special keel running its length that made it extremely tough.

As the wind whipped around it, the dharmaboat looked like a giant beast resting in the water, exuding a threatening aura. The boat's hold was much bigger than before, as was the cabin. It now had a location for rest, cultivation, and even a special medicinal plant laboratory. There was also a greenish light that flowed back and forth across the boat, almost like a living thing. That was something that made the dharmaboat much more durable. Most importantly, there was a large open spot in the deck that was currently empty, but had clearly been set aside for a special reason.

So far, Xu Qing had spent over 100 spirit stones, using mid-level materials to upgrade his dharmaboat to class-six!

The open spot in the deck had actually cost ten spirit stones. The reason was that a very unique item had caught his eye. It was a whale skull. Once set into the deck, it would make the dharmaboat much tougher, and would push it past class-six and to the peak of class-seven.

Unfortunately, the whale skull was shockingly expensive. After all, it was considered a high-level material. In order to purchase it, he would need a full 200 spirit stones. It seemed like a ridiculous price. But after going back several times to examine the whale skull, he finally gritted his teeth and decided that he would buy it.

Once my cultivation base reaches the eighth level, I'll buy that whale skull and push my dharmaboat to class-seven! Then... I'll go out into the open sea!

Boarding his dharmaboat, he sat down cross-legged to start his session of cultivation. The wind blew all night. By morning, it seemed so tired that it faded into nothing. Then the sun shone down, causing Xu Qing to open his eyes to a new day.

Now that they didn't need to investigate Night Dove, things were a lot more relaxed in the Violent Crimes Division. Occasionally, the Patrol Division would encounter situations they couldn't handle, and would request support. In fact, when Xu Qing showed up for roll call, Celestial Bureau Unit Six was given just such a support request.

Not many people went on the assignment. It was the Captain and five others including Xu Qing. As the Captain led them out onto the street, he explained the details. As it turned out, the Patrol Division actually needed help dealing with the Dispatch Division. The Dispatch Division and the Pilot Assistance Division were two of the most important parts of the port. Dispatch was responsible for all the dispatch orders for incoming and outgoing watercraft. Pilot Assistance was responsible for assisting ships and boats that wanted to enter the port.

Every single harbor in the port had a bureau of each division. And today, there was an issue in Harbor 96.

The Dispatch and Pilot Assistance Divisions in that harbor were at odds. Over 100 members of Pilot Assistance had gathered at the Dispatch Division office to protest. And thus, the Dispatch Division had put in a request for help from the Patrol Division. The Patrol Division, not confident that they could handle the situation, had in turn put in a request for support from Violent Crimes.

After hearing this explanation, one of the Unit Six constables sneered and said, "The reason for all of this is that the Dispatch Division in Harbor 96 should have given an incentive payment to Pilot Assistance this month. Instead, Dispatch only gave twenty percent of the usual. Put anybody in the shoes of Pilot Assistance, and they'd react the same."

"Disciples in Dispatch and Pilot Assistance get a regular salary," another constable said. "But Pilot Assistance provides a lot of help to Dispatch, which results in Dispatch getting extra money on the side. Because of that, it's customary for Dispatch to give incentives."

Although this was Xu Qing's first time hearing about this arrangement, it made sense to him.

"You know why?" another Unit Six constable said. "It's because Harbor 96 Dispatch just got a new overseer. It's that conclave disciple Zhao Zhongheng." [2]

Xu Qing's eyes narrowed, but he didn't say anything.

"Yeah, he's a conclave disciple, so he thinks he can change all the rules. I've heard that historically, Dispatch and Pilot Assistance split things fifty-fifty. But this Zhao

Zhongheng decided to change it to ninety-ten. No wonder the Pilot Assistance disciples are angry.”

Xu Qing listened to the talk as they proceeded to Harbor 96’s Dispatch Division. When they arrived, Xu Qing saw that the division headquarters itself looked like a large sail laid on the ground. It was made up of numerous structures, and had numerous dharmaboats docked off to the side.

In front of the main gate, over a hundred Pilot Assistance disciples had gathered. A group of Dispatch disciples was also there, and they were shouting at each other. The atmosphere was tense, as if fighting might break out at any moment. A large group of other random disciples had gathered to watch the commotion.

There were also Patrol Division disciples present, trying to mediate between the two groups. However, neither side seemed willing to back down. It seemed the slightest spark could cause a complete blowup. When the Patrol disciples saw the group from Violent Crimes arrive, they breathed sighs of relief. As for the crowd of onlookers, they parted to allow Violent Crimes through.

