

## Timescape 71

### Chapter 71: Jabbering Patriarch

The bright moon illuminated the dome of heaven, revealing a few idle clouds.

However, outside of the mansion grotto on the Sixth Peak, Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior actually looked gloomy in the moonlight. And that gloominess amplified the worry visible on his face. The truth was that he didn't care too much for the wealth he'd lost. The real reason he'd coughed up blood was the fury of seeing his sect headquarters ruined.

The spirit stones that had been out for the taking had been placed there mostly for decoration.

And what he worried about now was that his enemy was in Seven Blood Eyes, getting stronger and stronger. As anxiety mounted within him, he looked at the mansion grotto, and noted how silent it was. There seemed to be no response to his greeting.

Enough time passed for half an incense stick to burn. Then, he heard a sigh from within.

"Long time no see, Master Freespirit."

Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior's actual daoist name was Master Freespirit. However, it had been years since people in the area started referring to him as a patriarch. Thus, there were only a few people who called him by his daoist name. When Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior heard that name, a flicker of reminiscence appeared in his eyes, and he sighed lightly.

"Long time no see," he said.

The closed stone door of the grotto rumbled open, revealing inky darkness within, out of which strode an unusual-looking person. He was an old man who walked with a very rigid gait. He wore a deep blue daoist robe, had long gray hair, and he had a very somber expression on his face.

As he walked up to Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior and stood in front of him, the wind caught the edge of his robe and it swayed to the side, revealing... that he didn't have legs of flesh and blood. Instead, his legs were a mechanical construction. They glittered with blue light, and seemed especially cold because of the moonlight.

The blue-robed old man looked up at the clouds in the sky, and softly said, "It has indeed been a long time. And thus... I have to wonder what brings you here today."

Although they were standing on equal footing, it actually seemed like Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior was positioned beneath him as an inferior. After a moment of bleak silence, Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior explained the situation with Xu Qing.

"A huge calamity struck my sect recently.... Before leaving, the little thief stole all of my resources. He poisoned everyone, set a number of fires, and basically burned the headquarters to the ground.

"If he was just some ordinary brat, I wouldn't care as much. But after spending a huge amount of money to run a background check, I found out that he joined Seven Blood Eyes. Not only that, but he's doing well here. Now I'm sitting around worried all

the time. I can't stop thinking about accounts I read in the ancient records a few years ago.

"I've actually studied many ancient stories, and as it turns out, people like him usually have an unbeatably strong destiny. I was really an idiot to go after him with only two grand elders to back me up. I should have taken the whole sect with me. I should have gone all out to destroy him! Either that, or I should have turned weapons of war into gifts of jade and silk and just apologized...."

"Ai. Sadly, I missed that chance. Anyway, based on my analysis, I'm absolutely certain that after he grows up, he'll be impossible to stop.... And then I'll be killed beyond the shadow of a doubt!

"I just know in my heart that, once he rises to prominence, he'll rain fire and blood down on your Seven Blood Eyes, and completely destroy it! The ancient records all say that things will play out that way. And then, all it will take will be a single word from him, and my Golden Vajra Warrior Sect will be reduced to ashes."

Having finished his explanation, Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior hung his head bitterly.

The blue-robed old man stood there with a strange expression on his face as he listened to Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior. Then he shook his head.

"Master Freespirit, after all these years, you... really have taken to jabbering. You think a nobody like that has an unbeatably strong destiny? That he's going to rain fire and blood on Seven Blood Eyes, and wipe the sect out of existence? With one word, he'll destroy your Golden Vajra Warrior Sect? It sounds to me like you're imagining things...."

The patriarch sighed. "You don't get it. I trust my instincts...."

Seeing the patriarch like this, the old man in blue shook his head again. The truth was that the two of them didn't have some sort of deep friendship. Other than a few interactions years ago, they weren't very close.

"What peak is the kid assigned to?"

"The Seventh Peak," the patriarch replied quietly. "According to the background search I paid for, his name is Xu Qing, and he's in the Violent Crimes Division."

"It doesn't matter what division he's in, he's still just an Offpeak disciple. That said, though we treat them like venomous bugs in a jar, and even allow them to fight and kill each other, the fact remains that there are certain sect rules which just can't be broken...."

Seeing the patriarch look even more dejected than ever, the old man in blue sighed again.

“Ah, whatever. Look, I can have him roughed up, then force him to give you back the things he stole. If he doesn’t have them, then I’ll take everything he owns.”

With that, he took out his identity medallion and sent a message. Then he pointed at Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior. “Okay, it’s done. As for you, spend some time working on your cultivation! Even after all these years, you’re still just in early Foundation Establishment? You haven’t made any progress at all! Stop spending all your time reading those random ancient records. Stop sitting around jabbering all the time! If you keep this up, you’re going to develop an inner devil!”

The patriarch seemed to have more to say, but held his tongue. Things hadn’t turned out exactly as he’d hoped, but he could see that no amount of arguing was going to do any good. Sighing inwardly, he clasped hands and bowed.

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The night passed without incident for Xu Qing. At dawn, he opened his eyes from meditation and looked at the sack lying next to him. Last night, Huang Yan had given it to him as a gift, and inside were three mutant beast parts. There were two diamond-shaped skulls, and one feather.

All of them glittered with red light, indicating that they came from the same creature. Their auras were extraordinary, but unfortunately, they wouldn’t boost the toughness of his boat. Instead, they were related to magical techniques and speed.

I wonder how many spirit stones I could get if I sold them. Also, I’ve built up about 1,000 white boluses....

After organizing his belongings, Xu Qing left the dharmaboat and headed to the vendor cart where he usually purchased breakfast. The vendor was a burly, middle-aged man with no cultivation base. Like most common citizens in the capital city, he was a frank and straightforward person, and when he saw Xu Qing approach, he grinned. He liked this handsome young man from the Violent Crimes Division, and felt that he didn’t have the vicious air that most Seven Blood Eyes disciples did.

Xu Qing didn’t even need to put in an order. As soon as he walked up, the vendor served him some stuffed buns, steamed eggs, and a plate of pickled vegetables.

Xu Qing thanked him and sat off to the side, picked up some chopsticks, and started eating. He had become accustomed to eating with chopsticks lately. After finishing the meal, he put some spirit coins onto the table, then left for the Violent Crimes Division.

Morning roll call was a simple thing. He just had to swipe his identity card on the limestone stele at the Celestial Bureau, then wait for the formalities to end. Xu Qing was used to the process. After the roll call, he checked the duty roster, then headed back out onto the street. As he left, other disciples in the Violent Crimes Division offered polite greetings. After what happened with the Night Dove operation, he had a good reputation in the division.

Out on the street, Xu Qing bought a few pears to eat as he headed toward the medicine shop. His plan was to sell his white boluses, and also see how much he could get for the materials Huang Yan had given him the night before. Afterward, he hoped he would have enough to purchase that whale skull.

Before long, he caught sight of the shop he usually frequented to buy and sell medicinal pills and plants. It was as bustling as it usually was.

Xu Qing was a regular at this location, so as soon as he entered, the busy shopkeeper noticed him and smiled.

“Haven’t seen you for a while. Are you here to buy plants or sell pills?”

“Sell pills.”

Smiling even more warmly, the shopkeeper glanced at the pills Xu Qing handed him, then started counting out 20 spirit stones.

“You’re not even going to inspect them?” Xu Qing asked.

The shopkeeper waved his hand dismissively. “There’s no need to inspect your pills.”

Xu Qing nodded. He was absolutely confident that all the pills he’d concocted were of the highest quality. After taking the spirit stones, he clasped hands and left.

After he was gone, the shopkeeper took out a jade slip and sent a message to his boss. Then he yelled at one of the shop clerks to come over, put the medicinal pills in a box, and take them to the Second Peak. The clerk knew how important the pills were to the boss, so he packed them up quickly then ran out of the shop at top speed.

Before long, the box had been delivered to a young woman in her mansion grotto on the Second Peak. She looked to be about sixteen or seventeen years old, and wore a pale orange daoist robe. Sitting down with the box, she examined the pills.

In the light of the sun, her skin was as fair as snow. Her eyes glistened, and her long, black hair was coiled in a bun like that a princess might wear. The bun was fastened with a pearl hairpin, but a few strands of hair hung down and drifted about her face.

This young woman was the owner of the medicine shop, and was the same person Xu Qing had passed by some days ago when leaving the shop. As she examined the pills, the young woman made a faint exclamation of surprise, and her eyes widened.

I can’t believe they have such a high level of purity.

Although she could achieve the same quality, she couldn’t do it every single time. All of a sudden, she felt her sense of competitiveness stir.

If a Seventh Peak disciple can do this, then so can I. After all, I’m a cultivator who specializes in the dao of alchemy!

She waved her hand, causing several medicinal plants to fly over to her. Looking very serious, she started a session of pill concocting.

As she was trying to match Xu Qing’s efforts, he was walking the street toward the shops where the Sixth Peak disciples offered equipment forging services. As he neared one shop in particular, his eyes flickered with suspicion. Perhaps it was a misperception, but he felt like the vendors from the Sixth Peak were, intentionally or otherwise, glancing at him out of the corners of their eyes. Before, it hadn’t been like this.

Are they watching me?

Eyes narrowing, he put his guard up even more, and at the same time, gave up his plan to visit the Sixth Peak vendors. Instead of purchasing any materials, he headed back to Harbor 79, where he went into a session of cultivation.

Days passed and nothing happened. Xu Qing was still feeling suspicious, though, and was cautious everywhere he went. He also went through the Sixth Peak vendor area a few times to see what would happen.

He never again got the sense he was being watched. However, he didn't let down his guard. A few days later, after confirming repeatedly that it was safe, he picked a shop that had never participated in the strange behavior, and headed in that direction. He really did want to upgrade his dharmaboat, and virtually all the places to buy the necessary parts were run by the Sixth Peak. They essentially had a monopoly on that business in the Port District.

Even if something strange was going on, Xu Qing was ready to give it a shot.

Keeping his guard fully up, he hurried down the street toward the shop. However, that was when he heard a familiar voice.

“Xu Qing.”

He looked over his shoulder to find that Huang Yan was a short distance behind him. Huang Yan waved enthusiastically as he hurried to catch up, his fat jiggling up and down as he ran.

“Xu Qing, guess what? My Elder Sister returned my messages again today! Hahahaha! Come on, I'm in such a great mood that I have to treat you to some eggs!”

With that he reached out to grab Xu Qing.

Xu Qing was inclined to step back to avoid him, but then he thought about those fantastic eggs, as well as the materials Huang Yan had given him, and he hesitated. “I need to sell some things.”

“Sell things? Are you low on money? I can give you some!”

Xu Qing shook his head.

“Well, fine,” Huang Yan said, looking no less happy than before. “But at least let me come along. Afterward, the two of us are going to splurge on eggs! Deal? Okay, deal!” Huang Yan was clearly dead set on sharing his good mood. Looking around, he pointed at one of the nearby shops. “That's a good one. I've been there a few times.”

It was the same shop Xu Qing had intended to go to, and it was busy inside. In fact, Xu Qing recognized one of the customers. It was none other than Zhang San, who was there buying some things. When Xu Qing entered with Huang Yan, Zhang San noticed, smiled, and called out a greeting. [1]

“Come on, let's go,” Huang Yan said. “Hurry up and sell your stuff. Remember, the eggs are the most important thing right now.”

Xu Qing found the shopkeeper and walked over without any hesitation.

It was a big shop with two floors. There were all sorts of mutant beast materials up for sale, and all of them were very expensive. As Xu Qing neared the counter, the shopkeeper looked up. He was middle-aged, with a mustache shaped like the character 八, and a shrewd look. Upon seeing Xu Qing approaching, he smiled.

“Hello, Fellow Disciples. What are you looking to buy?”

“I want to sell some materials,” Xu Qing said calmly, then took out the materials from his sack. He didn’t just take out the items Huang Yan had gifted him, he also took out some things he’d taken from criminals he’d killed recently.

The shopkeeper looked at Xu Qing, then at the items. Muttering to himself, he looked at something behind the counter, then peered at Xu Qing. Face darkening and eyes turning hard, he said, “There’s something wrong with these items, young friend! A few days ago, the Golden Vajra Warrior Sect got in touch with our Sixth Peak and reported a big heist perpetrated on their sect. They lost a lot of resources, and the items here... are listed on the incident report as belonging to the Golden Vajra Warrior Sect! Young friend, are you really trying to sell me stolen goods? What’s the meaning of this! Don’t tell me that you have something to do with the Golden Vajra Warrior Sect heist? Could it be that a disciple from the magnificent Seventh Peak actually robbed the Golden Vajra Warrior Sect?”

It was obvious that the shopkeeper was deliberately speaking louder and louder, until every disciple in the entire shop could hear what he was saying. By the time he was done talking, the shop was completely silent, and everyone was looking at Xu Qing and the shopkeeper.

Xu Qing didn’t really care, though he was sighing inwardly. Despite all his caution, he had been unable to avoid this situation. Obviously, this whole thing was connected to Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior, and it caused the killing intent in his heart to grow even more intense. And now he knew that some important person from the Sixth Peak was actually working with the patriarch.

He glanced at the shopkeeper’s throat, as well as all the materials on the shelves, and then looked out at the open sea. His eyes started to turn cold as he tried to decide whether to just leave, or get into an argument.

As he deliberated, Huang Yan’s eyes turned wide and slapped his hand onto the counter with a loud thump.

“Stolen goods? Is this a stolen good?” Huang Yan picked up one of the mutant beast skulls he’d given to Xu Qing as a gift. At the same time, his eyes burned with unprecedented anger, as though he had just been insulted in the most outrageous manner. “This freaking thing belongs to me, got it, you bastard? How dare you say that one of my things is stolen!”

