

## Timescape 81

### Chapter 81: A Fair Price

The radiance of daybreak swept over the sea, illuminating everything, including Xu Qing.

Eventually, he exhaled. The terrifying entity at the sea floor had disappeared along with the coming of day. He had no idea who that giant was, nor who the dragon chariot belonged to. He hadn't seen any mention of them in the sea annals. But even just a distant glimpse of the giant had left him completely shaken, and also convinced that it was something absolutely astonishing. And for something that powerful to be dragging a chariot begged the question of who the owner of the chariot was, and what sort of glory they had commanded in the past. Thankfully, the giant didn't seem to have any evil intentions, or at least, not toward someone as weak as Xu Qing.

"The Forbidden Sea..." Xu Qing murmured, the vigilance in his eyes growing more intense.

Now that he had personally experienced some of the danger of the sea, he was going to be even more cautious in his travels. And would not deviate at all from the navigation route indicated on the sea chart.

A few days passed.

Xu Qing didn't see any other people. He was now getting more familiar with the Forbidden Sea. On a few occasions, he encountered sea beasts, and a few times, he was forced to fight. Every encounter ended with him acquiring some organic crafting materials. His dragonwhale had already proved to be invaluable, and what was more, the fighting rapidly improved Xu Qing's ability to engage in combat on the open water.

He didn't see any more terrifying entities like that giant.

One day, when the sun was hot and the sea breeze warm, Xu Qing finished his session of cultivation and looked through his dharmaboat defenses at something off in the distance. He frowned.

That was the direction of the Westcoral Archipelago, and beyond that, Sealizard Island. According to the sea chart, he would have to travel for seven more days to reach his destination. The notations on the sea chart indicated that his current path was the safest, and would eventually take him past the Westcoral Archipelago. However, now he was starting to doubt that this was the safest route.

The surface of the water ahead was covered with creeping vines. And in the middle of the vines were some dharmaboats, apparently stranded. However, the boats were so far away that Xu Qing couldn't tell for sure. He seemed to be on the edge of the vined area, where the vines were less numerous.

Apparently, something had attracted the vines from the depths of the sea floor, and after enough time passed, they would sink back down.

However, now that Xu Qing had arrived, giving the vines a new target, they started speeding in his direction. As he stood at the prow, fully on guard, his hands flashed in a double-handed incantation gesture, causing his dharmaboat to back away from the incoming vines.

Because he hadn't plowed headlong into the depths of the vines, he didn't need to waste time going all out to evade them. Unfortunately, they moved with extreme speed, and a couple managed to reach him and start wrapping around the hull of his boat.

The vines, pitch black and as thick as an arm, were covered with countless spikes, making them look extremely vicious. Even more shocking was that they had some sort of power of absorption, and thus, despite not immediately affecting the speed of the dharmaboat, Xu Qing got the feeling they were draining away some of the boat's spirit power.

Eyes flashing coldly, he pulled out his dagger, jumped over, and slashed the vines off the side of the boat. His quick action, coupled with the boat's speed, ensured that he was able to escape the area before any more vines could arrive.

Once at a safe distance, he looked back at the area with the vines. That was when he noticed something on the deck.

A few pieces of severed vine were there, wriggling like sea snakes, and oozing a green liquid with corrosive properties that made hissing sounds as it spread onto the deck.

An unsightly expression appeared on Xu Qing's face. When cutting the vines earlier, he had felt how tough they were; despite his high level of fleshly body power, it had still taken a lot of effort to cut through them.

After thinking the matter over, he performed a right-handed incantation gesture, causing spell formation lines underfoot to glow as the nucleus of the spirit convergence formation appeared.

Studying it, Xu Qing realized that three of the spirit stones in the middle of the formation were duller than the others, as if they were almost completely drained.

So, the vines really do absorb spirit power.

According to the sea annals, there were over a hundred types of creeping vines, although most were similar to each other. Because of having read about them, he was quickly able to judge which type this was. However, neither the sect's sea charts nor the sea chart he'd acquired from the young merman indicated that creeping vines like this were located around here.

That means that these vines moved to this location from somewhere else. And there is only one type of vine that likes to devour spirit power. Spirit-guzzling creepers.

Xu Qing thought back to the sea annals and frowned.

Spirit-guzzling creepers love to devour spirit power. They can't be harmed with magical techniques, and can only be severed by using brute force. They can gobble up the power of a dharmaboat, and can also take spirit power from cultivators. If you get caught by them, you'll die in agony. However, they're sensitive to mutagen, so they can usually be found in areas where the mutagen is weak.

Xu Qing looked off into the distance.

His current route was the fastest way to get to the Westcoral Archipelago, so if he deviated to avoid the vines, it would cost him a lot of time. Furthermore, he had no idea how much area was covered by the vines. According to the description in the sea annals, when spirit-guzzling creepers invaded, they would usually float about to cover a very large area.

Going around would cost time. And it's not like I'm out of options. Spirit-guzzling creepers aren't impossible to deal with.

After a bit more thought, his eyes narrowed, and he reached down to his bag of holding. A moment later, a black medicinal pill appeared in his hand. Of course, it was a black bolus, which contained a large amount of mutagen. Holding the pill in his hand, he stood on the prow and directed his dharmaboat right into the vine-filled area.

Soon, the surface of the water seethed with vines as they rushed voraciously toward Xu Qing and his dharmaboat.

However, as they got close, Xu Qing calmly tossed out the black bolus. As soon as it hit the water, it dissolved, and the mutagen levels skyrocketed. The incoming vines shivered as if they had sensed something profoundly loathsome, and then they roiled away in the opposite direction. Xu Qing's dharmaboat was now completely unobstructed.

Looking a bit more at ease, Xu Qing sent his dharmaboat moving onward at top speed. Though there were a lot of vines in the area, every black bolus he tossed out forced them away from him.

As he proceeded, and as he tossed out more black boluses, the mutagen around his boat grew more dense. Eventually, there was so much that he didn't need to throw out any more black boluses. The vines instinctively avoided him.

And thus, as he proceeded, he eventually neared the dharmaboats he'd spotted earlier. That was when the sea breeze carried voices from that boat into his ears.

"You were leading the way, Zhao Zhongheng! And this is where you brought us??"

"Elder Sister Ding, please, calm down.... There weren't any vines in this area before. They must have shown up only in the last few days. I had no way of knowing! But don't worry, I already sent a message to my grandfather asking for help. He should send people soon to help free us...."

It was none other than Zhao Zhongheng and his boat The Phoenix, which was stranded by the creeping vines, and had to struggle to make any progress forward. Surrounding him were the other boats in his convoy. All of them were trapped, and the disciples on them looked very anxious as they hacked away at the vines.

Zhao Zhongheng looked quite annoyed. It was absolutely true that he could never have predicted that creeping vines would be in this area. Right now, he was exerting every ounce of strength to try to get The Phoenix free of the vines. Meanwhile, Elder Sister Ding was clearly upset, and all he could do was apologize and beg her to calm down. After all, she had an extraordinary background.

Eventually, he had no choice but to take out a jade box, which he handed to her.

"Don't be angry, Elder Sister Ding. Trust me, we'll be fine. I'll get us to the Westcoral Archipelago. Look, this clearbright lozenge is a rare soul-nourishing medicine. Very expensive! My grandfather gave it to me, and now I'm giving it to you as an apology."

The beautiful Elder Sister Ding was running very low on patience. Frowning, she took the jade box from Zhao Zhongheng and forced herself to calm down a bit. Then, she opened her mouth to speak.

However, at that very moment, the sound of a dharmaboat reached her ears, and she looked over to see a boat speeding in their direction.

At the prow was a tall figure in a gray robe that flapped in the wind. He had long black hair, and as the sunlight shone through it, a scintillating halo glittered over his head. Beneath that halo was a face that could cause any member of the opposite sex to swoon. It was cold yet handsome, so much so that the creeping vines actually moved out of the way.

Elder Sister Ding's eyes glittered, and a charming smile appeared on her face as she waved at Xu Qing.

“Junior Brother! How are you dealing with these vines? Are you able to help us a bit?”

Her smile and voice were as sweet as candy, making Zhao Zhongheng, who had just spotted Xu Qing, look very uncomfortable. Despite being extremely polite during their entire journey, Elder Sister Ding had never once smiled at him in this way....

A look of displeasure appeared on his face, and hostility brewed in his heart as he glared at Xu Qing. And that was when he realized he recognized this newcomer.

“It's you!”

If it was anyone else, he probably would have long forgotten their face. But Xu Qing was the kind of person people didn't easily forget. As soon as he recognized Xu Qing, he sensed the spirit power fluctuations coming off of him, and realized that he was a lot stronger than the last time they'd met. That said, Zhao Zhongheng was a conclave disciple with a very high status, the type of person who looked down on countless Offpeak disciples. [1]

Eyes turning cold, he coolly said, “Get over here and help us open up a path.”

This was the way he normally bossed around gray-robed Offpeak disciples. After all, based on his experiences, disciples like that were usually in awe of him, and listened to everything he said.

Xu Qing had noticed The Phoenix earlier, as well as the two conclave disciples in pale violet robes who stood upon it. However he hadn't intended on doing anything other than speed past them.

“Hey, are you deaf?” Zhao Zhongheng shouted. “Didn't you hear what I said?”

Looking very grim, he summoned a host of water droplets that turned into a sword which shot toward Xu Qing's dharmaboat. As it neared, a screen of water shot up to block it. The water sword shattered.

Xu Qing's dharmaboat suddenly decelerated to a stop. He slowly turned and looked at Zhao Zhongheng, his eyes cold. Then the water by his boat seethed as a massive dragonwhale breached the surface. However, it only emerged partly from the water, the sunlight glinting dazzlingly on its surface. It let loose a spine-tingling roar, then smashed down onto the water and sank beneath the surface, creating a huge splash that sent water out in all directions.

The sight caused Zhao Zhongheng's face to fall. And his attendants all looked on with wide eyes. Even Elder Sister Ding looked surprised.

“A Forbidden Sea dragonwhale!” Zhao Zhongheng gasped, looking at Xu Qing in disbelief. He was a conclave disciple, so he usually exerted crushing pressure on Offpeak disciples. Except... that wasn’t an absolute rule.

An Offpeak disciple who could summon a Forbidden Sea dragonwhale while in the eighth level of the Seaforming Scripture indicated a shocking level of talent. People like that almost always reached Foundation Establishment.

Zhao Zhongheng knew that people like that weren’t worth provoking, and in fact, were worth making friends with. After all, if someone like that reached Foundation Establishment, their status would instantly reach a very high level. And then, they would be someone he would have to offer respectful greetings to.

Looking coldly at Zhao Zhongheng as his facial expression changed, Xu Qing calmly said, “I charge twenty spirit stones per boat. Except yours. For you it’ll be a hundred.”

## Chapter 82: Countless Movements Became Sinister

Back at the scavenger basecamp, Xu Qing had often charged a fee to provide help to others. Although his rate was a bit dramatic on this occasion, he didn’t feel uncomfortable about it at all. He was under no obligation to provide help, and therefore, it made sense that he would charge more money to someone who gave him an attitude.

Upon hearing his words, Elder Sister Ding looked thoughtful, while Zhao Zhongheng’s expression turned grimmer. Zhao Zhongheng even seemed inclined to say something in response, but didn’t. In the past, he would definitely have made a sarcastic comment, but right now, he was hesitating.

Xu Qing looked over the group, and when it seemed like they weren’t going to pay him, he didn’t say anything further, and just turned his boat around to leave. However, that was when Elder Sister Ding spoke up.

“No problem!” she said. Waving her hand, she summoned her own dharmaboat, a beautiful craft that resembled a willow leaf and pulsed with impressive spirit power. Leaping onto it, she sent it toward Xu Qing.

Stunned, Zhao Zhongheng stammered, “Elder Sister, y-you...”

Elder Sister Ding didn’t spare a second glance for Zhao Zhongheng. As she neared Xu Qing, the creeping vines in the area swarmed toward her. In the blink of an eye, she seemed to be in great danger.

Xu Qing waved his hand, sending out a black bolus to land right in front of Elder Sister Ding. Instantly, the vines backed away, allowing her clear passage. Once she was next to him, she jumped onto his dharmaboat and collected her own back up. Of course, she was actually standing precariously on top of his dharmaboat’s defensive shield.

Frowning, Xu Qing looked at her.

“Thank you for your help, Junior Brother. I’m Ding Xue. I’m fairly certain I’m older than you, so you can call me Elder Sister. My dharmaboat isn’t suited to travel in this area,

so I'd really like to spend an additional twenty spirit stones for safe passage with you." [1]

Elder Sister Ding was already getting a sense of Xu Qing's personality. With a sweet smile, she produced a Sixth Peak spirit note worth 40 spirit stones and offered it to Xu Qing.

Xu Qing glanced at the note, scanned Elder Sister Ding's cultivation base, and then quickly studied her throat. Finally, he created a small opening in the defenses, allowing her to drop down onto the deck. Then he waved his hand, causing the spirit note to fly over to him.

After confirming it was authentic, he didn't say anything further. He put the note in his sack, then got his dharmaboat moving again. He wasn't worried that she had any ill intentions; after all, the moment she stepped onto his boat, she was infected by his poison. That said, the poison required interaction with other poisons to become active.

As the setting sun shone over Xu Qing's dharmaboat, he stood tall and straight, looking incomparably handsome. Next to him stood Elder Sister Ding, slender and beautiful, her hair swaying in the wind. It was an amazing sight.