The Captain munched on an apple as he completely ignored Patrol as well as the two opposing factions. Instead, he found a suitable place off to the side to sit down and watch things play out. After all, the Violent Crimes Division only needed to get involved once deadly fighting broke out. Until that happened, they didn’t have to lift a finger.

The other Violent Crimes constables followed suit, including Xu Qing. After he sat down, he looked over the crowd. He didn’t spot Zhao Zhongheng, but he did see one familiar face.

Standing at the front of the group from the Pilot Assistance Division was the same pudgy young man who had given Xu Qing some condensing spirit leaves at the medicine shop some time ago. His name was Huang Yan. [3]

In fact, Huang Yan seemed to be speaking for the Pilot Assistance disciples. “You Dispatch bastards! You might as well make it impossible for us Pilot Assistance disciples in Harbor 96 to make a living. Without our monthly incentive, we won’t be able to keep up with cultivation and pill concocting. How are we supposed to survive like that in this deadly city? You’re literally trying to get us killed! Well since we’re dead either way, we might as well take you out first!”

Huang Yan wore an ordinary gray robe, but he stood with his shoulders square and his chest out. He had a very vicious expression on his face, and when he yelled, his neck bulged.

The person standing in the leadership position of the Dispatch disciples was a middle-aged man who wore the same gray daoist robe as Huang Yan. He actually wasn’t from the Dispatch Division in Harbor 96, but rather, was one of Zhao Zhongheng’s retinue.

Given Zhao Zhongheng’s status, there was no way he would go out to deal with a matter like this one, so he’d had one of his followers handle it.

The middle-aged cultivator’s eyes shone with cold light and extreme annoyance. He had been a follower of Zhao Zhongheng for a long time, and normally speaking, Offpeak disciples treated him with a lot of respect. He had brushed shoulders with so many conclave disciples that he’d come to forget his own status. As far as he was concerned, these gray-robed disciples weren’t even worth thinking about. That was especially true considering he knew without a doubt that Zhao Zhongheng wouldn’t change his mind about his decision.

“One incense stick’s worth of time,” he shouted. “Anyone who wants to live had better screw off before then!”

When he said that, the Pilot Assistance disciples’ killing intent surged. And when the Dispatch Division saw that, their eyes shone with cold light. Each disciple in Seven Blood Eyes was someone who had slaughtered their way out of a den of wolves, and didn’t ever feel the need to rely on the help of others. To people like that... killing wasn’t an unusual thing.

“You want us to screw off? Screw your grandpa!” Eyes wild, Huang Yan lunged forward in a head-butt, moving at top speed.

At that point, the tension exploded, and the two sides started fighting. Booms rang out, and the fluctuations of magical techniques shot out in all directions. Xu Qing looked on as hundreds of people started battling, and blood flowed.

The Patrol Division disciples who had been trying to broker a peace just backed up. At the same time, Xu Qing and the other Violent Crimes constables remained seated.

Xu Qing looked over at the Captain, who just kept eating his apple and occasionally cheering as he watched the fight play out.

“There are way too many people involved in the fight,” the Captain said between cheering. “A chaotic battle is the most dangerous type. Let them fight it out for a bit, then we’ll step in and calm things down. Besides... the sect doesn’t want two divisions slaughtering each other. I’d say there’s an eighty or ninety percent chance the bigwigs send someone to interfere.”

There were already casualties on both sides. As the screams and booms rang out, Xu Qing spotted Huang Yan in the crowd, eyes bloodshot as he fought wildly. He was in the seventh level of Qi Condensation, which made him particularly deadly in the fighting.

Before long, Xu Qing noticed the ringleader of the Dispatch Division, the middle-aged cultivator, backing up while glaring venomously at Huang Yan. Taking advantage of the fact that Huang Yan was facing away from him, the man waved his arm, causing a flying dagger to shoot out from his sleeve.

The dagger was made from a special material; it was translucent and glowed with a faint blue light. Apparently, it was poisoned.

Huang Yan was so caught up in fighting that he had no idea the dagger was heading straight toward his neck.

However, Xu Qing saw it. Eyes narrowing, he flicked his right hand, causing a drop of water to fly with shocking speed toward the flying dagger. When the water hit the dagger, a loud pinging sound rang out, and the dagger was knocked off course, speeding just past Huang Yan.