Brimming with indignation, Huang Yan threw the bone into the shopkeeper’s face.

Chapter 72: Terrifying Huang Yan

Huang Yan's voice was loud, and his eyes burned with fury. As far as he was concerned, the shopkeeper was insulting him, not Xu Qing. After all, among the things Xu Qing was offering for sale were the items Huang Yan had given to him.

The shopkeeper's hand snapped up to grab the bone Huang Yan had thrown in his face. His expression was now very grim. Inside, he was thinking scornfully of how Huang Yan had spent eight years working in the Pilot Assistance Division all for the purpose of chasing after a girl. The shopkeeper had the feeling this "Elder Sister" was probably just a random country farm girl, yet Huang Yan wouldn't give up on showering her with expensive gifts. If Huang Yan was just looking for trouble, the shopkeeper had no problem giving it to him.

"You're absolutely correct," the shopkeeper said casually. "They are stolen items. Apparently, you were an accomplice in the Golden Vajra Warrior Sect heist. Someone report this to the Violent Crimes Division! The perpetrators of the Golden Vajra Warrior Sect heist have turned themselves in!"

In response, one of the shop clerks dramatically pulled out a transmission jade slip, looked at the shopkeeper, and then slowly sent a message to report the incident. The other customers in the shop, who were all disciples from various mountain peaks, looked on with glittering eyes.

Disciples who joined Seven Blood Eyes and lived in the environment they did were all clever people. Everyone present could see what was going on here. This matter didn't really have anything to do with the Golden Vajra Warrior Sect heist, but rather... the fact that someone from the Sixth Peak wanted to cause trouble for either Xu Qing or Huang Yan. Or both.

No one in the crowd could tell for sure who was being targeted, but to everyone, it seemed likely that it was Xu Qing, as he was the one who had taken out the 'stolen' goods.

Not one person said a thing. Everyone just looked on, including Zhang San.

Xu Qing wasn't paying attention to the bystanders. He was most concerned with Huang Yan and his reaction. The two of them didn't have a very deep relationship, and because of that, he was a bit suspicious as to why Huang Yan was doing this.

He was even more suspicious of why the shopkeeper brought up the Violent Crimes Division, and how the clerk made the obviously exaggerated show of sending in a report. Altogether, this didn't seem like a trap set up by Huang Yan to kill him. After all, if Huang Yan wanted him dead, he could have just attacked him directly. There wouldn't be a need to drag the Violent Crimes Division into the situation and complicate matters. To the important people in the sect, Offpeak disciples killing each other wasn't worth causing a huge commotion.

In fact, this whole thing seemed more like an attempt to pressure him into returning the items he'd stolen from the Golden Vajra Warrior Sect.

Beyond all that, on his approach to the shop, he noticed that there were no intense spirit power fluctuations in the area, which indicated there weren't any powerful experts in hiding.

As Xu Qing pondered these things, and the shopkeeper reported the matter to the Violent Crimes Division, Huang Yan got even angrier.

"Violent Crimes Division? Xu Qing is in the Violent Crimes Division!"

Brow furrowed, the shopkeeper said, "Oh? Well, knowing the law and breaking it anyway is an even worse crime!"

Barking an angry laugh, Huang Yan was about to take a step forward when Xu Qing, whose suspicions were getting even deeper, held his arm out in front of Huang Yan and quietly said, "This has nothing to do with you, Huang Yan. You should leave." Examining the shopkeeper's throat, he continued, "These things are battle trophies I took from criminals I killed, so stop slandering me. If there's something you want to say, say it."

The shopkeeper's guard immediately went up. Xu Qing's reaction made it obvious he wasn't an average person. Truth be told, considering the situation had been communicated to the shopkeeper from the Sixth Peak, he could have simply demanded that Xu Qing return the stolen items. Instead, he saw it as an opportunity to make a small fortune, and had thus hatched a plan to slander Xu Qing.

However, Xu Qing had seen through his plan, which was very telling. What was more, people who could earn a good reputation in the Violent Crimes Division were generally complicated people.

As a shopkeeper, this man had powerful backers. He wasn't like the ordinary disciples, stuck like venomous bugs in a jar. Generally speaking, Offpeak disciples would go out of their way to avoid causing problems for him. However, the chill he felt on his throat made him change his strategy. Not wanting to cause further complications between himself and Xu Qing, and figuring he'd put on enough pressure already, he decided to simply explain the situation, including the demands of his superiors on the Sixth Peak.

Except, right at that moment, Huang Yan shouted, "You don't need to help me out, Xu Qing! This matter has nothing to do with you. They're obviously targeting me. I know what's going on here. This is the work of Zhao Zhongheng. He has a grudge against me and knew I would end up coming here, so he hired you to smear my name!"

The shopkeeper looked at Huang Yan with an odd expression on his face. Xu Qing was also looking at Huang Yan, his eyes narrowed. Xu Qing just wanted to resolve whatever the issue was, but Huang Yan had apparently decided that this whole thing was about himself.

Smacking the counter loudly, Huang Yan was about to keep yelling when the sound of footsteps drifted in from outside, along with a cold, sinister voice.

"Who would dare to perpetrate a crime like this?"

Along with the words, a group of people entered the shop.

When Xu Qing looked over his shoulder at the new arrivals, his eyes narrowed even further. They all wore gray daoist robes with Violent Crimes Division badges prominently displayed on them. In the lead position was the captain of Unit Three, the very same young merman Xu Qing had been shadowing for the past half a month. He had four Unit Three disciples with him.

Looking at Xu Qing coolly, he said, "Well, if it isn't you."

Xu Qing didn't respond, but the vigilance in his heart grew to an even more intense level. The Violent Crimes Division had arrived very quickly. What was more, the person to arrive was the very same young merman he'd had issues with in the past. Something seemed suspicious about the situation.



Things only seemed to be getting more and more complicated. There were three main issues. The first was the shopkeeper trying to pressure him into compensating the Golden Vajra Warrior Sect. That said, it was obvious that the situation would be easy to resolve. The second issue was Huang Yan taking the blame for everything, for unknown reasons. The third issue was the young merman showing up, which hardly seemed to be coincidental.

Without understanding the details of exactly what was going on, Xu Qing didn't want to take action.

Meanwhile, the young merman glanced around the shop, and the people in it, with a look of scorn. The truth was that he had never wanted to join Seven Blood Eyes. The Merfolk community wasn't large, but even still, he had a very high status in it, and as a result, had become an arrogant person. What was more, he looked down on humans. When the report came into the Violent Crimes Division, the case had originally been assigned to the Celestial Bureau. However, because it involved a person in that bureau, the case was then transferred to the Earth Bureau. And when the young merman found out Xu Qing was involved, he remembered their clash during the big operation, and personally took over.

Pointing at Xu Qing and Huang Yan, he said, "We have the criminal behind the Golden Vajra Warrior Sect heist right here, along with his stolen goods. And someone from our very own Violent Crimes Division is in on the whole thing. Arrest them both and take them back for interrogation!"

Huang Yan, seeing that the Violent Crimes Division was turning a blind eye to the truth, got even angrier. Stepping between Xu Qing and the young merman, he shouted, "Are you blind, you idiot? You think my stuff was stolen?"

Taking out his bag of holding, he turned it upside down in front of the eyes of everyone present. Instantly, hundreds of crafting ingredients and building materials started pouring out from inside, creating a huge pile. There were all sorts of items from mutant beasts, mostly bones and feathers from the same type of creature.

The onlookers gasped in surprise. All of these people had been around the block; they knew that this collection had to be worth thousands of spirit stones. Furthermore, the mere fact that Huang Yan had a bag of holding caused all of their eyes to glitter.

"You think my stuff is stolen? Well what about all this? Did I get all this from the Golden Vajra Warrior Sect? This is actually the complete corpse of a windwalker, except for the most precious part, the skull, which I gave to my Elder Sister. Are you trying to tell me I stole a windwalker??"

Even Xu Qing was so surprised to see these items that he gasped softly. He'd known that Huang Yan was rich, but seeing all of these things come out of his bag of holding came as a shock.

The shopkeeper was starting to feel a headache coming on. The Violent Crimes Division had shown up much more quickly than he anticipated, throwing a big kink into his plan. He looked hesitant. However, once you nock the arrow to the bow, you cannot but shoot it, and therefore, he braced himself and said, "The Golden Vajra Warrior Sect's report mentioned a windwalker!"

It seemed like a completely outrageous development, so Xu Qing just stood there observing coldly.

“Since the skull was also stolen,” the young merman said, “and you gave it to your Elder Sister, that means we have another accomplice. Take them away for interrogation, and go arrest the female criminal as well.”

The four Unit Three disciples immediately headed toward Xu Qing and Huang Yan. One toward Huang Yan. Three toward Xu Qing.

“You’re the criminal!” Huang Yan shouted, rolling up his sleeves. “Your whole family is full of criminals!” Then he stalked toward the disciples.

Xu Qing looked coldly at the three people heading toward him. Before, he’d intended to hold back until he knew exactly what was going on. But since the people from Unit Three were being so aggressive, he lifted his right hand. Instantly, water droplets filled the area, causing an intense pressure to build up. The disciples from Unit Three suddenly looked shocked as they realized they were locked in place and incapable of moving.

Although these people had been present during the joint operation with Unit Six against Night Dove, none of them had personally seen Xu Qing in action. They had only heard stories. But now that they were experiencing his strength in person, it caused waves of surprise to fill their hearts.

“Resisting arrest?” the young merman said, smiling to reveal a mouthful of sharp teeth. At the same time, he strode forward, moving so fast it caused a sonic boom in the shop. An instant later, he was in front of Xu Qing, reaching out with his right hand to grab his neck.

He had long, sharp fingernails, and he moved with such incredible speed that an ordinary person wouldn’t have been able to react. However, in the instant before he arrived, a black iron skewer appeared right in front of him.

He was fast, but Xu Qing was faster. And as Xu Qing pulled out the iron skewer, he lifted his right foot and sent his knee flying forward.

The young merman pulled his right hand back just as Xu Qing’s knee smashed into his own knee.

A boom rang out, and while Xu Qing rocked in place, the young merman staggered back five paces, then looked up with a bloodthirsty gleam in his eyes.

“Well, isn’t this interesting?” As he spoke, the ripples of the ninth level of Qi Condensation erupted from him, and behind him appeared a projected image of a vicious merman wielding a black trident. This wasn’t a projection of energy and blood, but rather, a natural bloodline power he possessed. Again, he moved toward Xu Qing, causing rumbling sounds to fill the shop.

They smashed into each other again, then again. Seven or eight times in a row, they clashed, sending out shockwaves that might have destroyed the shop if it weren’t for the spell formations built into it.

The surrounding onlookers watched with utter shock.

“They’re so strong!”

“The captain of Unit Three isn’t human. He’s got a Merfolk bloodline power, and battle prowess comparable to a disciple in the great circle of Qi Condensation from a powerful sect. As for Xu Qing... I can’t believe he’s so astonishing!”

“Remember that story going around about the only non-captain who killed a hideout chief during the Night Dove operation? Now that I think about it, that person was Xu Qing!”

Upon hearing the reaction of the crowd, an enigmatic smile appeared on Huang Yan’s face as he huddled in a hiding spot off to the side. Then the smile disappeared, replaced by an expression of fury as he yelled, “Great job, Xu Qing! Cut that fish down to size! He should die for trying to frame us! Kill him and we can have fish for dinner!” [1]

More booms rang out as the young merman was again forced backward, blood seeping out of the corners of his mouth. At the same time, the bloodthirsty look in his eyes grew stronger. To him, fresh blood was very exciting. Besides, he had a trump card that he hadn’t played yet. In fact, he put both of his hands together to start an incantation gesture.

What he didn’t notice was that he had just stepped on Xu Qing’s shadow.

Xu Qing’s expression had remained placid the entire time. But now his eyes flickered with killing intent, and he was about to make a move. However, that was when several very powerful auras suddenly locked down the entire area.

“Wait!” the young merman said, a vicious expression on his face. “I can handle this. Just watch.”

However, in that exact moment, an even more terrifying aura suddenly appeared outside the shop. Rumbling sounds echoed out as the other handful of auras that had locked down the area crumbled like dried-up weeds.

The young merman’s eyes went wide as he looked over his shoulder. Xu Qing also looked in the same direction, his pupils constricting.

A figure appeared, walking into the shop. At the same time, the cold voice of a woman rang out.

“Did someone just say I have stolen goods?”

Her voice was like an icy wind that froze everyone in place. Whether it was the young merman or the Sixth Peak shopkeeper, her single sentence caused everyone to shiver uncontrollably and look at the person who had just entered. She was a young woman, tall and menacing, with bronze skin and long, flowing hair. There was nothing dainty and beautiful about her; rather, she seemed wild and violent. She wore a pale violet daoist robe, and wielded a huge black sword that was almost two meters long. As she entered the shop, dragging the sword behind her, the tip caused sparks to fly up off the ground, and it left a huge furrow both in the door lintel and the floor.

Seeing her, everyone inhaled sharply. Someone bowed at the waist, then another, until everyone was bowing and clasping hands.

“Well met, Second Highness!”

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“Well met, Second Highness!”

This young woman was like a senior princess on the Seventh Peak. She had the authority to kill Offpeak disciples at her whim, and could even cripple conclave disciples if she wished. She was... the peaklord’s second successor apprentice.

At this point, Huang Yan scuttled out of his hiding spot and said, “Elder Sister! You’re finally here!”

### Chapter 73: Domineering Second Highness

The peaklord of the Seventh Peak had three successor apprentices.

One of them was forthright, charismatic, and made friends easily. That was, of course, the third highness.

