

## Timescape 91

### Chapter 91: Killing for Treasure

Given how massive an organization the Church of Departure was, and how small of a team was present, it didn't seem likely their goal was spirit stones. Besides, 'desire' was something each member had long since sacrificed to their overall goals. They were here on a more important mission, and that was a mission assigned by the Church. It was... to get a lizard skin that contained godliness!

Therefore, the moment the lizard shed that skin, the eight Church members shot to their feet, somber and desolate auras erupting from them. All of them pulsed with the fluctuations of the great circle of Qi Condensation as they headed right into the basin. They moved so quickly that, in the shortest of moments, they were closing in on their target.

Most shocking of all was how their group moved in complete unison, even down to the placement of their feet as they moved. They were like eight shining blades stabbing forth together.

As for the rogue cultivators in their paths, they didn't have time to get out of the way, and were slashed down like stray weeds in the path of a flash flood.

The strength on display from the Church of Departure caused the Sea Ghosts, who had been eying them this entire time, to look at them even more coldly. The Sea Ghosts had sent ten cultivators into the fight for the two mid-Foundation Establishment lizard skins, keeping back five. Now, those five rushed forward, pulsing with the fluctuations of the great circle.

The burly man with the fiendish face on his chest was the strongest of all, as even faint traces of Foundation Establishment were present in his aura.

The two sides clashed, and booms filled the basin. Then Xu Qing's cold eyes flashed as he unleashed the full power of his cultivation base and shot forward.

The lizard skin from earlier fell into the hands of the innkeeper from Plankspring Way. However, the only circumstance in which Xu Qing would worry about that was if the innkeeper didn't return to Seven Blood Eyes. As long as he returned, then even if he tried to back out on the deal... Xu Qing would make sure he paid his fair share including interest.

Because of that, Xu Qing didn't pay much attention to the innkeeper, nor did he say anything about the lizard skin. As the Church of Departure and Sea Ghosts started fighting, Xu Qing clenched his hands into fists and circulated his energy and blood.

The spectral drought demon appeared behind him, more clear and visible than ever. Its huge body was covered with cracks that seemed to flow with bright-red lava. The drought demon also surged with power that surpassed the Qi Condensation level, and thus, so did Xu Qing's two fists.

KA-BOOOOOOM!

One punch hit the Church of Departure. One punch hit the Sea Ghosts.

The full force of Xu Qing's battle prowess caused a deafening noise to fill the basin, along with a powerful windstorm.

Within that windstorm, the Sea Ghosts looked shocked, and the eight members of the Church of Departure shot backward and looked over at Xu Qing.

“Looking to get killed!?”

“Seven Blood Eyes....”

The Church of Departure and Sea Ghosts attacked, focusing some attention on each other, and some on Xu Qing. Both sides wanted to prevent anyone else from getting the lizard skins that floated in the middle of the basin.

However, Xu Qing’s ferocity was already on clear display. Having grown up in the slums, and experienced life in the scavenger basecamp, he knew how to take things by force. Waving his hand, he summoned a host of water droplets that shot out like rain in all directions.

At the same time, he slammed into a Sea Ghost nonhuman. The cracking sounds that resulted weren’t even drowned out by the boom of the collision, and then a dagger appeared, which Xu Qing slashed through his opponent. Not pausing for a moment, Xu Qing suddenly lunged backward and slammed his fist into the chest of a Church of Departure cultivator behind him. More loud cracking sounds rang out.

As his killing intent raged, blood splattered over his daoist robe, and his delicately handsome face looked incomparably cold and harsh.

After killing two opponents in a row, Xu Qing didn’t hesitate to go into an incantation gesture with his left hand. Instantly, the spectral drought demon behind him howled, and all of the water droplets in the area transformed into flammable oil that burst into flame.

From a distance, it looked like innumerable fire arrows were shooting this way and that.

The fire cast chaotic shadows, making it seem like a horde of devils was dancing wildly in the firelight. Because of that, no one noticed that a shadow was making its way through the chaos toward the lizard skins.

As the flames spread, Xu Qing backed up, while at the same time, the enemies up ahead formed a perimeter to prevent anyone else from getting close to the three lizard skins. However, that was also when a shadow suddenly shot up from the ground and started wrapping around the lizard skins. Simultaneously, the air next to the skins rippled and distorted, and the innkeeper bizarrely appeared, looking almost fanatical as he reached toward the lizard skins.

He was clearly one step behind Xu Qing, as the shadow beat him to the punch.

“Dammit!” The innkeeper’s hand latched onto nothing but air. As he fell back at high speed, others in the area noticed what was happening, and instead of focusing their rage on Xu Qing, they attacked the innkeeper.

Xu Qing’s expression was the same as ever as he took advantage of the moment to retreat further. Using his shadow to pull the lizard skins to him, he turned and raced toward the ridgeline.

Seeing that he was making his escape, the beleaguered innkeeper yelled.

“I don’t have them. Look, fools, this bag of holding is the only thing I have on me!”

The innkeeper pulled out his bag of holding and threw it in Xu Qing’s general direction. “Everything’s in there, you little punk. You keep it from now on!”

The innkeeper was a vicious person in his own right, and he knew that no amount of explanation would convince everyone of anything. Suddenly, a boom rattled out as the old man, without an ounce of concern for maintaining face, detonated all of his clothes except for his underpants. There he stood, completely bare to the world. He even spun in a circle to show everyone he wasn't hiding anything. Finally he dashed over to the anaconda, grabbed her, and then sped in pursuit of Xu Qing.

The others present were skeptical, but a few of them flew down the mountain after the old innkeeper, including members of the Sea Ghosts and the Church of Departure. However, as they got close, they switched targets to Xu Qing.

“Your tricks won't work on me! Other people might not be able to sense the aura of the lizard skins, but to me they're like a bright torch on a dark night!”

“Hand over the lizard skins!”

Two sets of pursuers unleashed astonishing magical techniques.

Xu Qing stopped suddenly and backed up, avoiding the attacks from the Church of Departure and the Sea Ghosts, his eyes glittering with killing intent. He didn't bother paying any attention to the innkeeper's bag of holding; he was certain nothing good was hidden inside.

Xu Qing had never assumed he would be able to pull a fast one on the other cultivators. It had been a lucky break that the innkeeper made a move, and that had given him hope that he might be able to get away while the others focused on the old man.

It quickly became apparent that Xu Qing was no coward. As killing intent burned in his eyes, he performed a double-handed incantation gesture, causing a blue talisman treasure to appear in front of him.

As spirit power entered it, it activated, transforming into a huge statue. It appeared to be a god of death worshiped by some nonhuman tribe. It had three heads and six arms, and emanated a cold aura of death as it lunged toward the Sea Ghosts and Church of Departure cultivators.

Xu Qing had acquired this talisman treasure from the young merman, and hadn't used it much. As such, it contained an attacking force comparable to the Foundation Establishment level. As it crushed down toward the Church of Departure cultivators and Sea Ghosts, they pulled out their own glittering talisman treasures to defend themselves.

A huge boom rang out as a shockwave surged out in all directions. Everyone backed away.

Xu Qing was strong, but there were too many enemy cultivators present. Blood was already oozing out of his mouth. That said, the injury wasn't bad enough that the violet crystal's powers of regeneration couldn't deal with it.

Xu Qing's eyes seemed to glitter more profoundly as he looked around at the cultivators in the area. He licked his lips, and the acrid taste of the blood reminded him of his days in the slums, and the scavenger basecamp. He didn't like complicated scenarios. He had the lizard skins, and his enemies didn't want him to leave. In that case, it was a simple situation.

I just need to kill them all.

As he looked around, the surrounding cultivators were shaken inwardly.

They had seen vicious people before, but this young disciple from Seven Blood Eyes had killing intent so intense it made many of their hearts pound. That said, godly lizard skins were at stake, and that was just too great of a temptation. Because of that, few of the cultivators were willing to back down.

The only ones who did were some of the nonhuman cultivators who had held back from attacking Xu Qing up to now. They knew how ruthless he was, and therefore, they hung back, hoping that an opportunity might present itself. Among them was the nonhuman in the woven rush raincoat and the burly trunked man.

After a brief standoff, the first to make a move was the Church of Departure. The Church had lost one of their members in death, leaving behind seven. All of them pulled out long spears and rushed toward Xu Qing with mountain-toppling, sea-draining force.

The Sea Ghosts took action as well, along with a few of the scattered nonhuman rogue cultivators.

As everyone rushed forward, someone in the lead unleashed a bloodcurdling scream as his body started turning blackish-green. Then he vomited a huge mouthful of black blood.

“There’s poison here!”

There were more than a few cultivators who were affected. In the blink of an eye, seven or eight started bleeding out of their eyes, ears, nose, and mouth. As everyone looked on in shock, Xu Qing made a move. Moving with incredible speed, he closed in on the Church of Departure cultivators. His dagger appeared in his right hand, which he used to bat aside a spear. Then he dodged more spears before stabbing his dagger into the throat of an enemy.

As blood sprayed everywhere, Xu Qing pulled his iron skewer out of his sack and advanced toward the gathered foes.

A rumbling sound could be heard as the spectral drought demon appeared, howling to the heavens as a sea of flames erupted around it, causing Xu Qing’s fleshly body power to skyrocket.

In the blink of an eye, a great slaughter went underway on the mountaintop basin!

Off in the distance, the old innkeeper shook the last of his pursuers. As he carried the anaconda along, he looked over his shoulder and cursed, “Stinking brat! So you did take them!”

He picked up speed as he ran. However, the anaconda didn’t seem willing to flee, and instead wanted to go back and help Xu Qing. As she struggled, she made urgent cooing sounds.

Glaring, the innkeeper said, “The damn punk is incomparably treacherous. Don’t you realize that, you silly girl?”

Smacking the snake unconscious, he raced along until he reached the shoreline. Not needing a boat, he headed into the water and disappeared without a trace.

Chapter 92: Blood-Soaked Sealizard Island

At night on the open water, the wind could change with no warning. The weather was as unfathomable as the depths of the sea. In the sky over Sealizard Island, thunder rumbled and occasional lightning bolts could be seen. A storm was coming.

Thanks to the illumination of the lightning, it was possible to see a great slaughter underway on the tallest mountain on the island.

Three godly lizard skins were valuable enough that any rogue cultivator would risk life and limb to get them.

As the thunder boomed overhead, Xu Qing's eyes overflowed with killing intent. Lunging forward, he body-slammed a cultivator from the Church of Departure, sending the man staggering backward.

Not bothering to wait for a counter attack, and ignoring the incoming magical techniques, Xu Qing plunged his iron skewer into the man's chest six or seven times, piercing his heart. The man trembled with each blow. Then Xu Qing jumped away as the magical techniques arrived. They slammed into the cultivator's corpse, ripping it to shreds.

Meanwhile, as Xu Qing backed away, four Sea Ghost nonhumans spread out to surround him. All of them were obviously powerful body cultivators.

There was also the burly man with the vicious face on his chest. Performing a double-handed incantation gesture, he summoned a huge sphere of blood that quickly transformed into a crimson bat. As the bat shot toward Xu Qing, it bared its fangs; obviously a bite from this bat would result in either severe injury or death.

Seeing the danger, Xu Qing threw out a talisman treasure that created a defensive shield. As the bat and the other Sea Ghost cultivators were held off, Xu Qing then turned toward three cultivators from the Church of Departure.

His current goal was to wipe out the people from the Church of Departure! And that was because they were the biggest threat.

The Church of Departure didn't care about life. That applied to their enemies and to themselves. As a result, they were formidable fighters.

As Xu Qing closed in with the spectral drought demon and its sea of flames, the Church of Departure cultivators' expressions flickered. However, they still continued with their attack, even if it meant their own injury or death.

Booms rang out as one of the three cultivator's chests caved in. The next cultivator managed to grab hold of Xu Qing's waist. Xu Qing stabbed him in his head, but before dying, the man grabbed the skewer, making it impossible for Xu Qing to pull it out.

The third cultivator was the first to show any sort of emotion in his eyes. It was fanaticism.

"Departure!" he howled, and his entire body burst into flames, turning into a dazzling lance that shot toward Xu Qing with shocking speed.

Xu Qing's eyes glittered coldly as his spirit sea suddenly erupted, appearing outside of him and rushing out in all directions.

The corpses of the two Church of Departure cultivators collapsed from the force, and the other cultivators in the area who had been rushing toward Xu Qing had no chance to get out of the way, and were struck.

Taking advantage of the moment, Xu Qing spun, just barely avoiding the burning lance, which passed right by his chest.

That said, even though it didn't stab him, it still brushed against him, shredding his clothing and slicing open his flesh.

Gasping for breath, Xu Qing backed up about fifteen meters. Stopping, he bent his legs, then launched off of one foot, shooting forward like an arrow. Leaving behind a string of afterimages, he closed in on another of the Church of Departure cultivators. This cultivator's eyes also burned with fanaticism.

"Departure!" he howled, as he also chose to self-detonate.

There were only three people left from the Church of Departure. Of that group, one remained unmoving, while two flew toward Xu Qing at top speed. Within their cloaks, their eyes burned just like their compatriots, as they also chose to self-detonate!

Some distance away, the Sea Ghosts' eyes were bloodshot as they looked on. They had roughly a dozen cultivators left, all of whom were unleashing trump cards, including three talisman treasures.

There were more. The surrounding rogue cultivators, including people who had rushed over from other mountains on the island, were edging forward and launching their own attacks.

From a distance, it looked like Xu Qing was in a very dangerous position. In the blink of an eye, three cultivators from the Church of Departure self-detonated, all of the Sea Ghosts attacked, and multiple talisman treasures exploded. The area around Xu Qing exploded, and waves of dirt showered over him.

And yet, before that dirt could settle, Xu Qing shot out from inside like a bolt of lightning. Surrounding him was a glowing yellow light cast by another talisman treasure. Specifically, it was a flight talisman, attached to his leg.