Meanwhile, back on Zhao Zhongheng's boat, there was no such beautiful image. Furthermore, the wind caused Elder Sister Ding's tender voice to float right back to Zhao Zhongheng.

"What should I call you, little Junior Brother? This dharmaboat of yours is amazing. I've never seen anything like it. Say, little Junior Brother, what department do you work for?"

Zhao Zhongheng was already getting very anxious. After all, he had expended painstaking effort just to get Elder Sister Ding out onto his boat. Feeling very frustrated, he gritted his teeth and took out a red paper talisman.

Shockingly, it was a talisman treasure!

Seeing that Elder Sister Ding was leaving with Xu Qing, he threw the talisman out onto the water. It instantly ignited, releasing a huge wave of energy that rolled out in all directions.

The vines surrounding The Phoenix were caught in the explosion; many of them directly collapsed, while the others retracted rapidly.

Taking advantage of the moment, Zhao Zhongheng shouted, "Elder Sister, wait for me!"

As the words left his mouth, he sent The Phoenix shooting off at top speed, not holding anything back. As for his friends in the other boats, they all started crying for help.

"You wait here," he yelled back. "I already contacted my grandfather, he'll send people soon to save you."

Having no more time to waste on them, he left them behind. Unfortunately, there were just too many creeping vines in the area, and they quickly started entangling him again. Heart aching, Zhao Zhongheng threw out more talisman treasures.

As the talismans exploded, clearing a path through the vines, he got closer to Xu Qing.

The sound of the explosions finally caused Elder Sister Ding to look away from Xu Qing and over her shoulder. When she saw The Phoenix and Zhao Zhongheng, as well as all the explosions, she laughed coldly.

“I didn’t ask you to follow me, Zhao Zhongheng. You offered to take me to the Westcoral Archipelago. I told you to take a different route, but you insisted on going your way. I could have dealt with being stuck, especially since you said there was nothing you could do about it. But as it turns out, you did have a way to get us free. You just didn’t want to use it!”

Zhao Zhongheng looked at her bitterly. The bravado he’d shown when first going out to sea was completely gone.

“You don’t understand, Elder Sister,” he said. “My grandfather... he gave me these life-saving talismans for emergency use only. I hardly have any left....”

Elder Sister Ding snorted coldly, looked away, and completely ignored him.

Zhao Zhongheng was getting even more anxious, as he didn’t dare to offend Elder Sister Ding. And the more he looked at Xu Qing’s dharmaboat, the more he disliked it. However, he could tell that Xu Qing was strong, so therefore, he suppressed his anger and threw out a few more talismans. Finally, he broke free and was able to get close to Xu Qing’s dharmaboat.

“Elder Sister, please, come back and join me,” he said. “I know I messed up....”

It seemed as if Elder Sister Ding hadn’t even heard him. Smiling sweetly at Xu Qing, she said, “Junior Brother Xu, are you hungry? I have some snacks here.”

With that, she took out a small box from her bag of holding.

Face completely expressionless, Xu Qing shook his head and looked over at her. “Elder Sister Ding, we’re free from the creeping vines now. Please disembark.”

Hearing his words, Zhao Zhongheng started to get excited, and mused to himself that Xu Qing apparently did have some tact. Then he looked at Elder Sister Ding with high expectations.

“Where are you heading, Junior Brother Xu?” Elder Sister Ding asked sweetly. “Maybe the two of us are going in the same direction?”

Zhao Zhongheng’s expression turned unsightly again.

Xu Qing frowned.

Seeing Xu Qing’s reaction, Elder Sister Ding’s eyes narrowed slightly. After a moment of thought, she hesitantly continued, “Let me explain, Junior Brother Xu. I’m heading to the Westcoral Archipelago. It’s about five days from here. If it’s too far out of your way, we can part ways. But if it’s convenient for you, I’d like to offer 200 spirit stones for safe passage. Does that work for you, Junior Brother?”

With that, she pulled out two spirit notes and looked at Xu Qing, her beautiful eyes glittering.

Xu Qing looked at the spirit notes and his heart started to beat a bit faster. He never could have guessed that his sea outing would result in making so many spirit stones in one day. He was heading

to Sealizard Island, which was so close to the Westcoral Archipelago it was almost part of it. So naturally, it would be convenient to give her a ride. If she had simply asked for free passage, he would have refused. But since she was offering 200 spirit stones....

Although 200 spirit stones was a lot of money, this was his boat, and according to the traditions of the sect, he was responsible for the safety of anyone onboard. In other words, giving Elder Sister Ding passage was like accepting a temporary mission. The open sea was a dangerous place, and this mission was somewhat urgent. Therefore, it wasn't unusual at all that he would charge a spirit stone fee.

Having reached this point in his train of thought, he nodded.

Elder Sister Ding's smile became even more radiant as she handed the spirit notes to Xu Qing. Meanwhile, back on The Phoenix, Zhao Zhongheng looked completely miserable. Though he knew that Xu Qing was an extraordinary person, he couldn't keep the fury from showing in his eyes.

Xu Qing completely ignored Zhao Zhongheng's glare, and just sent his dharmaboat speeding forward.

Xu Qing was actually in a great mood. 200 spirit stones was a very tidy profit. However, he felt a bit out of sorts as Elder Sister Ding just kept talking and talking, asking all sorts of questions. In fact, there seemed no end to her questions, and most of them revolved around personal information. Also, she kept staring at his face, which he found somewhat annoying. For the most part, he ignored her.

However, the more he ignored her, the friendlier she got. All he could do was try to get a bit more speed out of his dharmaboat in the hopes of ending the journey sooner.

Meanwhile, Zhao Zhongheng felt like he was going to explode. The fire in his eyes and the fire in his heart seemed like they might erupt into real flames. That was especially true when he thought about all of his hard work, including asking his grandfather to talk with Elder Sister Ding's family to allow the two of them to go out alone.... And now an Offpeak disciple was reaping all the rewards. He felt like he was going mad, like all the frustration within him was about to erupt from within his heart.

That stinking shrew! I let her on my boat for free, but now she's throwing away money to ride with some pretty boy? It's obviously because she likes him. Is she blind? I'm obviously exponentially better than that little punk!

Spirit stones? I have too many to count. Status? I'm a conclave disciple! Background? My grandfather is an elder on the Seventh Peak! That brat can't compare to me at all. In fact, he can't even compare to a single hair from my head.

What's impressive about him, other than that Forbidden Sea dragonwhale? He's got nothing! He's just some Offpeak egghead. So what if he's good-looking? Being good-looking doesn't put food in your stomach!!

As Zhao Zhongheng stewed in his jealousy, the sun sank toward the horizon and dusk spread.

When the sun set over the sea, everything became more profound and mysterious. There was still a faint red glow on the horizon, illuminating the waves, making the scene look like a beautiful painting. The glowing light made the waves seem like rolling flames, one cresting the other.



Eventually, the fire in the sky faded away, and the flames on the water died out. Everything turned dark. The waves subsided into ripples, and the wind eased, making everything very quiet and peaceful.

It wasn't safe for boats to move about at night. There were far more dangers than during the day, and therefore, Xu Qing stopped and lay anchor. Meanwhile, Elder Sister Ding pulled out some food, smiled sweetly, and offered him some.

Xu Qing declined her offer, went into the cabin, and activated the cabin's defenses. Elder Sister Ding didn't seem the least bit offended by Xu Qing's cold demeanor. In fact, she smiled, sat down cross-legged in front of the cabin, and said, "Junior Brother Xu, you're going to work on your cultivation? I'll sit as dharma protector for you!"

On The Phoenix, Zhao Zhongheng once again felt like he was going mad. Looking over at the beautiful Elder Sister Ding, he called, "Elder Sister, I have some fresh fish that we could—"

"Not interested," she interrupted coolly.

"Elder Sister, I—"

"Don't need it."

"I—"

"Could you keep it down?" she said, glaring at him impatiently. "Don't interrupt Junior Brother Xu's cultivation."

Zhao Zhongheng's face darkened, and he gnashed his teeth as he glared at the cabin. By now, the madness in his heart was at a peak level. However, there was nothing he could do but sit down in a huff and start meditating. And thus, time passed, until it was deep in the night.

Being wrapped up in meditation, the three of them didn't notice something very unusual happening.

It seemed like countless twinkling stars on the surface of the water, slowly transforming into shadowy figures. It was almost as if... the darkness of the Forbidden Sea was set aside for these figures as a profound and mysterious realm of dream.

However, as the shadowy figures rose into the sky, their expressions turned vicious, until they were like evil ghosts. Some seemed to be people who had died of drowning. Others looked like rotting beasts. Before, they had been resting peacefully, but now they had become vicious, and they released piercing cries that shook the soul. Anyone who heard their miserable cries would feel their scalp tingling from shock.

Soon, the dream... became a nightmare!

Everyone opened their eyes.

Zhao Zhongheng looked around, his pupils constricting, while Elder Sister Ding appeared somber as she rested her hand on her bag of holding.

Xu Qing walked out on the deck, looking around sharply. What he saw was countless evil ghosts, madly flying high into the sky, almost as if they had been summoned.

Hordes of them. Filling the area.

Gloomy and sinister. Strange and grisly.

It was a case of... ghosts haunting the night.

Xu Qing looked up at the numerous evil ghosts letting loose piercing cries. As he did, he recalled a passage in the sea annals which described this phenomenon..

“There is a fantastic symphony in the endless sea; mortals are unable to hear it; it accompanies Crimson Yang the golden crow; countless movements become a song; it is called Natural Sounds Welcome the Moon.

“The god loved it; the god's eyes gazed upon it; the endless sea became forbidden; countless movements became sinister.

“Disciples of our sect who encounter it, shall not engage, shall not touch, shall not disturb....” [2]

The sea annals went on to recount a story that taught Seven Blood Eyes disciples that the sea surrounding the continent of South Phoenix was originally called the Sea of Endlessness.

Many years in the past, before the broken face of the god came to the dome of heaven, a strange symphony could sometimes be heard on the never-ending sea. It was a very unusual symphony that ordinary people couldn't hear. Only cultivators could catch snippets of it drifting across the water.

The story explained the details of the symphony's origin.

The sun in the sky wasn't a star, it was actually a huge golden crow. A divine bird. Its name was Crimson Yang, and every day it would fly out from its palace in the depths of the Sea of Endlessness. At night, it would return to the same place. That cycle continued endlessly. It was as if the divine bird had been given a mission it would never deviate from.

Every night when it returned to its palace, the musicians there would play a symphony. That music contained countless symphonic movements that combined into a dreamlike illusion. The name of the symphony was Natural Sounds Welcome the Moon.

When the symphony played, the moon would rise into the sky, and would take Crimson Yang's place to patrol heaven and earth.

One day, the broken face of the god arrived. The god heard the symphony and liked it. Then the god's eyes half-opened looked in the direction of the music's origin. That gaze caused the Sea of Endlessness to boil as unimaginable levels of mutagen erupted there. As the Sea of Endlessness filled with mutagen, it changed into the Forbidden Sea.

The countless movements that made up the symphony also came under assault. The music became sinister, deathlike. Ghostly.

That was why it came to be that countless ghosts would occasionally haunt the night.

### Chapter 83: A Dragon from the Depths

The story was a way of telling the disciples of Seven Blood Eyes that if they encountered this strange event out on the sea, they shouldn't engage with it, touch it, or do anything.

Xu Qing stood there quietly. Thinking about the sea annals, he sat down cross-legged and looked out into the cold darkness at the countless evil ghosts, shrieking as they flew up into the sky.

The most relevant aspect of this account from the sea annals isn't the actual story itself. Rather... it's the fact that it's called a story and not a legend. Compared to legends, stories contain more aspects of truth.

As he looked at the countless ghosts, their cries grew even more piercing. It was a scene that would leave more timid people trembling. Xu Qing, on the other hand, was used to things like this. He had gazed into the eyes of the god above. He had lived for half a month in a city filled with grues and mutant beasts. From a young age, he had survived in city slums, surrounded by the worst humanity had to offer and witnessing countless deaths. In both the forbidden region jungle and Seven Blood Eyes, he had been sharpened as if on a grindstone. He knew that there were many things in the world that would try to take your life. There were many things that could kill you.

So while this scene would strike terror into the hearts of most people, to him, it actually seemed peaceful. To him, it was as if the shrieking of the evil ghosts was actually the lingering sound of a symphony. Closing his eyes, he sat still and listened.

From a distance, both Xu Qing himself and his dharmaboat seemed insignificant compared to the countless ghosts haunting the night.

However, the lingering sound of the symphony grew clearer and clearer in his ears....

Countless ghosts haunted the night. Countless ghosts danced in the night. Countless ghosts made a symphony in the night.

Zhao Zhongheng looked very nervous. Xu Qing listened to the music. Elder Sister Ding seemed very curious about Xu Qing. Time passed.

When dawn came, the music vanished, and Xu Qing opened his eyes. In his mind, he could recall various bits of the symphony.

As for Elder Sister Ding, she couldn't help but ask, "Junior Brother Xu, did you listen the whole night? What did you hear?"

Xu Qing ignored her. Feeling a bit annoyed at being disturbed, he focused on the lingering symphony in his mind. That just made Elder Sister Ding more curious. Peering at him, she tapped her bag of holding and produced a jade box which she offered to him.

"Junior Brother Xu, here's a clearbright lozenge, which can do a great job of nourishing your soul. Please take it. And... do you mind answering my question?"