One of them had a fiery temper and was feared by fellow disciples. That was clearly the second highness. It wasn’t just disciples from the Seventh Peak who could feel her wrath; disciples from other peaks could as well. Everyone knew that she had a violent temper, as well as a bewildering level of strength. Say one wrong thing to her, and she might attack you. Furthermore... over the years, her wrath had been unleashed even on Foundation Establishment cultivators from other peaks. A lot of them.

Because of her spectacular strength, and the fact that she represented the peaklord, no one could even attempt to reason with her. She was so domineering that her name was known throughout all of Seven Blood Eyes. Even elders hated running into her, much less ordinary disciples. In fact, she wasn’t just famous in the sect. She was even more well-known on the open sea. She had killed too many pirates to count, and there were entire minor species who would tremble upon hearing her name.

Now that she was here, her incredible might weighed down on everyone present, even Xu Qing. He felt an intense sensation of crisis in his heart, something that reminded him of the spectacular beasts in the forbidden region jungle.

In fact, she seemed far stronger than Honor Guard Li, to the point where Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior would seem weak in her presence.

Xu Qing was more on guard than ever and even backed up a few steps out of caution.

The threatening sensation he felt from Second Highness was simply too intense and terrifying. In fact, he even looked through the door and out onto the street, but didn’t see anyone... apparently, nobody else in the sect cared about what was happening here.

However... Huang Yan didn’t seem to feel any of the pressure at all, as if he’d planned all of this and things were going exactly as he’d thought they would. He didn’t even try to keep the excitement off his face.

Groveling over to Second Highness, he said, “Elder Sister, this shopkeeper and that stinking fish said that the things I gave you were stolen from the Golden Vajra Warrior Sect. Elder Sister, you know that I’m an upright person. I’m sincere, honest, straightforward, genuine, gentle and considerate. You’re the only person I’ve ever loved! If they want to slander me, fine, I can deal with

that. But they cannot slander the gifts I give to you! Slandering my gifts is the same as slandering the love I've shown for you for the past eight years, Elder Sister!"

Standing next to Second Highness, the pudgy Huang Yan looked a bit out of place. Whether it was how tall she was, or how thick he was, he seemed like a child standing next to an adult.

In response to his words, everyone in the shop gaped in absolute shock, including Zhang San. To them, this turn of events seemed almost inconceivable.

The shopkeeper looked a bit dazed as he muttered, "Second Highness... is the Elder Sister you talk about all the time?"

The words sounded awkward coming out of his mouth, yet they revealed how the shopkeeper felt inwardly, as though an endless herd of wild horses was trampling through his mind and heart. Most people were familiar with Huang Yan, who was relatively well-known on the Seventh Peak for being "head-over-heels in love." Everyone had heard the rumors about how he'd been pursuing some Elder Sister for eight years, showering her with so many gifts they could fill up entire shops....

Because of the details, everyone assumed that there was more to Huang Yan than met the eye, otherwise he wouldn't have been able to survive for so many years with his wealth intact. However, many looked down on him. After all, most people didn't think a true man would debase himself so much for a woman.

Therefore, everyone present, from Zhang San to the shopkeeper to the other disciples, were now seeing Huang Yan in a new light. Most of them looked at him with unprecedented reverence, and others seemed outright jealous.

Obviously... all of them wished they could have an Elder Sister like this.

It didn't matter if it took them eight years, eighteen years, or even twenty-eight years.

Xu Qing was also shocked. He looked at the smugly content Huang Yan, then at the domineering Second Highness, and he seemed somewhat dazed. Never in his wildest imaginings could he have guessed that the person Huang Yan had pursued for eight years was actually the second highness from the Seventh Peak. Now Xu Qing realized that Huang Yan had been so brash earlier because he missed his Elder Sister. He had intentionally created a scene in the hopes of getting her to show up.

Upon hearing Huang Yan's tale of being wronged, Second Highness's eyebrows shot up and she stalked contemptuously past the young merman, who stood there with his head bowed.

Huang Yan went with her, keeping his chin stuck up in a good imitation of her contemptuousness.

Her attitude seemed to irritate the young merman. He trembled as if he were having a hard time controlling himself. However, his complexion was ashen, and there was fear visible in his eyes.

Right now, he was thinking about a massacre that took place in the Merfolk Isles thirty years before. Second Highness had been in the middle of it all, splattered with blood. It took place during the Seventh Peak's Grand Competition. Because humans were evil to the core, and because the magnificent Merfolk refused to acknowledge subservience, the Seventh Peak chose to have their Grand Tournament in Merfolk territory. The reality was that they used it as a pretense to suppress the Merfolk. It was only after that incident that the Merfolk and the humans became 'allies.'

After that, Seven Blood Eyes had stepped in on numerous occasions to save the Merfolk from being exterminated by others. But to many Merfolk, the only reason the humans did that was because they were obligated to. In the end, the alliance with humans was a disgrace to them.

Despite his chaotic mood, the young merman kept his head bowed, and didn't dare to look up. However, in his heart, he was raging, and he vowed to make Seven Blood Eyes pay for the humiliation they had heaped on his people.

Seeing the young merman stand there with head bowed, Second Highness seemed even more contemptuous than before. Walking up to Xu Qing, she looked at him coldly.

Taking a deep breath, he kept a somber expression on his face as he clasped hands and bowed. "Well met, Second Highness."

"Elder Sister," Huang Yan said, "this is my good friend Xu Qing. He got implicated in this whole thing as well." He went on to proudly show off all the items he had just dumped out of his bag of holding.

Nodding, Second Highness turned away from Xu Qing and stepped to the counter. Lifting her huge sword, she put it down with a thump.

The black sword was so huge and heavy that the sturdy wooden counter creaked and half-collapsed. As a result, the sword tip came to point right at the shopkeeper's belly. As it gleamed coldly, the shopkeeper started to sweat, and his face turned pale.

Trembling, he said, "Second Highness, I just—"

"You said my things were stolen goods?" she asked coolly.

The shopkeeper started sweating even more, to the point where his back was soaked. His expression was bitter, and in his heart, he was howling in grief. He had originally thought he could make some money out of all this. Then Huang Yan came along and threw everything into chaos. And how could the shopkeeper have ever guessed that Huang Yan was backed by someone as god-like as this? There was no way he would ever dare to provoke the explosive Second Highness. In fact, not even the honor guard who had organized this entire matter would ever dare to trifle with her. After all, Master Seventh doted on her, treating her like the senior princess of the Seventh Peak.

All the shopkeeper could do was stammer, "It was a m-mis... misunderstanding. Really, j-just a misunderstanding. I misjudged the situation. How could those possibly be stolen goods....?"

Xu Qing saw all of this, and his eyes gleamed. More than ever, he realized that in the world he lived in, strength was the eternal constant. What was more, Second Highness' words revealed what it truly meant to be domineering.

"You didn't misjudge," Second Highness said coldly. "These really are stolen goods. And you know who stole them from the Golden Vajra Warrior Sect? Me. You have a problem with that?" She nudged her sword forward, so that it sliced into the shopkeeper's garment, and touched the skin of his belly.

He shivered from head to toe, and cold sweat poured down his face. Although he wanted to go along with whatever she said, he wasn't sure exactly how to respond.

Continuing, she said, “You can tell whoever you work for that I’m the one responsible for the Golden Vajra Warrior Sect heist. Furthermore, you can tell the Golden Vajra Warrior Sect that they have three days to bring me a satisfactory apology accompanied by a gift.”

Her words were an obvious threat. Anyone who heard her understood that if the Golden Vajra Warrior Sect’s apology and gift weren’t satisfactory, then... soon enough there wouldn’t be anything called the Golden Vajra Warrior Sect. After clearly establishing how domineering she was, she looked at the items Xu Qing had been trying to sell.

“Are you going to buy these?”

“Y-yes... yes I’m going to buy them....” the shopkeeper said. Wanting to pant from frustration, but not daring to, he quickly took out 100 spirit stones. Then he noticed Second Highness frowning, and he gritted his teeth and took out an additional hundred. With 200 spirit stones placed neatly off to the side, he looked at Huang Yan and Xu Qing with a pleading smile.

Ignoring him, Second Highness picked her massive sword up off the counter and turned to leave. As she passed the young merman, she said, “Get the hell out of my way. You stink like rotting fish.”

The young merman trembled visibly, but he also backed up a few paces.

As she stepped out the door, everyone in the shop clasped hands and joined their voices to say, “Respectful farewell, Second Highness!”

Xu Qing did the same, though he looked up with his eyes to observe her leaving.

After she was gone, Huang Yan glanced around at the crowd looking very pleased. Then he slapped Xu Qing’s shoulder.

“You saw that, right?” he said, beaming with delight. “That was my Elder Sister. My goddess. After this, who would ever dare to slander us? That said, you were certainly on your game, you little punk. You didn’t hesitate to stand up for me, and even share responsibility. I’m going to remember this. Let me tell you, I’m the kind of person who repays kindness with kindness. Unfortunately, I don’t have anything good on me right now. But don’t worry, I’ll go back and find a good gift to send you later.”

Before Xu Qing could respond, Huang Yan waved goodbye and rushed after Second Highness. “Elder Sister! Wait for me....”

Xu Qing still felt a bit dazed. After Huang Yan was gone, he looked down at his clothing, then at the dour young merman, whose eyes flashed when their gazes met.

Xu Qing took the 200 spirit stones from the shopkeeper, who didn’t even dare to meet his eyes. Then he left without another glance at the merman. Outside of the shop, he adjusted his clothing and walked off with a dark look in his eyes.

Meanwhile, back in the shop, the young merman watched Xu Qing leave, his expression unsightly, and his heart full of malice.

When someone dares to touch me, even if they survive, they don't stay alive for much longer afterward. Sadly, I rarely get to see them die.

With a cold harrumph, he flicked his sleeve and left. In his mind, Xu Qing was an ant, and would be dead already if it weren't for Huang Yan.

Everyone in Seven Blood Eyes deserves to die. That kid took credit for my hard work, so he deserves to die more than anyone else. And he'll be dead sooner or later.

#### Chapter 74: The Path to the Yellow Springs

The sun shone hot and bright in the dome of heaven. It was noon, so the sun was right in front of the face of the god above. The dazzling light made it difficult for mortals to even look up.

The god behind the sun seemed to surpass space and time. It didn't matter whether it was day or night. It didn't matter whether one was dreaming or not. It didn't matter if you talked about the past or the future. That god was always there. Hē witnessed the transformations to the world below. Hē witnessed all life and death. Hē witnessed the brutality and chaos that hē had brought to the world. Even the burning sunlight seemed more vicious because of that god. It was like the sunlight was more evil, as though it didn't want the current season to leave quietly, the way it should according to the way of nature.

Instead, the sun beat down onto the lands below, and filled every corner of the Seven Blood Eyes capital city with devastating heat. Even standing in the shade of a tree, or beneath the eaves of a building, it would seep in. Not even the sea breeze could dispel it. It was like a poison that had seeped deep into the bones and marrow.

It was like... something on the hem of Xu Qing's daoist robe.

Although that hem seemed ordinary, if you looked closely, you would see traces of powder on it. Like the vicious heat that seeped into heaven and earth under the influence of the god's broken face, that powder sent something deep into Xu Qing's flesh and blood. It was moving very quickly, and it seemed ravenous.

From the moment it appeared until it seeped into him, only a few breaths worth of time passed. Xu Qing looked calmly down at the hem of his garment, then headed toward his berth.

The powder had been placed on his garment by the young merman during their fight. Virtually any other person would probably have been unaware of what happened. After all, the poison was colorless, odorless, and in some respects, didn't even count as a poison. But Xu Qing was skilled in the dao of medicine, and could already think of seven or eight different types of medicinal items that could behave in this manner. It would take some analysis for him to determine which it was. That said, his clashes with the young merman made Xu Qing's killing intent even more intense than before.

It's about time to do some fish-killing.

Back at his berth, he stepped onto his dharmaboat and activated the defenses, separating himself from the outside world. Everything became quiet.

He sat down cross-legged, and ripped the hem off his daoist robe. After looking at it closely, he performed an incantation gesture with his left hand, causing a small fireball to appear in his palm.



The Seaforming Scripture relied on water. However, it was common for magic cultivators to master a number of different techniques, for backup if nothing else. Even the jade slip with the technique description had introductions to other techniques.

After summoning the fireball, Xu Qing sent it toward the ripped hem of his garment, causing it to catch fire.

Hissing sounds rang out as it burned, causing a thin smoke to billow up.

The flickering flame illuminated Xu Qing's eyes as he closely watched the fabric burning. The flames were red, and they burned through the material very quickly, turning the gray fabric into crumbling bits of ash. Within the space of a few breaths of time, it had been completely burned up.

Xu Qing looked at the ash and sniffed the smoke.

It's made from the blood of ghostlonging horseshoe crabs. It's a poison, but at the same time, not a poison.

The medicinal codex Grandmaster Bai had left with Xu Qing talked about ghostlonging horseshoe crabs. They lived in the depths of the sea, and were quite rare. Xu Qing had two of them in his possession, but hadn't found any complementary medicinal ingredients, so he hadn't done anything with them.

That said, he knew that their blood could be used to create an incredibly effective medicine. But if prepared in a different way, then in accord with the polarity of yin and yang, the blood's aura would become something loathsome to a wide variety of mutant beasts.

It also has the characteristics of morningstar grass. Xu Qing closed his eyes to think. When he opened them, their black recesses glittered with incomparable coldness.

Grandmaster Bai's codex didn't explain what happened when you mixed those two types of ingredients. However, based on Xu Qing's understanding of medicinal principles, he knew that adding the latter would amplify the loathsome quality of the mixture. A small amount of that mixture would cause mutant beasts to shy away. But a large amount would attract them with killing intent.