With that, he could achieve levels of speed surpassing anything from before. Moving at top speed, he slammed into a rogue cultivator who held a dagger.

The man screamed as his body exploded. Not pausing, Xu Qing grabbed the dagger and sped toward more surrounding enemies.

Blood still oozed out of the corners of his mouth, and his Seven Blood Eyes daoist robe was in tatters. However, the iciness in his eyes didn't show any signs of thawing. Wherever he went, screams rang out, and bodies dropped. Blood spread out everywhere until the muddy ground reeked of gore.

Several Sea Ghost cultivators lost their heads as he dashed by them.

Amidst the brutal slaughter, the sole remaining cultivator from the Church of Departure and the Sea Ghost with the fiendish face on his chest joined forces and were able to temporarily keep Xu Qing at bay.

Shrugging off a magical attack from the two of them, Xu Qing plunged his right hand into the chest of a rogue cultivator, then threw him to the side. Flying up to a nearby boulder, he lowered himself to his haunches and glared icily at the surrounding enemies.

The remaining member of the Church of Departure was their leader.

There were four Sea Ghosts, including the man with the face on his chest.

As Xu Qing scanned the area, blood dripped off of his dagger and mixed with the blood on the ground. Xu Qing had a flight talisman, and thus could have simply flown away. But these people wanted to kill him. According to his own rules, he couldn't just leave. He needed to eliminate any potential future threats by killing everyone present.

There were over forty corpses on the ground, and the aura of death they emanated was incredibly strong. The rogue cultivators that were still alive were all trembling, and didn't dare to keep fighting.

Xu Qing frowned.

He needed to eliminate anyone who had attacked him today. Even someone whose cultivation base was weaker than his was a potential calamity.

At this point, the sole survivor from the Church of Departure, their leader, suddenly spoke. "I just want one lizard skin. Give it to me, and once I report back to my superiors, you'll earn the friendship of the Church of Departure!"

"I want one too," said the face on the chest of the burly Sea Ghost. "If you don't cooperate, you're going to have a hard time making it out of here alive."

Ignoring them, Xu Qing tapped into the flight talisman to speed toward the fleeing rogue cultivators who had attacked him earlier. Moments later, their heads flew off their shoulders.

Seeing this, the Church of Departure cultivator and the burly Sea Ghost again joined forces and launched an attack.

The Church of Departure cultivator's black hood flew back, revealing the face of a middle-aged man with cold eyes and an astonishing aura. His energy surpassed the great circle of Qi Condensation, and was very close to that of Foundation Establishment. As he waved his hand, a black fog rolled out that turned into the shape of a huge gravestone. It was covered with cracks and was surrounded by numerous vicious souls. However, the souls were vague and difficult to see clearly, making it clear that this man couldn't fully utilize this technique. Regardless, the gravestone of black fog shot right toward Xu Qing.

Meanwhile, the burly Sea Ghost howled as his body shriveled up, while at the same time, the vicious face surged with blood-colored light. The redness of its eyes spread to the entire face, and then it spat out a mouthful of blood. The blood instantly transformed into a flying sword that pulsed with a baleful aura as it shot toward Xu Qing.

The other Sea Ghost cultivators also used trump cards to attack Xu Qing.

In that critical moment, Xu Qing's eyes narrowed and he lifted his right hand over his head. Violet light flickered, swirling around overhead to make the shape of a huge saber.

It was thirty meters long, nine meters wide, made from violet light, and oppressively sharp!

It was like a heavenly saber hovering in midair, and thrummed with an indescribable harmonious dao, as though the saber contained magical laws of both heaven and earth.

The moment the saber appeared, the burly Sea Ghost's face fell, and he gasped, "Qi Condensation enlightenment can produce daoist magic?? This is freaking... something Qi Condensation can produce???"

He immediately fell back in terror.

The leader of the Church of Departure was also shaken, and his face was pale.

That was when Xu Qing, his face completely expressionless, dropped his hand.

An intense rumbling echoed out as the violet saber fell from the sky, slashing into the basin and destroying everything in its path!

The blood-colored flying sword shattered. The black tombstone exploded. Everything shook as the entire basin was sliced into two parts. As for the leader of the Church of Departure, he stared in shock at Xu Qing as he was ripped apart, blood spraying everywhere.

The burly Sea Ghost trembled visibly, and a look of despair appeared in his eyes. He wanted to look down at his waist, but before he could, the blade slashed through him, cutting him in half. He was dead, as was the face on his chest.

Also torn to shreds were all the other Sea Ghost cultivators.

A moment later, everything in the basin went silent. The only sound that would be heard was the thunder in the sky. The rain... had finally started falling.

The raindrops plopped onto the ground, but it wouldn't be easy to cleanse the blood.

Xu Qing stood there, panting and covered with wounds. Though most of the wounds were already healing, there were some that were so deep it didn't seem they would stitch up. This had not been an easy battle for him, especially considering how many opponents he had to deal with.

Turning, he noticed the trembling nonhuman in the woven rush raincoat, and the trunked cultivator.

"We didn't attack you!"

"We never made a single move against you!!"

The two of them were shaking uncontrollably.

Xu Qing didn't respond. Off to the side were more of the rogue cultivators who had attacked him, and were now fleeing in confusion. He didn't chase them. He just watched closely as, before they could get far, they screamed, their bodies turning greenish-black as they fell over dead.

The trunked cultivator and the nonhuman in the raincoat trembled even harder.

Ignoring the two of them, Xu Qing turned and made a grasping gesture with his right hand. His iron skewer flew into his hand. Then he waved his hand again, and the skewer shot back and forth among all the corpses. He needed to make sure none of them were just pretending to be dead.

The cultivator in the raincoat and the trunked man backed up slowly. When they were sure Xu Qing wasn't paying attention to them, they started running. It wasn't until they were a good distance away in the jungle that they breathed sighs of relief.

However, not even they could suppress the greed in their hearts, and both of them surreptitiously took out jade slips that they could use to send messages to their leader. They were worried that if they waited too long, Xu Qing would get away.



However, before they could even send their messages, two streams of light screamed toward them. Looks of surprise appeared briefly on their faces before their throats were slashed open. They fell to the ground, dead.

Xu Qing looked away calmly. He knew that even though there were no Foundation Establishment cultivators on Sealizard Island, that didn't mean they weren't hiding out at sea. The two cultivators he had just killed had been about to send out messages, and he had no doubts it was for that purpose. Ordinary people wouldn't stop to send messages in a moment like that.

While checking to make sure everyone was dead, Xu Qing also organized all of the loot.

Before long, he looked up suddenly, and his shadow shot toward three rogue cultivators who were only pretending to be dead. The shadow wrapped around their necks and hoisted them into the air.

Before they could plead for mercy, snapping sounds rang out as their necks were crushed.

Meanwhile, the dead face on the chest of the burly Sea Ghost suddenly opened its eyes, and a small blood-colored imp emerged from it. It was obviously some unusual method to evade death. In the blink of an eye, the imp shot out to the open sea, and fled off into the distance.

Watching coldly, Xu Qing said only one thing.

“Forbidden Sea dragonwhale!”

The sea off the coast of Sealizard Island erupted as a 300-meter-long snakeneck dragon shot up and devoured the blood-colored imp in a single bite!

Then it splashed down beneath the surface and disappeared, leaving behind only rolling waves.

The rain fell harder.

Chapter 93: Like a Phoenix. Like a Hawk.

It was amidst pouring rain that Xu Qing appeared on the beach again. Walking past the bones and corpses half-buried in the sand, he eventually reached the water. The storm had kicked up large waves which obviously contained hidden dangers.

Xu Qing suddenly recalled that the Church of Departure had come on a ship, but he didn't see it anywhere.

Although there were no Foundation Establishment cultivators on this island, he didn't dare to stick around the area, even in the water near the island. If there was a Foundation Establishment cultivator nearby who had it out for him, they wouldn't be far away. That was where they would be waiting for their Qi Condensation cultivators to return successfully with lizard skins.

Xu Qing obviously couldn't be certain that the Church of Departure or Sea Ghosts had sent Foundation Establishment cultivators along on the trip. But if they were out there, it was highly likely they had already been notified about the big fight that broke out. There was no way that Xu Qing could personally prevent all communications from leaving the island.

After some thought, he decided not to leave immediately. Instead, he sat down cross-legged and meditated a bit to stabilize his cultivation base and recover a bit. A short time later, he opened his eyes and looked out at the open sea, his eyes flashing coldly.

If there's a Foundation Establishment cultivator out there....

After pondering the matter further, he suppressed any killing intent within him. Having no idea how many of them might be, he didn't want to get involved in another dangerous fight.

After more thought, he took out his dharmaboat. Then he waved his hand, and cracking sounds rang out as a small flying boat emerged from the bottom. Zhang San had installed the flying boat as an emergency contingency in case the dharmaboat was destroyed and he needed to escape. The flying boat wasn't built according to the dharmaboat specifications laid forth by the sect. In fact, the smaller boat couldn't compare to a real boat in terms of defensive or offensive capabilities. However, Zhang San had given it a huge boost to speed, ensuring that it could move at more than double the top speed of the dharmaboat.

Of course, using it for long-term travel on the open sea would be dangerous.

After thinking about it some more, Xu Qing's eyes filled with determination. After taking out the jade slip with the detailed instructions for the dharmaboat, he set it to auto-pilot, put it on the same course he'd followed when coming to the island, then activated the defenses and started it moving.

As he watched it speed off, he suppressed the regret of losing his dharmaboat, and then stepped into the flying boat.

Just as he was about to leave, he turned back and looked at the island. Rain obscured most of it, and as the wind made its way through the plants and trees, it sounded almost like whispered conversation, perhaps gossip about the recent bloody battle.

It was a dark and stormy night, and the mountains were quiet.

Xu Qing looked at it all, then clasped hands and bowed deeply at the waist.

"Sorry for disturbing you, Senior."

Having said that, he turned and sent the flying boat off the beach and under the surface of the water. As the boat sped along underwater, Xu Qing retracted his aura. His dragonwhale was also there to mask its presence.

This was Xu Qing's plan to get away safely from the island. One boat was a distraction, the other was hidden. And they were going in different directions. Hopefully, this would help him avoid any Foundation Establishment cultivators out there.

After he was off in the distance, the rain-soaked island suddenly trembled, and then slowly sank beneath the surface.... Seawater surged across the island as that happened, washing away whatever traces of blood the rain had been unable to remove. Shortly after, the island floated back up. This time, it was free of any bloodstains. Strangely, all of the fallen trees and shattered boulders had returned to their previous state. Even more strange, while the island was under the water, a pair of huge eyes opened, looked indifferently at the flying boat off in the distance... and then closed again.

\*\*\*

An hour later....

As the flying boat moved at an astonishing speed underwater, Xu Qing sat cross-legged, stabilizing his cultivation base. At a certain point, his eyes snapped open, and he took out the jade slip from the dharmaboat. It crumbled into ash, indicating that the dharmaboat had been destroyed.

So, there was a Foundation Establishment cultivator out there. Should I go deeper underwater to avoid detection, and wait for the Foundation Establishment cultivator to leave? Or should I pick up speed?

After some thought, he chose the latter option.

He didn't want to just sit around and wait to die. After all, there were terrifying things underwater as well. And if this enemy stuck around for a long time, he could be in trouble.

He didn't want his own life to depend on whether this opponent stayed around or left.

As the flying boat picked up speed, he worked even harder to keep his aura reined in. Thankfully, the water itself would ensure his aura didn't spread very far. What was more, because he didn't need to worry about mutagen, he could stay deeper underwater.

The only question was how the flying boat would fare.

That said, it wasn't a question he could sit around pondering in the moment. Under his control, the flying boat shot along under the water. Sometime later, his pupils constricted as a sense of deadly crisis filled him. Someone out there was searching for him.

Trying to stay absolutely quiet, he dropped deeper while simultaneously moving forward.

The feeling of crisis didn't go away. What was more, the flying boat was suffering from the effects of the water pressure and the encroaching mutagen. Going on in this way wasn't an option. Frowning, he put away the flying boat and proceeded with only his dragonwhale around him.

Time passed. Soon, it was the next day.

The sense of crisis slowly faded. However, it didn't disappear completely. Somehow, this enemy had locked onto Xu Qing in a way he couldn't discern.

Xu Qing knew he couldn't afford to be careless. Gritting his teeth, he prepared to go even deeper into the water to try to escape whatever was locked onto him. However, that was when his mind spun as an immense pressure suddenly weighed down from the dome of heaven.

Being under the water, Xu Qing couldn't see what was going on above him on the surface, but he could definitely sense the terrifying pressure.

This wasn't something from Foundation Establishment, but rather, a colossally monstrous aura from the sky. Because of that pressure, whatever force was locked onto him retreated in alarm.

Shaken, Xu Qing took advantage of the moment to continue on with greater speed. Some distance away, after confirming that he was free of whatever had been locked onto him, he continued on his way.

However, he knew that he could only travel this way temporarily. Though he hadn't run into any underwater danger so far, the longer he stayed below the surface, the more likely he would encounter something deadly.

After continuing for some time, he triple checked that there was no danger on the surface, then carefully went up. Poking his eyes above the surface of the water, he looked around. Almost immediately, his attention was drawn to the sky. It should have been dawn right now, but the sky was pitch black. And that was because there was a thick cover of black clouds overhead. They stretched for what had to be hundreds of kilometers, blocking out everything beyond.

And Xu Qing was right in the middle of it all.

The wind screamed and thunder rumbled. Lighting crackled across the dark clouds, causing heaven and earth to shake violently. The sea seethed, as though it were kowtowing to whatever entity was above!

If that were all there was to the situation, it might not have been a big deal. But as Xu Qing looked up, he realized to his shock that there was some entity within those clouds that defied imagination. It was as if this being existed on a different level of life, exuding so much pressure that Xu Qing couldn't move his muscles. Even his soul felt like it was vibrating, and his mind went blank.