Over on The Phoenix, Zhao Zhongheng's eyes were wide with fury. That was the same pill he had given to Elder Sister Ding earlier when she seemed irritated.... And now, when Xu Qing seemed irritated, she was giving it to him....

Zhao Zhongheng felt like he was going to be overwhelmed with madness.

"Clearbright lozenge?" Finally, Xu Qing's concentration was broken, and he looked over at the pill. He knew that clearbright lozenges were very valuable, and also rare. A

bit surprised, he took the jade box, checked it to make sure it was safe, and then put it in his sack.

Elder Sister Ding seemed pleased, and looked at him with an expectant smile.

“Okay, Junior Brother Xu, now you have to tell me. I’ve read the story in the sea annals about countless ghosts making a symphony in the night. Not many people get a chance to hear it. Only people with very keen senses are able to.”

Xu Qing nodded, and a look of reminiscence appeared in his eyes. “I heard the voice of my teacher, patiently instructing me about plants and vegetation.”

“Junior Brother Xu, you’re skilled in the dao of plants and vegetation?” she said, her expression one of admiration. “That’s incredible!”

On The Phoenix, Zhao Zhongheng’s lips curled with derision, and he muttered, “Who can’t talk big?”

Ignoring the jealous Zhao Zhongheng, Elder Sister Ding politely started asking some questions about the dao of plants and vegetation.

Although Xu Qing still felt a bit annoyed, because of the clearbright lozenge, he forced out some answers. Shortly after, they started moving again.

Zhao Zhongheng was clearly getting very anxious, because he kept fawningly offering gifts to Elder Sister Ding in the hopes of getting her back onto his boat.

However, she coldly refused most of his offers. In some cases, she had no choice but to accept a gift, but even still, didn’t give any indication that she planned to rejoin him. Occasionally, Zhao Zhongheng would hear her laughing, and it caused his internal organs to burn as if with fire.

As the days passed, Zhao Zhongheng heard more of Elder Sister Ding’s laughter from Xu Qing’s boat than he himself had heard in an entire year. On many occasions, Elder Sister Ding would bring up the topic of medicinal plants with Xu Qing, even though Zhao Zhongheng knew that she generally had no interest in that subject.

Any time Xu Qing actually answered her questions, she would give him some gifts as a ‘consulting fee.’ And all of those gifts were things that Zhao Zhongheng had given her.

As for Zhao Zhongheng, he eventually started realizing that the scene actually seemed very familiar. It was... similar to how he acted around Elder Sister Ding.

It was a disheartening realization. However, Zhao Zhongheng wasn’t ready to give up yet, so all he could do was try to keep his spirits high and do his best to keep moving forward.

In fact, in the hopes of attracting Elder Sister Ding’s attention, he made a show of unleashing his cultivation base to kill various sea beasts that they encountered, and then prepare them as meals. Then he would invite her over to his boat to have a taste. Although she never accepted any invitations, it seemed like she might agree at some point, and that was encouraging.

At noon on the third day of travel, as Xu Qing’s dharmaboat and The Phoenix proceeded along, a piercing cry suddenly echoed down from the sky.

Xu Qing, who was sitting cross-legged, opened his eyes and looked up to see a pseudotooth albatross. It had long, slender wings, with a wingspan of over twelve meters. It was cyan, with brown spots all over it, but most eye-catching was its beak, which looked like a huge pair of iron pincers. One could only imagine how terrifying of a bite it had.

Right now, the sea was calm, making it seem like a huge, black mirror. And it wasn't unusual to spot sea birds flying in the sky. This pseudotooth albatross was only one of many such sea birds. There were others, most of them tiny dots in the distance as they soared about hunting for food.

As for the pseudotooth albatross, it circled directly above, making it seem like Xu Qing was its next target. However, after only a short time, it apparently realized how dangerous Xu Qing was, and it veered away to leave.

Xu Qing looked at it for a moment, then looked back at the placid surface of the water.

In contrast, Zhao Zhongheng's eyes shone brightly, and he looked over at Elder Sister Ding.

"Elder Sister Ding! The sea annals say that pseudotooth albatrosses taste amazing. If you want, I can shoot it down and we can have a wonderful lunch."

Standing, Elder Sister Ding looked at the bird, then smiled at Xu Qing and said, "Junior Brother Xu, do you want to have pseudotooth albatross for lunch?"

Xu Qing was warming up to Elder Sister Ding. She was actually a good student, and reminded him of himself back when he would ask so many questions about medicinal plants. Of course, she also offered compensation. In fact, up to this point she had already given him nearly 200 spirit stones in exchange for information.

The past few days had given him a much deeper insight into these conclave disciples, and he had come to the conclusion that they weren't bad people. That said, he would reserve judgment for conclave disciples in general. After all, conclave disciples were just people. And people were all different. Some were intelligent, some were foolish. Some were sharp-witted, some were impulsive.

Although some conclave disciples seemed somewhat innocent, there were others who had risen through the ranks of the Offpeak gray-robed disciples, people who had profoundly baleful auras. Xu Qing had the feeling that his lack of contact with conclave disciples explained why he hadn't run into people like that. Zhao Zhongheng was no villain. He was foolish and, just like the Captain had said, was an idiot. In contrast, Elder Sister Ding was no fool. But she had clearly lived a sheltered life, which was unusual in the chaotic world they lived in. It just went to show that she must have an impressive background.

Zhao Zhongheng's way of treating her was more proof of that.

When Xu Qing thought back to when the countless ghosts haunted the night, he remembered how she'd kept her hand on her bag of holding the entire time. She definitely had some astonishing life-saving items in there, given to her by senior members of her family.

As Xu Qing saw Zhao Zhongheng preparing to take down the bird, he said, "Don't forget. When the sea is too calm, something is wrong."

“That’s what cowards say!” Zhao Zhongheng replied, laughing coldly. Placing his hands together, he prepared a magical technique to snatch the pseudotooth albatross.

Just then, as the pseudotooth albatross seemed about to leave, it noticed Zhao Zhongheng about to attack it. Wheeling around, it picked up speed and shot down like a meteor toward the two dharmaboats.

“Perfect timing,” Zhao Zhongheng said, laughing. Jumping off of his dharmaboat, he stretched out his hand.

Xu Qing’s expression flickered with vigilance, and he shot to his feet. Looking back at the sea behind them, he noticed an area of roiling water many dozens of meters in diameter, following along just underneath the pseudotooth albatross.

There was something under the water, and it was getting closer!

Eyes flashing coldly, Xu Qing rapidly performed an incantation gesture, causing his dharmaboat to shift into defensive mode. At the same time, he looked through the eyes of his dragonwhale, allowing him to see something absolutely colossal moving up at high speed from the depths of the sea.

RUMBLE!

It shot out of the water behind them, creating an explosion of water fully 300 meters from end to end.

It was covered with black scales, and had an incomparably vicious head that seemed like a mix between a dragon and a crocodile. The salty smell of the sea grew stronger, and the waves seethed as massive jaws opened and chomped down on the pseudotooth albatross, consuming it in a single bite!

The pseudotooth albatross was big, but compared to that gigantic mouth, it was tiny. A moment later, the huge dragon splashed back down into the water and disappeared.

Waves surged out, causing Xu Qing’s dharmaboat and The Phoenix to spin like leaves on the surface of the sea. That said, the former was in control, while the latter was not.

Zhao Zhongheng’s face became a mask of utter astonishment. He had only just shot up into the air, and hadn’t been moving very fast. Otherwise, he would have been right in front of the pseudotooth albatross, and he would have been gobbled up as well.

Dripping with seawater, and feeling the lingering terror of having nearly died, he turned around and shot back toward The Phoenix. Even after his feet were planted firmly on the deck, he still trembled uncontrollably. He seemed terrified that the huge creature would appear again.

Despite his fear, he still had the heart of a Seventh Peak disciple, so he instinctively took control of his dharmaboat and got it back under control. As he picked up speed, he called, “That was a snakeneck dragon! Elder Sister Ding, hurry back here to The Phoenix. We need to get out of here!”

[1]

“Shut up!” she shot back. “If you hadn’t been an idiot and provoked that bird, it would have left. The sea annals clearly state that snakeneck dragons eat pseudotooth albatrosses! The dragon obviously showed up because of the bird. If you hadn’t attacked the bird, the dragon would probably have just moved on!”

Seventh Peak disciples knew that, of all the beasts that hunted the Forbidden Sea, snakeneck dragons weren’t at the apex. But they could survive in the mutagen-infested waters of the deep sea, and their savagery was widely known. What was more, it was impossible to judge them by cultivation level alone. After all, they were so huge that, unless someone possessed clearly superior battle prowess, the dragon would always have the advantage.

Zhao Zhongheng knew all of this, so though he wanted to argue back, he didn’t have much to say.

“It’s probably gone already by now...”

Elder Sister Ding was much more on top of things than Zhao Zhongheng. Despite being flustered, she kept her cultivation base ready and pulled out a long, green sword, just in case she needed to take action. At the same time, she kept her right hand on her bag of holding, where she clearly had a trump card ready to use. Then she kept her eyes on the sea.

Xu Qing was the calmest of the three. He had sensed early on that something unusual was going on, which was why he had activated all of his dharmaboat’s defenses.

The rushing waves were like the hands of a giant that roughly shoved his boat off into the distance. That said, his dharmaboat was very stable, so he didn’t lose control, and instead used the momentum of the waves to aid in his retreat.

His calmness seemed to affect Elder Sister Ding, as she relaxed a bit, though her gaze remained sharp.

Then Xu Qing’s eyes glittered, and he growled, “It’s not gone!”

#### Chapter 84: Magical Enlightenment from the Sea

Thanks to his dragonwhale, Xu Qing was able to see that the terrifying entity from the depths of the sea had not left.

After moving some distance away, it turned its long neck and looked at them with its part-dragon part-crocodile head. Its cold eyes brimmed with slaughter as it locked its gaze onto Xu Qing’s dragonwhale like a hunter assessing the weakness of its prey. Its torso somewhat resembled that of a massive penguin, and was fully 600 meters long. It had four draconic flippers that swayed back and forth in the water, covered in living barnacles. Most spectacular of all was its long neck, down the back of which ran a crest of black spikes. This was indeed a snakeneck dragon!

As was recorded in the sea annals, this was one of the common predators in the Forbidden Sea.

Xu Qing remained calm. Back in the forbidden region jungle, he had learned that when dealing with powerful beasts, you should never show fear. Furthermore, the sea annals said that snakeneck dragons were actually very cautious. If there was any sign that their prey was actually a threat, they would take the initiative to flee.

With such thoughts on his mind, Xu Qing's eyes glittered coldly. "Both of you, unleash the power of your cultivation bases. We need to make ourselves threatening!"

Without a word, Elder Sister Ding did as requested, releasing explosive fluctuations from her cultivation base. Zhao Zhongheng, though somewhat foolish, wasn't stupid beyond all hope, and also did the same thing. He also put The Phoenix in full attack mode.

The snakeneck dragon stirred restlessly. It was obviously affected, but didn't seem ready to give up yet.

Eyes narrowing, Xu Qing gave a cold harrumph and performed a single-handed incantation gesture. Instantly, his dharmaboat's sails retracted into defense position. At the same time, Xu Qing tapped into his cultivation base.

Rumbling sounds echoed out as the aura of the eighth level of the Sea and Mountain Incantation caused the spectral drought demon to appear behind him. Its green and cracked skin, spiral horn, and bright red eyes made it look ferocious as it let loose a guttural scream toward the water. At the same time, an astonishing level of heat rolled out from it. It was an unusual heat that could not be extinguished, and in fact caused steam to rise from the surface of the sea and fill the area with a haze.

The snakeneck dragon stirred again, and then, apparently not liking this development, it started to back up, albeit slowly.

Elder Sister Ding's eyes went wide, and then they started to shine. As for Zhao Zhongheng, he took a deep breath and looked over at Xu Qing in amazement.

Xu Qing didn't spare them any attention. He remained focused on the snakeneck dragon. After releasing the power of the Sea and Mountain Incantation, he also unleashed the Seaforming Scripture, causing the surrounding seawater to swirl rapidly. At the same time, his dragonwhale's aura violently locked onto the snakeneck dragon.

And he wasn't done. His dharmaboat's solitary horn, as well as its four legs, glowed brilliantly, sending out awe-inspiring light in all directions. The horn could devour spirit power, and the legs each had three thousand spikes that could shoot out, and both were ready to be used.

The snakeneck dragon seemed shocked. Its crest of spikes began to undulate, as if it was starting to think of Xu Qing as a direct threat.

Meanwhile, Xu Qing's gaze was integrated with that of his dragonwhale, and it was as cold as ice.

In this manner, enough time passed for an incense stick to burn.

The snakeneck dragon swam in a few circles, then slowly backed up. Its aggressiveness vanished, it turned and fled.

Xu Qing didn't let his guard down. He maintained the aggressive stance as he started his dharmaboat moving. Only after traveling for about half a day did he finally breathe a sigh of relief.

That was when Elder Sister Ding and Zhao Zhongheng on The Phoenix also relaxed.

The sea annals were right. They don't like to take risks, and will only attack when they're one hundred percent confident of achieving victory.



Xu Qing turned to look at the sea ahead of him. He knew that, in reality, these were considered coastal waters, and weren't even close to being the 'deep sea.' Despite that, there were still real dangers present. It was easy to imagine what gruish dangers lurked further out. He looked up at the broken face of the god above. All of it was the fault of that entity. The god had changed all living beings, and created constant terror and danger everywhere.

Xu Qing looked back at the sea. For a long time... he simply thought about that snakeneck dragon. It looks like it belongs in the Forbidden Sea.