Expression flickering, Huang Yan looked at Xu Qing and nodded. Then a malevolent expression overtook his face as he turned toward the middle-aged cultivator, howled, and threw himself forward.

“Dammit!” the middle-aged cultivator growled, and he tried to leap back, but Huang Yan blocked his path, then lunged forward with a head-butt.

The resulting crunch was drowned out by the general chaotic sound of the battle, but Xu Qing saw the middle-aged cultivator’s face distort with pain before he launched a counter attack.

The fighting continued, and the casualties grew.

Off to the side, the Captain glanced at Xu Qing and then smiled enigmatically.

Xu Qing didn’t say anything, and in fact, looked away from Huang Yan. He had interfered in the fighting simply because Huang Yan had been so generous with those condensing spirit leaves.

As the fighting between the two departments grew more intense, a booming voice rang out like thunder.

“Everybody stand down!”

A figure appeared overhead, walking through the air and emanating a terrifying aura that weighed down on the entire area. All of the disciples below looked up in shock.

“Time to get to work,” the Captain said quietly, getting to his feet. He really looked like he was ready to enforce the law. Xu Qing and the others joined him.

At that exact same moment, the figure from above resolved into a young man in a violet daoist robe. He wasn’t particularly good-looking, and his eyes weren’t unusually threatening. But there was something shocking about him as he hovered in midair, looking down coldly at the disciples from both sides of the conflict.

Chapter 70: Let Me Treat You to an Egg

All of the disciples from Dispatch and Pilot Assistance stopped in place, expressions of reverence on their faces. One person in the crowd recognized who this person was, and immediately offered a respectful salute.

“Greetings, Honor Guard Li.”

Meanwhile, Zhao Zhongheng flew out from inside the Dispatch Division, looking a bit taken aback. Once outside, he bowed respectfully to the figure hovering above.

Xu Qing was shocked by all this. He could sense the spectacular fluctuations coming from this Honor Guard Li. And given that his memories of Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior were still fresh, he was certain Honor Guard Li was much stronger.

Meanwhile, Honor Guard Li looked around coldly and said, “I’m here with orders from Elder Zhao. All disciples from the Dispatch Division and the Pilot Assistance Division who participated in the fighting will be fined three months’ salary. Furthermore, Pilot Assistance will receive the same incentive as before! Zhao Zhongheng, Elder Zhao wants to see you. Come with me!”

Although Honor Guard Li kept his face expressionless when he looked at Zhao Zhongheng, inside, he was feeling very disappointed. He knew exactly what the problem was here: Zhao Zhongheng was the grandson of an elder, but he was also an idiot. He was a conclave disciple with a spectacular background, but his Offpeak assignment had resulted in a huge mess.

How could such a spectacular elder have such an idiot for a grandson?

Honor Guard Li looked away and made a grasping gesture. As a result, Zhao Zhongheng was snatched up, his face pale with shock and terror. Then the two of them disappeared in the direction of the Seventh Peak.

With him gone, the issue between Dispatch and Pilot Assistance was resolved. However, there were still bloodstains and corpses to deal with, and as a result, despite the issue being over, there was still visible animosity in the eyes of the disciples on both sides.

The Captain stepped forward, took a bite of his apple, and then said, "Alright, everyone, show's over. We'll be leaving now. By the way, that fellow just now, Honor Guard Li, is one of Elder Zhao's favorites. Li Diling. Considering that he personally came to take away Zhao Zhongheng, I'd say Zhao Zhongheng is in for some rough treatment."

With that, he walked away.

Unit Six went with him. As Xu Qing left, he looked over his shoulder and saw the disciples from the Pilot Assistance Division clustered around Huang Yan.

Xu Qing looked away, and the sea breeze lifted his hair back, revealing his eyes. From the way they glinted, it was clear he knew whom to show gratitude to, and whom to feel resentment against.

His shift came to an end as the evening sun cast its light over the lands.

Once off duty, Xu Qing spent some time shadowing the young merman. Unfortunately, the opportunity he sought never presented itself, so eventually he went back to his dharmaboat to work on his cultivation.

Life was a lot more interesting in Seven Blood Eyes compared to the scavenger basecamp, but Xu Qing kept the same routine when it came to cultivation. He knew that cultivation was the foundation of everything. Furthermore, his plan to go out on the open sea required a cultivation base breakthrough, and that point kept getting closer and closer.