If you put that mixture onto a person, it would seep into their aura, and invade their flesh and blood. It wasn't a poison, so it didn't cause the symptoms of poisoning to appear. In fact, the mixture could be considered nourishing. As a result, it wasn't something easy to detect. But once it was in the body, getting rid of it wasn't easy. It was something that could stick around for years.

Xu Qing had experience with a loathsome substance that would attract mutant beasts. The first time he fought with Squad Thunderbolt in the forbidden region, Savage Ghost had a bottle in his sack that contained something like that. And Savage Ghost's little bottle was like nothing compared to the substance that had been put on Xu Qing's daoist robe. In fact, they were as different from each other as heaven and earth. [1]

Here in the sect, being infected with an aura like this wouldn't be very dangerous. But out on the open sea.... Xu Qing knew that if he went out to sea with this aura on him, he almost certainly wouldn't come back alive.

It was an incredibly devious way of killing someone. It left behind no evidence, and was vastly more sinister than the venom of a viper. Furthermore, it would work even if a lot of time passed.

Someone other than Xu Qing, without his understanding of the dao of medicine, would probably die without any idea of who had killed them.

But I wonder if you have what it takes to spot my little poison trap! Xu Qing thought.

Though the young merman had poisoned him, the truth was that the mantis was stalking the cicada, unaware of the oriole behind. Xu Qing had also poisoned the young merman!

Similarly, it was an undetectable poison that served as a mark. The difference was that the merman's mark would attract the loathing of mutant beasts in the sea, while Xu Qing's mark was a symbol of death for people who walked on the land.

Face expressionless, Xu Qing collected the ashes of his burned garment, then opened his bag of holding and looked at the medicinal pills he had inside. Then he glanced at the surrounding medicine cabinets. He wasn't extremely skilled in dispelling poisons. Besides, the aura he was infected with wasn't actually a poison, so the powers of regeneration provided by the violet crystal wouldn't be much help.

However, what he was good at was dealing with being infected by poisons. Therefore, he took out some poison powders and pills. The pills he consumed in quick succession, then he scattered the powders and inhaled deeply.

A violent tremor passed through him, and beads of cold sweat broke out on his forehead. However, he remained seated in a cross-legged position, feeling himself burning up from the inside. Meanwhile, the killing intent in his heart fermented, like the calm before a storm.

The poison inside of him burned at his organs, bones, flesh, and blood. He couldn't extrude the aura of the ghostlonging horseshoe crab and the morningstar grass. So instead, he would eliminate them with poison, then use his powers of regeneration to regenerate himself. The process took about four hours.

Around evening time, he slowly opened his eyes, which were completely bloodshot. The poisons within him had been driven out, and along with them went the aura of the ghostlonging horseshoe crab and the morningstar grass. After inspecting himself, he looked at the sun outside.

"Soon enough, I'll be able to have a good night's sleep," he murmured. Standing, he straightened out his clothing and closed his eyes.

Eventually, the sun seemed to be moving out of the way for the moon to take its place. Then evening turned dark, and the moon rose. The stars in the sky were like fireflies in a graveyard, hardly enough to provide much illumination.

It was a good night for killing.

Xu Qing opened his eyes. Quietly placing his iron skewer in his sleeve and his daggers in his boots, he checked to make sure he had all of his poisons ready. Then he left his dharmaboat and sped off into the night.

The moonlight shone down coldly as he sped through the city like the wind, his eyes as cold as a lone wolf's.

The icy sea breeze hit him, rustling his garment and lifting his hair. However, it couldn't purge the city of the unique scent of the marker he'd placed on his target.

Eventually, the sound of the wind in his ears became something like a call to death.

He was going to be doing some killing tonight.

Chapter 75: Fish-Killing!

The night wind was a bloody scythe, gory and humid, an ambassador of death that swept through every corner of the city. In the darkness, that ambassador of death moved relentlessly forward, merging with the shadows, then dispersing, foreboding to the extreme as it sought to bring all to despair.

Until... its relentless progress into alleys of the city caused it to run into a person standing in the shadows.

This person wore a gray robe, and seemed like someone that blades or needles couldn't harm. And he emitted a frigid energy that seemed to block off the light of the stars. It was suffocating.

When the wind hit him, it was like when cold rivers ran into the sea, or when a pack of jackals encountered the king of all wolves. The wind stopped, and everything went quiet. The person in gray looked over his shoulder, and his eyes were as cold as a deep pool of black water. The wind laughed. It had found something to believe in. A comrade. Hefting its scythe of death, it blew past the figure in gray, stirring his long hair and robe.

The wind's stronger than usual tonight. Xu Qing turned to look through the darkness toward a building. To him, the building was like a coffin looming in the night. It was the home of the young merman. Because he wasn't an ordinary disciple from the Seventh Peak, he didn't qualify for a dharmaboat, and was forced to rent a place onshore.

Xu Qing watched the place quietly. In the darkness of night, his breathing sounded like a cold, winding stream.

He was waiting.

Because of the marker he had placed, he knew for certain that the young merman was here. Furthermore, based on what he had learned from shadowing the merman recently, he would likely be going out alone soon. Maybe even tonight... considering how bad his mood was.

Therefore, Xu Qing was inclined to simply wait through the night. Time passed. Two hours later, when the moon slipped behind some clouds, the breeze picked up, scraping over the house, which was now cloaked in darkness.

Because of the coffin-like building, the wind seemed even lonelier, like a hoarse whisper uttered just before death.

A figure appeared on the outer wall of the building.

His gray daoist robe couldn't cover up the smell he exuded, which was like the sea, and his green eyes didn't do anything to make him seem less sinister. His robes flapped in the breeze, making an impressive silhouette in the darkness, but at the same time, it almost seemed like a peeled-off layer of human skin.

This person was none other than the young merman, who was in an extremely foul mood today because of the humiliation he had suffered earlier.

Senior princess of Seventh Peak? Who cares about you? One of these days I'm going to brutalize you! I'll use your body to raise ghostworm maggots! The young merman ground his teeth in fury. His bad mood had caused him to come out a few days earlier than usual. He really felt the need to vent.

And the way he did that was have his two older cousins make arrangements to bring him, not women, but children. It was a secret he had to keep tightly under wraps: he liked to torture and kill non-Merfolk children. That was what truly made him happy.

Jumping off the wall, he sped into the night, quickly vanishing. Anyone present who was either watching him or observing him in some other way would lose track of him. It was like he didn't even exist. However, that didn't mean that Xu Qing's mark had gone away.

Xu Qing looked in the direction the merman had disappeared into, and quietly started moving through the darkness.

The wind picked up, slicing through the air like a blade, and echoing through the silence of the night.

An hour later, in a remote alley of the city, the air rippled and distorted as the young merman appeared, seemingly out of nowhere. As soon as he appeared, a sensation of danger filled him, and he shot backward.

He wasn't fast enough. A thick screen of water appeared behind him, which rapidly spread out to cover the entire alley, blocking all avenues of escape. Then something like a growl echoed from within the water ahead of him.

There, a whale appeared, the result of a magical technique, bulging out from the water at high speed. It rushed toward the young merman with incomparable force and boundless killing intent, its gaping mouth full of sharp teeth.

The young merman's eyes glinted sharply.

"Well, isn't this funny. Here I am in a foul mood, and you show up to amuse me."

His hands flashed in a double-handed incantation gesture, but before he could finish, Xu Qing's shadow, which was melded with the darkness, seemed to stretch like ropes, wrapping around his arms and pulling his hands apart, making it impossible to finish the gesture. Then the shadow stretched toward his throat.

Wherever the shadow touched him, he felt an intense pain, like something corroding his flesh. The young merman's expression flickered.

Along with the pain came an intense sensation of deadly crisis, and his breath came in ragged pants as the whale got closer and closer. Just when it seemed the whale would consume him, he howled loudly, and a blue light erupted from within him. The blinding light scattered the gruish shadow and spread out to fill the area. It stabbed into the whale, causing the projection to collapse.

However, the power behind the whale didn't vanish, and continued to surge like a wave. The young merman trembled and staggered backward, coughing up blood, his expression ferocious. Yet he managed to take advantage of the time bought by the blue light to reach toward his bag of holding. Before he could open it, the shadow once again grabbed his arms, preventing him from moving. Then the shadow started spreading out over him.

This development caused the young merman's heart to fill with astonishment. At the same time, a dark glow shot out from the darkness and toward his forehead. Behind that dark glow... was a figure in gray, emerging from the screen of water!

The dark glow moved with the speed of a black bolt of lightning. And the young man behind it had black hair swirling around him, his face expressionless, but his eyes as cold as ice.

The wind around him was like a scythe, as if the ambassador of death had come with him, grinning within its black cloak.

"It's you!!" the young merman blurted as the sensation of deadly crisis within him grew stronger. Then he spat out something silver-colored.

It shot into the wind, transforming into a massive chakram that rolled toward the incoming iron skewer. When the two weapons clashed, a huge boom echoed out.

The massive power behind both attacks caused both the chakram and the skewer to fly off to the side. However, that didn't stop Xu Qing and the young merman from locking eyes.

As Xu Qing closed in, the spiked gills on the side of the young merman's face flared, making him look even more vicious than before. At the same time, he spat out a blue pearl.

"Time to die!" he howled. The blue pearl erupted with shocking rays of light which shot toward Xu Qing from all directions.

This was a life essence divine ability, and the young merman was fully confident that not even someone in the great circle of Qi Condensation could stand up to it. Only a Foundation Establishment cultivator would have a chance. Grinning viciously, he prepared to deal with the gruish shadow that still covered him.

However, that was when the blue light unleashed a huge boom, and the young merman's expression flickered with surprise.

Within the bounds created by that blue light, a massive figure could now be seen, seemingly propping up heaven and earth as it stood there. It was pitch black, with two horns on its head and spikes covering its body like an evil ghost. In fact, it seemed almost like the king of all evil ghosts. Roaring noiselessly, it extended both of its hands and grabbed the blue light.

It was... the spectral hobgoblin!

Beneath that immense spectral hobgoblin was Xu Qing, his face completely expressionless as he closed in on the young merman.

Xu Qing was covered in wounds from that binding light, but his flesh was already healing. What was more, the killing intent in his eyes had reached an explosive level.

Neither in his previous clash with the young merman, nor on the occasion when he fought the non-human innkeeper, had Xu Qing gone all out like this. He hadn't used his shadow, he hadn't summoned the spectral hobgoblin, and he hadn't revealed his powers of regeneration.

He would only reveal his true abilities when dealing with someone he was about to kill.

“Projection of energy and blood? And your cultivation base! This is impossible! Your powers of regeneration, they....” The young merman’s face was a mask of utter astonishment. And as the sensation of deadly crisis turned into one of complete terror, he lost his ability to speak straight.

He wanted to open his bag of holding and take out a communication jade slip to send a message asking for help. But the shadow wrapping him up almost seemed alive. No matter how he wrenched his hands about, he couldn’t free himself, and couldn’t take out anything from his bag of holding. As for Xu Qing, he didn’t waste any time at all. As he closed in, a dagger glinted in his right hand.

When the young merman saw the dagger, he let loose a mad howl. Ignoring the shadow wrapping around his neck, as well as how various parts of him were melting, he suddenly twitched.

In that instant, his legs flipped up and blurred, transforming into a black fish tail, which he thrust toward Xu Qing with all the force he could muster. At the same time, his natural bloodline ability erupted, causing the illusory merman projection around him to join with him in the powerful tail strike.

Xu Qing’s facial expression remained unchanged. Nor did he slow down. Instead, he clenched his left hand into a fist and punched. As he did, the spectral hobgoblin did the same. Flesh was shredded and blood sprayed everywhere as the young merman’s fish tail collapsed into several pieces. And as the spectral hobgoblin’s blow landed on the huge merman projection, it shattered.

The ground shook, and a miserable shriek rang out from the young merman’s mouth. However, the surrounding water screen was so thick that the sound remained captured in the alley.

“I curse you!!” the young merman screamed, his eyes crimson. As he did, the shattered and bloody remnants of his fish tail twitched as if alive, then burst into flames, which shot toward Xu Qing at incredible speed.

It happened fast, but not faster than Xu Qing could react. As the flaming flesh and blood surrounded him, he moved with even greater speed, leaving behind nothing but a series of afterimages to be surrounded by the curse attack.

Then he appeared behind the young merman, and before the shattered fish tail could do anything further, he put his dagger to the young merman’s throat.

Trembling, and his voice shrill, the young merman shrieked, “Xu Qing, I—“

He never finished speaking. Only those three words left his mouth before...

Xu Qing slashed the cold dagger through his throat. As usual, he wasn’t interested in hearing anyone’s dying words.

A familiar slashing sound echoed about. As blood sprayed, the young merman twitched violently, like a fish on the chopping block whose neck had just been slit. His eyes went wide, and he tried to look over his shoulder, but he failed. He took a last gurgling gasp, then collapsed to the ground in front of Xu Qing.

“You got my clothes dirty,” Xu Qing said softly. That was the only thing he said during the entire fight.

“You....” Blood poured out of the young merman’s neck, and he twitched again. Then he lost his ability to breathe. His eyes still contained a desire to live. And they also seemed incredulous at what was happening. He still couldn’t believe that someone like himself, chosen by heaven, would die like this.

Then, he was thoroughly dead.

Xu Qing’s expression remained calm as he took the speed-enhancing talisman treasure off his leg. Then he scooped up the young merman’s bag of holding, which had not been opened the entire fight. Finally, as he turned to leave the alley, his shadow left the young merman’s corpse and returned to his feet.