After some thought, he sat down cross-legged and performed a double-handed incantation gesture. His goal: to slowly change the appearance of his dragonwhale.

Meanwhile, now that they were out of danger, Elder Sister Ding and Zhao Zhongheng both looked at Xu Qing. The former had bright eyes, the latter seemed both bitter and astonished.

Although they had not witnessed Xu Qing fight, they had seen his power, and had laid eyes on the terrifying spectral drought demon. Then there was Xu Qing's dragonwhale. Because of those things, both conclave disciples realized that Xu Qing was even stronger than either of them had imagined before.

As for Zhao Zhongheng, he was thinking, This Xu fellow can generate projections of flesh and blood. And he also has a Forbidden Sea dragonwhale from the Seaforming Scripture. In other words, his body cultivation seems to be in the great circle. How could he be this strong?

Meanwhile, Elder Sister Ding was thinking, Junior Brother Xu isn't just good-looking. His cultivation base is more profound than I realized. And there are probably other things he's being deceptive about. Someone like him has a high probability of reaching Foundation Establishment in the future....

As the two of them were lost in their thoughts, Xu Qing's dragonwhale was growing larger. Its neck grew longer, and a crest of spikes appeared atop it. Four fins grew out of its sides. It was already starting to look like a snakeneck dragon. It seemed more vicious than before, and also stronger.

Before encountering a snakeneck dragon, Xu Qing wouldn't have been able to make these changes. But after seeing one, he felt that this change to his dragonwhale would make it faster, more nimble, and better at attacking.

At the same time, as he drew on the Seaforming Scripture, the water droplets formed swordfish, pseudotooth albatrosses, and even a giant. A moment later, water exploded as Xu Qing's modified dragonwhale shot out. As it roared in midair, several swordfish leaped out to join it, creating something like a glittering rainbow.

The sight caused Elder Sister Ding and Zhao Zhongheng to look over with wide eyes. And when they sensed the spirit power fluctuations of the Seventh Peak's Seaforming Scripture, they were stunned.

Not every disciple who reached the eighth level of the Seaforming Scripture had the level of control necessary to create a dragonwhale. And not all disciples who could create a dragonwhale would be able to gain the enlightenment sufficient to change its form.

Because of that, Elder Sister Ding and Zhao Zhongheng were even more shocked than they had been before.

Neither the snakeneck dragon nor the swordfish existed in the magical technique illustrations in the Seaforming Scripture. They were all the product of Xu Qing's enlightenment. It was as if the sea itself had led him to a new dao. It was profound and gruishing, and did not need to speak a word to impart great teachings. It could provide inspiration and revelations.

Time passed. As they traveled, Zhao Zhongheng hung his head in bitterness and discouragement. By now, he was absolutely convinced that Xu Qing... was a person he couldn't afford to provoke. He was convinced Xu Qing would reach Foundation Establishment, and when he did, Zhao Zhongheng would have no choice but to treat him respectfully.

He didn't want to ask his grandfather for help to deal with Xu Qing. He didn't dare. The reason was that he had attempted such things in the past. And though such enemies would usually end up miserable, so would he, as his grandfather would usually beat him to a pulp afterward. He could only pray that this journey would end soon, and that Xu Qing would be on his way.

While Zhao Zhongheng prayed incessantly, the waves calmed down. The three travelers didn't encounter any further dangers, and soon, they were getting close to the Westcoral Archipelago. Eventually, they spotted land on the horizon.

Elder Sister Ding remained in high spirits the entire trip. From the moment she had boarded Xu Qing's dharmaboat until this point, she had paid him about 300 spirit stones in exchange for the knowledge he had imparted to her.

From that, Xu Qing could see that Elder Sister Ding really did value knowledge and learning. He had come to like her. After all, if the trip had gone more smoothly, he wouldn't have benefited as much as he had...

Of course, given how much effort he put into answering her questions about plants and vegetation, and also everything that had gone into keeping her safe, he felt that their deal was perfectly reasonable.

For the last half a day of travel, Xu Qing patiently answered all her questions. And this time, he didn't ask for anything in exchange. That was how pleased he was with Elder Sister Ding's attitude toward learning.

When Zhao Zhongheng saw that, he fell into complete despair. If the pretty boy had stopped asking for payment, it meant he was ready to finally make a move....

That was when Zhao Zhongheng noticed the distant Westcoral Archipelago, and he could hardly wait to end this trip and get rid of Xu Qing.

As evening fell, it was obvious that Elder Sister Ding was reluctant to part ways with Xu Qing. However, the Westcoral Archipelago was getting very close.

When they were finally at their destination, Zhao Zhongheng could hardly contain his excitement as he looked at Elder Sister Ding, waiting for her to get off of Xu Qing's boat.

Just before disembarking, she turned back to Xu Qing and said, "Junior Brother Xu, are you sure you don't want to come with us? I need to go offer my respects to one of my seniors. It's my aunt. She has an amazingly profound cultivation base, and loves to help members of the younger generation. If you come along, I'm sure you'll benefit a lot." [1]

Off to the side, Zhao Zhongheng's heart was pounding into his throat, and he was staring straight at Xu Qing, terrified that he might nod in agreement.

"I think not," Xu Qing said with a polite smile. "I have some other matters to attend to. Take care, Elder Sister Ding."

Elder Sister Ding kept looking over her shoulder as she disembarked. When she was finally on the shore, Xu Qing's dharmaboat rumbled to life and turned around.

Elder Sister Ding stood there, her long black hair and daoist robe swaying in the breeze. Looking at Xu Qing on his dharmaboat, she called, "Safe travels, Junior Brother Xu. Once we're both back at the sect, I'll come find you to ask some more advice!"

Hearing this, Zhao Zhongheng's heart pounded, and he looked like he might start crying.

Meanwhile, Xu Qing gave her a nod, waved, and then sent his dharmaboat speeding out to sea. As he left the island behind, and his dharmaboat once again became quiet and peaceful, his expression turned placid. However, his gaze remained sharp. He stood there like an unsheathed sword, eyes glittering coldly as he looked at the Forbidden Sea beyond the archipelago.

That was where his ultimate destination was. Sealizard Island. Given his current rate of travel, he would get there in two days. Sealizard Island was a common place to harvest sealizard skins, so it was almost guaranteed that there would be fighting and killing there.

His days of travel had him feeling very familiar with the Forbidden Sea. And also... he was ready for action.

I need to stay even more on guard than ever.

He waved his right hand, and the dharmaboat sped up. Following the sea chart, he got closer and closer to Sealizard Island.

Along the way, he made sure his daggers were ready. He put on his gauntlets, sharpened his black iron skewer, and put his poisons in order.

One day. Two days....

On the evening of the third day, as crimson sunlight stabbed through dark clouds onto the sea, the wind picked up. That was when Xu Qing spotted an island ahead.

The island itself was pitch black, as if it were covered with a sinister haze that hid man-eating monsters. Humidity and rot filled the air, laced with failure and death. Hundreds of watercraft were moored in the area, many of them very unusual-looking and obviously not dharmaboats from the Seventh Peak. On the beach were corpses of both people and beasts, creating an even more sinister air.

As he neared, he realized the island was covered with black-forested mountains. The place was somber and desolate, and there was a constant pressure, like black clouds that made an evening feel oppressive.

As Xu Qing's dharmaboat approached the beach, he sensed eyes beyond the treeline, watching him. The gazes were not friendly. When he sensed them, his eyes narrowed, and though his expression remained calm, he unleashed a sharp, penetrating aura.

It was almost like he had transformed into a lone wolf. As a result, the gazes shifted away from him.

Xu Qing stepped onto the beach, collected up his dharmaboat, and then brushed some dust off his shoulder. As he walked toward the jungle, he looked down at the corpses.

#### Chapter 85: The Summit of a Fiendish Island

Grayish-brown bones were scattered on the black sand. Some had been wiped clean by the wind-blown sand. Others were fresher, and still had bits of rotting flesh on them. Thanks to the wind, the sand piled up against the bones, and filled the skulls of people and beast alike.

Sealizard Island looked like a sinister and brutal place to Xu Qing. The red glow of sunset created dappled light on the beach, like red leaves. It looked almost like a crimson shroud laid over the dead.

Xu Qing looked away from the scattered remains, and in the gathering darkness, he headed into the jungle. The moment he stepped into the trees, it was as if two hands had blotted out the sky, turning everything pitch black.

Xu Qing was like a specter moving through the jungle, eyes darting back and forth to coldly look at his surroundings as he moved. He wasn't unfamiliar with jungles. Granted, this was an island in the middle of the sea, so the jungle wasn't exactly the same as the one he had become familiar with. But there were a lot of similarities. For instance, the vegetation on the ground included many common medicinal plants.

Xu Qing was like a fish in water, moving along without any problem. He quickly identified some of the unique aspects of this place. There were many fallen trees, and upon examination, he realized that the line of fallen trees led straight back to the water. Standing atop one such area, he looked at the surrounding trees, then closely examined the ground.

There are scales on the trees.

He even picked up a palm-sized scale, which was grayish-black and still smelled like the sea.

This is from a sealizard. And it's fresh. From what Xu Qing could tell, this was a path a sealizard had taken after crawling out of the water. It was what had knocked down the trees.

There are other paths here. Each was left by a shedding sealizard. It makes sense that they all go in different directions. I wonder where they go to shed. Is it random... or is there one specific place they gather?

After some thought, he decided to follow the trail. Having made his decision, he started moving, going faster and faster. At the same time, he kept fully on guard. He had no idea if there were cultivators here who were beyond the Qi Condensation level. On the one hand, sealizard skins were very valuable. On the other hand, they weren't very useful for Foundation Establishment cultivators.

Regardless, he needed to be careful. After all, a small lapse in judgment could be deadly.

The breeze in the jungle carried with it the scent of rotting vegetation. Xu Qing inhaled, but didn't detect any other odors. Therefore, he proceeded onward steadily. About an hour later, it was night, and he was getting deep into the mountains. Leaping up into a tree, he crouched down, and looked at what was ahead.

Not too far away was a grayish-black lizard skin. It was broken down and dried-up, and had obviously been sitting there for a while. Most likely, it had been damaged in a fight.

Thanks to his earlier research, Xu Qing knew that there was a special way to preserve sealizard skins as long as they were harvested right after being shed. That was when they were most valuable. Without being preserved, they would degenerate and become worthless. That was why there was often bloody fighting that went on when sealizards shed. It was also why Xu Qing expected to run into other cultivators here.

Xu Qing dropped out of the tree and searched the area more thoroughly.

As he explored the mountains, he found more damaged lizard skins. At the same time, he came to realize that the shedding spots were all near the actual mountains. In fact, the higher into the mountains he got, the more skins he found. He was now starting to understand things better.

The sealizards must shed their skins at high elevation.

Looking up, he saw a very tall mountain in the distance. His gaze sharpened.

There. That must be the best spot on the island. The biggest and strongest sealizards must go there. And those skins will be the most valuable!

With such thoughts on his mind, he started heading toward that specific mountain. As he moved along swiftly, he finally started noticing other cultivators.

They were all rogue cultivators, and most were in about the fifth level of Qi Condensation. Although they weren't very strong, all of them had vicious looks in their eyes. However, they knew their place. They were all on smaller mountains, and when they spotted Xu Qing, they simply watched him pass, then breathed sighs of relief when he was gone.

Xu Qing also breathed a sigh of relief. The fact that so many low-level cultivators were gathered here seemed to confirm his theory that it was unlikely he would run into anyone in Foundation Establishment.

That said, he didn't lower his guard. After all, if there were Foundation Establishment cultivators here, then they would be gathered in exactly the location he wanted to reach.

As time passed and Xu Qing sped along, he passed through numerous mountains until he was at the tallest peak on the island. Looking up, he saw many auras erupt from the mountaintop and lock onto his position.

He froze. However, after sensing what was happening, a strange expression appeared on his face as he realized these weren't the auras of Foundation Establishment cultivators.

Continuing on calmly, he noticed that there were more and more sealizard skins on the mountain. From the aura they emanated, they all seemed to be roughly in the fifth or sixth level of Qi Condensation. It seemed to also confirm his theory that the sealizards liked to get to a high elevation before shedding.

As for the energy fluctuations he had detected, he ignored them as he started speeding up the mountain.

The top of the mountain was actually a huge basin surrounded by a ridgeline with trees. There were quite a few cultivators there, and they were stronger than the cultivators he'd encountered so far.

Most were in the eighth or ninth level of Qi Condensation, though he noticed a few in the great circle. Most importantly, there were no Foundation Establishment cultivators!

Everyone present had either brutal gazes or cold expressions. They seemed bloodthirsty, and the type who would kill anyone on the spot. There weren't many humans present. The majority of the cultivators were non-human. Some cultivators stood alone, others gathered in groups. Many of the cultivators smelled like the sea, indicating that they were probably pirates who spent most of their time on the water. Virtually everyone present turned to look at Xu Qing when he arrived.

Xu Qing looked the group over and immediately recognized four or five criminals from the bounty list, causing his eyes to glitter. However, he didn't make any move. Instead, he found a big tree where he sat down cross-legged to rest.

Although he was glad there were no Foundation Establishment cultivators present, he couldn't operate under the premise that all his assumptions were correct.

After sitting down, he looked around to think. He was used to being in the presence of ill intentions. Whether it was in the slums or the scavenger basecamp, that had been a matter of course. Therefore, he just sat there calmly and prepared to do some cultivation. However, that was when he frowned and looked coldly at a group of pirates that had been eying him since he arrived.