It won't be hard to achieve that cultivation breakthrough. But I still need to upgrade my dharmaboat to class-seven. Unfortunately, I still can't afford the materials I need.

Pulling out a jug of alcohol, he took a sip. He wasn't sure when exactly he had acquired a taste for alcohol, but he liked it now. As he drank, he considered going to Plankspring Way to try to earn some cash. After thinking about it, he decided not to. Until he figured out a way to get rid of that innkeeper once and for all, he needed to stay away for fear of beating the grass and startling the snake.

He pulled the jug up to take another sip, which was when he realized it was completely empty. It was currently dark, and he wasn't inclined to go out to buy more alcohol, so he put the jug down to the side and closed his eyes to meditate.

Time passed, and soon the moon was up, casting its light over the water. The bay looked almost like a mirror in the night, both mysterious and beautiful. In those nighttime circumstances, Xu Qing opened his eyes from meditation and looked outside his boat. Shortly thereafter, footsteps could be heard on the shore. And then, Xu Qing's eyes glittered as he heard a familiar voice from outside.

"Brother Xu Qing, it's me, Huang Yan. From the Pilot Assistance Division!"



Hearing this, Xu Qing stepped out onto the main deck. There on the shore, bathed in moonlight, was a pudgy young man whose gray daoist robe was both wrinkled and stretched taut over his belly.

Seeing Xu Qing come out, Huang Yan grinned. After the fight earlier that day, something wonderful ended up happening to him, and he went out drinking. After getting a bit tipsy, he started thinking about the events of the day, then did some asking around to find out Xu Qing's name and his berth number. Then he'd come here to offer thanks in person.

"Brother Xu Qing, I'd like to say thanks for what you did today."

Xu Qing gave him a nod, then said, "There's no need for thanks. You already gave me some condensing spirit leaves at the medicine shop a while back."

"Huh?" Huang Yan said, looking stunned. Then he thought back and apparently remembered the incident. Shaking his head, he said, "You helped me because I gave you some condensing spirit leaves?"

"Not 'some,'" Xu Qing said, sounding very serious. "You gave me seven stalks in total."

Huang Yan blinked a few times, looked more closely at Xu Qing, and then laughed. He had originally planned to simply come here and say thanks. He hadn't intended to get into a conversation. At the most, he'd figured he would give a small gift as a token of gratitude. But now he was coming to feel that Xu Qing was more amusing than he'd realized. Reaching into his sack, he pulled out two palm-sized eggs. They were pale, and in the light of the moon, they seemed to sparkle.

"Brother, you're an interesting guy. Let me treat you to an egg."

With that, he tossed the egg toward Xu Qing. Unexpectedly, it passed right through the dharmaboat's defensive shield.

Surprised, Xu Qing waved his hand, causing a host of water droplets to appear, surrounding the egg and stopping it in mid-flight. Looking at it closely, he saw that even after passing through the defensive shield, it was still whole, without even a crack on its surface. He looked back at Huang Yan.

"What is it?"

"A little thingy."

Grinning, Huang Yan put his right index finger in his mouth, licked it, and then used it to poke a hole in the egg. Instantly, a fragrant aroma filled the area, which Xu Qing could smell even inside the defensive barrier of his boat. Huang Yan then swirled his finger around inside the egg, put it to his lips and took a sip, a rapturous expression on his face.

Meanwhile, the wonderful aroma caused Xu Qing's cultivation base to stir, and he felt an instinctual sensation inside of him telling him that the egg was something absolutely extraordinary. After a moment of hesitation, he tried to poke a hole in the egg with his finger, only to discover that the egg was extremely tough. He tried again with more force, but nothing happened. Confusion shone in his eyes.

Huang Yan burped, then said, "You need to use your spit. These thingies are strange. If you don't use spit, it's way too hard to break them open."

Xu Qing hesitated for a moment, then sucked his finger for a moment before poking a small hole in the egg. Instantly, the same amazing aroma spread out, causing his cultivation base to stir even more dramatically. In fact, his flesh and blood seemed to thirst for a higher level of life.

Panting slightly, Xu Qing put the egg to his lips and took a sip. Then his eyes went wide and he took a much bigger sip.

Huang Yan stood off to the side, staring in anticipation as he waited for Xu Qing to react.

However, even after a very long moment passed, Xu Qing didn't say anything.

"Well?" Huang Yan said. "What do you think? Was it good?"