He could do nothing but move his eyes, and as he did, he caught a glimpse of the terrifying entity above.

It was a massive creature covered in black flame that resembled both a phoenix and a hawk!

It had the head of a phoenix, a neck like a snake, a beak like a swallow, a curved back like a turtle, and a tail like a fish! Beneath the black flames, the entity's body was five-colored and dazzling in a way that defied description. As it soared within the black clouds, it seemed immensely holy. [1]

In fact, it even seemed to contain some of the same godly resonance that existed in the god's face above.

It was obviously this being that had driven away the unknown cultivator that wished to do harm to Xu Qing.

Rumbling sounds filled heaven and earth as the black clouds eventually rolled off into the distance, leaving behind the clear, bright sky behind it. When it was off in the distance, and Xu Qing regained his senses, he breathed a sigh of relief.

However, just as the breath left his mouth, that terrifying being in the black clouds turned and looked back at the surface of the water.

As it did, the water a few dozen kilometers from Xu Qing exploded, sending out massive waves in all directions, along with whipping winds. At the same time, the mutagen became vastly more intense as if it were converging on that spot.

Even though Xu Qing was a good distance away, he could see it very clearly, and not only was he physically shaking, but also, his mind reeled. The hawk-like phoenix retracted its gaze and disappeared back into the clouds. Thunder rumbled as the clouds disappeared over the horizon.

Eventually, the waves died down, and Xu Qing let loose a long sigh of relief. His face was pale as he looked off into the distance, still feeling shaken. The feelings he had experienced because of that god-like bird were unlike anything else he had experienced while traveling the open sea. Not even the giant dragging the bronze dragon chariot came close.

What was it? It was flying in the direction of South Phoenix....

Suddenly, he thought of something.

South Phoenix. Phoenix...?

Xu Qing had perused many of the ancient records in the Violent Crimes Division back in Seven Blood Eyes, and he remembered reading that on the other side of the Mountains of Truth was a huge forbidden region that made up seventy percent of the continent.

The biggest forbidden region on the continent of South Phoenix is called Forbidden by the Phoenix....

Xu Qing's mind reeled as he speculated what it might mean. After a short time, he took a deep breath and stopped speculating. The best he could do was ask around when he got back, and do some more research.

With such thoughts on his mind, Xu Qing sank back down into the water, then kept moving as before. A few hours later, after determining that he really wasn't being followed, he broke the surface, got on his flying boat and started moving at top speed.

Three days passed during which he traveled very carefully to make sure no one had locked onto his position. He still suspected that the appearance of the phoenix had inadvertently shaken his pursuers, ensuring that it couldn't track him properly. However, that didn't mean he would let his guard down. Though he didn't go underwater again, he didn't spare any spirit stones to make sure the flying boat moved at top speed.

During the three days that passed, most of his injuries healed. However, he was still very pale, and was also exhausted from all the fighting.

When he thought back to the slaughter, he realized that despite his extraordinary cultivation base and battle prowess, he had never been this tired in his entire life. Thankfully, the benefits had been astounding, and thus, he was pleased with how it all turned out.

Not only did he have three godly lizard skins, but also, he had ten skins from ninth-level lizards, and even more skins from lower-level lizards. What was more, he had acquired numerous prized treasures, and even three talisman treasures. Though the calligraphy on them was fading, meaning they could only be used a few times, they were still worth a lot. In terms of spirit stones... according to his calculations, he had over four thousand.

Most rogue cultivators weren't very rich, so that large amount came mostly because of the Sea Ghosts he had killed. The people from the Church of Departure all seemed destitute, much to his disappointment.

Given how much he had benefited overall, he decided not to worry about the Church of Departure's lack of wealth.

Forgetting the godly lizard skins, I have a total of about 20,000 spirit stones. After tallying everything up, he pushed the flying boat toward Seven Blood Eyes as fast as it could go.

His increase in cultivation base, and the wealth he had acquired, ensured that he didn't care at all about the spirit stones he needed to feed into the flying boat to keep it going. All of the days he had spent traveling had given him a deep reverence of the sea. His bags were full, and now all he wanted to do was get back.

By using the spirit stones to push the flying boat to its limit, he knew he would reach the sect in only three more days.

On the way back, he kept close to the coast, and thus avoided any unusually dangerous circumstances. It was about half a day out from the Seven Blood Eyes port that he finally ran into another watercraft from the sect.

It was a battleship, heading toward him at high speed.

Although it appeared to be a Seventh Peak Coastguard Division ship, Xu Qing kept his guard up. He made sure his snakeneck dragon was just below the surface of the water at fighting readiness. At the same time, he took note that there were five dragonwhales under the Coastguard Division battleship. One of them looked like a giantfang shark.

Xu Qing shivered inwardly, and maintained full vigilance.

Before long, the battleship neared, water spraying around it. The ship was covered with terrifying spell formations, and it had over eighty magical spikes that could release terrifying power. What was more, Xu Qing saw over thirty Seventh Peak disciples on the main deck.

With all of that, the battleship obviously was at peak readiness for combat. As the battleship neared, a voice echoed out from it, harsh and authoritative.

“Seven Blood Eyes Coastguard Division here. Unknown craft, identify yourself.”

“I’m Xu Qing from the Seventh Peak Violent Crimes Division,” he replied calmly.

The thirty cultivators on the battleship were clearly clustered around one young man in particular. He had a gray daoist robe that swayed in the wind, and lightning-like eyes that radiated immense pressure. From the fluctuations that rolled off of him, he seemed to be in the great circle of Qi Condensation. As he stood there, he looked sharply at Xu Qing.

“Xu Qing?” a familiar voice said from within the thirty cultivators on the deck of the Coastguard Division ship. A moment later, Zhou Qingpeng emerged from the crowd. Looking surprised, he waved in greeting to Xu Qing, then turned respectfully to the young man in the great circle of Qi Condensation and said a few things.

The young man nodded curtly.

Zhou Qingpeng clasped hands, then leaped off the battleship and landed on Xu Qing’s flying boat.

Smiling, he said, “Xu Qing! I can’t believe we’re meeting here on the open sea. Are you coming back from a sea voyage?”

“I’ve been out for a while, and I’m on my way back to the sect.” Xu Qing looked over at the young man standing on the deck of the battleship.

“That’s my boss,” Zhou Qingpeng explained proudly. “He’s Ding Xiaohai from the Coastguard Division.” He looked at Xu Qing’s flying boat. “What happened? Your boat is in such bad shape... The Coastguard Division has the authority to search all watercraft, but I don’t think we’ll need to look at yours.” [2]

The two of them chatted for a bit, until Zhou Qingpeng finally clasped hands in farewell. Before leaving, he recalled something and leaned over to Xu Qing.

“By the way,” he said quietly, “once you’re back at the sect, don’t go out to the open sea again for a while. The Coastguard Division was informed that some unusual things have been happening on the seafloor. In fact, my boss said that some very terrifying beings have been seen.”

Zhou Qingpeng looked frightened to report this information. After giving some more advice, he jumped back onto the battleship.

Terrifying beings? Xu Qing thought as he clasped hands and bowed to Zhou Qingpeng on the battleship.

The battleship turned, then headed off in another direction.

On the battleship, Ding Xiaohai looked at Xu Qing and his flying boat, as well as the snakeneck dragon under the surface of the water. Turning to Zhou Qingpeng, he said, "Zhou Qingpeng, that friend of yours is no ordinary person."

Zhou Qingpeng looked surprised for a moment, then lowered his voice and said, "Elder Brother Ding, a while back the Violent Crimes Division sprung a trap on Night Dove. There was a story about someone who wasn't a captain, but managed to kill one of the hideout chiefs—"

"It was him." A thoughtful look could be seen in Ding Xiaohai's eyes.

Hearing Ding Xiaohai's words, Zhou Qingpeng looked off in the direction of Xu Qing's flying boat, a bit in a daze.

Meanwhile, Xu Qing stood on his boat, seemingly unaffected by the waves rolling across the surface of the water.

#### Chapter 94: Gu Muqing

The rest of the day went by in a flash.

The moon rose over the still sea, and stars appeared in the dome of heaven, making it seem like the port district of Seven Blood Eyes was covered in a fine, mysterious gauze veil.

From a distance, the seven towering peaks hung over the lands, seven blood-colored eyes looking out like awe-inspiring guardians. They stood guard over the prosperity of the sect, ensuring that commoners longed to come to the city. It was a place where people could make something of themselves, and earn enough money to pay the residence fee. That, in turn, ensured that Seven Blood Eyes was a prosperous place. The eyes struck fear into the hearts of those on the outside, and ensured that nonhumans and other criminals didn't dare to cause any problems.

In terms of the vicious disciples within the sect, they were simply like venomous bugs in a jar. Those that emerged would be lone wolves that were capable of surviving in the chaotic world. Only wolves like that deserved to be members of Seven Blood Eyes, and share in the profits of the sect.

Xu Qing looked at the port as he flew closer and closer in his flying boat.

Numerous dharmaboats floated on the surface of the water, and beams of light from the lighthouses shifted back and forth everywhere. That, coupled with the light of the moon, made the water sparkle.

One particular beam of light belonged to the lighthouse on Harbor 79. And that was where Xu Qing's seemingly rickety flying boat came to a stop. The beam of light focused on him, forcing him to narrow his eyes. Shielding them with one hand, he produced his identity medallion with the other. A soft glow emerged from the identity medallion as a spell formation scanned it to confirm his identity. Only then did the sluice gate open to let him in.

The beam of light shifted away from him, and his vision returned to normal. As he entered, the familiar breeze hit him, lifting his hair as he looked out over the harbor. At long last, he breathed a sigh of relief. Seven Blood Eyes was a vicious and dangerous place, but it was much safer compared to the open sea. At the very least, Offpeak disciples wouldn't have to face enemies that existed at a higher level of cultivation than them.

"I'm back," he murmured as he piloted his flying boat back to his berth.

His return in the middle of the night attracted some attention from the other disciples in Harbor 79.

If had been anyone else, he wouldn't have earned much more than a glance. But when the disciples realized it was Xu Qing, many of them stepped out onto the decks of their dharmaboats and offered him greetings with clasped hands.

His last breakthrough, when the Forbidden Sea dragonwhale appeared, ensured that he was well-known in Harbor 79.

The disciples who stepped out to greet him noticed the dilapidated flying boat he was on, and realized he must have faced some very harrowing circumstances. However, Offpeak disciples knew how to maintain decorum, and wouldn't ask inappropriate questions. Thus, all of them just pretended not to notice that Xu Qing's boat was in such bad condition.

In response to the greetings called to him, Xu Qing clasped hands and bowed formally. Then, when his flying boat was back in his berth, he glanced around a final time, stepped into the cabin and started meditating. It was just the same as he had done before going out to sea.

As soon as he closed his eyes, he put away thoughts of the slaughter back on the island. However, he remained as vigilant as ever. That was especially true considering the wealth he had returned with. Granted, he was well-known enough that it seemed unlikely anyone would try to attack and rob him. But he still didn't let his guard down. As before, he scattered poison powder both on the shore and in the water around him.

At the same time, he hadn't forgotten about the young merman he killed before going out to sea, or the dharma protectors that had been keeping an eye on him.

I wonder how things have been going with the issue of that dead fish.

Instead of asking around, he just focused on his breathing exercises.

The night passed. The next morning at dawn, the wind was gentle and the sun beautiful. The first rays of morning light were like the lips of a beautiful woman, gently bringing warmth to all living beings, and driving away the cold of night.

When the sunlight hit his boat, Xu Qing opened his eyes, walked out, and looked at the port district.

Finally, he was looking at something familiar. Perhaps it was the sight of the disciples on patrol, or the other early risers. Perhaps it was the morning wind, the sound of the commoners getting to work, or the aroma of food in the air. Regardless, Xu Qing was in a very good mood.

Not worrying about the dilapidated state of his daoist robe, he flew off of his flying boat, put it away in the bottle, and headed to the cart where he usually ate breakfast. The vendor gave him an enthusiastic greeting as he ordered a big meal. The vendor glanced at his ruined robe, but didn't say



anything about it. Apparently he'd seen things like that many times in the past. The meal was so familiar and delicious that Xu Qing ordered seconds.

After settling the tab, he didn't report in to the Violent Crimes Division immediately, but instead went to the city's Disciple Administration Office to buy a new daoist robe.

After changing, he thought for a bit and then decided that he should go to the Transportation Division to see Zhang San. His flying boat needed some work, and as for his dharmaboat... he needed a whole new one. However, after considering how much wealth he had accumulated, he wasn't worried about that.

Elder Brother Zhang San helped me out a lot, and I never paid him back. I need to make up for that.

Patting his bag, Xu Qing headed toward the Transportation Division.

As the sunlight grew brighter, Xu Qing arrived. From a distance, he saw that, in addition to the various workers assigned to the Transportation Division, there were some other disciples present that he wasn't familiar with.

There were seven or eight of them, and they were all young women. Every single one was good-looking, and not even their daoist robes could cover up their attractive curves. In addition to their beauty, there was something distinctive about them; they all specialized in the dao of alchemy. These young women were disciples from the Second Peak.

Among the group was a young woman whose pale orange robe made it clear she was a conclave disciple. Her robe was eye-catching, but so was she; she was immaculately attractive and beautiful. She looked to be about sixteen or seventeen years old, was elegant and lithe, with bright eyes, a sunny disposition, and a graceful aura. She seemed like a sweet-tempered person. Thus, despite how the others crowded around her, she didn't come across as being a conclave disciple. She just stood there looking calm and refined.

As Xu Qing looked over the group, he realized that they were standing around Zhang San.

Compared to the beautiful girls, Zhang San, who was squatting on a sandbag rubbing his hands together, looked very unimpressive. That was especially true considering his well-worn clothing. Seeing Xu Qing approach, Zhang San waved a greeting, then looked at the Second Peak disciples and slapped himself on the chest.