It was a gang of about eight cultivators. Two of them were human, six were non-human. In terms of the latter, some had tentacles for hands, some had three eyes, and one of them looked human, but had wings. They were looking at Xu Qing with overt ill intentions and malice. The one with wings even turned to one of his companions to mutter something. After that, the three-eyed non-human stood up and started walking toward Xu Qing.

As he neared, the three-eyed non-human grinned nastily and said, "I've never liked Seven Blood Eyes disciples. So this one can either screw off, or he can stick around to be food."

He emanated the fluctuations of the eighth level of Qi Condensation in an obvious attempt to seem threatening.

Xu Qing studied him, trying to determine if his throat was a vital spot. Then he glanced at the cultivator companions further back. Obviously, they were trying to feel him out, and if they determined that he was worth bullying, then they would target him.

After sizing up the situation, Xu Qing lifted his right hand and reached over his shoulder.

A moment later, a semi-transparent figure appeared behind him, with Xu Qing's hand gripping its neck firmly. The struggling figure resolved into a blue-haired non-human covered with scales. From the clothing he wore, it seemed he was also a member of the pirate gang.

His eyes shone with terror as he tried to fight back. However, that was when a crack rang out as Xu Qing broke his neck.

Then Xu Qing sent the power of the Seaforming Scripture coursing into the nonhuman's blood, causing him to explode. Blood and gore rained down everywhere, though none of it touched Xu Qing.

Non-humans had different organs and body structures than humans, and Xu Qing wasn't interested in wasting time trying to figure out what vital spots to hit. Therefore, he just eradicated him by detonation.

In the instant Xu Qing killed the non-human, he didn't show even a hint of expression in his eyes. It was almost as if he had just killed a bug. Then he looked coldly at the three-eyed nonhuman, who was now trembling in anxiety. What was more, his companions behind him all looked absolutely shocked, and were now completely on guard.

"Sorry, this was just a misunderstanding," the three-eyed nonhuman said. Then he slowly walked back toward his companions.

Unfortunately, he didn't know Xu Qing, and thus had no idea that Xu Qing didn't allow any threats to his safety to exist. Even as the three-eyed nonhuman started moving backward, Xu Qing burst into motion. He became a string of afterimages that arrived so quickly the three-eyed nonhuman barely had time to throw up his spirit power defenses.

Xu Qing's fist slammed into the defensive barrier, and it shattered. The three-eyed nonhuman's pupils constricted, and he opened his mouth to speak. But before he could, Xu Qing's fist smashed into his chest like a hammer crushing an ice cube. The nonhuman's chest caved in and his organs exploded.

The other pirates shot to their feet, yelling in anger as they prepared to join the fight. However, Xu Qing was already moving toward them. The moment he had killed the first pirate, he had already made the decision to kill the others too. By doing so, he would cut the weeds and eliminate the roots.

Xu Qing moved with blinding speed. The surrounding rogue cultivators and nonhumans watched as he fell upon the pirates. Bloodcurdling screams rang out and booms filled the area.

In the blink of an eye, six pirates were dead, leaving behind only the nonhuman with the wings, whose expression was one of unprecedented terror as he backed away. However, a moment later, a sharp dagger whistled through the air and stabbed into his forehead. His body flopped to the ground.

It was over.

Gasps could be heard from the other cultivators in the area. Everyone had witnessed the event, and all of them were now looking from the corpses of the pirates to the expressionless Xu Qing.

Feeling the gazes on him, Xu Qing went one by one to each corpse and cut off its head with his dagger. Going back to his original resting spot, he hung the severed heads from a tree. With that done, he sat down cross-legged and looked across the basin to the opposite ridge. There, he saw a huge anaconda poking its head out from behind a boulder. Beneath that snake's head was a familiar face.

He's here too? thought Xu Qing, his guard going up even more and his eyes narrowing as he looked at the huge snake behind the gruish old man.

It was the innkeeper from Plankspring Way, and when he saw Xu Qing, his heart sank.

"What is that little punk doing here?" he murmured. Their eyes met, and then just as quickly, they looked away from each other.

"Bad luck," the old man growled. Next to him, the anaconda's eyes glittered.

"Coo. Coooo."

“What do you mean by ‘hello, Elder Brother?’” the old man said, glaring. “He doesn’t understand your cooing.”

“Coooo, coo.”

“Uh, what? You want to ask which he likes, snakes in general, or eating snake gall bladders? Are you crazy? What’s the point in even asking? Didn’t you notice how he was looking at your gall bladder area?”

“Coo!”

“You don’t believe me?” the old man said incredulously.

“Coooo.”

“No, I’m not going to ask him for you. I know full well that you secretly signed up with the Seventh Peak Intelligence Division, so you can just go back and ask them how many snakes the brat has killed.”

The old man was fed up with the anaconda. From the moment the snake had laid eyes on Xu Qing, she had been bewitched. Gone crazy, even.

“Trust me,” the old man said with a sarcastic chuckle, “he’s not admiring your figure.”

#### Chapter 86: Don’t Mess with Me

Xu Qing sat cross-legged in the tree, staying completely on guard as he looked at the spot where the old innkeeper from Plankspring Way was hiding. Killing intent flashed through the depths of his heart. The innkeeper was on his list of enemies on his bamboo slip. However, Xu Qing had never been confident in being able to best him, and had thus steered clear of Plankspring Way.

Lo and behold, the innkeeper was here.... Xu Qing’s eyes narrowed.

That said, Xu Qing’s primary reason for coming here was to earn profit. And considering how hard he knew it would be to kill the innkeeper, he stifled his killing intent and scanned the area again.

The people here were all extraordinary, especially the people who were here on their own and not with groups. There were many that Xu Qing sensed were very dangerous. That was one reason why he’d slaughtered the pirates who had provoked him. At a young age in the slums, he had learned that being deceptive about your true skills and abilities had both advantages and disadvantages. Sometimes, being deceptive would end up causing you even more trouble.

Therefore, he’d struck like lightning, openly displaying a bloodthirsty and baleful aura to shock the onlookers. It was something he had planned to do from the moment he arrived, and was a tactic he had honed in the slums.

In certain moments, baring your fangs was the best way to give a warning to others and say, Don’t mess with me!

The reason he had beheaded them was twofold. First, he wanted to intimidate the onlookers. Second... there were bounties on those heads.



After looking around, Xu Qing flicked his finger to send some poison powders filtering down in the area around him. Then he closed his eyes to meditate and wait for the sealizards to come. His actions had achieved the desired result. Everyone seemed afraid of him. What was more, they acknowledged that he qualified to be there, and also approved of how, in the end, he maintained the previous balance in which everyone tolerated each other's presence.

Because of that balance, nothing else happened as the night came and went. As the sun rose the following day, Xu Qing opened his eyes and looked down the mountain. At the same time, seven or eight other pairs of eyes did the same thing.

Further down, beyond the line of sight of anyone present, there were loud rumbling sounds, as though some colossal creature were on the move. As the sounds drifted up the mountain, the cultivators present seemed to pulse with somber and deadly auras.

A moment later, Xu Qing watched as a 25-meter-long sealizard appeared within the trees. It was pitch black, with skin that looked like the bark of an old tree, and sharp claws on all four limbs. Its skin bore the scars of age, and reflected the morning sun as it moved. The skin already seemed to be ready to slough off, indicating that the lizard was about to shed. It seemed to be gasping for breath as it climbed, as though each step caused it pain. Yet it moved without pausing for a moment.

Despite its apparent weakness, it emanated fluctuations comparable to the eighth level of Qi Condensation. Everyone present tensed; there was no way the lizard didn't realize there were so many cultivators in the area. That said, it didn't seem to care. As it struggled up the mountain, more rumbling sounds could be heard from behind it. Trees crashed to the ground as another sealizard appeared. Then a third and fourth. In total, six sealizards could be seen climbing up the mountain.

Six eighth-level sealizards!

Xu Qing was starting to get a bit excited. He knew that in the Port District in Seven Blood Eyes, the skins of these lizards were worth a lot of money. Probably 500-600 spirit stones each.

His eyes glittered as he looked at the lizards. It was almost like he wasn't looking at mutant beasts, but rather, spirit stones. However, seeing that no one else present moved a muscle, he waited quietly to see what would happen next.

The rumbling sounds continued as the six sealizards crawled up to the top of the mountain. Not even glancing at the surrounding cultivators, they crawled into the basin. Releasing powerful roars, they began to wriggle out of their old skins. The sound of the roars left the surrounding cultivators feeling shaken.

As for Xu Qing, he watched with sharp eyes as the sealizards' struggle made the top layer of their skin fall off.

The entire process took about an hour. The first lizard to completely shed its skin looked rejuvenated, and left without ever looking at the cultivators. The shed skin was exactly the same size as the lizard that had shed it, but it wasn't black. Instead, it was partially translucent and cyan in color, with visible striations. It glittered almost like a jewel.

Still, no one made a move.

Xu Qing stayed put, his eyes flashing.

A short time later, the second lizard shed its skin and left. Then the third and fourth. It was only after the last lizard finished shedding that someone took action.

It was the innkeeper from Plankspring Way, who shot down into the basin like an arrow loosed from a bow. Then the other cultivators sprang into action, their killing intent raging.

Xu Qing did the same, leaving behind a string of afterimages as he dropped down from the tree and shot with astonishing speed into the basin.

There were about thirty cultivators in total, all of them trying to take six lizard skins. In the blink of an eye, merciless and deadly fighting broke out.

As booms echoed, Xu Qing became like an unsheathed sword as he got close to the nearest skin. Next to him was a nonhuman cultivator wearing a woven rush raincoat, his eyes glittering coldly.

“Screw off!” the nonhuman said, waving his hand. The spirit power of the ninth level of Qi Condensation erupted out with crushing pressure toward Xu Qing.

Xu Qing didn’t spare a look or even a change in expression for the man. Clenching his left hand into a fist, he threw a punch. As his fist flew through the air, a projection of energy and blood appeared. The spectral drought demon roared noiselessly as its fist combined with Xu Qing’s to strike the enemy.

The nonhuman’s face fell. He had known from the beginning that this Seven Blood Eyes disciple had an unusually powerful cultivation base. But it wasn’t until he saw the spectral drought demon that his heart started to pound with fear.

“A projection of energy and blood? You’re in the great circle of body refinement!”

He tried to back away, but was too slow. Xu Qing’s fist slammed into him, causing blood to spray out of his mouth.

He was also an extraordinary cultivator; using some unknown technique, he blurred, then disappeared. An instant later, he reappeared off in the distance, still coughing up blood. His rush raincoat had been half-shredded to pieces, revealing that he had blue skin. As he looked at Xu Qing, his eyes flashed with fear.

Xu Qing ignored him, reached out, and grabbed the lizard skin. Then, just as he was preparing to secure a second skin, he heard a shout from off in the distance.

“Are you trying to get us all killed?”

Xu Qing turned to see a rogue cultivator who had arrived to the scene too late to join in the fight for lizard skins, and thus, was heading toward the last of the departing sealizards.

Before he could get close to it, he was intercepted by a burly nonhuman with a long nose that looked like an elephant trunk.

“You damn idiot!” the trunked cultivator yelled. “Don’t you know that if you kill even a single sealizard, we’ll all die?”

Furious, he knocked the rogue cultivator to the side. The other surrounding cultivators glared at the newcomer with overt killing intent.

The rogue cultivator's expression flickered as he backed up and said, "It's just one sealizard! How could it possibly kill all of us?"

"You're new here, aren't you? Do you know why there aren't any Foundation Establishment cultivators here or in the surrounding waters? Do you really think we're standing on an island? Listen up. This is not an island. We're standing on the back of a gigantic lizard! These mountains are the ridges on its back!" The trunked nonhuman's eyes shone with killing intent.

"The reason there are so many sealizards here is that they're the offspring of the big one! In order to protect them, it keeps the area clear of anything above the Qi Condensation level. Now you're trying to kill one of its offspring while standing on its back? Are you freaking tired of living? If you piss off the big one, we're all dead!! The only reason it allows Qi Condensation cultivators here is because we're too weak for it to care about!"

The trunked nonhuman unleashed another attack, as did some of the other rogue cultivators who had failed to secure a lizard skin. An agonized shriek rang out as the newly arrived rogue cultivator was hit from multiple sides, and then died. A moment later, his belongings were being split up by those who had attacked him.

Meanwhile, Xu Qing sucked in a breath as he finally came to understand why there were no Foundation Establishment cultivators nearby. Glancing down at the ground beneath his feet, he then shot toward a group of cultivators fighting over one of the skins. His dagger flashed with cold light. Whoever got in his way, he cut down, and as the wind lifted his hair, his eyes shone harshly. After cutting down three cultivators, Xu Qing secured a second lizard skin. Looking around, he saw that the other lizard skins were all accounted for. Already, he could identify who the top cultivators were. Each of them was splattered with blood, and had risen to the top by slaughtering everyone around them.

Xu Qing had acquired two lizard skins, as had the innkeeper from Plankspring Way. Of the remaining two, one fell into the hands of a lone nonhuman, and the other was taken by a group of five. Although everyone present was more than willing to fight and kill, for the moment, they were holding back.

Xu Qing scanned the area, his gaze lingering on the innkeeper, and especially the anaconda behind him.

The huge snake met his gaze, and actually nodded to him.

Xu Qing didn't return the nod. Seeing that the fighting was done, he returned to the treetop and sat down cross-legged.