At the mouth of the alley, he didn’t stop walking, and didn’t bother to look back at the carnage. He just snapped his fingers.

The screen of water which had sealed off the alley trembled and then started to move. It grew smaller, converging on the corpse of the young merman. Finally, it made a thump as all of the power of the water screen was focused on the corpse. A boom rang out as the corpse shattered into a mass of gore. The young merman had been killed in body and soul.

Xu Qing walked off into the distance.

The screen of water became droplets that cleansed the quiet alley. The blood was washed away, creating puddles that the rising sun shone off of brightly.

When night ended, and day came, it happened in the blink of an eye. It was similar with humans. It was similar to life and death.

#### Chapter 76: Drought Demons can Scorch all Living Things

The early morning breeze drifted through the port, causing the boats to sway in the water. A few wisps of wind, not content to just make the boats sway, tried to kick up some waves. However, the waters of the sea were too deep, and if the wind wasn’t careful, it would end up consumed by the waves. In that respect, it would be like a fish that overestimated its strength, and provoked something it shouldn’t have.

The light of dawn was quieter than the wind, and seemed content to simply illuminate the boats on the water. Eventually, it shone on Xu Qing, who was still on his way back.

To him, there was no difference between killing people and killing fish. As long as someone looked at him with killing intent, the end result was determined. He wanted to stay alive, and therefore, anyone who threatened his life had crossed the line.

Some people had it better in life than others. One of the scholar teachers back in the slums had once joked about that. He said that in a rich and flourishing world, those in power would fix such problems with a simple bandage. However, in a chaotic world, there was no way to cover up the truth.

In Xu Qing’s journey of life, he had come to understand that there was one thing in life that was fair. And that was: death wiped away everything. It didn’t matter if someone died alone in an alley, or if they died surrounded by treasure and fine wine. Both were dead.

Second Highness was right. He did smell like rotten fish.

Once in his dharmaboat, he washed himself until the noxious odor was gone. Only then did he relax. He was off duty today, so there was no need to go in for roll call. And feeling like there was one less thorn in his side, he was ready to get some good sleep.

But first, he settled into a cross-legged position and took out a bamboo slip, upon which was carved 'young merman.' He scratched the name out. He looked at the first name on the list, Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior, and his eyes glittered with killing intent.

"Soon..." he murmured. Then he took a look at the bag of holding that the young merman had failed to open. He was curious to see what was inside. After examining it briefly, he sent some spirit power inside. To his surprise, it wasn't as difficult to open as he'd suspected. After someone died, the branding mark on the bag of holding would vanish.

After sending his spirit power inside the bag, he saw a few items. He subconsciously gasped softly.

He was this rich?

There were only 100 spirit stones. However, there were also 20 spirit notes from the Sixth Peak, each of which was worth 100 spirit stones. That level of wealth got Xu Qing's heart pounding. After all, he'd never had this much money on hand. Of course, he knew that he would need to wait for some time to pass before he tried to exchange the notes.

There were some other things in the bag of holding. There were four or five prized treasures, as well as two talisman treasures.

One of the talismans was yellow, the other was blue.

Seeing them caused Xu Qing no small amount of shock; the markings on the talismans were about eighty to ninety percent complete, indicating they hadn't been used much.

After some examination, he concluded that the blue talisman was defensive, while the yellow one could be used offensively.

If that fish had managed to get into his bag of holding.... Xu Qing's eyes narrowed as he contemplated how the fight might have turned out. He probably would have been able to kill his opponent in the end, but it would have taken a lot longer, and would have been much more draining.

My shadow is proving more and more useful. He glanced down at his shadow, and thought back to how it had wrapped around the young merman. It had almost seemed like his shadow was alive.

Was I seeing things?

Looking at his shadow, he rubbed his chest where the violet crystal was. Eyes glittering, he thought again about how the crystal seemed to help him exercise restraint and control over his shadow.

Whether or not his shadow was alive, he had the feeling he should do some more tests.

With that, he sent some of his spirit power into the violet crystal, though it took several tries to do successfully. Once he did succeed, his entire body shone with violet light, which became a force of suppression that weighed down on the shadow. The shadow twisted and distorted while simultaneously growing a bit fainter. Xu Qing looked closely at the shadow and felt satisfied.



He didn't want to waste mental energy trying to figure out if his shadow was somehow alive. The worst case scenario would be that the shadow had no way to become alive, and he would waste some spirit power figuring out how to suppress it. After a few more attempts, he went through the process of suppressing the shadow, then moved on to other things.

Putting the two talisman treasures away, he looked at the remaining items in the bag of holding. There were two things of note. One was a sea chart covered with meticulous notations. It was much more detailed than the sea charts kept by disciples from the Seventh Peak.

It even noted the location of the Merfolk Isles. After examining it, Xu Qing came to the conclusion that it was far more valuable than either of the talisman treasures. After all, to disciples who needed the sea to further their cultivation, a detailed sea chart would make sea travel much safer, and would make it a lot easier to collect resources. Information was often far more precious than spirit stones.

The last item was also far more valuable than the talisman treasures. And that was because... he had seen an item like this before, albeit only once. It was a palm-sized piece of iron that resembled a box, yet wasn't a box. After looking at its metal surface, Xu Qing took out a similar piece of metal from his bag of holding. He had acquired this from Horsefour in the scavenger basecamp. The man's partner Fatmountain had coveted that piece of iron so much that he intentionally let Xu Qing attack him. [1]

Putting the two pieces of iron next to each other, Xu Qing studied them, which was when he realized that they looked exactly the same.

What's going on here? Xu Qing felt more curious than ever.

He had been in many of the shops in the Port District, but had never seen anything like these pieces of iron for sale. Yet whether it was Fatmountain's greed to acquire it, or the fact that it was hidden in the young merman's bag of holding, there was obviously something very unusual about this type of metal.

I need to figure out a way to get some more information.

After some thought, Xu Qing put everything away, looked out at the sky, then lay down on his wooden cot and closed his eyes. He didn't rest for long. About four hours later, when it was after noon, he opened his eyes and stretched. He actually felt great. Best of all, he felt a lot more relaxed after the previous night's events. And he also sensed that his Sea and Mountain Incantation... was very close to the breakthrough point.

The seventh level was the great circle for me. So what will happen when I reach the eighth level....? I wonder if I'll have enough battle prowess to kill Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior. Actually, he felt like he had spent too much time in the seventh level.

But during that time, the Sea and Mountain Incantation had been preparing for some sort of transformation, and now he could sense the time had come. Sitting down cross-legged, he activated the spirit convergence formation, fed it a spirit stone, then closed his eyes and started cultivating.

Time passed. Afternoon faded into evening, and then night fell. As Xu Qing sat there cross-legged, he suddenly shivered, and his flesh and blood became taut. His bones started to creak, and his blood vessels bulged, becoming like vicious snakes spreading across his skin. It was a shocking sight, but at the same time, the power of his energy and blood surged with every beat of his heart.

As the power of energy and blood swirled around him, the spectral hobgoblin appeared, roaring noiselessly to the sky. As it did, its expression twisted and distorted as if some immense force was forcing it to transform!

When an ordinary person cultivated the Sea and Mountain Incantation to the great circle, the result was an adult spectral hobgoblin. But with Xu Qing, the spectral hobgoblin appeared in the seventh level. He had no idea what would happen after that.

The truth was that not even the person who invented the Sea and Mountain Incantation could ever have guessed that someone like Xu Qing would come along and reach the great circle early.

After all, the Sea and Mountain Incantation was a low-level technique that was usually cultivated while simultaneously having to deal with mutagen. Never before had someone done what Xu Qing had done, in other words, cultivate it while completely free of mutagen.

As time passed, the veins on Xu Qing bulged out even more, until it looked like his skin was covered with countless cracks. Blood started oozing out all over him, and his energy and blood seemed like they might make him explode. It was like Xu Qing's body was a clay pot, and his energy and blood were trying to explode out from inside.

However, that was when a violet light spilled out from his chest, covering him, repairing all the damage. His physical form became more refined, while at the same time, intense pain filled him. His bones cracked. His flesh and blood shattered. It was like he couldn't keep control of his physical body. However, the light of the violet crystal repaired everything.

It became a cycle, over and over again. His energy and blood grew stronger, to the point where the dharmaboat's spell formation couldn't contain the fluctuations. From a distance, it looked like his boat was bathed in a blood-colored glow.

As the power flowed out, it attracted the attention of other disciples in Harbor 79. As they looked over in astonishment, Xu Qing opened his eyes, and they were crimson. A massive rumbling sound echoed out, filled with the resonance of a single character. It filled his mind with heaven-rending, earth-crushing booms, and caused him to shake from head to toe. Meanwhile, the spectral hobgoblin's noiseless howl grew more intense as it began to split apart and... reveal a new body!

It was completely green, and seemed to burst with berserk madness. There was also something very gruish about it; its cracked and wizened skin resembled the ground during a deep drought. Its hair was long and messy as it hung over its shoulders, and its eyes were crimson. It had vicious fangs, as well as a long, black horn that crackled with lightning. As it howled noiselessly to the sky, it seemed ready to rip apart the dome of heaven. What was more, it seemed to be surrounded, not with water vapor, but with black flames that scorched everything around it. Strictly speaking, they weren't flames, but rather, a natural result of all the water vapor in the area being sucked up.

"Drought demon!" Xu Qing murmured. That was the specific character that had filled his mind. It was also the next iteration of the energy and blood projection of the Sea and Mountain Incantation. [2]

It was even stronger than the hobgoblin!

Goblins can move mountains, hobgoblins can transport seas, and drought demons can scorch all living things!

The moment Xu Qing opened his mouth to mutter 'drought demon,' a power more vigorous than anything before erupted from within him. Xu Qing shot to his feet, bursting with fleshly body power that broke through all previous shackles. He was now in a higher level of Qi Condensation!

His dharmaboat defenses couldn't withstand the force and shattered, and even the boat itself sustained some damage.

Meanwhile, the disciples in Harbor 79 looked on with wide eyes and hearts filled with shock.

Not even Xu Qing could have guessed that his Sea and Mountain Incantation breakthrough would cause such a commotion. Furthermore... he could tell, because of the explosive results from the Sea and Mountain Incantation, his Seaforming Scripture was now stirring on the verge of a breakthrough.

As Xu Qing stood there silently, the surrounding disciples clasped hands and called out respectfully to him.

"Congratulations, Elder Brother Xu Qing!"

"Congratulations, Elder Brother!"

They showed respect to strength. That was also why they called him Elder Brother.

They could easily imagine the incredible strength required to cause a commotion this way during cultivation, and also shatter the defenses of a class six dharmaboat. What was more, the pressure emanating off of Xu Qing caused all of them to tremble violently.

This was... the pressure of a truly powerful expert!

Chapter 77: Forbidden Sea Dragonwhale

Moonlight shone onto the surface of the water and the damaged dharmaboat. Xu Qing stood there, somewhat in a daze as he listened to the surrounding disciples offer their congratulations.

Although he had gone into this Sea and Mountain Incantation breakthrough intentionally, the process had been dangerous, and his heart was still pounding as a result. He thought back to how his body had collapsed over and over again. Reliving the feeling, he couldn't help but inhale deeply. If he hadn't been able to rely on the violet crystal to recover, then the spectral drought demon would never have appeared, and he would be dead. Of course, the boost that came from surviving that ordeal was quite spectacular.

That was especially true of the now-vanishing spectral drought demon, whose terrifying strength had Xu Qing full of anticipation.

After a moment, he walked out onto the main deck, where the moonlight illuminated his black hair and gray robe. He stood tall and straight, his facial features cold but delicately attractive. He had the unusual air of a breakthrough still on him.

Looking around calmly at all the nearby disciples, he clasped hands and bowed.

"Many thanks, fellow disciples."

The disciples returned the bow. They could detect the cultivation fluctuations that continued to roll off Xu Qing, and from that, they could deduce that his nighttime session of cultivation wasn't going

to end with this breakthrough. Feeling even more shocked than before, they went back into their dharmaboats, not wanting to disturb him any further.

It would have been completely inconceivable for something to happen like this a few months ago when Xu Qing first arrived at Seven Blood Eyes. But now it was a reality.

Xu Qing retracted his gaze and stepped back into the cabin. Sitting down cross-legged, he looked at the spirit convergence formation, and the spirit stone there, which was full of cracks and almost fully drained. He also looked around at the damage to his boat. He frowned.

He knew that his boat's defenses had been destroyed by the sudden shockwave. The spirit stone had similarly suffered.

I wonder if the next Sea and Mountain Incantation breakthrough will be like this one....

He still felt a bit nervous, but more than that, disappointed. After all... it was going to be expensive to fix his dharmaboat. However, after thinking about what he'd acquired after killing the young merman, he felt a bit better.

That said, now wasn't the time to be calculating money matters. Stowing his anxiety regarding the Sea and Mountain Incantation breakthrough, he focused on his Seaforming Scripture, which was currently roiling on the verge of its own breakthrough.

Taking a deep breath, he replaced the depleted spirit stone in the formation, then reactivated the boat's defenses.

Then he looked at the moonlight streaming down to hit the boat itself, and after mulling the matter over, he added a second spirit stone. Then he performed an incantation gesture, and the dharmaboat rumbled as the power of the two stones added further strength to the defenses. A moment later, even the moonlight was completely blocked out.

Having accomplished that, he closed his eyes and sensed the power flowing through him, which was many times greater than before.

Previously, he had already been as strong as the great circle of the Sea and Mountain Incantation. Now that he had burst through the previous shackles, his fleshly body power had reached an even higher level.

It was so intense that Xu Qing knew he wouldn't even need to utilize the Seaforming Scripture to strike fear into the heart of Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior. He could do that with a single punch from the Sea and Mountain Incantation. It made sense considering that he was the first person, whether in ancient times or modern, to cultivate the Sea and Mountain Incantation to this level.