"Don't you worry at all, ladies. It'll all be taken care of. When Ol' Zhang goes out to sea, everyone gives me face."

Realizing that Zhang San was in the middle of some sort of business deal, Xu Qing stayed off to the side in the shadows. Within the darkness, his gray daoist robe looked attractive and gentle. At the same time, his position in the shadows created a stark contrast with the bright sunlight. In fact, because of that contrast, his gentleness seemed like a mask, beneath which was a cold indifference that bordered on hostility. What was more, his long black hair cascaded down his back, making another contrast with his clothing, and giving him a very unique look.

All of that caused the Second Peak disciples to notice him and cast glances in his direction.

Xu Qing's facial expression remained unchanged as he stood there quietly, waiting.

Before long, Zhang San finished his negotiation, then stepped over to Xu Qing and grinned. “So, you’re back, you little punk. How did you do out there?”

“Not bad,” Xu Qing replied with a smile.

“As long as you made a bit of profit, that’s all that matters. By the way, see those disciples? They’re from the Second Peak.” Looking very pleased with himself, he gestured with his chin and continued, “And look at that pretty one. She’s a conclave disciple named Gu Muqing. It’s impossible to say how many people dream of being her daoist partner. Ahem. Including me. They’re going out to sea for training, and are looking for an escort. It’s a big deal. Lots of other disciples in the port district were vying for the job, but I beat them all out. Not even the Captain can compete with me.”  
[1]

With that, Zhang San looked at Xu Qing, assuming that he would get an envious reaction.

Xu Qing just nodded.

Zhang San looked disappointed. “Uh... Junior Brother Xu Qing, shouldn’t you congratulate me? After I come back, I could very well have a daoist partner!”

After thinking about it, Xu Qing realized that Zhang San was right. Plastering a congratulatory look onto his face he said, “Congratulations.”

Zhang San looked back at him, speechless at Xu Qing’s lack of envy. “Alright, whatever. I’m not going to force you.... So, did you come for repairs to your dharmaboat?”

Removing the congratulatory expression from his face, Xu Qing took out one of the lower-level sealizard skins. “Elder Brother Zhang, I did indeed come for repairs to my boat. I was also hoping that you could add this sealizard skin to make it more durable.”

As the words left his mouth, Xu Qing suddenly looked over at the Second Peak disciples not too far away. They had been about to leave, until Xu Qing took out the sealizard skin. At that point, the Gu Muqing that Zhang San had mentioned noticed the skin and stopped walking, her eyes lighting up.

“Say, Fellow Disciple,” she said, “is that an eighth-level sealizard skin?”

She had that immature type of voice that was unique to young women. Couple with the soft sunlight that shone down on her, and that air of alchemy that surrounded her, she seemed unusually attractive.

However, when Xu Qing heard her words, he frowned and instinctively put the sealizard skin away. His guard was up, and he reminded himself that he couldn’t just go around to the shops in the sect showing off the sealizard skins. And he should have waited until this girl was far away before pulling it out.

Gu Muqing noticed his change in demeanor, and quickly said, “There’s a medicinal pill I want to concoct that requires a large amount of sealizard skins. I’ve already bought every single one I could find in the shops in the city. In fact, that’s one of the reasons I came out today. Unfortunately, I still don’t have enough. If you have some extra, I’d be more than willing to buy them. Money isn’t an issue.”

Having finished her explanation, Gu Muqing looked at Xu Qing, her eyelashes quivering and her eyes glistening as if with anticipation.

Xu Qing thought about it for a moment. He wasn't opposed to selling her some sealizard skins, but before he did, his main priority was to attend to his dharmaboat.

Off to the side, Zhang San seemed stunned. He looked at Xu Qing, then at Gu Muqing, and suddenly had the feeling that his plan about escorting her out to sea was in danger. In fact, he already felt like he was a third wheel. Clearing his throat, he prepared to say something when Gu Muqing looked closer at Xu Qing, and suddenly her eyes lit up.

“Wait a second. I remember now. You're Xu Qing!”

#### Chapter 95: The Creditor Comes Knocking

It was midday, and the sun hung so brightly in the sky that a mortal person wouldn't even be able to look at it directly.

Standing in that bright sunlight, Gu Muqing shone like an immortal. Though her pale orange daoist robe covered her from head to toe, she was attractive in a way the garment couldn't conceal. The curves accentuated by the fabric made it possible to imagine the kind of slender, elegant figure that was hidden beneath. The skin not covered by the sleeves of her robe was as fair as a lotus in the snow, and coupled with the waterfall of black hair going down her back, made her exceptionally beautiful.

As Zhang San looked at her bathed in sunlight, he seemed a bit distracted, and was even blushing a bit. In contrast, Xu Qing, who still stood in the shadows, didn't look any different than usual. In fact, his cold eyes were currently measuring up the young woman's throat. To him, it didn't matter if she was beautiful.

This wasn't his first time encountering her. There weren't a lot of conclave disciples in the capital city, and he recognized the time he'd encountered her at the entrance of the medicine shop a few months ago. [1]

He had brushed past her, nothing more. But the fact that she knew his name caused his guard to go up even more than usual. He needed to determine quickly whether or not she was a threat.

After assessing her, he came to the conclusion that if it came down to a fight, he could kill her. Her cultivation base wasn't bad, but in terms of her state of readiness or the way she carried herself, she couldn't come close to the rogue cultivators on Sealizard Island. Then he considered that she was a conclave disciple from the Second Peak, and given that the Second Peak focused on the dao of alchemy, he quickly checked the area for signs of poison.

“You don't need to look so surprised, Junior Brother Xu Qing,” Gu Muqing said with a sweet smile. Her voice was clear and charming. “Elder Brother Zhang San didn't tell me about you. I heard your name somewhere else.”

At this point, Zhang San's heart was racing, and he was thinking that this girl really did deserve her reputation as being chosen by heaven on the Second Peak. And he was very pleased with the way she called him Elder Brother. Zhang San laughed heartily and was about to say something when Xu Qing's calm voice cut through his laugh.

“I’m not surprised.”

“Uh....” Zhang San said, looking at Xu Qing. Inwardly, he sighed and thought, Ahh, Xu Qing. Don’t you know what to do when a pretty girl takes the initiative? You’re not even reacting! If it was me, I would start chatting her up and then ask her out on a date. Come on, this is pure destiny!

Hearing Xu Qing’s words, Gu Muqing smiled, took out a medicinal pill, and extended it in her palm for Xu Qing to look at.

“Junior Brother Xu Qing, you sold all of your white boluses to my shop! I’ve been researching your medicinal pills for a long time now. I’m really curious: how did you manage to get such a high level of purity?”

Xu Qing looked at the pill and could tell it was one of his. After thinking for a moment, he didn’t answer her question, but instead took out a few sealizard skins.

“I have eighth level skins for 530 spirit stones, ninth level skins for 960 spirit stones, and great circle skins for 1,030. How many do you want?”

These were the same prices that the skins would sell for on the open market. He had the feeling that if he tried to sell them directly to a shop, he wouldn’t get as good of a price. Since Gu Muqing wanted to buy lizard skins, it made sense for him to deal with her directly.

Upon seeing the lizard skins, Gu Muqing’s eyes lit up. However, she didn’t immediately buy them, but instead repeated her previous question, though worded slightly differently. It seemed that, after realizing she was talking with Xu Qing, her interest had shifted from lizard skins to something else.

Xu Qing frowned. But then he considered how many white boluses her shop had purchased from him, and that she was now considering buying his lizard skins, he decided to just patiently answer her question.

“When blending the mixture, I add in an appropriate amount of nightcorpse morning glory to improve the purity level.”

Upon hearing this, Gu Muqing thought about the answer for a moment, then asked another question. She was very polite, but Xu Qing felt irritated nonetheless. As far as he was concerned, knowledge was valuable, and shouldn’t be given away without compensation. For her to ask for free information was a bit over the top. In contrast, Elder Sister Ding had a sense of propriety, and had offered him something valuable along with every question she asked.

Therefore, instead of answering her, Xu Qing actually came back with his own question. “Is there any way to increase the poison level in ghostlonging horseshoe crab blood? And is there a way to keep it fresh for longer?”

Gu Muqing considered the question. Then, looking very sincere, said, “I never thought about that before. My Master mostly teaches about vital yang medicine. Let me think for a moment.... If it was me, I’d add in some inworld tea leaves as a thickening agent. That would make the ghostlonging horseshoe crab blood more poisonous.”

Xu Qing's gaze turned serious, and after thinking about her answer for a moment, he perked up a bit. Her suggestion had opened up a new path for him to explore, something he hadn't thought about before. As such, he had to ask another question.

"Inworld tea is usually used as a neutralizer, but it does have some poison elements. How would you turn those poison elements into medicinal primers?"

"Ahhh? More poison questions? Well, let me think.... Maybe you could pull it off by using goldbutton weed?" Although Gu Muqing wasn't sure of her answer, it was obvious from Xu Qing's reaction that something had clicked in his head.

This got Xu Qing even more excited, and thus ensued a deep conversation with Gu Muqing regarding the dao of medicine. It was something of a strange conversation. Xu Qing mostly asked questions about poisons, and Gu Muqing mostly asked questions about medicines. But that didn't matter. Both parties could confirm that what the other was saying was correct. And as they talked, both of them were able to clear up areas of confusion they'd had. Eventually, Gu Muqing stepped into the shadows next to Xu Qing as they went back and forth talking to each other.

Time passed.

As the sun shone, a delicately handsome young man stood with a pretty, spirited young woman. It was like a beautiful painting that was marred only by Zhang San standing there in his grubby work clothes.

Zhang San was flabbergasted by what was happening. As he looked at the two of them, he sighed inwardly and mused that being good-looking really was a huge advantage.

Furthermore, he was really starting to worry about his sea venture. That said, Xu Qing had just returned from a sea voyage, and likely wouldn't go out again soon. Breathing a sigh of relief at that thought, he said, "Hey... Junior Brother Xu Qing, why don't you give me your dharmaboat? It doesn't seem like the two of you will be done chatting any time soon. I can start working on it in the meantime."

Xu Qing clasped hands respectfully to Zhang San, then took out the bottle with the flying boat in it and handed it to him.

Zhang San took the bottle without even thinking about it. Then he looked down at it, and his eyes went wide as he saw that there was only one dilapidated flying boat inside.

"Isn't this the flying boat from inside the dharmaboat? Where's the actual dharmaboat?"

"Destroyed," Xu Qing said calmly, and then he turned back to Gu Muqing and asked about something related to the dao of poison.

Zhang San inhaled sharply as he looked at the little bottle. That was when he started to realize that Xu Qing had definitely encountered some deadly situations while out at sea.

Four hours passed.

Eventually, the afterglow of the setting sun caused the lands to be filled with a dappled mixture of brightness and darkness. Gu Muqing seemed like she wanted to keep talking, but Xu Qing ended the conversation and also completed the sealizard skin deal with her.

“Thank you so much for clearing all that up, Junior Brother Xu Qing. It’s getting late, so I’ll say goodbye for now. I want to get back and try some of the things you suggested regarding white boluses. I still think it’s going to be hard. After all, I made a lot of attempts, but never managed to get the level of purity as high as yours.”

Gu Muqing looked somewhat frustrated.

As for Xu Qing, he was of the mind that part of his success was due to the tutelage of Grandmaster Bai, and part of it was because he had no mutagen in him. Because of the latter, the medicinal pills he concocted would have less impure energy, and thus, the results would be purer. Of course, that wasn’t something he would reveal to anyone.

Shaking her head, Gu Muqing turned to leave, wrapped up in her thoughts.

Xu Qing gave her a respectful salute, then watched her leave. He had benefited a lot from their exchange, and it had given him an even more rounded understanding of the dao of poison. Furthermore, he now had some new directions he wanted to explore.

After Gu Muqing was gone, Zhang San returned. With a concerned sigh, he said, “So... Xu Qing. Your boat.... It’s not going to be an easy job. I don’t even have enough spirit stones in savings to cover everything. You basically need a new boat. It’s going to be really expensive.”

Xu Qing didn’t say anything in response. He just looked around to make sure they were alone, then took out the three godly lizard skins.

The instant Zhang San laid eyes on them, he started shaking. All of his concern vanished, and his eyes went wide. Looking at the golden glow coming off of the skins, he inhaled sharply, then said, “Those....”

Without saying another word, he grabbed Xu Qing and pulled him into the warehouse. Once inside, he reached out with trembling hands to take the lizard skins. As he examined them closely, he started to breathe heavily, until finally he looked up at Xu Qing.

“Godly lizard skins! They’re from Foundation Establishment sealizards, but I can even sense a Gold Core aura! These things are worth so much money! If you showed these off in public, it would lead to mass slaughter! How did you get them?”

“I won them in a fight,” Xu Qing replied calmly. “Is it enough for a new dharmaboat?”

Upon looking at Xu Qing’s facial expression, Zhang San’s pupils constricted. He could tell that there was a lot of shed blood behind Xu Qing’s explanation, and finally realized why Xu Qing had gone out to sea on a dharmaboat and come back on a flying boat.

“It’s more than enough,” Zhang San said. “With this, I can make you a dharmaboat that will be incomparably stupefying! But I need some time. Come back tomorrow!”

Zhang San's eyes were shining. He knew that with the godliness in these lizard skins, he could create a dharmaboat that would be a masterpiece, something the likes of which he had never created before.

Xu Qing nodded, then took out about 5,000 in spirit notes and put them off to the side. After some thought, he took out another ten thousand spirit stones from his bag of holding, and also put them off to the side. Many of the spirit stones were splattered with blood.

Seeing them, Zhang San's eyes went wide, and his heart skipped a beat. With an odd expression on his face, he asked, "How many people did you kill?"

"Not many," Xu Qing replied.

"If you use all your spirit stones for a new dharmaboat, then what will you use for cultivation? Also... do you really trust me this much?"