The other parties seemed relieved that he wasn't taking further action, and also fell back to their waiting spots.

The basin once again became tranquil. However, the cultivators who had not acquired lizard skins had grim expressions as they looked at Xu Qing and the others who had.

Meanwhile, the old innkeeper took out a pipe and started smoking, looking very content. However, after a moment, he seemed to remember something, and quickly took out a generic antidote pill and consumed it. Next to him, the anaconda made some cooing sounds, but he ignored them.

Eventually, the huge snake nudged him, and the innkeeper looked over, annoyed, and said, "Like hell I'm going to 'remind' him. He's a greedy wolf who kills without batting an eyelid. I don't need to remind him of anything. You think he doesn't know there's gonna be a big fight tonight? You ingrate! Why do you care so much about him, huh? Ai. I treat you so well. I raised you! But you don't care at all about my old bones! I was just poisoned, for goodness sake!"

As the old man griped, Xu Qing studied the area through narrowed eyes. He was careful to take note of everyone with vile dispositions, and especially, their bags.

Licking his lips, he scattered some more poison powder in the area.

The day passed and night fell.

Stark moonlight shone through the trees, creating countless mysterious shadows that swayed and danced like ghosts in the night. Slowly but surely, the cold night filled with killing intent. Not even the moonlight could cover over the greed of the cultivators. And the somber sea breeze moaned like a dirge.

#### Chapter 87: A Vicious Night

Dark clouds slowly obscured the moon and turned the Forbidden Sea pitch black. Eventually, not even the dirge of the wind dared to interfere with the darkness, and it faded away. Gradually, an oppressive aura weighed down on the quiet mountain top.

At one point, a howl of anguish pierced the silence. Everyone was instantly on the alert.

Xu Qing opened his eyes. He saw figures drifting through the night, obviously targeting the people who had acquired lizard skins during the day. He didn't spare any attention for the other three parties who had acquired skins. Instead, he focused on seven figures closing in on his position. The lack of moonlight couldn't prevent his eyes from glittering coldly with killing intent. Almost as soon as the figures started moving toward him, he took action.

The attackers thought that the darkness would be their ally, but little did they know that Xu Qing actually preferred that darkness.

In the blink of an eye, Xu Qing had disappeared from the top of the tree.

There were a total of seven attackers, and three were leading the charge. Of that group, one shivered as his forehead was split open by an iron skewer. Blood sprayed out of the mouth of another as Xu Qing passed by him. The third died in even more agony. He was an extremely obese nonhuman. As he neared the tree, a dagger flashed, tearing through his throat with such force that his head flew off his shoulders along with an eruption of blood.

It wasn't until the third was already dead that the other two screamed as they also died.

After the three clean kills, Xu Qing lunged backward, slamming into a human cultivator who was in the middle of unleashing a magical attack. A thud rang out as the man's chest caved in, and blood sprayed left and right. There were only three more attackers, and seeing what had just played out, they all gasped.

“You two unleash magical attacks,” a nonhuman shouted. “I’ll pin him down!”

This nonhuman was extremely short, about the same height as a five-year-old child. However, as he charged toward Xu Qing, he grew larger with each step, until he was three meters tall.

Xu Qing’s expression was the same as ever. Ignoring the giant cultivator charging toward him, and the other two behind him performing incantation gestures, he lifted his right hand and made a pinching gesture. A buzzing sound filled the air as countless droplets of water rose up from the surrounding plants, then converged into long, thin threads that formed a net of water. Underneath the pale moonlight, the threads glittered coldly, spreading out to cover the other cultivators, with Xu Qing in the very middle.

Swishing sounds filled the air, and the two cultivators performing magical attacks looked shocked as the water net hit them. Their spirit power defenses provided almost no resistance. The water sliced through them, then hit the cultivators, instantly chopping them up into chunks of bloody flesh.

As for the giant nonhuman rushing toward Xu Qing, his face went pale, and his eyes shone with terror. He opened his mouth to speak, but then his skin started turning greenish-black. Screaming, he staggered backward, then fell onto his back, where he twitched a few times before dying.

Then the water net fell on him, as well as the other recently-killed cultivators, chopping them all to bits.

The extremely obese cultivator was obviously dead, but as he was chopped up, he unleashed a bloodcurdling scream. Then a small ghost-like imp emerged from within him. Many nonhumans had unusual ways of staying alive. Using some strange technique, the imp became very skinny, slipped through the water net, then fled.

Xu Qing didn’t pursue him. He just watched coldly and counted in his head.

One. Two. Three....

A moment later, the cultivator in imp form started shaking visibly. Turning to look at Xu Qing, he said, “Let me go....”

Before even finishing with the third word, his body started to melt, beginning with the tongue. Even without a tongue, he was able to scream shrilly. It was so loud and piercing that it drowned out the sounds of the fighting coming from the other three directions.

Everyone looked over. As they watched, the imp fell to the ground, thrashing around while screaming. Eventually, the screams stopped as he transformed into a pool of blood. Gasps rang out, but were immediately cut off as the surrounding cultivators scrambled to pull out antidote pills. The only one who didn’t seem concerned was the old innkeeper.

He had been steadily consuming antidote pills ever since Xu Qing arrived the day before. After all, he had some experience dealing with Xu Qing’s poisons.

Ignoring the surrounding cultivators, Xu Qing retrieved his dagger and iron skewer, took the bags that had belonged to his opponents, and then went back to the treetop to meditate.

Perhaps because this island was really the back of a huge lizard, the spirit power and mutagen were both very strong. Most cultivators who spent long periods of time at sea were used to such

environments. They all had various cultivation techniques to separate the mutagen from the spirit power. However, at some point, they would all have to go ashore and use medicinal pills or other methods to extrude the mutagen they had built up.

But Xu Qing didn't need to do that. As a result, he had no apprehensions about furthering his cultivation here. What was more, because of the aura of the Forbidden Sea, it was even easier to make progress with the Seaforming Scripture.

Even though Xu Qing was sitting there with his eyes closed, no one even considered attacking him. In fact, they all kept their distance, fearful of being poisoned. Their fear affected the fighting in general, and before long, things calmed down again.

And thus, the night passed.

When dawn came, it was as if it bit the lip of night, causing blood to seep out. That blood spread out, growing fainter and fainter until light filled the sky.

On the ridge overlooking the basin, the lone nonhuman cultivator who had acquired a lizard skin the day before had been joined by a fellow cultivator. Apparently, they had come to an agreement to work together. The newcomer was the cultivator in the woven rush raincoat that had clashed with Xu Qing briefly the day before.

As for the group of five who had laid claim to one of the lizard skins, they were now dead. In their place was the burly, trunked nonhuman, who was leading a group of seven other cultivators.

Only Xu Qing and the innkeeper from Plankspring Way were still alone.

The only difference was that Xu Qing was surrounded by blood and gore, while... not a single corpse could be seen near the innkeeper.

Xu Qing glanced at the innkeeper's anaconda, and the snake seemed to notice. Looking back at him, she nodded as if in greeting. That seemed strange to Xu Qing, but he didn't think about it too much. Closing his eyes, he continued meditating.

Meanwhile, the old innkeeper nudged the huge snake with his foot, and gave a cold harrumph.

"Did you see that?" the innkeeper said. "He's ignoring you. If I were you I'd stop thinking about the little punk all the time. I'm the only family you have in this world."

"Coo. Coooo."

Looking hurt, the snake gazed longingly at Xu Qing at the top of the tree. Seeing this, the innkeeper sighed. Feeling a bit bad, he said, "Now you're crying? Come on. The brat can't speak snake language, so of course he's ignoring you...."

Hearing this, the anaconda's eyes brightened a bit.

When a girl comes of age, the innkeeper thought, marry her off. It's the same with stupid snakes.

For a moment, the old man tried to decide if he should kill Xu Qing. However, the thought of Xu Qing's ruthlessness made him abandon such thoughts.

Time began to pass. Ten days went by.

During that time, cultivators came and went. At some times, nearly a hundred cultivators gathered on the ridge. At other times, there were only a few dozen. Some were lone operators. Others were pirates. Some were nonhumans from other islands in the sea. Regardless, though there was constant fighting and killing, there were always new cultivators to replace the old ones. Sealizards appeared on three occasions, and each time, Xu Qing fought with ruthless decisiveness. Not only did he acquire more lizard skins, but also, the area around his meditation spot became piled up with corpses. In fact, the entire tree seemed stained with blood. It was a truly ghastly sight. Eventually, it became such a shocking area that, to the people in the area, Xu Qing's area was like its own forbidden region.

There were others who had a similar reputation. One was the innkeeper, and the other was a new team made up of the nonhuman in the woven rush raincoat and the burly, trunked cultivator. They had acquired quite a few lizard skins, yet didn't seem ready to leave. Apparently, they were waiting for something to happen.

Sensing that there was more to come, Xu Qing didn't leave, but rather, focused mostly on cultivation. The spirit power was lively, and the mutagen strong. Because of that, Xu Qing increasingly felt like he was in the forbidden region outside the scavenger basecamp, where his cultivation speed had increased rapidly.

He was now getting close to the ninth level of the Seaforming Scripture.

I should be able to break through in three days or less.

As he went through his breathing exercises, spirit power rushed into him, nourishing him. At the same time, the mutagen poured into his shadow. As a result, his spirit sea, which had once been 261 meters, grew even larger.

264 meters. 267 meters.

Two more days passed. On the morning of the third day, Xu Qing's rippling spirit sea was very close to being 270 meters. When it hit 270, his Seaforming Scripture would reach the ninth level.

A disciple who reached the ninth level of cultivation using Seven Blood Eyes techniques would be able to dominate just about any other human cultivator in that same level anywhere in the continent of South Phoenix. They could even consider fighting a Foundation Establishment cultivator from a small sect.

There was little need to mention that Xu Qing's body cultivation had reached an unheard-of level by using the Sea and Mountain Incantation. After all, he could summon the spectral drought demon. Therefore... once he achieved a breakthrough with the Seaforming Scripture, his battle prowess would skyrocket. When that happened, he would surpass people at the very peak of Qi Condensation, and could well be considered as strong as a Foundation Establishment expert. In fact, Xu Qing was convinced that, once he was that strong, he could defeat and even kill Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior, though it would be a long, hard fight.

I'm going to break through tonight! Eyes filling with anticipation, he prepared to continue with his cultivation when, all of a sudden, the sound of footsteps echoed from further down the mountain.

Whoever was walking toward them hadn't shown their faces yet, but an aura of cold brutality preceded them, filling the basin, and causing everyone to look over, expressions flickering.

The newcomers... weren't sealizards, but rather, were cultivators!

They wore an odd assortment of clothing, but looked shockingly fierce, like the kind of people who would slaughter others without the slightest scruple. There were sixteen of them, and each one emanated powerful cultivation base fluctuations, and had ghastly auras.

"Sea Ghosts!"

"It's the Sea Ghosts!"

"Dammit, what are they doing here??"

Immediately, cries of astonishment echoed out in the basin.

#### Chapter 88: Xu Qing's Rules

Xu Qing's eyes glittered with enigmatic light. He wasn't unfamiliar with the Sea Ghosts. Back in Seven Blood Eyes, when he was low on spirit stones, he had collected bounties on a handful of criminals, and one of them was Sun Dewang from the Sea Ghosts. [1]

The man ended up getting cleaned out in a gambling hall owned by Zhao Zhongheng, and when he left, Xu Qing took his head. Other than the bounty itself, he hadn't earned much from that incident.

Back during that time, Xu Qing had learned that most pirate organizations in the Forbidden Sea were made up of outcasts from various sects, islands, and clans. They were usually people who had nowhere else to go, and thus joined a pirate organization. There were a few large-scale pirate groups, and one of them was the Sea Ghosts.

All of these newcomers had cultivation base fluctuations that surpassed Sun Dewang. And there were four who were at the top of the pack. From what Xu Qing could tell, they were all in the great circle of Qi Condensation. These were people who lived on the edge of a blade, and from their strong, baleful aura, Xu Qing could tell that they surpassed anyone that he had encountered in the scavenger basecamp.

Xu Qing's eyes narrowed as he looked at the sixteen Sea Ghosts. After flying up to the ridge surrounding the basin, the other cultivators present bristled with an aggressive aura.

Obviously the Sea Ghosts had a reputation such that, wherever they went, people disliked them. The Sea Ghost cultivators didn't seem to care. They all had cold, detached expressions, while some even smirked coldly as they looked around. Their attitude was just as cold when they looked at Xu Qing and the innkeeper. It was as if no one present was worth their attention. However, they didn't take any action. They found an empty spot and sat down cross-legged.

As they looked around coldly, one of them said, "Everyone here can get lost. Or not. But if you stay, all you can do is look at the sealizard skins. If you try to take them from us... you'll die."

The voice pulsed with killing intent as if it reached the ears of all present. No one said anything in response.

Xu Qing sat there thinking about what to do. Based on how hesitant everyone else seemed, he could only guess that the Sea Ghosts had come to Sealizard Island because of some special reason.

Should I just leave?



After taking a moment to examine the fluctuations of his cultivation base, his eyes filled with determination, and he turned and left. He moved with such speed that, only a moment later, he was off in the distance.

All of the other cultivators present were visibly surprised, including the innkeeper, who thought, Is the brat really leaving?

A few of the Sea Ghosts glanced at him leaving, but quickly looked away.

And thus, Xu Qing moved at top speed through the jungle and down the mountain, not stopping for anything. About an hour later, he was back at the beach. Looking as calm as ever, he tossed his dharmaboat out onto the water and jumped on board.