"Yeah, pretty good." Xu Qing felt something warm flowing through him, and he even had beads of sweat on his forehead.

"Well that's a given," Huang Yan said, looking pleased. "It took a lot of effort for me to get these eggs. My Elder Sister loves them, but today I'm letting you try them."

By this point Huang Yan was starting to get a sense of Xu Qing's personality, so he took a deep breath and didn't say anything further.

Neither did Xu Qing. He just continued to drink from the egg.

Time passed, and silence prevailed. Huang Yan sat on the shore, Xu Qing sat on his boat. Neither seemed inclined to disturb the other.

It was a fantastic feeling as far as Huang Yan was concerned. He felt more and more relaxed, and as the effects of the alcohol he'd consumed earlier continued to take hold over him, his eyes became a bit unfocused. Then, he looked at Xu Qing sitting in the moonlight, and couldn't help but say, "Say, Xu Qing, you're pretty good-looking. But that's not going to help much if you fall in love. It'll make girls feel insecure. When you look like me, though, girls can have true peace of mind!"

Xu Qing didn't respond. He just sat there sipping the egg, making sure not to lose a single drop.

Huang Yan didn't seem bothered by Xu Qing's silence. Stretching out on the beach, he put his hands on his chest and looked up at the moon. It seemed like he was thinking about a specific person. He sighed.

"Do you have a special someone, Xu Qing?"

Xu Qing was getting a sense of Huang Yan's personality; he was obviously a warm and casual person. Xu Qing shook his head.

"See, I told you! With your good looks, it won't be easy to woo a girl. It's different for me. In fact, I don't mind telling you that today was a really great day. Not because of the reward I got from the Pilot Assistance Division after that fight. No, it's because I found out my Elder Sister really does care about me. That's why I went drinking tonight. You know what, Xu Qing? I've been sending my Elder Sister gifts for years

now. Today was the first time she asked me to get something for her. She said to do it soon as possible! This is so amazing. She actually likes me!”

Xu Qing hesitated. He had never fallen in love, and wasn't even sure what to do if it happened. But he did know that something seemed off about what Huang Yan was saying. Glancing curiously over at Huang Yan, he could see that he was a bit drunk, and also, that it wasn't the time to question him.

Then he thought back to what the shopkeeper at the medicine shop had said about Huang Yan chasing some girl for seven or eight years.

After a moment, Xu Qing knew what he should say. Taking another sip from the egg, he spoke from his heart and said, “Congratulations.”

Looking even happier, Huang Yan patted his stomach. “I can tell you mean it, Xu Qing. Not like other people. You know what? I'm the kind of person who repays kindness with kindness. You helped me out today, and I'm going to make sure you didn't help me in vain.”

Huang Yan sat up and took out a small leather sack. He tossed it to Xu Qing.

Scrambling to his feet, he continued, “There are some dharmaboat materials in there. Consider them a gift to commemorate our newfound friendship. Well, I'm taking off now. Let's hang out again sometime.”

Swaying a bit as he walked away, he took out his identity medallion and started to send a message....

Xu Qing simply watched him sending a message and chuckling as he left. He was glad he hadn't said anything more than he did. After Huang Yan disappeared in the distance, Xu Qing went back inside the cabin.

Meanwhile, the sea breeze blew past Xu Qing and through his hair, carrying his scent through the night toward the main city.

The wind passed numerous structures, and blew through street after street. It witnessed all the bustling activity. Eventually, it started to lose power toward the south part of the city, where the Sixth Peak rose high. And it finally stopped upon reaching an old man who was quietly climbing the stairs that rose up the peak.

If the wind had a spirit, and it could return to Xu Qing and report what it saw, he would recognize that man. It was none other than... Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior.

The moonlight revealed that his face was more wrinkled than before. In fact, every wrinkle seemed deep and full of melancholy. Altogether, they made the patriarch seem full to the brim with bitterness. After trudging to a spot halfway up the mountain peak, he stopped outside of a mansion grotto.

It had an arched stone doorway surrounded by verdant green grass. Above the doors, the name of the grotto was carved in calligraphy as flamboyant as dancing dragons and swirling phoenixes.

Idle House Grotto.

The name alone made it obvious that whoever occupied this mansion grotto was calm, tranquil, and elegant. They were the kind of person who liked to pick flowers and relax indoors.

Outside of the grotto, Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior took a deep breath, then clasped his hands and bowed.

“Fellow Daoist Idlecloud. Do you have time to visit with an old friend?”