"There's someone who owes me a few thousand spirit stones. I'm going to collect them tonight. As for trust.... Elder Brother Zhang San, I'm pretty sure the stuff you have in your warehouses is worth a lot more than what I just handed over."

Clasping hands to Zhang San, he turned and left.

It was evening, and everything was rapidly turning dark. As Zhang San watched Xu Qing walk off into the distance, he thought, Someone out there owes him thousands of spirit stones? Also... considering how much he trusts me, there's no way I'm going to skim anything off the top. I've thrown my lot in with him, so I'm going to support him to the bitter end!

\*\*\*

As evening fell over Plankspring Way, the old innkeeper sat there complacently, smoking a pipe and reveling in feelings of success.

"I really came out on top this time," he said. "A mid-Foundation Establishment lizard skin! This thing is worth 5,000 spirit stones! It's a pity I couldn't get those godly lizard skins. That said, there's no way that poisonous brat had an easy time back there. The more I think about him leaving empty-handed, the better I feel. Hahaha! I haven't opened for business in quite a while now. I bet I'm going to get a lot of customers tonight!"

As the innkeeper sat there feeling very pleased with himself, the huge anaconda suddenly smacked her head into him, then made numerous indignant cooing sounds.

The old innkeeper glared at the anaconda and was about to chide her, when he realized how sad she looked, and felt bad. He sighed.

"Ai. The young fellow is plenty crafty. If things got bad, he could always just run away, right? I doubt he ended up dead."

The anaconda seemed to feel slightly better hearing that, but she still seemed dispirited as she shrank back into the corner. The old innkeeper said a few more comforting words. Eventually, it was dark outside, and the innkeeper heard the footsteps of customers outside.

“I’ll get you some good snacks to eat later,” he said. “Enough chatting. It’s time to open the doors.”

Stepping outside, he saw a customer rushing toward the inn. A smile broke out on his face. However, only a moment later, that smile disappeared.

A dagger flashed through the night, flying like a lightning bolt, stabbing right into the neck of the criminal that had been running toward the inn. It threw him through the air until he slammed loudly into the wall on the other side, leaving behind a huge plume of blood. The criminal screamed. Then the screams turned into gurgles.

After that, more footsteps could be heard from the surrounding darkness.

#### Chapter 96: A Gruish Inn

The wind picked up as the darkness of night deepened. The moonlight only made things colder. The night was so deep that it was like the hand of death, poised over the Book of Life and Death, covering everything with ink.

Eventually, the scene became a dark painting of death. Everything was black. The only color was the ghastly red blood dripping out of the neck of the criminal who was now pinned to the wall. The footsteps grew louder and a figure in gray appeared, slowly emerging from the painting.

As that figure neared, it superseded the flowing blood, and became a source of frigid cold outside the inn on Plankspring Way. In fact, it was so cold that the dripping blood seemed to congeal. At the same time, the innkeeper’s pupils constricted as he looked at the newcomer.

It was a young man with flowing black hair. He was tall and slender, with cold eyes that perfectly matched the sharp angles of his face. He looked like an unsheathed blade as he approached.

He was none other than Xu Qing.

His expression was calm as he walked past the innkeeper to the corpse. Reaching down, he took the criminal’s sack, then pulled the dagger out of the wall, twisting it so that it decapitated the corpse. As the body fell to the ground, Xu Qing kicked it.

The corpse flopped down in front of the grim-faced innkeeper.

A whooshing sound could be heard as the anaconda appeared, peeping past the innkeeper to look at Xu Qing. Her eyes glittered.

“Coo. Coooo.”

“My treat,” Xu Qing said coolly.

Looking very happy, the anaconda swallowed the corpse and gave Xu Qing a nod.

“This is too much, Xu Qing!” the old innkeeper said, glaring at him coldly.

Xu Qing turned to look at the old man, then flicked his wrist, sending his dagger flying out into the darkness. It pierced through the wind, then provoked another scream as a second criminal who had been running toward the inn was stabbed through the forehead. The force of the blow shattered his skull, sending blood and shattered bone flying everywhere. The body flew six meters back through the air until flopping onto the ground.



Seeing this, the innkeeper's eyebrows shot up. He could now tell that Xu Qing was actually stronger than he had been on Sealizard Island.

"Just what do you think you're doing?" the innkeeper said angrily, veins bulging on his forehead. At the same time, a sense of danger was building in him, causing ropes to appear out of nowhere and drape around him.

However, the moment the ropes appeared, intense flames erupted from Xu Qing, raising the temperature so high that the ropes bent away from him.

Around then, a third scream rang out.

It was a third criminal. Upon simply approaching the area, his entire body turned greenish-black, and he died a moment later.

Xu Qing ignored the dead criminals and instead eyed the innkeeper's throat as he tried to decide whether or not to kill him.

The innkeeper looked at Xu Qing, his heart sinking. He knew why Xu Qing had come, yet he was loath to simply hand over thousands of spirit stones. Everything he had said up to this point had been in the hopes of convincing Xu Qing that the bag of holding he had thrown him on Sealizard Island was valuable enough that their spirit stone debt should be considered settled.

But the fact that Xu Qing hadn't said a word so far made it clear that no amount of bartering was going to appease him. Furthermore, Xu Qing's aura was full of killing intent, which caused the old innkeeper's heart to pound with a feeling of deadly crisis.

"Don't do anything rash, Xu Qing!" he blurted. "I have a trump card!! It's my inn. Actually, it only looks like an inn. The truth is that it's a grue! It's sleeping, but if it wakes up, the First Peak will mobilize to crush it. And if that happens, you're done for!!"

Behind him, the entire inn shivered, and a terrifying pulse of energy emerged from the very tables, chairs, tiles, and bricks that made it up. It seemed like the inn really was some sort of grue, and it was about to wake up.

Xu Qing's pupils constricted, and the sudden sensation of deadly crisis caused him to back up a few paces.

As for the anaconda, she had been lying off to the side watching curiously but not interfering. She seemed to think that if Xu Qing and the innkeeper started fighting, nothing dangerous would come of it. When she sensed what was happening with the inn, a gleam of familiarity appeared in her eyes, and she patted the floor of the inn with her head as if in greeting.

Then she noticed Xu Qing looking in her direction, and made several cooing sounds, while simultaneously nodding her head, as if to tell him that the innkeeper was telling the truth.

"I'm not human, Xu Qing," the innkeeper went on. "And this is no ordinary inn. It's a grue. My people have the power to put grues to sleep; years ago, I put this thing to sleep and brought it to Seven Blood Eyes. I'd hoped to sell it to the First Peak. However, they wanted me to keep it here for ten years before giving me any money.

There were no other options, plus they offered me a lot of money, so I agreed. But that doesn't change the fact that I'm poor! I also need cultivation resources!

"Besides, I'm friends with Huang Yan! Plus, I saved Zhang San's life once. And the Captain and I owe each other our lives. So don't do anything rash, Xu Qing. We can be friends! I gave you information about wanted criminals before, remember? That information was real! I haven't done anything to harm you."

Xu Qing listened grimly. Then he looked at the inn. To him, it seemed like a massive, ghastly mouth, ready to devour anything in its path. He'd known all along that there was more to this old innkeeper than met the eye. And he'd always assumed the old man would have trump cards. That was why he'd always held back from making a move on him. But he would never have guessed that the man's trump card was the inn itself!

Xu Qing didn't believe for a minute the part about selling the inn to the First Peak. But the sensation of danger was absolutely real. And because of that, Xu Qing didn't think it was worth it to press this issue. Being as cautious as he was, he made the decision not to take any further action. Instead, he would keep an eye on Plankspring Way. Looking at the innkeeper, he retracted any killing intent and coolly said, "Give me my spirit stones."

Sensing that Xu Qing's killing intent had vanished, the innkeeper took out three spirit notes, each worth 1,000 spirit stones. With a flick of his fingers, he sent them flying over to Xu Qing. Xu Qing looked them over and then walked off with the heads of the criminals.

During the entire encounter, he only said two things.

Meanwhile, the anaconda made a few cooing sounds in Xu Qing's direction. She sounded cheerful.

Xu Qing didn't look back.

"Pipe down," the innkeeper said, taking out some generic antidote pills and consuming them. "You ungrateful snake! Now we're out of spirit stones, and instead of feeling sorry for me, all you care about is him! He nearly killed me, and the inn almost woke up!"

"Coo!"

"You think I deserved it...?" Looking angrier than ever, the innkeeper swished his sleeve, sat down, and furiously started smoking his pipe again. When he thought back to the killing intent he had just felt from Xu Qing, he felt astonished. The young fellow's murderous aura is even stronger than before. I wonder what ended up happening on Sealizard Island. I need to ask around!

Meanwhile, Xu Qing was walking through the night thinking about what had just played out. There were a lot of unusual things in the world, and though he couldn't be sure that the innkeeper's story was true, what he did know was that the sense of immense danger from the inn was real. After walking quite a distance away, he looked over his shoulder in the direction of Plankspring Way, then fully suppressed his killing intent.

Because his dharmaboat wasn't finished, he decided that it would be best to spend the night at the Violent Crimes Division. As he entered, he ran into the Captain, who was just leaving after a busy day of work. He was munching an apple as he walked out. When he noticed Xu Qing carrying three severed heads, he smiled and tossed him an apple.

"So hardworking!" he said. "You just got back and you're already out nabbing criminals? Did you have a profitable time out at sea?"

Xu Qing caught the apple, then took out a 100-spirit-stone note and gave it to the Captain. "I did okay."

The Captain accepted the note, then hopped onto a nearby stone bench. Squatting down, he said, "I heard that there was an island near the Westcoral Archipelago where a lot of people died. Were you in that area, by any chance?"

Xu Qing shook his head.

The Captain smiled and continued to eat his apple. Instead of continuing with the previous subject, he lowered his voice and dramatically said, "Let me tell you about a really shocking event that happened. Just after you left, we got a huge case. All the disciples were talking about it. It was really grisly, to be honest."

At this point, the Captain looked at Xu Qing, expecting him to ask for details.

Xu Qing just looked back at him.

A moment passed, and then the Captain sighed. "Ah, Xu Qing. When people talk to you like this, you're supposed to act curious. That way, the person who's talking to you won't feel embarrassed, and they'll be comfortable going on. It's called being polite."

Xu Qing thought about it for a moment, then tried to look curious.

Looking pleased, the Captain glanced around to make sure they were alone, then lowered his voice again and continued, "Remember the Captain of Earth Bureau, Unit Three? That merman? Well, he was killed! Violent Crimes Division got the case, but considering it was a nonhuman, it wasn't made a huge priority. The victim had dharmaprotectors, plus two cousins, and they've gone crazy trying to track down the murderer... Ah, what a chaotic world we live in. I mean, the guy was a crown prince of one of our allies! But dead is dead, and thus, it was kind of a big deal. Anyway, enough chit-chat, Junior Brother Xu. I need to go on patrol."

With that, the Captain stood, straightened his clothes, and hopped off the bench. As he left, he stopped right next to Xu Qing, leaned over, and whispered, "The Merfolk and Seven Blood Eyes are allies. So they're being allowed to search for the culprit. Also, I heard... that the Merfolk have a magical technique that allows the two cousins to sense the presence of the killer. They've been searching for over a month, and have investigated every person that fish had dealings with. I bet they'll find the killer sooner rather than later. Everyone is waiting to see what happens. It's quite an interesting situation."

Giving Xu Qing an enigmatic smile, the Captain left.

Xu Qing stood there thinking. After a moment, his eyes glittered coldly. Turning in the heads of the criminals and taking his reward, he found a place to meditate.

The following morning at dawn, he left the Violent Crimes Division. As he walked along, he passed a candied fruit vendor, where he bought a skewer. Then he headed into a certain alley, where he stopped in place. Only moments later, a woman approached from behind. She was good-looking to the point of being alluring, and upon reaching him, she dropped to her knees and kowtowed.

“Milord,” she said. This was the informant he had hired when he first arrived in the city. Up to this point, he hadn’t needed any information from her, so he hadn’t summoned her.

Turning, he took a bite of candied fruit and asked, “Has anything big happened recently?”

Seeing him eat from the skewer of candied fruit, the woman shivered a bit. However, only a moment later, she looked at him reverently and said, “There are two big things that everyone’s talking about. The first is the Seventh Peak’s upcoming Grand Competition, which they hold every thirty years. The Grand Competition is always a violent and blood-soaked affair. Supposedly, they chose a Merfolk island as the location of the last tournament, and the place ran red with blood. Afterwards, they became Seven Blood Eyes allies.

“The second big thing also has to do with the Merfolk. One of their crown princes died, and his two cousins have been searching the Port District for over a month, trying to find the killer...”

People who worked the street usually knew the most about what was going on. After becoming an informant for Xu Qing, this young woman had obviously worked hard to gather information. As a result, he was very pleased with her report.

“Anything else?” he asked.

The informant thought for a moment, then said, “Nothing big. Although, I did hear about a small sect that moved out of Seven Blood Eyes territory. You don’t hear about that kind of thing very often. It was called the Golden... something... Sect.”

“Golden Vajra Warrior Sect?” Xu Qing asked.

“Yes!” she said with a nod. “It was the Golden Vajra Warrior Sect.”

After considering all of the information, Xu Qing handed her five spirit stones, then turned and left. To this young woman, five spirit stones was an immense amount of wealth. Gasping, she looked at the departing Xu Qing with even more fanatical reverence than before.

Once outside the alley, Xu Qing started walking along and thinking about the Golden Vajra Warrior Sect.

They moved away? he thought, his eyes narrowing. Then he thought about the Merfolk situation. The Captain and his informant had told him essentially the same thing, and it caused killing intent to bubble within him.

Both of these situations are potential calamities.

After he was off duty that day, he headed to the Hall of Sea Annals to submit a report about the giant he’d seen pulling that dragon chariot. According to the rules governing the Hall of Sea Annals, if you submitted new information that was corroborated as true, you would get a reward. It could

take time for that to happen, though. After he was finished with the report, it was evening time, and he headed to the Transportation Division.