The first thing he did was activate the defenses. As they whirred into place, he performed a double-handed incantation gesture, and the water around the boat roiled as a snakeneck dragon appeared. It began to swim circles in the water below as it kept an eye on the surroundings.

Having accomplished these things, Xu Qing looked back at Sealizard Island, his eyes shining.

His smooth victories on the island, and his increase in cultivation base, had not caused him to become less vigilant and alert. His temperament was the same as before. Therefore, because he was just on the verge of a cultivation base breakthrough, he decided not to arrogantly stay on the island. It would likely have been safe, especially considering how strong he already was, and the fact that he had enough poison to kill anyone who got too close to him. But all that wasn't necessary.

He had been like this even in his days in the slums. All it took was a bit of arrogance or carelessness, and you could give someone an opportunity to do something to you. Considering that he made it a practice of exterminating any threats to his safety, it didn't make sense for him to put himself in a position to be targeted by others. It was a simple rule for survival in a chaotic world.

Some people would forget that as they got stronger and stronger. But Xu Qing would never forget the hard lessons he had learned growing up. They were engraved onto his very bones.

Now that he was in a safe location, he closed his eyes. Almost immediately, his cultivation base rumbled as he began the breakthrough.

Meanwhile, back at the basin on Sealizard Island, the poison in the area was already starting to fade away. Many of the cultivators present were breathing sighs of relief. That said, the Sea Ghosts posed a big threat, and therefore, the rogue cultivators were feeling more pressure than ever. Of course, all of them were hesitant to leave. As time passed, some finally made the decision not to stay.

Before long, evening was approaching.

As the evening sun dropped past the horizon, a fog appeared on the water. It spread out in all directions, almost as if some invisible god were in the middle of breathing exercises, and its aura were spreading across the Forbidden Sea.

Fog wasn't exactly a rarity on the Forbidden Sea. Therefore, even if it appeared, people wouldn't be surprised. However, when an incredible shockwave rolled from the shore out to the open water, quite a few cultivators looked over.

All of them saw intense spirit power fluctuations in that direction. Seemingly endless amounts of spirit power were rushing toward a dharmaboat on the water. The size of the disturbance reached over 180 meters, but kept growing rapidly, until it was 267 meters.

That wasn't the end of the matter. As the spirit power continued to rush in, the area around Xu Qing's dharmaboat became like a huge whirlpool.

As it rumbled, water sprayed everywhere, and like a torch on a dark night, it captured the attention of many of the people on Sealizard Island. Numerous gazes shifted to observe what was happening, and up in the mountains, gasps could be heard.

"I can't believe someone is breaking through!"

"This breakthrough feels... so strong!"

The people by the basin were shocked, including rogue cultivators and Sea Ghosts alike. All of them looked at the whirlpool with expressions of shock.

"That's the disciple from Seven Blood Eyes who left earlier!"

"He's actually going for a cultivation base breakthrough!"

Xu Qing couldn't hear any of the reactions. He was on his dharmaboat in the middle of the whirlpool, trembling as his spirit sea grew along with the whirlpool outside.

It was almost like there was another world within him, superimposed with the world outside.

As those two worlds overlapped, Xu Qing trembled even more violently, while simultaneously emitting bright violet light. He began to breathe more heavily as his cultivation base operated. Then his spirit sea pushed past that final distance to reach 270 meters, while in the outside world, the whirlpool also became the same size.

His inner sea and the outer sea had reached the same point, and it caused rumbling like thunder to explode in Xu Qing's mind.

RUUUUUUMMMBLE!

He had broken through from the eighth level of the Seaforming Scripture and into the ninth!

But the process wasn't over yet!

The whirlpool and the spirit sea kept growing. 273 meters. 276 meters. 279 meters....

The whirlpool in the outside world seemed to stimulate his spirit sea, and together they increased in size.

Xu Qing had never experienced anything like this before because he had never achieved a breakthrough while out in the Forbidden Sea. The spirit power was much stronger than in the harbor. The growth continued.

282 meters. 285 meters. 288 meters.

When the whirlpool reached the 291-meter mark, it was the same with his spirit sea. That was when the fluctuations of the ninth level of Qi Condensation erupted from within him.

Meanwhile, the water in the 291-meter area around him erupted, shooting water high into the air.

That was when Xu Qing's eyes snapped open. Violet light shone from his eyes for several breaths of time before fading away. Then, even stronger fluctuations rolled out. The spectral drought demon appeared behind him, as berserk and vicious as an evil ghost as it howled to the sky. As a result, the water for nearly 300 meters around the boat seemed like it burst into flames. In other words, it became a sea of fire. The howling spectral drought demon then inhaled deeply, and the 291-meter sea of flames rushed into its mouth. Upon swallowing all of it, the drought demon shivered, and the cracks covering its skin glowed with red light. The light grew brighter and more intense, until it looked almost like lava.

Finally, dazzling light filled the area, while something like the power of fire shot out from within Xu Qing!

It wasn't a case of water somehow transforming into fire. Instead, it was a gruish mixture of the two. And because of the fire, the aura of the Forbidden Sea became like a flow of water. It was also the sign that Xu Qing's breakthrough was complete.

The violet light disappeared, and he slowly stood. As his aura swept out from the dharmaboat, all of the top experts on Sealizard Island were shocked to their cores.

That was especially true of the cultivators by the basin. All of them struggled to keep their breathing calm as they realized a huge enemy was going to be coming their way.

Xu Qing really had experienced a shocking breakthrough. And the people who knew that the most clearly were those who had clashed with him previously. All of them were flabbergasted.

Xu Qing had been dangerous before, but now that he had broken through, they could only imagine how much more dangerous it would be to fight him.

The innkeeper from Plankspring Way looked stunned as he spoke quietly to the anaconda.

"Maybe you should go try to seduce him? There's more to this little punk than meets the eye. He's in the ninth level of Qi Condensation, but to me, he feels more like someone in Foundation Establishment!"

Of course, the biggest reason why everyone was feeling nervous was that... Xu Qing jumped back onto the shore and started racing back up to the basin! After the time it takes an incense stick to burn, his wild aura was once again spreading out atop the mountain.

Ignoring everyone else, he went back to his same spot on top of the tree, where he sat down cross-legged and started meditating.

This time, the Sea Ghosts were obviously taking him very seriously. And some of them even looked afraid.

Making a show of strength came with upsides and downsides. And in this environment, the upsides seemed to outweigh the downsides.

Xu Qing had used his breakthrough to tell the Sea Ghosts: don't mess with me.

As for their demand for others to not touch the sealizard skins, he was responding with: your demands... don't apply to me.

Chapter 89: Unbreakable Alliance

He didn't speak the words. He made them clear through his actions. Now, he sat at the top of the tree, and he didn't leave like he had before. He wasn't doing anything different from before, nor had his facial expression changed, but the feelings of the surrounding cultivators were dramatically different.

Those who had feared him before... currently feared him even more.

Those who had disregarded him before... were now paying very close attention to him.

The mood in the basin became more stifling. Then, as the night grew deep, rumbling echoed out from the bottom of the mountain as two eighth-level sealizards started climbing up.

Everyone paid close attention to the lizards. However, after they climbed into the basin and shed their skins, no one did anything. They just watched as five of the Sea Ghosts went down to retrieve the skins.

Everyone except for Xu Qing, that is. Opening his eyes, he looked at the two shed skins and then got to his feet.

Everyone looked over.

Ignoring them, Xu Qing simply dropped out of the tree and shot into the basin. Completely disregarding the Sea Ghosts cultivators, he headed toward the nearest lizard skin.

Seeing this, one of the nonhuman Sea Ghosts glared at him grimly. Eyes flashing, he flexed his fingers, causing his fingernails to grow longer until they were like blades. Slashing at Xu Qing, he said, "That's my lizard skin, friend, so you—"

Before he could finish speaking, Xu Qing reached up, grabbed his arm, and wrenched it forward, while simultaneously jumping up and kneeling him in the chest.

Cracking sounds echoed out as the nonhuman's chest caved in. Cracks spread out to the rest of his body, and then a boom rang out as he exploded. However, what exploded wasn't flesh and blood. Instead, it was wood. This nonhuman cultivator wasn't actually a person, but rather, a puppet!

The other Sea Ghosts seemed to put their guard up as Xu Qing reached over and took the sealizard skin. Then he turned in their direction and looked at them coldly.

Several of the other Sea Ghosts seated cross-legged nearby stood up, looking both fearful and ferocious.

The two parties faced off for a short time.

One of the Sea Ghosts was a burly, bare-chested man whose chest was a mass of wriggling flesh that resembled a vicious face. It looked like a newborn child, wrinkled, but abounding with life force. It had crimson eyes that were currently locked onto Xu Qing as it said, "You broke my toy, friend. But that doesn't matter. How about... we split the sealizards here fifty-fifty? That's not too much to ask, is it?"

Xu Qing didn't respond. He just took the sealizard skin he'd just grabbed, turned around, and went back to the treetop, where he sat down to meditate.

He had a very clear purpose for coming to Sealizard Island, and that was the lizard skins. He hadn't come to kill people. As long as no one got in his way, there wasn't any need for fighting. Furthermore, he didn't see the need to be overly greedy.

Xu Qing knew that acting this way would have benefits. Because of the intimidating Sea Ghosts, the other rogue cultivators wouldn't cause any trouble. In the end, he would benefit more. He had sufficient battle prowess. But given the life-or-death circumstances, he knew some of these people would have trump cards. Besides, what would be the point of slaughtering them?

In the end, the Sea Ghosts' proposal aligned with his interests, so he accepted the offer.

Time passed. Three days went by.

During that time, Xu Qing acquired another lizard skin without any incident. He was still suspicious about why the Sea Ghosts had shown up, and why the other cultivators were just sitting around doing nothing.

On the third day, a huge ship appeared out at sea, and its destination was obviously Sealizard Island. At that point, Xu Qing's suspicions grew even stronger.

The ship was at least 300 meters long and was pitch black. The style of construction did not resemble Seven Blood Eyes dharmaboats; it was shaped somewhat like a maple leaf. What was most curious of all was that anyone who looked at it would feel a chill rising within them, as if there were grues aboard it straight from a forbidden region. The main reason for that was the black lacquer that covered the ship. That dark color wasn't natural; rather it seemed to be a type of blood that had been spread on the ship, making it seem very grisly!

"The Church of Departure!"

"I can't believe they're here too!"

From the ridge of the basin, it was possible to see all the way down to the sea. And therefore, Xu Qing had a good view of the black ship speeding toward the island. He also heard all of the whispered and fearful reactions around him.

The more than one dozen Sea Ghosts had serious expressions on their faces, and were conversing in hushed tones. It seemed they viewed this incoming force as dangerous enemies.

Xu Qing observed through narrowed eyes. He wasn't unfamiliar with the Church of Departure.

Back in the scavenger basecamp, he'd befriended that young girl whose brother was the captain of a law enforcement team from that church. Eventually, that girl's brother had come to take her away.

[1]

On that occasion outside the general store, Xu Qing had heard the scavengers talking about the Church of Departure. Apparently, most people thought of them as lunatics.

Later, after joining Seven Blood Eyes, he had found more information about the church while browsing through information in the Violent Crimes Division.

The Church of Departure was one of four major powers in South Phoenix. The others were the Violet Lands, Seven Blood Eyes, and Words of Truth.

The Church advocated for following the example of the Ancient Emperors and Imperial Sovereigns in leaving the world of Armageddon. They constantly preached that the holy land the Ancient Emperors and Imperial Sovereigns had left to was a place of beauty, with no famine, frost, or killing. And the spirit power there was pure. They claimed that, one day in the future, that holy land

would open its doors to the world of Armageddon, and that everyone who exercised faith in the Church would be able to go there.

The members of the Church of Departure truly believed in their creed. And they viewed anyone who disagreed with their faith as heretics who deserved to be punished with the death penalty.

It was only natural that a church with such fanatical doctrines would be considered full of lunatics.

I wonder how she's doing, Xu Qing thought as he recalled that little girl and the candy she'd given him. However, he was quickly pulled away from his memories and back to the present as the Church of Departure's ship got closer and closer. What exactly is going on here on Sealizard Island?

As Xu Qing's suspicions grew deeper, the old innkeeper from Plankspring Way looked down at the Church of Departure's ship, and he sighed.

"It's over. The Sea Ghosts and the Church of Departure are here this time. They're obviously here for the same reason as me."

As the innkeeper facepalmed bitterly, the anaconda made a few cooing sounds. The innkeeper looked at the snake for a moment.

"That actually makes sense."

The innkeeper stood up and headed toward Xu Qing's tree, with the anaconda following along looking very excited. Of course, not many people know what an excited anaconda looks like, so few people realized it.

The fact that they were moving caused the other surrounding cultivators to look over and see what was happening. That included the Sea Ghosts. That said, the arrival of the Church of Departure was too distracting for them to pay much attention to anything else.

Xu Qing eyed the innkeeper's throat as he approached. The old man stopped with the anaconda about 30 meters away from the tree.

"Hey, young fella. I want to talk business. Don't spread out any more poison, alright? And can you clear a path through the poison that's already here?"

Xu Qing already had an idea why the old innkeeper had come, so he waved his hand as if to dispel the poison in the area.