In the past, the hobgoblin was the limit. But now the spectral hobgoblin had experienced an unheard-of transformation into a drought demon. Xu Qing could still sense that arid dryness and mad desire to scorch all living things.

What was more, the spectral drought demon could be considered a newborn while in the eighth level. Xu Qing could hardly imagine what it would be like in the ninth level. And when he reached the tenth level, which was the true great circle, he had to wonder... would the drought demon transform again?

At this point, there was no one who could give him guidance regarding the Sea and Mountain Incantation. Not even its creator had accomplished what Xu Qing had.

After pondering the situation for a bit, he started working with the Seaforming Scripture.

Time slipped by slowly but surely. Two hours later, a wind kicked up in Harbor 79....

As it passed over the water, it converged on Xu Qing's dharmaboat, where it created a vortex, like a black hole that caused all the spirit power in the area to rumble toward it. As the wind blew, the boats in the harbor swayed up and down. All of the Seventh Peak disciples there looked back to the spot they had been focused on before, as if they all wanted to witness Xu Qing's rise to prominence.

Majestic streams of spirit power struggled to outdo each other as they rushed toward Xu Qing's boat, where they poured into him and converged in his spirit sea.

Every time the Seaforming Scripture powered up, that sea grew by 30 meters. Although that growth included both its surface area and depth, looking at it from above, it was like watching a small circle grow into a larger circle. As Xu Qing neared the breakthrough point, the aura of the Forbidden Sea entered him with the spirit power, causing rumbling and cracking sounds to fill him. At the same time, his spirit sea expanded.

As it broke past the previous limit, it reached an extent of 240 meters.

However, things weren't over yet. As the spirit power continued to course madly through him, the sea expanded further.

246. 249. 252.

It continued all the way to 261. Only then did the spirit sea seem full. Xu Qing opened his eyes, and violet light glittered brightly. At the same time, something about him seemed beyond that which was mortal.

"Dragonwhale," he murmured, waving his right hand. Something like the howl of a dragon erupted from within him, while at the same time, a head burrowed out from his chest that resembled both a dragon and a whale. It was pitch black and emanated a shocking and ghastly aura.

It howled as it emerged from Xu Qing, growing larger and larger, smashing through the dharmaboat defenses to rise overhead.

It was fully 240 meters in length and had numerous swaying tentacles that emanated a blue fluorescence. As it appeared, the rumbling sounds caused waves to roll across the surface of the water; if this dragonwhale crashed down, it would surely unleash force that would cause mountains to shake.

The disciples in the surrounding dharmaboats were shocked.

"Forbidden Sea dragonwhale!"

"That's the characteristic magic from the eighth level of the Seaforming Scripture! But not everybody can form a dragonwhale in the eighth level. You have to have an exceptional level of mastery to pull it off!"

“Xu Qing unleashed a shocking display of fleshly body power earlier. Now that his magical techniques have reached the eighth level....”

“This battle prowess....”

Meanwhile, Xu Qing sat cross-legged in his dharmaboat, looking up at the dragonwhale undulating above. His eyes shone brightly; he had been looking forward to this day.

The Seaforming Scripture description mentioned that when reaching the eighth level and forming a spirit sea of 240 meters, it was possible to form a Forbidden Sea dragonwhale. It was the result of a magical technique, and would exist permanently within him. The whale would swim in the sea, accompanying a Seventh Peak disciple and their dharmaboats as they traveled about. In other words, they could provide major assistance to the disciples when they went out to the open sea.

However, forming the dragonwhale required a high level of control, so not all disciples could succeed when reaching the eighth level.

I finally reached this level. Then he exercised a thought, and the dragonwhale roared as it shot down into the water in a huge splash. Afterward, it was nowhere to be seen. However, when Xu Qing sent his thoughts out, the dragonwhale would form again in the water. The Forbidden Sea dragonwhale was... a watershed point for Seventh Peak disciples!

If I ran into Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior out on the open sea, I’d probably be able to cut him down!

Xu Qing’s eyes glittered.

If I wasn’t on the open sea, though, I would have to pay a huge price just to seriously injure him. I need to go out to sea. I need to improve my cultivation base, get more resources, then return... and figure out a way to slaughter Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior!

At daybreak I’m going to go upgrade my dharmaboat. And hopefully, I’ll be able to go out to sea tomorrow. Worst-case scenario, I’ll aim for the day after!

Xu Qing could also tell that along with his double breakthrough in both fleshly body and cultivation base, he had a more subtle level of control over his shadow.

That made him even more confident than before.

Meanwhile, all of the disciples in the harbor around him had heard the roar of the dragonwhale. It was a unique sound that most people wouldn’t recognize. But disciples of the Seventh Peak knew exactly what it was....

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In the Coastguard Division in Harbor 32, a huge battleship was leaving the port. Coastguard battleships were unique, and very different from the disciples’ dharmaboats.

A young man in a gray robe stood on the deck of the battleship, pulsing with powerful fluctuations. He had blue hair and golden eyes, and as he gazed off into the distance, he murmured, “So, another person reached the eighth level. And they formed a dragonwhale. Whoever this is, they’re not an ordinary person.... Very interesting.”

“Do you want me to make some inquiries to find out more information?” asked one of the seven or eight Coastguard Division disciples behind him.

Unexpectedly, one of those disciples was Zhou Qingpeng, who stood there looking cautious and somewhat timid.

As he had mentioned during the reunion dinner, he had received a recommendation to work with a chosen disciple in the Coastguard Division. It was the young man with blue hair, who was generally known as the number one Qi Condensation disciple in the Seventh Peak. Even some conclave disciples would call him ‘Fellow Daoist.’ He was Ding Xiaohai.

“Wait until we get back,” Ding Xiaohai said coolly. Then he looked away.

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Around the same time, the Captain reclined comfortably in his chair in the Violent Crimes Division, munching on a rather rare star-shaped fruit. He also noticed what was happening, and it caused him to look in the direction of Harbor 79. He smiled.

So, he was in such a good mood he broke through? What a straightforward kid.... I like him, but he’s still a bit too weak. I really can’t have someone so weak in my unit. Maybe I should find a few people for him to kill?

The Captain put down the fruit and started to think deeply about the issue. He really was a freak, just like Zhang San said.

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That night, quite a few people from the Seventh Peak noticed Xu Qing’s dragonwhale. It led to a variety of reactions. Some people felt anticipation, others admiration, and others, envy. There were also some people in the Port District who felt fury and grief. And those were... the Merfolk cultivators.

Several people had gathered in the shadowy alley where the young merman had died. In front of the group were two figures, one short and one tall. They were sisters, and they were the older cousins of the young merman, as well as the lovers of Third Highness. The oldest sister seemed calm, but the younger one stood there trembling, her gills flared and her eyes burning with killing intent.

Off to the side was an old merman, who seemed to wallow in pain and bitterness as he said, “This is where His Highness’s aura vanished. However, this area has clearly been cleaned up. There aren’t any clues to determine what happened. Given His Highness’s strength and status, I’d say he probably isn’t dead, just missing. Although, surely his life slip—“

“His Highness’s life slip shattered,” said the younger of the two sisters through gritted teeth.

The old merman’s face went pale. As a dharma protector, he knew that he should face consequences for a mistake like this. However, he had only been following orders. He had been strictly prohibited from following His Highness earlier that night. Of course, he had an idea about the young merman’s secret hobby. That said, he could never have guessed that something like this would happen....

“Could it be the work of Seven Blood Eyes leadership?” the old merman asked hesitantly.

“If Seven Blood Eyes leadership wanted to kill someone, would they need to cover it up?” the older of the two young mermaids said, her voice cold. “Furthermore, His Highness’s bag of holding had a wish box in it. That item is very important, and we can’t let it fall into the hands of a random person.”

“Sister,” the younger mermaid said angrily, “His Highness perished! We need to be thinking about revenge! Why are you so focused on the wish box??”

“You know full well how important a wish box is. It’s a gift that represents an entire epoch!”

“All I know is that His Highness perished, and we need to track down the killer!”

The two sisters glared at each other for a long moment. Then the older sister said, “You want revenge. I want the wish box. We can do both. As a member of the imperial clan, His Highness’s blood can be tracked. If the killer is nearby, we should be able to sense it. First, we need to identify all the people His Highness had conflicts with recently. That includes the family members of anyone he tortured and killed. We need to investigate all of them. I want to know who had the guts to kill the crown prince of our people!”

Off to the side, the younger sister ground her teeth, her eyes shining with madness. “After we find him, I’m going to torment him! I’ll make him and his family beg for death. They’ll howl in pain and grief! Then I’ll force their souls into the bodies of shrimps, and eat them!”

#### Chapter 78: Zhang San Makes an Investment

To most people in Seven Blood Eyes, that night was no different than usual. But to others, it was a very different night. Among those others, the reactions included...

... sighing on a dharmaboat, envious of extraordinary people.

... stewing in fury and rage, vowing to chop enemies into mincemeat.

... leaning back casually in a chair, a mountain of fruit seeds piling up off to the side.

... sitting bitterly in an inn, feeling incomparably flustered and anxious.

In some cases, the way to decide if a person was acclimating to a new situation wasn’t to look at their demeanor or bearing. Instead, you looked at how people reacted to them.

Those who were envious were the disciples in Harbor 79. Those who were furious were the Merfolk cultivators. The one with the pile of fruit seeds was the Captain. And the one who was flustered and anxious was Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior.

Regardless, as the light of dawn spread out over the lands, it obscured the various reactions. It was like the poem that spoke of the dragon-fish dancing through the night. The next day, that energetic, sleepless night resulted in exhaustion. [1]



As shafts of sunlight poked through the damaged exterior of the dharmaboat and landed on Xu Qing, he opened his eyes. The sunlight revealed the sparkle in his eyes which, like the rising sun, held endless optimism for the future.

I wonder if sunrise on the open ocean will feel like this.

Thinking about such things, he got to his feet. He had a lot to do today.

First he went to the Violent Crimes Division to request time off to go out to sea. It wasn't a complicated process. Seventh Peak disciples didn't always stay at port; since their cultivation was linked to the sea, it was only natural for them to leave. After going through the various procedures, he was granted forty days of leave. If he came back early, he was required to report in. If he came back later, he would have to work overtime to make up the difference. After finishing at the Violent Crimes Division, it was still early, so he decided to head to the Sixth Peak shops. After all, it seemed unlikely that what happened last time would reoccur.

However, after arriving, he looked around at the shops and hesitated. As he did, he realized he'd just received a voice message on his identity medallion. It was from the Captain.

"Xu Qing! Did you forget about something?"

Xu Qing stared at his identity medallion in shock, trying to figure out what the Captain was talking about.

"Never mind. I'll just be frank. You owe me 500 spirit stones, Xu Qing. When are you gonna pay me back?"

Glaring, Xu Qing responded with a single sentence. "It's 100 spirit stones."

"Alright, fine, fine. I'm not gonna haggle. 300 spirit stones, okay? Now, when are you gonna pay me back?"

Xu Qing didn't respond. Instead, he took out the bamboo slip with the names of his enemies carved onto it. Finding the Captain's name, he scratched out the question mark after the name.

"Hey, why aren't you saying anything? I saw that you requested time off, you brat. Are you going out to sea to avoid paying me back? Ah, whatever. The open sea is dangerous, and you really have to make sure your dharmaboat is upgraded. I want to make sure you don't end up dead and my 500 spirit stones completely lost.

Therefore, I have to remind you that if you want work done on your dharmaboat, you should go see Zhang San!"

Zhang San? thought Xu Qing. He hesitated.

The Captain, meanwhile, seemed very excited to talk about Zhang San. In fact, he went on to give more details, explaining how Xu Qing should act around Zhang San, what he should say, and other things. Finally, he ended his message.

Xu Qing stood there for a while thinking. Then, feeling a bit surprised at himself, he went to the Transportation Division. Upon arriving, he found Zhang San squatting atop a pile of cargo, smoking

a pipe and looking very relaxed. Occasionally, he would shout some orders to the workers under his command.

When he caught sight of Xu Qing, his eyes narrowed slightly, and then they glittered.

“Yo! Shouldn’t you be at work now, Junior Brother Xu? What are you doing here?”

As Xu Qing neared, he noted how Zhang San was squatting on the pile of merchandise. Without hesitation, he hopped onto the pile. This time, before Xu Qing could worry about maintaining some distance, Zhang San shifted to the side to make sure there was some space between the two of them.

Xu Qing looked at him for a moment, then squatted down.

Smiling, Zhang San noted Xu Qing’s handsome features that would drive the opposite sex crazy. After muttering to himself for a moment, he said, “Squatting is pretty comfortable, huh?”

“Agreed,” Xu Qing said with a nod.

“So. What’s up?”

“Elder Brother Zhang, my dharmaboat needs some upgrades.”

Zhang San was stunned. “You need to upgrade your dharmaboat? Who told you to talk to me about that? The Captain?”

Xu Qing didn’t answer the question. He just took out two apples, one of which he gave to Zhang San.

Zhang San accepted it out of instinct, then suddenly seemed regretful. He offered it back to Xu Qing. Xu Qing didn’t take it.

Zhang San smiled wryly, muttered a few more times as he rubbed the apple, and then looked at Xu Qing.

Xu Qing looked back at him.

A moment passed, and Zhang San laughed. “If you promise me one thing, I’ll help you with the upgrades.”

Xu Qing had been paying attention to Zhang San’s wording, and noticed that he didn’t mention helping Xu Qing find someone else to help with the upgrades. He was going to do the work himself. “Say the word, Elder Brother Zhang.”