There, he found Zhang San looking exhausted, but at the same time, wildly excited.

“Junior Brother Xu, I really went all out with your dharmaboat. I’ve never been more proud of my work!” Leading Xu Qing to the warehouse, he threw open the door.

The first thing Xu Qing saw was a shockingly amazing dharmaboat.

It was 300 meters in length, covered in sealizard skin, and glowed with a scintillating black light. It pulsed with the energy of the great circle of Qi Condensation, and had defenses so strong they were visible to the naked eye.

The basic structure hadn’t changed. However, there were now two huge, curved horns stretching along either side of the boat. They looked vicious and intimidating, and even Xu Qing was so struck by their appearance that his pupils constricted.

Even more astonishing was that the eight sails were now more than twice as large. Their structure was different as well, and they were pitch black. They looked like the wings of some ferocious beast.

The interior of the boat was covered with Foundation Establishment lizard skin. Because of that, the boat was tougher on the inside than it was on the outside, giving it a mysterious quality that could make all the difference in a life-or-death situation.

“As for the godliness,” Zhang San explained excitedly, “I extracted it and then infused it into the eight sails. Once you activate them, the dharmaboat will be able to either fly above the surface of the water or dive beneath it.

“Most importantly, I connected the godliness to the boat as a whole, giving the entire boat the ability to repair itself to a certain extent. There are few qualities more precious to Seven Blood Eyes disciples than that, and your boat has it!

“Furthermore, the godliness can be sent outward in the form of a shocking attack. I’m not even sure if a Foundation Establishment cultivator could stand up to it, and even if they did, they would definitely end up seriously injured. That said, I suggest you refrain from doing something like that. It would be a big waste, and if you do it enough, the godliness will run out. Once that happens, all of your dharmaboat’s properties will decline.

“All said, this dharmaboat of yours is not technically in the Foundation Establishment level of strength. But it’s not that far off. In fact, all you need to do is add in a Foundation Establishment power source, and then it will not only be in that level, it will be impressive within that level!

“That said, don’t casually insert a Foundation Establishment power source. You need the heart of some really amazing beast. Ideally, it would be the heart of a godly

entity.... If you add that, your dharmaboat will be on the same level as an actual Foundation Establishment godly entity!

“Of course, I know you, Xu Qing. You don’t like to show off. Therefore, I designed your boat so that you can easily make it look exactly like it did before. Then, you can reveal its true state only when you deem it necessary!”

Xu Qing was deeply shaken as he looked at the huge dharmaboat. Sometime later, he left the Transportation Division and went back to Harbor 79. Even after he arrived, he still felt excited.

\*\*\*

Five figures made their way through the night in the Seven Blood Eyes capital city. Two led the way, and three followed those two. The three in the back were attendants, and the two in the lead were young women with sharp eyes. These sisters were the cousins of the young merman, and they were also the lovers of Third Highness. The younger sister had eyes bursting with killing intent, while the older sister had a curious expression. The latter wasn’t interested in killing; she had a different goal.

“We’ve been searching for over a month!” the younger sister said through gritted teeth, her eyes burning with vicious anger. “We eliminated everyone who ever had a problem with our little cousin. This is the only person we couldn’t investigate because he was out at sea.”

“It doesn’t matter,” the older sister said. “All we have to do is lay eyes on him and our bloodline ability will tell us if he’s the killer!”

“If it really was him, then I’m going to skin him alive! I’ll make him understand true suffering. I’ll eat a bit of his flesh every day, and then after he dies in agony, I’ll extract his soul and place it in a merlamp to burn for all time!”

On this dark night, it seemed that asuras were out, ready to take lives!

Chapter 97: The Asuras Appear

It was a dark night without much wind. And when that meager wind hit the defenses of Xu Qing’s dharmaboat in Harbor 79, it dispersed into nothing. However, if it had been able to pierce the defenses and sweep through the dharmaboat, it would have found... no one.

Some distance away, Xu Qing waited quietly in the shadows, leaning against the wall of a building, his arms crossed over his chest as he watched his dharmaboat. His eyes were sharp and focused.

I wonder if they’ll come tonight. He looked up at the dark sky. It seems like a good night for killing. It made him think of his return trip out at sea, when he looked up at those black clouds and caught a glimpse of the hawk-like phoenix.

After retrieving his dharmaboat from Zhang San, he had asked about that entity, and Zhang San told him that it had something to do with the biggest forbidden region in the continent of South Phoenix: Forbidden by the Phoenix. The phoenix was the emperor of that forbidden region, and its name was Flame Phoenix! The place was called Forbidden by the Phoenix because of that phoenix. It was a

supreme entity that maintained dominance, not just over that forbidden region, but over all of South Phoenix. Furthermore, the name South Phoenix also came from that phoenix!

It was said that, to the south of the Revered Ancient mainland, there was a godly entity, a phoenix, that danced in the highest heavens. Its might caused the dome of heaven to grow dark, and it inspired awe among all living beings. It was named Flame Phoenix, and its dwelling place was an island that came to be called South Phoenix.

Zhang San didn't know any more details than that.

Flame Phoenix, Xu Qing thought. As he furthered his cultivation, broadened his horizons, and expanded his knowledge, he came to know a lot more about the world he lived in.

The wind blew, carrying with it the sound of fabric brushing against fabric. That caught Xu Qing's attention, so he put aside thoughts of Flame Phoenix and turned his cold gaze to a spot further down the harbor.

Soon enough, he caught sight of five figures. Three men. Two women.

Xu Qing was familiar with these women. Whether it was the scent of the sea that surrounded them, or their physical appearance, he realized instantly that they were sisters related to the young merman he'd killed. They had strong cultivation bases. One was in the ninth level of Qi Condensation, and the other was in the great circle. Behind them were three attendants who were also Merfolk cultivators. They appeared to have cultivation bases in the eighth level of Qi Condensation, and in the light of the moon, their features were vicious and full of killing intent.

Xu Qing looked at them coldly, his eyes narrowed. However, he didn't take any action, he simply watched them.

Where are the Foundation Establishment dharma protectors?

As he watched, the five Merfolk made their way clear of some patrolling disciples, then approached his dharmaboat.

Perhaps they felt confident because of their association with Third Highness. Or maybe it was simply their Merfolk arrogance. Regardless, upon nearing the dharmaboat, the younger sister made as if to charge forth in attack.

The older sister reached out to stop her. The older sister was obviously the more prudent of the two, and didn't want to act blindly. Lifting her right hand, she produced a talisman treasure. It wasn't a talisman used for attacking purposes, though, but for surveillance.

After only a few breaths of time, Xu Qing could tell that the two mermaid sisters knew he wasn't in the boat. Then he watched as they backed up as if to leave. His eyes grew colder. The reason he'd left his boat was that he didn't want to kill anyone near it. If he did, it would be too obvious what happened, and there could be consequences.

Of course, if they actually managed to get past the defenses and get on board, he had ways to deal with them. But now that the five Merfolk were leaving, he would simply follow them and pick them off one by one from the shadows.

However, after they only took a few steps, the older sister's expression flickered, and she suddenly turned and looked directly at the spot where Xu Qing was hiding.

“Bloodline curse fluctuations!” she said. “Our brother’s killer is right there!”

The moment the words left her mouth, the younger sister looked over, her green eyes burning with killing intent. She charged forward, right toward Xu Qing. At the same time, the three attendants’ killing intent raged, and they also charged toward him.

So, they noticed me.

Xu Qing frowned. If he killed Third Highness’ people right here, it would surely attract attention. Besides, there was also the chance that they could call for backup.

Therefore, as they charged forth, he flew backward, keeping his aura reined in and also trying to make himself look panicked. Hopefully, if they thought he was scared, it would decrease the likelihood they would send a message for help.

That said, he didn’t plan to get involved in a prolonged fight. As long as he could lead them to an out-of-the-way location, he would strike like lightning.

And thus, the five Merfolk began chasing him. The younger sister was in the lead, her eyes murderous. As she dashed forward, she waved her hands, causing black bubbles to appear around her and then shoot toward the ‘panicking’ Xu Qing. As the bubbles neared him, he could sense the fluctuations of a magical technique, as well as a very strong level of mutagen. This attack was obviously designed to pollute him.

“So, you killed my cousin! Now that we found you, I’m going to make you wish you could die!”

Behind her, the three Merfolk attendants all pulled out prized treasures.

One of them had a bone sword. The second used an item that covered his hands with scales that rapidly turned into poison spikes. Finally, a tumor appeared on the back of the third, growing so rapidly it burst through his clothing. Then it exploded, sending out a cloud of poison gas that formed the image of an evil ghost and shot toward Xu Qing.

The older sister was in the very back. She was obviously the most cautious of the group, and didn’t want to get too close to Xu Qing. She had some sort of defensive talisman treasure in her hand.

Xu Qing didn’t look at any of the magical techniques being used. Instead, he just picked up speed.

By the time they were about to hit him, he had reached a remote corner of the harbor. Suddenly stopping in place, he turned, his eyes full of killing intent. Then he shot toward the Merfolk, moving many times faster than moments before.

In the blink of an eye, he was right in front of the furious younger sister. Completely ignoring the bubbles and the mutagen, and before she could even react to the development, he slammed right into her chest.

She was in the ninth level of Qi Condensation, and was considered innately talented. However, Xu Qing’s fleshly body power surpassed the Qi Condensation level, and his spirit power was also incredibly strong. Against that, her body might as well have been made from paper....



A thump rang out, and her eyes widened. Before she could even scream, she shattered. Blood sprayed left and right as every part of her besides her head exploded. As for her head, a blue light wrapped it up, keeping it alive and shooting backward in retreat.

Seeing that, Xu Qing threw his iron skewer toward the head. Without losing any momentum, he continued toward the merman cultivator with the bone sword.

The cultivator's face fell as Xu Qing reached out, grabbed the sword, and twisted his wrist. A crack rang out as the sword snapped. Then Xu Qing used the broken tip to stab the merman in the throat. This attendant was in the eighth level of Qi Condensation, but that didn't stop the blood from spraying everywhere as he died.

Things weren't over yet. Xu Qing jumped onward, reaching the attendant with the tumor on his back and the cloud of poison gas. The attendant tried to back up, but before he could take more than a few steps, he suddenly turned greenish-black. Then blood sprayed out of his mouth and he dropped dead from poison. As it turned out, his poison wasn't nearly as effective as Xu Qing's.

The third attendant was so shocked he was shaking. And he planned to release a scream. But before he could, a host of water droplets appeared around him, which then smashed down onto him, crushing him into a pulp.

By this time, the iron skewer had reached the blue shield of light protecting the younger sister's head.

The shield was astounding, and managed to prevent the skewer from piercing it. However, the power behind the skewer was so intense that it sent a shockwave through the shield, half-destroying the head. Even still, it wasn't enough to kill the mermaid. Screaming, she used her momentum to keep flying toward her older sister.

Everything happened in the time it takes a spark to fly off of a piece of flint. Xu Qing attacked with ultimate ferocity, killing the three attendants, and then pulling out a dagger and rushing at top speed toward the older sister.

The older sister's face filled with unprecedented terror and fear. In fact, she almost couldn't believe that her younger sister was hovering on the brink of death. Because of her natural caution, the defensive talisman treasure, and the fact that she was in the great circle of Qi Condensation, she didn't end up being poisoned. What was more, the attack of a single dagger wouldn't be enough to break through her talisman treasure.

A rattling boom rang out as the talisman's defenses shook violently. The older sister was in complete shock. Never could she have guessed that the seemingly ordinary Harbor 79 would have such a terrifying entity in it. This level of battle prowess was virtually the same as Foundation Establishment. And then she thought about how she had intentionally come to provoke this person.... The older sister's scalp tingled, and she inwardly cursed her dead cousin.

Dead is dead! Why did we have to provoke a fiendish killer like this??

In that moment of ultimate crisis, it was without the slightest hesitation that she pulled out another talisman treasure and threw it out with all the force she could muster. Rumbling sounds echoed out as it transformed into a huge fish tail which swept toward Xu Qing.

Using that moment of opportunity, the older sister grabbed her panting sister's head, then unleashed the full power of her cultivation base to turn and run. Her expression was one of complete terror, and in her heart, she could think of only one thing: flee!

If she could run far enough away, maybe the dharma protectors would show up. They had agreed ahead of time to do just that. In fact, as she sped away from Xu Qing, she pulled out a transmission jade slip to send them a message. However, she had no time to check if the message was received. With her cultivation base burning at maximum, she pulled out a third talisman treasure to break through a wall of water put up by Xu Qing.

Booms rang out left and right. Normally speaking, someone would have noticed this commotion in the harbor. But it was a remote corner, and Xu Qing had set up a wall of water to keep the sounds of fighting contained.

It didn't take long for Xu Qing to deal with the huge fish tail. Face grim, he looked at the fleeing mermaid, then started moving after her. He shot forward at full speed, even using a flight talisman to ensure that he moved like a lightning bolt right toward her.

#### Chapter 98: One out of Fifty

The night was as quiet as dead water. The wind was as sharp as the edge of a blade. Xu Qing sliced through the silent night like a saber.

A fight had started, and Xu Qing didn't care about anything else. The Merfolk cultivators had come after him, and therefore, he would kill them! It didn't matter if they were associated with Third Highness. Since they had attacked him, he was already prepared to deal with Third Highness if he had to. Worst case scenario... after he killed the Merfolk, he could leave Seven Blood Eyes and go out to sea. He really didn't want to do that, but since things were already in motion, he would if he had to.

Right now, he pushed forward at top speed, getting closer and closer to the mermaid. Unfortunately, she had a very strong cultivation base, and a lot of talisman treasures. She was also burning her cultivation base in her attempt to escape. As he got closer, she suddenly pulled out three talisman treasures that seemed to function just like flight talismans.

In the blink of an eye, she accelerated with astonishing speed, leaving Xu Qing behind as she shot toward a certain harbor.