Seeing that, the innkeeper sighed and stepped into the 30-meter perimeter. Walking up to a point about nine meters from the tree, he quietly said, "Aren't you curious why the Sea Ghosts and the Church of Departure are here? I won't waste words. I'll tell you exactly what's going on. Based on seasonal calculations, there's a high likelihood a Foundation Establishment sealizard will appear soon. Lizard skins like that are worth a lot of money. Early Foundation Establishment skins go for 2,000 spirit stones. The mid-level go for 5,000, and the late-level go for at least 10,000.

"I'm old and not as strong as I used to be, so what do you say we work together? Forge an unbreakable alliance! We join forces to get the lizard skins, and we split everything fifty-fifty. And we trust each other to watch each other's backs!"

The old innkeeper spoke with dignity, but also quickly. After he finished, he looked up at Xu Qing, only for his face to fall. Scrambling to produce a handful of medicinal pills, he consumed them and then started cursing Xu Qing.

“You damn brat! You said you wouldn’t spread out any more poisons, didn’t you??”

After thinking for a moment, Xu Qing said, “I didn’t spread out any more poison. That was left behind from earlier.”

“Flipping... wait, why did you wave your hand a moment ago?”

Xu Qing frowned. “You told me to clear a path through the poison.”

“... did you?” the innkeeper asked, glaring.

“My poisons can’t be cleared away.”

Xu Qing was starting to get a bit irritated. This old man was listed on his bamboo slip, and it was only because of the tenuous circumstances that he wasn’t attacking him.

The innkeeper looked at him for a long moment, speechless, before finally sighing. “Trying to talk with you is impossible. Are you saying that, since you can’t clear your poison, you just waved your hand as an act? To make me feel better?”

Xu Qing stared coldly at the old man, not saying a word.

Veins started to bulge on the innkeeper’s forehead. Meanwhile, the anaconda made a few cooing sounds. Gritting his teeth, the innkeeper consumed another handful of medicinal pills, then looked angrily at Xu Qing.

“Allies. Agreed? Or not?”

“Alright,” Xu Qing replied.

Xu Qing’s quick response caused the innkeeper to sigh. Then, he was about to say some more when the Church of Departure’s ship reached the shore.

At least seven or eight figures shot off of the ship and into the jungle. The light of the moon wasn’t enough to illuminate them completely. However, they all wore black cloaks with hoods that covered their faces. They emanated somber and gory auras, and moved with incredible speed as they shot toward the mountaintop basin.

Looking grim, the old innkeeper said, “The Church of Departure is full of crazy people. You know, there’s a story people tell out at sea. Supposedly, the Church of Departure secretly controls a bunch of islands where they carry out research and experiments on grues. The locations are so secret that no one has ever figured out where they are.”

Xu Qing’s eyes narrowed as he looked in the direction of the incoming members of the Church.

Chapter 90: A Golden Glow that Causes Madness

Before long, footsteps could be heard as the group from the Church of Departure walked out of the forest and to the ridge line surrounding the basin. There were eight of them, and they all wore black cloaks with red suns embroidered on them. They looked strange and bizarre, and at the same time, radiated a sinister coldness. That was especially true given how their eyes gleamed within the

darkness of their hoods. There wasn't a scrap of emotion on them, as if the living beings here meant absolutely nothing to them and their Church.

That apathy toward death struck the rogue cultivators and nonhumans to the core. Even the Sea Ghosts, who were widely known to be cruel and ruthless, seemed somewhat afraid of them. After all, cruelty and ruthlessness were aspects of humanity. However, the people from the Church of Departure seemed like emotionless killing machines.

Along with their arrival came a sinister coldness that filled the basin and caused many of the surrounding rogue cultivators to finally turn and leave. The people from the Church of Departure didn't bother looking at such rogue cultivators. They simply sat down cross-legged. After that, they didn't move a muscle.

Xu Qing glanced at them, but didn't see the big brother of that young girl from the scavenger basecamp, so he looked away and closed his eyes to meditate.

The innkeeper didn't go back to his previous spot. Instead, he picked a much closer spot that was poison-free, and sat down cross-legged, keeping his guard up against both Xu Qing and the other nearby cultivators.

This little brat agreed too quickly. Something seems off. I have to be careful.

The atmosphere in the basin remained tense as ten more days passed.

During that time, no sealizards appeared.

None of the cultivators present seemed surprised by that. The water surrounding the island was calm, with few waves. It was like the increasing pressure that would build up before a storm. It was the same in the basin. Everyone remained silent, except for the anaconda, who would occasionally look at Xu Qing and make some cooing sounds.

Xu Qing didn't understand, so he ignored the snake, and instead focused on remaining in peak fighting condition. He wiped his dagger clean. He sharpened his iron skewer.

As for why he'd agreed so quickly to the alliance, it was because he didn't trust the old innkeeper, and knew the innkeeper didn't trust him.

It was on the evening of the tenth day that something finally happened.

Rumbling could be heard from the sea, and the waves which had been mostly absent for the past ten days suddenly surged. Terrifying auras erupted from the sea, spreading out in all directions and covering the island. Far out past the shore, Xu Qing saw numerous whirlpools in the water, getting closer to the island.

The cultivators present didn't say anything. They just kept their cultivation bases rotating in a ready state, ready to strike like lightning when the time came.

When the first whirlpool reached the shore, water erupted everywhere as a huge sealizard stepped onto the sand, its 150-meter-long body blackish violet. In the twilight, it almost looked like it was covered with jeweled armor that glittered with black light. It seemed incredibly tough, and at the same time, radiated pressure that far surpassed the Qi Condensation level.

The immense energy caused dust and sand to whip about in the air everywhere.

It was a Foundation Establishment sealizard!



Whether it was its armored skin, its sharp claws, or the terrifying vertical pupils in its eyes, this sealizard seemed capable of unleashing endless slaughter. It seemed intelligent as it shook the water off of itself, then looked around coldly at the island. Finally fixing its attention on the basin, it began contemptuously climbing up.

The immense mightiness on display caused all of the cultivators on the island to feel like they were being crushed.

Furthermore, there wasn't just a single Foundation Establishment sealizard coming to the island. A second climbed up onto the shore and entered the jungle, then a third. The aura of the third was stronger than the others, and it looked to be 300 meters long. When it threw its head back and howled, a windstorm sprang up around it, causing the trees in the jungle to shake violently.

Even the cultivators at the basin could feel the strong, sea-flavored wind hitting their faces. The sensation of crushing weight on their cultivation bases got even stronger.

Even Xu Qing's pupils constricted as he sensed the terrifying might of the three Foundation Establishment sealizards. From what he could tell, the first two were strong, while the third was so overwhelming his eyes stung when he looked at it. He inhaled sharply as he thought back to Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior. Even the first two sealizards were so strong that they could crush the patriarch into dust.

Eyes lighting up, the innkeeper from Plankspring Way said, "Two mid Foundation Establishment sealizards. And one in late Foundation Establishment! The skins of the first two are worth at least 10,000 spirit stones each. As for the skin of the third... it would sell for 15,000-16,000! Xu Qing, it's time to make our alliance a reality."

The other cultivators in the area looked similarly excited, including the Sea Ghosts, rogue cultivators, and nonhumans. Tens of thousands of spirit stones were on the line, and that was just too enticing. In the world of Armageddon, that level of wealth was simply too much for these cultivators to resist.

Xu Qing looked down at the beach where the three sealizards had exited the sea. The feeling of danger was so intense that his hair stood on end, and he felt himself quivering.

Part of that was because of the aura crushing down on him, but part of it was his body telling him that it was ready to take action at any moment.

If I can get one of these Foundation Establishment sealizard skins, then I can go back fully satisfied. That much wealth would be more than enough to upgrade my dharmaboat, and also keep my cultivation going without constantly having to worry about earning spirit stones.

Counting the lizard skins he had already collected, he had enough to make about 2,000 spirit stones. If he added in the items he had taken from the cultivators he'd killed, plus the gifts Elder Sister Ding had given him, he would probably end up with a total of 4,000.

Add in a Foundation Establishment lizard skin, and I can go home victorious!

As he made up his mind, rumbling sounds reached his ears as the sealizards started climbing the mountain. They didn't fly in the air, but instead, charged through the jungle, knocking down the trees along the way, which actually aided in the shedding process. When they finally reached the top of the mountain, they completely ignored the cultivators as they tromped into the basin. They were

so huge that the three of them took up the greater part of the open space in the basin. Being so close to Foundation Establishment creatures caused the cultivators to temporarily stop breathing.

Then the sealizards threw their heads back and roared, and the sound of which was powerful enough to be deadly. Rumbling sounds filled heaven and earth as the sound waves swept out in all directions.

There were some cultivators whose fleshly bodies couldn't stand up to the force. Trembling, they coughed up huge mouthfuls of blood as they sustained serious injuries.

At the same time, many of the large trees in the area shattered.

As the sound of the roars rolled out destructively, it became obvious that any weak cultivators didn't stand a chance.

Xu Qing also trembled, but his fleshly body was strong, and the sound waves didn't cause him much trouble. However, the tree he had been sitting atop crumbled into ashes.

As Xu Qing dropped to the ground, he ignored the tree and instead looked around the basin like a hawk, waiting for the first complete skin to appear.

The innkeeper was doing the same thing, as were the Sea Ghosts and other nonhuman cultivators who could stand up to the sound of the roar.

As everyone waited in anticipation, enough time passed for an incense stick to burn. At that point, the two mid Foundation Establishment sealizards finished shedding. However, it was to the disappointment of everyone present that the huge lizards ripped large portions of their shed skins off of the larger swaths, then swallowed them. Then, they leaped into the air above the basin, unleashing muffled roars into the heavens.

Though the skins they left behind had holes in them, they still possessed bizarre properties. As everyone watched, they rapidly shrank down until they were palm-sized.

The more than one dozen Sea Ghosts burst into movement, as did the nonhumans and rogue cultivators. Apparently, nobody was worried about the threats the Sea Ghosts had made, and were completely obsessed with the potential profits to be had.

The old innkeeper similarly charged forth.

However, Xu Qing was the fastest of all. In the shortest of moments, all of the cultivators present were on the move, with the exception of the people from the Church of Departure.

Now, dozens of people were fighting over two pieces of Foundation Establishment sealizard skin.

Xu Qing chose to head toward the nearest one, as did the innkeeper. Neither of the two liked each other, so despite choosing to work together, they still had their guard up.

As they closed in on the skin, they faced their competitors, killing intent blazing.

Xu Qing tapped into his cultivation base, causing droplets of water to spring up everywhere, then fly out in all directions. He also wielded his dagger, aiming it with cold efficiency at one of the nonhuman Sea Ghosts. This Sea Ghost was in the great circle of Qi Condensation, which meant he was very strong. But Xu Qing was stronger. Xu Qing's right fist slammed into his chest, accompanied by the might of the spectral drought demon.

The nonhuman cultivator howled as he was sent flying backward, pulling out a talisman treasure to protect himself. Even with the added protection, blood sprayed out of his mouth. Then the talisman treasure collapsed, and he slammed into the ground 20-25 meters away.

The old innkeeper was equally as fierce. Numerous ropes appeared, wrapping around the necks of the nonhuman cultivators. However, some of them also whipped toward Xu Qing.

Xu Qing had just knocked several enemies away and was about to grab the lizard skin. However, that was when the ropes appeared. Thankfully, he had been ready for something like this, and let out a cold harrumph as he sent the power of his energy and blood surging out.

Rumbling sounds echoed out as the ropes collapsed, and it seemed like he was just about to lay his hand on the lizard skin. However, that was when four Sea Ghosts lunged at him with burning killing intent, their eyes bloodshot as they performed incantation gestures to unleash magical techniques.

The old innkeeper was also surrounded by rogue cultivators.

Two other Sea Ghost cultivators shot toward the lizard skin, and were about to grab it when the air near the skin rippled and distorted, and a huge anaconda appeared out of nowhere, struck out, and grabbed the skin in her mouth.

Looking very excited, the anaconda glanced at Xu Qing and the innkeeper, and seemed inclined to go help Xu Qing.... That was when the innkeeper's eyes flashed, and he started laughing uproariously. The glow of a talisman treasure appeared, knocking aside everyone and closing in on the snake.

As the light wrapped around the anaconda, the innkeeper's expression was one of excitement.

“Good girl. Wonderful job!”

The spectral drought demon appeared behind Xu Qing, howling, a sea of flames spreading out from it in all directions. Nearby Sea Ghosts screamed and fell back, coughing up blood. But Xu Qing ignored them and turned to face the innkeeper, his eyes glittering with icy coldness.

Meanwhile, the 300-meter sealizard that remained in the basin threw its head back and roared.

Old skin exploded as the lizard completed the shedding process and emerged anew. Then it chomped up a mouthful of the shed skin before shooting up into the sky. Its energy and blood seemed to surge to new heights as if the lizard were in the process of surpassing the Foundation Establishment level!! It roared madly, leaving everyone below shaken, and their eyes, ears, nose, and mouth bleeding.

As for the remaining shed skin, it rapidly shrank down and formed three pieces. Those three pieces of lizard skin emanated incomparably astonishing energy that far surpassed the other two skins. What was more, they seemed to glitter with golden light.

As that golden light spread out, even the clouds above stirred, and there was a god-like feeling that weighed onto everyone. In fact, Xu Qing couldn't help but think back to the Seven Blood Eyes entrance assessment, and the blood of the godly entity!

Eyes wide, the innkeeper from Plankspring Way shouted, “This... am I seeing things? This late Foundation Establishment lizard actually has some godliness! That aura of godliness is going to make those skins even more valuable!!”

At that point, the people from the Church of Departure opened their eyes, and they shone with cold, callous light. This was what they had come here for!