“From now on, do you mind not staring at my throat? It’s hot today... but it’s giving me the chills.” Zhang San blinked a few times as he looked at Xu Qing.

Xu Qing thought about it for a moment, then looked Zhang San in the eyes.

Zhang San facepalmed and sighed. “Your gaze is really strange. It’s like whatever you look at, you want to hurt. Alright, forget it. It’s not going to be easy for you to change how your eyes work. I’ll help you with your dharmaboat. But I have to tell you up front that I charge a lot....” With that, he hopped off the pile of cargo and beckoned to Xu Qing.

Xu Qing stood, clasped hands, and then followed. Zhang San led him to a warehouse behind the Transportation Division. When he opened the warehouse door, Xu Qing saw a whole host of crafting materials glittering brightly.

Xu Qing was taken aback. The materials were all very high quality, and he even saw seven or eight entire dharmaboats that were in various states of disassembly. Toward the back of the warehouse, there was a half-built Coastguard Division battleship....

There were also watercraft from various nonhuman groups. Xu Qing couldn't help but gasp at the sight. He felt like he was actually in one of the Sixth Peak shops.

Off to the side, Zhang San looked very pleased with himself.

"What do you think?" he said, clasping his hands behind his back. "Let me tell you, when it comes to Seventh Peak disciples, I might not be the best fighter and I might not have the best cultivation base. But when it comes to working on dharmaboats. Hmmphh. Most Sixth Peak disciples can't measure up to me. I have a few dozen warehouses in this area, all filled with my work. Furthermore, no one would dare try to rob me!"

Thinking back to the instructions the Captain had given him, Xu Qing opened his eyes wide and tried to look shocked. Then he asked, "Elder Brother Zhang, are you really a Seventh Peak disciple?"

Zhang San seemed very pleased with Xu Qing's facial expression. He burst out laughing. "That's exactly what the Captain asked me. Sadly, my innate talents were discovered too late, otherwise I'd already be a conclave disciple in the Sixth Peak. Now, bring out your dharmaboat so I can have a look."

Xu Qing's eyes shone with respect as he took out the little bottle with his dharmaboat in it. Zhang San looked it over, and then without a word turned to start working. But then Xu Qing, after hesitating for a moment, thought back to what the Captain had told him and said, "Elder Brother Zhang San, I feel like my dharmaboat is actually built fairly well. It has many parts that I've upgraded to a very high standard."

Zhang San stopped in place, his eyebrows raised to form an inverted 八 shape. "Fairly well? Very high standard? Are you serious? Forget the materials, the craftsmanship alone is just atrocious. And look at the sides of the boat! Just glancing at the hull on either side you can tell the spirit convergence formation is put in shoddily. That scale was installed wrong, which messes up the boat's structure and influences the formation. I can tell with a glance that this work was done by some piece of trash disciple from the Sixth Peak.

"Oh, and look at the prow and stern. This is supposed to be a class-six dharmaboat, not a class-one! The emphasis should be on the inner workings, not the appearance! Why make it so eye-catching? It'll just attract the attention of enemies. Practicality is the most important thing."

Peering into the bottle, Zhang San said, “Trash. This thing is complete and utter trash. You can’t take this thing out on the open sea. If you do, and you run into a big storm or a large sea monster, then it simply doesn’t have the strength, rigidity, stability, or reliability to keep it watertight.”

Xu Qing felt shaken at how professional Zhang San sounded. Feeling even more respect than before, he clasped hands and bowed deeply.

Seeing this, Zhang San felt pleased. He enjoyed it when other disciples showed him reverence and admired his professionalism. That was how the Captain had treated him as well, although in retrospect the end result was him losing a lot of spirit stones....

Regardless, he had originally intended to just do some minor upgrades. But after Xu Qing mentioned that his boat was built ‘fairly well,’ it was too much for Zhang San to take.

Zhang San bore Xu Qing no ill will; everything he said was accurate. If an ordinary disciple took Xu Qing’s dharmaboat out to sea, it wouldn’t be problematic. But Xu Qing’s battle prowess virtually guaranteed that he would run into some powerful sea beasts, and go to some dangerous areas. Therefore, a dharmaboat like this wasn’t suitable.

Looking very pleased with himself, Zhang San proudly said, “I can see that you’ve been focusing on durability, so I’ll help you focus on that. We’ll make sure that when you take this dharmaboat to sea, if you get attacked by any huge beasts, you’ll be fine as long as they aren’t in the Foundation Establishment level. And even if you take damage, the boat won’t collapse!”

“Many thanks, Elder Brother,” Xu Qing said somberly, and then took out some spirit stones. “I have 200 spirit stones here. I have some more that I set aside to use when I go out to sea. Is this enough...?”

He had the feeling that 200 spirit stones probably wouldn’t cover all the work.

Zhang San looked at the spirit stones, and then at Xu Qing. Then he thought back to what the Captain had said about Xu Qing, and what he’d witnessed that day in the Sixth Peak shop. He recalled the cry of the dragonwhale the previous night, and the spirit power fluctuations. And considering how happily he’d criticized Xu Qing’s dharmaboat, he swallowed any bitterness he felt and put on a smile. [2]

“That’s enough. You have some great future prospects, kid. I invested in the Captain back in the day, and as for you... I’ll consider it another investment. Come pick up the boat tonight.” With that, Zhang San got to work.

Xu Qing looked deeply at Zhang San, gave a solemn expression of thanks, clasped hands and bowed deeply, then left.

After he was gone, Zhang San let loose a long sigh and scowled.

I screwed up again. Every time I run into these people who are so good at cultivation, I always have to show off my skills. I could just sit around enjoying my work. But now... I have to live up to my own bragging. Wait, hold on. How come the little punk was acting like the Captain...? That said, the Captain is really stingy. He didn’t give me a single spirit stone. Pretended he was broke. The kid is actually a lot nicer than the Captain.

In the final analysis, he was doing this for two reasons. The first was that the Captain had recommended keeping an eye on Xu Qing. The second reason... was that he trusted the Captain's sense of judgment.

I'm not going to regret making this investment!

Zhang San had started out obscure and unknown. Now he was still obscure and unknown, although he kept it that way on purpose. He was very wealthy, ran the entire Transportation Division from behind the scenes, and was someone nobody would ever dare to rob. And all of that was because he had once helped the Captain upgrade his dharmaboat.

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After leaving the Transportation Division, a strange expression appeared in Xu Qing's eyes. Finally, he took out his identity medallion and sent a voice message to the Captain.

"Captain, do you think it worked?"

"Did you do everything I told you to do?"

"Yeah...."

"Hahaha. Perfect. It's fine. Zhang San is one of us. Plus, he's rich. But if you think you're taking advantage of him now, just make sure to help him out later."

Xu Qing nodded earnestly. Then he took his bamboo slip back out. On one side, he added Zhang San's name. Then he flipped it to the side with his enemies on it, and added a question mark back to the Captain's name.

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Back in the Violent Crimes Division, the Captain was happily eating some strange fruits that couldn't be purchased in the capital city, and could only be found on one of the nonhuman islands far out at sea. After finishing his message to Xu Qing, he picked up a document relating to a complaint filed against Zhang San. On a recent mission out at sea, Zhang San had unleashed an incredible level of bloody violence, including plundering some nonhuman trading ships. The complaint demanded that Zhang San be severely punished. After reading it, the Captain smiled, then waved his hand, causing the report to crumble into ashes.

As long as my Offpeak friends don't betray me, nobody will lay a hand on them.

Chapter 79: A New Person at Sea

By noon, the sun shone brightly.

As Xu Qing walked the streets, he decided that he would definitely help out Zhang San sometime in the future. He had to pay back this favor with the dharmaboat. Although he wasn't sure what the dharmaboat would look like after Zhang San was finished, he had the feeling that there was going to be a lot more than 200 spirit stones' worth of work in it.

He also needed to properly thank Zhou Qingpeng for the gift of the ghostlonging horseshoe crabs.

As he thought about such things, he kept his eyes on his surroundings, and the people on the street. Nothing looked any different than it usually did. It seemed that... the death of the young merman

hadn't caused any big waves in the capital city. It was the same in the Violent Crimes Division. In fact, few people seemed aware of what had happened.

Xu Qing pondered that as he headed in the direction of the Hall of Sea Annals.

All disciples had to visit the Hall of Sea Annals before going out to sea for the first time. All sorts of precious information was kept therein. It contained years upon years of accounts detailing the strange and wonderful things Seven Blood Eyes disciples had encountered on the open sea. That included countless descriptions of sea beasts. It was a spectacularly comprehensive collection of information. It was prohibited to copy the information and take it out of the Hall of Sea Annals. But by paying a small fee, you could go inside and study the annals to your heart's content.

Furthermore, whenever disciples encountered strange matters or new sea beasts, they were asked to report the matter. After the information was verified, a considerable reward would be given. And the rewards were even greater for more precious information. Of course, if a disciple couldn't provide clear and strong evidence to prove their report was accurate, the verification process could take a very long time. Sometimes, hundreds of years could pass. That alone generally prevented people from randomly reporting false information in the hopes of getting a reward. And the unverified information didn't make it into the Hall of Sea Annals. As a result, any information found in the halls could be considered true and accurate. Because of that, Xu Qing knew that everything he learned was important, and could possibly save his life.

He already knew which general direction he wanted to explore. Thanks to the detailed sea chart from the young merman's bag of holding, he had his eyes set on one island in particular. It was located beyond the Westcoral Archipelago, in an area filled with dangerous submerged reefs. Because sealizards often shed their skin in that area, the place was called Sealizard Island. Sealizards were both vicious and rare. They usually lived in groups at the bottom of the ocean, and only came to the surface when they shed their skins. Anyone who wanted the skins had to collect them very quickly after they were shed, otherwise they would crumble into nothing. Because of that, they were very valuable. Acquiring such skins was difficult.

Furthermore, their defensive properties were amazing, which made them a high-quality material. In fact, mid-quality and low-quality materials couldn't even compare to them. Xu Qing had seen them for sale in some of the Sixth Peak shops, and knew that the skin of a lizard that was only in the third level of Qi Condensation would fetch a price of at least thirty spirit stones.

As a sealizard's cultivation base grew, its skin would become more and more expensive. The skin of a fifth-level lizard would go for 150 spirit stones, while the skin of an eighth level lizard would cost 500-600. It was a shocking level of wealth that ensured Sealizard Island was constantly visited by vicious bands of non-human cultivators from throughout the Forbidden Sea. In short, it was a dangerous place. Without a certain level of strength, going there was risking certain death.

That was exactly where Xu Qing intended to go.

As he thumbed through the sea annals, time passed by slowly but surely. Before he knew it, evening had come. After committing as much to memory from the sea annals as possible, he left.

I'm totally ready. I just need my dharmaboat.

As he looked out at the sea, the sound of the crashing waves reached his ears, and his eyes shone with anticipation.

The moon was up by the time he got back to the Transportation Division. The workers, tired after the hustle and bustle of the day, were leaving en masse. Walking past them, Xu Qing noticed Zhang San sitting atop a pile of cargo, smoking his pipe. Zhang San's face was somewhat obscured by the shadowy evening light, but the flickering flame of his pipe made it possible to see how exhausted he was. Xu Qing felt a bit apologetic as he prepared to walk over. However, that was when he noticed a familiar face in the crowd of workers who were hustling to get out of his way.

It was a petite young woman who was none other than Li Zimei. She had joined the sect at the same time as Xu Qing. When she spotted him, she seemed as reserved as ever, but she still smiled.

In the light of the moon, her smile seemed warm and sincere.

Xu Qing gave her a smile of encouragement in return, then watched her as she left. Finally, he joined Zhang San.

"You know her?" Zhang San asked curiously.

"Yeah," Xu Qing said softly. "Her name is Li Zimei. We joined the sect at the same time. She has a very tough character."

Zhang San nodded. "She's a good girl. Since the two of you are acquainted, I'll make sure to look after her."

"Thank you," Xu Qing said solemnly.

"It's nothing. Come on, let me show you your dharmaboat." Eyes sparkling, he hopped off the pile of cargo and led Xu Qing toward a warehouse in the back, different from the one they'd been in earlier.

Upon stepping inside, Xu Qing saw a huge boat that was so impressive he stopped in place. He'd known all along that his boat would look different. But even still, the sight of it left him completely stunned.

The prow, which had previously resembled a crocodile head, was no longer long and narrow. Now, it was a much more snub-nosed beast, with a black horn that lay mostly hidden in its forehead, but seemed ready to stab out at any moment. The boat had previously seemed flashy and flamboyant, but now, it seemed reserved, with its brutality kept hidden.

There were more changes. The boat was no longer 60 meters long and shaped like a willow leaf. Instead, it was actually shorter, but at the same time, wider. It was roughly diamond-shaped, and even resembled a turtle shell to some extent. Each plank on the deck was covered with scales, as well as complex formation markings.

Both sides of the ship featured two circular legs, four in total for the whole boat. They could expand and retract, which would allow the boat to move on land. Hidden within the wheels at the end of the legs were numerous sharp spikes.

There were big changes to the cabin as well. It now consisted of a small, two-story superstructure which would save space while also adding more room for the spell formation. Most eye-catching of all were the large sails that now stuck up from the deck, shaped like heavenly sabers. There were eight total, with four near the prow and four near the stern. All of them were tilted symmetrically at

an angle. They resembled wings, but at the same time, looked like sharp blades. In the hold of the boat was a large empty area that could hold sea beasts.

Overall, the dharmaboat now looked like some gigantic, awe-inspiring creature.

“This...” Xu Qing said, reeling a bit at the dramatic changes to his boat.

Seeing Xu Qing’s reaction, Zhang San’s exhaustion turned into pride.