Despite getting some distance away from Xu Qing, she wasn't feeling at ease. From the moment the three attendants had been killed, and her sister grievously wounded, she had been thrown into a state of utter anxiety. Xu Qing's ruthlessness put her more at fear for her life than she had ever been. What was worse, the coldness in his eyes caused her to tremble to the core of her being.

Up ahead in the harbor, she spotted a familiar dharmaboat, and it was only then that she started to feel less terrified. In fact, hope appeared on her face. She'd stopped wondering why her dharma protectors hadn't come to her aid, and was only focused on reaching that dharmaboat as quickly as possible. That was where she could find shelter.

You killed my cousin. You killed my family. You got me in this bedraggled state. Xu Qing... I'm going to have Third Highness expel you from Seven Blood Eyes! And then I'll get my revenge!

The mermaid gritted her teeth, and her eyes turned red as she burned her own blood to get even more speed.

Meanwhile, Xu Qing's eyes were as cold as ice. He could tell that his target was heading toward Third Highness' dharmaboat, and in fact, he could already see the luxurious craft off in the distance. It was lit with lamps, and the sound of singing and dancing could be heard from inside. That only caused Xu Qing's killing intent to grow more intense. Burning the flight talisman for everything it was worth, he sped up. However, that was still too slow.

Moments later, the mermaid's act of burning her own blood earned her enough speed that she leaped onto Third Highness' dharmaboat. Staggering as she landed, she shrieked for help.

"Help me, my love!"

Almost instantly, a group of Third Highness's retainers jumped out to surround her protectively.

At the same time, Third Highness flew out from the cabin and to the mermaid's side, a look of astonishment on his face. He looked at her bedraggled state, like a begonia pelted by rain in a storm, and his face filled with tenderness.

"Why are you crying, my belle? Who's been bullying you?" Then he looked at her younger sister, gasping breathlessly. Anger appeared on his face. "How did you end up like this?"

That was when Xu Qing arrived at Third Highness' dharmaboat. Stepping into the water outside the boat, he looked at Third Highness holding the mermaid.

Gritting her teeth in grief and indignation, she pointed at Xu Qing and said, "It was him, my love! This Xu Qing killed my cousin! My sister and I went to talk things over with him, but the evil villain destroyed her body and killed our attendants. I had to burn my own blood to get here in time. You have to take charge of the situation, my love! Whether for personal reasons or the alliance, we Merfolk aren't going to let this matter go. And look at the state my sister is in!"

At this time, the younger sister's eyes opened, and she looked up at Third Highness and let loose a string of curses.

After hearing everything, Third Highness's eyes looked as cold as ice as he slowly said, "What incredible gall! This is completely outrageous! Do you have a death wish?"

The retainers all started pulsing with deadly and somber auras.

Xu Qing stood there silently, his daoist robe swaying in the sea breeze, and his long hair dancing behind him. He looked at Third Highness, and then he looked at the sea beyond the port. He had made his decision.

Meanwhile, the mermaid breathed a sigh of relief, while simultaneously glaring at Xu Qing with venomous hatred. She already knew exactly how she was going to deal with Xu Qing. In fact, she felt like her younger sister's earlier suggestion was too tame. She would do ten times worse, and would make sure that Xu Qing regretted ever existing.

"Many thanks, my love. Please, make sure this—"

“You misunderstood, baby,” Third Highness interrupted gently. “I meant that you have a lot of gall.”

Stunned, the mermaid looked up at Third Highness. “My love, you....”

He looked like he always did; loving, compassionate, and tender. His eyes seemed full of love. In fact, she wondered if she’d misheard him, and was about to ask him to repeat what he said. But then, Third Highness reached up like he usually did to stroke her hair, and instead slammed his palm onto the crown of her head.

A pop rang out as a tremor passed through the mermaid. Then her head exploded. Blood sprayed out in a mist, and her headless corpse flopped onto the ground.

Seeing this, Xu Qing’s pupils constricted.

This was unexpected.

Off to the side, the cursing young sister was flabbergasted. Her expression changed from one of weakness and pain into intense shock and disbelief. That was especially the case considering Third Highness looked as tender and loving as he always did, with the exception of the blood on his hands. The younger sister felt like her mind was playing tricks on her. She just couldn’t believe that the person who had held her and her sister so closely in his arms, had just killed her sister. If his facial expression had changed, for instance becoming cold and sinister, it would have been easier to accept. But the fact that his face remained as compassionate as ever caused the younger sister to tremble uncontrollably.

“My love...” she said, her eyes filling with terror.

Wiping his hands clean, Third Highness smiled warmly at the younger sister, then glanced at Xu Qing. “Please forgive my lack of manners, Junior Brother. Can I help you with something?”

Xu Qing’s hair stood on end as he looked at the smiling, tender Third Highness, and then the corpse on the deck of the boat, and then the terrified head of the younger sister, who had obviously been poisoned, and wouldn’t live long.

Xu Qing had never encountered anyone like this before. Third Highness’s words and actions truly had him trembling with fear. There was no way he could ever have predicted this outcome, and had actually been in the middle of planning his escape from Seven Blood Eyes. After quietly looking at Third Highness’s genial smile, Xu Qing clasped hands and bowed. Then, heart full of vigilance, he left.

Some distance away, he looked back and saw Third Highness standing there on the boat. Looking at him, Xu Qing couldn’t help but recall the image of him gently killing that young mermaid.

Obviously, Third Highness was an extremely dangerous person!

\*\*\*

After watching Xu Qing disappear into the distance, the smiling Third Highness looked over at the younger sister’s head. Eyes full of tender warmth, he said, “You and your sister were wonderful, baby. I couldn’t have accomplished Master’s mission without you. Plus, I was able to do a favor to the little fiendish killer from Sealizard Island. Not bad. Not bad at all. I like you even more now.”

In response to his warm words, the younger sister's expression became one of absolute terror. Then, she opened her mouth to speak. Before she could, Third Highness lifted his foot and stomped it down. The head exploded.

Looking regretful, he said, "Ai. Now I'll only be able to relish your tenderness in my memories."

The surrounding retainers kept their heads bowed, and not daring to even look at Third Highness, started cleaning the gore off the deck. Before long, the deck looked as good as new. Then one of the retainers produced a crystal bottle which he handed reverently to Third Highness.

"Third Highness," he said. "We caught the Merfolk dharmaprotectors red-handed. We have them captive now."

"Very good," Third Highness said with a smile. "Go to the Merfolk and explain that I can help them cover up the incident of the dharmaboat blueprints stolen from Seven Blood Eyes. However, in exchange, I want an ancient teardrop from the Merfolk royal clan. Have it sent over here immediately."

Having said that, he took the bottle and took a drink of the nutritional tonic within. After handing it back to the retainer, he walked out into the air, then shot in the direction of the Seventh Peak.

It didn't take him long to reach the summit. There in a grand hall was Master Seventh, sitting in front of a Go board, deep in thought. Across the board from him was the same servant from before. [1]

Looking up solemnly at the servant, he said, "You played the wrong move!"

The servant looked down at the board, picked up one of the pieces, and then put it down in a different spot.

"Are you seriously trying to take back your move?" Master Seventh snapped. "Don't you know that taking back a move counts as losing? You just lost!" Swiping his hand across the board and scattering the pieces, he looked over at Third Highness.

"Well met, Master," Third Highness said. His tone of voice was completely different than moments before. He sounded very respectful as he kowtowed.

"What's going on?" Master Seventh asked coolly.

"Master, I got to the bottom of the Merfolk situation. Things didn't go exactly as planned, but in the end, it all worked out.

"They really were here at the behest of the Seazombies, trying to steal dharmaboat blueprints from the Seventh Peak. We caught them red-handed. I also confirmed that, in order to curry favor with the Seazombies, the Merfolk secretly built a Corpse Tower to offer as blood tribute.

"The proof is here on this jade slip. It also contains a list of four names, those being sect honor guards who are on the payroll of the Merfolk Isles." With that, Third Highness offered a jade slip forward with both hands.

Master Seventh made a grasping gesture, and the jade slip flew over to him. After looking at the list of names, his face turned cold. However, he didn't say anything.

Next, Third Highness trembled slightly as he lowered his voice and said, "There's something I need to apologize for. That Merfolk prince killed some commoner children. He was working together with his two older cousins. I didn't realize what was going on, and for that, I accept any punishment you give me, Master."

Master Seventh actually looked somewhat relieved. "You broke the rules, therefore, confine yourself to the Bone-Scorching Cavern for seven days."

Upon hearing the words 'Bone-Scorching Cavern,' Third Highness shivered. Bowing his head, he voiced his affirmation then departed.

Watching his apprentice leave, Master Seventh stood and looked down the mountain toward the port. It seemed he was focusing on Harbor 79.

A moment later, he shifted his gaze to the open sea.

Off to the side, his servant quietly said, "The Merfolk aren't idiots. It seems unlikely that they would brazenly attempt to steal our dharmaboat blueprints...."

"Third Sib is greedy for profit," Master Seventh said, "and I know he's not above playing games. But he wouldn't dare to fabricate evidence of a Corpse Tower. The Merfolk... have been getting close with the Seazombies, who are the sworn enemies of Seven Blood Eyes. The Merfolk have some wild ambitions, that much is obvious. It seems all the financial aid we sent them, and all the disciples that died for their sake... mean nothing. In that case, we're going to take back what we're owed. Principal and interest." [2]

Master Seventh's eyes glittered coldly as he looked out at the open sea.

Chapter 99: Traveling to the Crimson Wilds

Standing at the top of the Seventh Peak, Master Seventh looked coldly at the sea for a long moment. Then he looked away.

"Come on," he said, "let's play another game."

"Of course," the servant said. As he prepared the board, he hesitated, then quietly asked, "Master Seventh, about Third Highness and the Kid...."

Master Seventh looked at the servant. "You care a lot about the Kid, don't you?"

The servant nodded but didn't say anything.

"Third Sib does things by fair means or foul," Master Seventh continued. "That's just who he is. He looks kind, but the reality is that he's completely emotionless. That's how he rose to the top during his Offpeak years, and that's how he joined the ranks of my apprentices. It's what I like about him. As for the Kid, the question is whether

he can figure out what Third Sib is all about, and whether he can stand out in his own way. It'll depend on how smart he is. In this chaotic world, fools don't last very long."

With that, Master Seventh looked out at the predawn sky, which was just about to fill with light.

\*\*\*

Beneath that same dome of heaven, in Harbor 79, Xu Qing sat down in his dharmaboat to think. As the sun rose, driving away the darkness of light, his eyes glittered.

First. Thirty years ago during the Grand Competition, the Merfolk became allies of Seven Blood Eyes. It makes sense that the two parties would seem united, but have underlying disagreements. Back during that incident at the Sixth Peak shop, the young merman was obviously scared of Second Highness. That seems to indicate that she was part of the Merfolk slaughter at the competition thirty years ago.

Second. Apprentices of the peaklord of the Seventh Peak probably wouldn't openly go against his wishes. Second Highness' attitude toward the Merfolk shows that things aren't going perfectly with them. Then Third Highness actually killed some Merfolk. None of this is hard to reconcile. Except, why would Third Highness invite the Merfolk to Seven Blood Eyes, and then kill them? And also, why did he do it right in front of me? Third Highness has some other motive. If I was him, what circumstances would motivate me to do something like that? What would make me kill someone in another person's presence?

Xu Qing's eyes narrowed as he realized there was one obvious answer.

There's only one thing that makes sense, and that would be if I wanted to blackmail the Merfolk. I would need some sort of leverage against them. And if no leverage existed, then I would need to create the leverage! I would only kill someone with a witness around if doing so would be profitable. Then I could both blackmail the Merfolk and also earn a favor at the same time. The premise is that the witness would need to be important.

Xu Qing thought back to the mysterious smile on the Captain's face when he talked about the incident at Sealizard Island. It was obvious the man had some backdoor channels to get information. If the Captain had the means to do that, Third Highness would too.

Furthermore, Xu Qing hadn't forgotten about how someone had locked onto his position when he fled Sealizard Island. He hadn't been able to identify the person behind that when he was speeding along underwater, but right now, his eyes glittered as he came up with a theory about who it was.

The fact that Seven Blood Eyes is allowing all this to happen seems to indicate... that they want to strike a blow against the Merfolk! Regardless, the time has come for me to get out of here for a while!

Xu Qing had no way of knowing if his analysis was correct. Therefore, he would leave for a short time in case there were ramifications to the recent events. Only after they blew over would he make his return.

After all, he was very close to reaching the tenth level of Qi Condensation. After that would come the breakthrough to Foundation Establishment, which would qualify him for Onpeak life, and also earn him the right to share in Seven Blood Eyes profit. That meant he would have a minimum monthly income of 5,000 spirit stones for as long as Seven Blood Eyes existed. From the moment

he heard about that, he had been intrigued by the possibility. Of course, staying alive was more important.

Therefore, it was without hesitation that he chose to take a trip out of the sect. Besides, this was a good opportunity to take care of something that had been troubling him for a long time. And that was... Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior. Only by killing him could Xu Qing truly sleep well at night.

Having made his decision, he didn't waste any time. As the sun rose, he put away his dharmaboat then went to the Violent Crimes Division.

The Golden Vajra Warrior Sect is an official sect. They might be small, but if they really relocated their headquarters, they won't be able to do it secretly. Seven Blood Eyes keeps an eye on everything that happens in its territory.

As a member of the Violent Crimes Division, Xu Qing had the right to browse the division archives, which contained all sorts of information about what was going on in Seven Blood Eyes territory.

Of course, the information wouldn't be as detailed as what the Intelligence Division had access to. But it was a lot easier to do research in his own workplace than to go to the Intelligence Division.

Therefore, it didn't take long before he was at the Violent Crimes Division's Archives Office.

He was much more well-known in Violent Crimes than the sect in general. He had performed spectacularly in the Night Dove operation, and had brought in the heads of numerous criminals for bounties.