“The craftsmanship on your old dharmaboat was sadly lacking,” Zhang San said coolly. “Therefore, I made some changes. The biggest alterations were to the boat’s keel, hull, internal structure, cabin, prow, stern, and superstructure.

“I completely replaced the keel, which will make the boat a lot more stable. With some adjustments to the internal structure, you can reach optimal levels of strength and speed. However, you still have some room to make upgrades in those regards.”

With that, Zhang San leaped up onto the dharmaboat.

“I injected some devourer marrow into the black horn at the prow. If you stab a sea beast with that horn, it will absorb its spirit power and then store it in the spell formation.

“See the four legs? Each leg has 3,600 razor-sharp spikes in it. If you get into a dangerous situation, you can shoot those spikes out and detonate them.

“I didn’t change the spirit convergence formation, but I did create this magazine here which will let you load up 50 spirit stones at the same time. Also, there’s a small flying boat hidden inside the hull that can move at double your normal top speed. You have to sacrifice the dharmaboat to use it, but it could save your life if you run into a really bad situation and need to escape.”

Zhang San reached up to touch one of the sails. Looking very proud, he continued, “And then we have the sails. I invented this type of sail. Watch.”

He took out a spirit stone, put it into the spell formation, and then stamped his foot. The formation activated, and the eight blade-like sails folded up, creating a defensive shell. In that configuration, the boat looked like a huge snapping turtle, ready to either attack or defend itself.

“When you add in the dharmaboat’s default defense system, this means you have two lines of defense. It makes the boat even more durable. What’s more, you can also use the sails like blades to unleash extraordinarily deadly attacks.

“The groove on the bottom of the boat allows you to establish a firm connection to your dragonwhale. In the right conditions, that will allow you to use your dragonwhale to fly for short periods of time.”



Zhang San jumped off the dharmaboat, stood in front of Xu Qing with his hands clasped behind his back and chin up, and said, "And this, Xu Qing, is a true class-seven dharmaboat. What do you think? Satisfied?"

Xu Qing felt battered by waves of inward shock. Taking a deep breath, he took a few steps back, clasped hands, and bowed very deeply.

"Many thanks, Elder Brother Zhang. This dharmaboat makes me... very, very satisfied!"

"When it comes time to upgrade your dharmaboat to a dharmaskiff," Zhang San replied, "then I'll help you plan everything out according to your power source. A dharmaskiff is a real weapon!"

Overall, Zhang San was very pleased with Xu Qing's attitude. However, his exhaustion was getting the best of him, and he couldn't hold back from yawning.

Seeing this, Xu Qing said his goodbyes. After placing some more spirit stones off to the side, he packed up his dharmaboat and left the Transportation Division.

After he was gone, Zhang San let loose a dejected sigh. I lost so much money on this deal, I can hardly take it. I can't believe I did such a good job.... I'm gonna go broke. This brat had better do really well in the future....

Swallowing his grief, he took the spirit stones and left the warehouse. Along the way, he recalled the disciple that had joined the sect along with Xu Qing. Taking out his identity medallion, he sent out some voice messages to make sure she was taken care of.

If I'm going to make an investment, I might as well go all in. There's no other option.

As Zhang San continued to sigh, Xu Qing returned to Harbor 79. Back at his berth, he produced his dharmaboat, which crashed down onto the water. Taking a look at the huge boat, he stepped aboard and started inspecting everything up close.

That night, Xu Qing looked at all of the work Zhang San had done, and he felt more admiration than ever. Finally, as the night came to an end, he stood on the deck and watched the sunrise.

Then, he performed a right-handed incantation gesture.

Time to go out to sea!

The water seethed as his class-seven dharmaboat exited its berth. Then, as numerous other disciples watched him from their dharmaboats, he turned the prow toward the sluice gate of the harbor.

His boat was like a caged beast that was finally being freed. As he stood on the deck, his long hair streamed behind him in the ocean breeze, glittering in the morning sun, his gray daoist robe fluttering.

## Chapter 80: Bronze Dragon Chariot

The sun shone brilliantly over the untamed Forbidden Sea, causing the raging waves to howl to the heavens. The crashing waves caused the black water to froth up and splash on the defensive shield around Xu Qing's dharmaboat. As he stood at the prow looking out at the sea, his hand flashed in an

incantation gesture, causing spirit power fluctuations to roll out and dispel the mutagen brought by the splashing water.

Similar to the broken face of the god above, the Forbidden Sea that surrounded South Phoenix forever caused humans to feel awe and reverence. It wasn't just because the sea was wide and deep, but also because, in the hearts of humans, it was eternally mysterious. It was that sense of mystery that filled Xu Qing's heart as he gazed at the distant horizon where the sky and the Forbidden Sea touched each other.

Compared to the vast sea, the boats and ships coming in and out of Seven Blood Eyes seemed like tiny feathers drifting about on the water. The people on the dharmaboats were the same.

Xu Qing looked at the boundlessness and felt minuscule.

The sea annals mention that when disciples go to sea for the first time, they feel tiny. It's a normal reaction. At the same time, it makes you want to go out and conquer the world.

As Xu Qing looked out at the black water, he realized that this wasn't just his first time going out to sea. It was also his first time seeing the sea from the sea. That said, he didn't feel the urge to conquer the world. He had no grand ideals or lofty aspirations. He just wanted to stay alive in the chaotic world. And if he could improve his life a bit, that would be even better.

And thus, it was with full vigilance that Xu Qing sat down cross-legged for cultivation, while simultaneously keeping an eye on everything around him.

Time passed with nothing but the crash of the waves. However, at around noontime, a commotion from behind him caught his attention.

Eyes flashing, he looked over his shoulder.

Coming from the direction of the Seven Blood Eyes port were seven or eight dharmaboats, and the people aboard them were making quite a bit of noise.

Other than the dharmaboat in the lead position, most seemed to be class-five or -six.

As for the lead boat, the spirit power fluctuations coming off of it indicated it was probably class-eight or -nine. It looked amazing, being gold in color, with golden feathers all over it that glittered in the sun. It was especially ostentatious in contrast to the black water of the Forbidden Sea. In fact, it seemed like a chicken spreading its tail in the hopes of looking like a peacock. Altogether, it was vulgar and inelegant.

The prow was crafted to look like a phoenix, so it should have looked elegant and graceful. But with all the gold and other embellishments, the phoenix seemed to have lost its soul, and was worried that other people might not notice it.

Upon seeing it, Xu Qing's eyes narrowed, and he took out a dagger.

The capital city of Seven Blood Eyes was a dangerous and brutal place, but at least there were rules there. For instance, Foundation Establishment cultivators couldn't cause problems for Qi Condensation cultivators. But Xu Qing knew there was only one rule on the open sea, and that was... the weak were the prey of the strong.

It didn't matter if you were dealing with humans or non-humans. It didn't matter if you were dealing with fellow members of the sect, or dangerous beings native to the Forbidden Sea. If you ran into an enemy in the Foundation Establishment level, you could die in an instant.

Out here, anyone could be an enemy.

As the ostentatious dharmaboat neared, Xu Qing heard a voice from the deck that he detested, carried to him by the sea breeze.

"Elder Sister, a lot of people are curious about how many spirit stones I spent on The Phoenix. Honestly, I don't want to go into that, since most people just get depressed when they hear the details. As I'm sure you know, to people like us, spirit stones are a constant source of frustration.

"Truth be told, I don't think much about spirit stones. When the sect was establishing the rankings of the dharmaboats, they asked my opinion about it. They really wanted my boat to rank seventeenth. Anyway, I don't really care about that sort of thing.

"In my opinion, it doesn't matter how many spirit stones I spend on The Phoenix. All I care about is that the boat can further my dream. And what is my dream, you might ask? It's to be like a phoenix and soar through the dome of heaven.

"Elder Sister, I also hope to have a companion to soar by my side, to see the beautiful scenery with me, and to share my troubles with."

The voice carried to Xu Qing by the breeze was none other than the person the Captain had described as an idiot, Zhao Zhongheng. He stood on the deck of his golden dharmaboat named The Phoenix, and next to him was a young woman wearing a pale violet daoist robe. She was in her twenties, charming and slim, her garment making her seem like a beautiful violet flower. As Zhao Zhongheng spoke, her brow was slightly furrowed as if from irritation. As the sea breeze caused her violet gown to sway, she noticed Xu Qing on his dharmaboat in the distance.

As the sun shone down, a whale breached the water between Xu Qing and the young woman, soaring high up into the air.

The whale's cry was like something from the ancient past, like a flute echoing out to make everything still and empty. Then the whale crashed down, sending water spraying up and cutting off Xu Qing and the young woman.

As for the young woman, the sun shining into her eyes made it impossible for her to see Xu Qing's face clearly. However, there was something about him that she knew she wouldn't forget.

A moment later, the dharmaboat convoy she was part of disappeared into the distance.

Xu Qing watched them go. After confirming that they really had just been passing by, he put his dagger away and continued with his cultivation.

Time passed. As he worked on his cultivation, his dharmaboat continued deeper into the Forbidden Sea. Slowly but surely, the ghastly and gruish nature of the sea became more apparent to him. He saw a school of zombiefish, whose power of will remained after death, like a black polluted shadow

that stretched toward his dharmaboat. He saw the terrifying shadow of a giantfang shark, incomparably vicious as it tore its prey to shreds. [1]

There were some areas in which he sensed immense might emanating from the sea floor. He usually tried to go around those areas, and when he couldn't go around them, he kept his guard up. Based on his study of the sea annals, he knew that none of these things were unusual. But he still felt the need to stay fully vigilant.

The mutagen in the Forbidden Sea was very strong, almost as if the sea itself were made from it. Because of that, Xu Qing's shadow grew even more pitch black, as if it were made from ink. And then, suddenly, it seemed as if it wanted to move of its own accord.... When Xu Qing noticed that, he didn't hesitate for a moment to use the power of the violet crystal to viciously suppress it. He had to repeat the process several times to make it work properly. Only when the shadow seemed to grow somewhat fainter did he feel a bit more at ease.

Eventually, the sun began to set, and Xu Qing prepared for his first night at sea. Perhaps because this part of the sea was so close to Seven Blood Eyes, he hadn't experienced any serious dangers during the day.

As the evening light stretched out over the water, some aggressive swordfish appeared, leaping in and out of the water, leaving behind arcs of scintillating water before they shot beneath the surface again. With the sun reflecting off of their cyan bodies, they seemed to glow, making them incredibly beautiful.

Perhaps because of Xu Qing's dragonwhale, most of the swordfish kept their distance. However, a few jumped up and slammed into his dharmaboat defenses, which hissed loudly as the fish were subsequently knocked back into the water. When the swordfish hit the shield, they were close enough that Xu Qing was able to get a good look at them. They had rows and rows of menacing sharp teeth, and red eyes that glowed ferociously.

At a certain point, Xu Qing waved his hand, causing numerous water droplets to form just outside the shield and create a buffer. That way, none of the fish would accidentally kill themselves from hitting the shield. The sea annals emphasized that when Seventh Peak disciples went out onto the Forbidden Sea, they should avoid killing sea beasts as much as possible. Killing sea beasts could attract the attention of grues that were native to the sea.

The sea annals didn't go into details about such grues. However the thought of them caused Xu Qing to pay attention to every rustle of the wind during his first night.

According to the sea annals, nighttime was a lot more dangerous than daytime. On the open sea, anything was possible. That said, the sea annals also made it clear that though there was danger everywhere, a lot of things came down to luck. An unlucky person might die on their first outing. A lucky person could go out to sea countless times without any trouble.

It seemed Xu Qing's luck was good, as he didn't experience anything gruish on his first night, and didn't hear anything other than the sea breeze and the crash of waves.

As dawn approached, he opened his eyes and prepared to relax a bit. However, that was when a sudden sensation of intense fear erupted within him like a volcano. He suddenly went tense from head to toe, his eyes opened wide as he scrambled to make sure his dharmaboat defenses were at maximum.

At the same time that he opened his eyes, his dragonwhale did the same. The dragonwhale could act as Xu Qing's eyes and ears, and since it was in the water under his boat, he was able to look down toward the sea floor. However, he saw nothing in the darkness. But he heard something that sounded almost like the grinding of teeth.

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

The sound caused Xu Qing's breath to come raggedly as he thought back to the Singing in the forbidden region. The coldness he had felt back then was exactly what he was sensing now.

Expression turning even more serious, he tapped into his cultivation base and made sure his dharmaboat was completely in defensive mode. As he remained fully on guard, he kept watch through the eyes of the dragonwhale. Gradually, he saw something on the seafloor. It was a gigantic humanoid creature, covered with countless tentacles that swayed and writhed. Draped over one shoulder was a massive chain that stretched behind it. Shockingly, at the end of the chain was a bronze dragon chariot. [2]

The chariot was very rundown, covered with rust and other traces of extreme age. However, the body of the chariot had beautiful carvings that still emanated an imperial air.

The giant was pulling the dragon chariot along, and with each step taken, massive amounts of silt billowed up from the sea floor. It seemed to be simply passing by. And thanks to the distance, Xu Qing wasn't able to see it clearly. However, despite the distance, the crunching sound of each step pierced into his heart and mind, filling him with fear, and causing him to tremble instinctively.

Only when the giant figure disappeared into the distance did he start to calm down, though the fear lingered within him.

What was that?

Face pale, he walked out onto the main deck and stood by the prow, looking off into the distance.

As for the dragonwhale beneath the surface, all it could make out was a vague shadow that was the giant.

The last bit of darkness before dawn retreated, and the sky turned bright. The sun was like a torch, evaporating the black waters to create the clouds overhead. The heat spread, until the sky was bright red. This was the beautiful morning glow of dawn.