Because of that, when he arrived, the Archives Office disciples were very polite, and gave Xu Qing access to whatever he asked for. Before long, he was browsing through some random reports that the sect didn't take very seriously. That was where he found the clue he was looking for.

They sought asylum with the Church of Departure?

His eyes narrowed as he read through the file. Most people thought of the Church of Departure as being full of lunatics. And most organizations viewed the Church with either revulsion or fear. It was more common to leave their area of influence than get closer to them.

I doubt it's just because of me that they moved. It probably has a lot to do with Second Highness and her demand for gifts. After paying up, they were probably broke, and also terrified. Rather than stay in Second Highness' territory, they decided to just leave.

Xu Qing rubbed his chin as he perused the details of the Golden Vajra Warrior Sect's departure. Then he left the Violent Crimes Division.

Out on the street in the Port District, he went around to some random shops to sell some of the miscellaneous items he'd acquired on Sealizard Island, including a handful of lizard skins. He also bought some things he would need while away from the sect, including quite a few poisonous plants.

Finally, he stood outside of a shop that sold talisman treasures. Trying not to feel disappointed at how many spirit stones he was about to lose, he went inside.

Shortly after, he came out with some special talisman treasures. These specific talismans could change a person's appearance and aura. Although the effect wasn't perfect, it was good enough for what Xu Qing wanted to do.



It was currently noontime, and though winter was on the way, Seven Blood Eyes' geographical position ensured that even winters were warm. After all, the sun shone brightly here year-round.

Walking through that sunlight, Xu Qing entered an alley. When he emerged from the other end of the alley, he looked different. He wasn't delicately handsome, but rather, looked like a sallow, long-faced middle-aged man. And instead of a daoist robe, he wore an ordinary jerkin. His cultivation base fluctuations were different as well. Instead of being those of the ninth level of Qi Condensation, they were more like the third.

He knew full well that someone in the ninth level of Qi Condensation would stand out among scavengers. But someone in the third level of Qi Condensation, though impressive, wouldn't draw a lot of attention.

Sensing that the power of the talisman treasure was active, Xu Qing looked around cautiously, then kept his face expressionless as he headed toward the teleportation portals. He didn't use his identity medallion, but instead paid the spirit stone fee. Before long, he stepped onto the portal and disappeared into the dazzling light.

\*\*\*

In the eastern part of South Phoenix, some tens of thousands of kilometers away from the old headquarters of the Golden Vajra Warrior Sect, was a vast, sparsely populated area. It was a wilderness in which a specific type of crimson, saw-toothed grass grew. Because of that grass, it came to be called the Crimson Wilds.

From a distance, the place looked like it was covered with fresh blood. It was actually a somewhat ghastly place. The mutagen there was much stronger than in most wilderness areas of South Phoenix, and as a result, the mutant beasts were much fiercer.

It was no surprise that in such a foul environment, cities were not common. You might see one every few hundred kilometers. They were crude and primitive places, and scavengers usually occupied the slums around them.

Whether you considered the geography or the population, the Crimson Wilds was a nasty place. The clans of the Violet Lands looked down on it, and Seven Blood Eyes hardly paid it any attention. However, the Church of Departure, because of certain aspects of their teachings, liked nasty places like this, and often proselytized there. That was why the Crimson Wilds came to be part of the Church of Departure's territory.

On the edge of the Crimson Wilds was a city jointly operated by the Violet Lands and Seven Blood Eyes. It was the only place in the Crimson Wilds that had a teleportation portal.

The teleportation portal blazed to life, and a middle-aged cultivator with a sallow complexion and a black jerkin appeared. Of course, it was Xu Qing in disguise.

Before he even stepped off of the portal, he was surrounded by a putrid, noxious scent. To people who weren't familiar with it, that odor would be very difficult to acclimate to. But Xu Qing was very familiar with it, though it was a bit stronger than the places he'd lived before. He kept his face expressionless as he walked off the platform. The handful of lazy guards nearby barely looked at him.

As he walked through the city, he saw that most of the buildings were gray and dilapidated. Trash and feces littered the ground. Everyone looked on edge, and people kept their distance from each other. There weren't many women, and those he did see looked ferocious. There were a few children, who stuck to the shadows in the alleys, and looked out with dull eyes that had seen plenty of death. Occasionally, he heard screams or angry curses.

Seems more like a scavenger basecamp.

People looked at him with either caution or ill intent, but he ignored all of them. He didn't stay in the city long. In fact, he went straight out the gate and then started moving at top speed through the wilderness.

The Golden Vajra Warrior Sect had relocated to the Crimson Wilds, and wasn't very far from this exact city.

Before coming, Xu Qing had checked a map of the area, and knew where he was going.

He moved with incredible speed, the chill wind biting against his face. He even felt a few snowflakes smack into him, and some of the distant low-lying mountains were capped with snow. Winters were warm in Seven Blood Eyes, but in this place, it was already getting very cold.

It made him think of the past. And as he traveled, he saw many beasts, as well as human remains.

A chaotic world. Expression calm, he picked up speed.

In this manner, time passed. Soon night came, and with it, more wind and snow. Once he was far from the city, and out in the Crimson Wilds proper, Xu Qing suddenly stopped moving and looked off into the distance.

Along with the wind came the sound of vicious laughter and blood. Through the snowy wind, he could see a pile of corpses. Within it were commoners, guards, and surrounding it were random cargo and damaged horse carts. It was obviously a merchant caravan that had been heading toward the city.

Next to the pile of corpses stood a group of about a dozen people in tattered clothing, their hair disheveled, and their expressions vicious. They were criminals, and most of them were in the second level of Qi Condensation. Some were tending to weapons, some were rifling through cargo, and others were dragging the corpses away. A few were giving way to bestial desires upon the corpses of dead women.

Even further away were some fires; apparently someone was preparing hot food. Obviously, this merchant caravan had run into these criminals, and everyone in the caravan was now dead.

Xu Qing's arrival attracted the attention of some of the criminals, who looked at him with vicious eyes.

Seeing that he emanated the fluctuations of the third level of Qi Condensation, they grinned viciously and started heading right toward him.

They thought Xu Qing would be their next victim.

Xu Qing looked at them coldly. He had seen acts of slaughter just like this many, many times. Of course, his experience with scavengers led him to realize that the caravans that braved the

wilderness usually weren't filled with good people. People in those caravans wouldn't hesitate to slaughter anyone weaker than themselves.

That was just how things were in a world of chaos. People killed, and they got killed. There was no point in compassionately trying to figure out who was good and who was bad.

But... since these people had attacked him, he couldn't just leave them alone.

#### Chapter 100: The Patriarch's Anxiety

A waning moon hung in the dark sky, like a curved blade that caused the wind to scream. That wind kicked up the scattered bits of snow on the ground and bent the red grass of the Crimson Wilds.

Fresh blood splashed here and there as Xu Qing walked forward like a specter. His dagger gleamed in the darkness as it slashed through one criminal after another. The evil in that blood did not qualify to melt the coldness, nor was it capable of warming the snowy wind. Even the red grass seemed to despise it, bending over so the blood dropped to the ground.

One corpse after another fell within the cold wind.

Xu Qing's dagger became the last light they would ever see. With every step, he killed. When his dagger slashed through the neck of the final scavenger, the terror in the man's eyes faded into darkness. Then Xu Qing stood there surrounded by the fallen corpses.

Every person died from a single slash.

Every wound was in the throat.

Slitting the throat was the most convenient and quickest way to kill someone. That said, it involved a lot of blood, and Xu Qing frowned at how much had splashed on his clothes. But the killing intent in his eyes was not reduced by the blood on his clothing. When he attacked, he cut the weeds and eliminated the roots. It didn't matter that these criminals were likely powerless to seek revenge if he let them live.

Xu Qing didn't like carelessness, and he didn't like potential calamities.

Besides, he was on his way to deal with a thorn in his side. As a result, he couldn't afford for anyone to start talking about him.

Looking up, Xu Qing gripped his dagger and started walking toward the sound of an uproar.

Up ahead was where the cooking was going on. Surrounding the pot were eight criminals who had previously been partaking in the soup. But after the slaughter that had just been carried out, they were now looking in terror at Xu Qing.

He looked back at them.

On the ground between the two parties were the tracks left by corpses that had been dragged across the ground. Except... no corpses were visible. Only torn clothing.

The corpses... well, Xu Qing knew exactly where they were.

The smell of meat in the air was not unfamiliar to him. He had smelled the same thing back when he lived in the slums. After all, the first person he had ever killed had been someone trying to eat him. [1]

As he walked forward, Xu Qing kept his eyes on the eight people around the pot. Their faces fell as they stumbled backward to flee. But even the fastest among them only got a few steps away before a black iron skewer flew through the air like lightning, stabbing into his head and piercing out the other side.

Xu Qing started walking faster. His dagger flashed in the moonlight, even colder than the surrounding snow as he slashed the throat of the second scavenger.

“Friend, don’t be so—”

A head flew!

“We’re sorry! We didn’t realize who you are!! We can give gifts—”

Blood spilled from a slashed neck.

“You’re dead, fool!!”

A head exploded.

The slaughter lasted for five breaths of time. After that, everything went quiet. The lonely moon shone down, and snow drifted in the wind. The corpses bled, turning the soil red. It really was the Crimson Wilds.

Looking around at the bodies, Xu Qing cleaned his blade and took out his Corpse-Ravaging Powder. Before long, the corpses had been melted into blood. He looked at the big pot, then extinguished the fire beneath it.

He was suddenly struck with a better understanding of why endless numbers of people struggled to live in the Seven Blood Eyes capital city, despite the exorbitant living fee that had to be paid on a daily basis.

In this chaotic world, human life wasn’t worth much.

Turning, he continued on his way.

As the night went on, the wind grew stronger, and more snow fell. As the snowflakes drifted down around him, the wind lifted his long hair behind him, and tried to burrow into his clothing. Frowning, he tightened his clothes, spit some snow out of his mouth, and kept walking.

The night passed.

The next morning at daybreak, he saw a mountain off in the distance.

The Crimson Wilds were mostly plains, without many mountains. And the few mountains present were usually more like hills than mountains. But this was a true mountain, though it wasn’t quite on the same level as the original headquarters of the Golden Vajra Warrior Sect. Whether in terms of extravagance or intimidation factor, it just didn’t measure up.

Xu Qing could see some buildings on the mountain, but overall, the place looked a bit bare. There didn’t seem to be very many disciples either.

“This is the Golden Vajra Warrior Sect?” he murmured.

According to the information he'd dug up, this mountain was indeed the new headquarters of the Golden Vajra Warrior Sect. Obviously, not everyone in the sect had been willing to acclimate to a new environment. That was more the case considering that the Crimson Wilds were so nasty and desolate.

And given that they had only been here a short time, the Golden Vajra Warrior Sect currently seemed quite sad.

However, Xu Qing kept his guard up. Just because the sect didn't look to be doing well didn't mean he could relax. He had no idea what things were like inside the sect, nor would he know until he took a look himself. Therefore, instead of doing anything specific, he would take some time to observe.

Like a hunter, he would remain patient.

Turning away from the sect, he left the area and found the nearest scavenger basecamp, which was about 50 kilometers away. It was a lot livelier than the Golden Vajra Warrior Sect, and even from a distance, Xu Qing could hear the raucous sounds of life. Before getting too close, he took out his old fur overcoat and put it on. He also took some mud from the ground and smudged up his face. Given his vigilant eyes and his physical appearance, he looked very much like an ordinary scavenger.

After making sure his disguise was perfect, he headed into the camp. There were guards outside, but they did nothing more than glance at him as he passed. It almost didn't make sense to say that Xu Qing had disguised himself as a scavenger. The reality was that he was a scavenger. He had the same air. The same eyes. The same ferocity.

After entering the camp, he looked around at the tents, and then focused his attention on a spot up ahead where about a hundred scavengers were gathered. They were all cheering spiritedly, and were the source of the noise he had detected further out.

What had them all excited was a brutal scene playing out in front of them. It was some sort of competition, almost like a dog race. There were eight emaciated people in tattered clothing, running as fast as they could. All eight people had strong mutagen, and their skin was mostly greenish-black. Obviously, they were very close to mutating. They looked both maddened and in despair as they ran along a course full of sharp rocks and broken blades. Every step they took caused more blood to flow, and drove them into further madness. Their goal was visible at the end of the racetrack: a blotchy white bolus.

To someone close to mutation, a white bolus could literally save their life, if only for a time. For this group, this was their chance to get such a pill.

To them, it didn't matter if they bled a bit. They would still run with madness to get that pill.

Considering how raucous the crowd was, it was obvious many people had placed bets on the outcome.

As Xu Qing watched, one of the runners reached the end of the track, grabbed the white bolus, and consumed it. The other contestants stopped in despair and were dragged back to the starting line. Meanwhile, another white bolus was put up at the end of the track, and another race began.

Some of the scavengers in the audience howled with delight, others cursed endlessly. But now that a new race was starting, new bets could be placed.

Turning away from the spectacle, Xu Qing looked in the direction of the Golden Vajra Warrior Sect.

\*\*\*

50 kilometers away from the basecamp in that very sect, Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior sat in the grand hall atop the mountain, looking angrily at the sect leader, who seemed to be hesitating to speak.

“You think I wanted to come to this dump?” the patriarch grumbled. “Obviously not! But do you know what would have happened if I didn’t? That damn shrew from the Seventh Peak is just outright evil! That ‘gift of apology’ drained me of half my life savings!!

“And then there’s the Kid, who’s rapidly rising to prominence in Seven Blood Eyes. What do you expect me to do, sit around until he reaches Foundation Establishment and then comes to slap me to death? Based on all the ancient records I’ve read, I’m in a no-win situation....”

Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior was truly angry at how badly everything had gone in such a short time. The ramifications of moving the sect had been dramatic. Not everyone wanted to come along, and many of the disciples secretly fled. He had killed some for betraying the sect, but he couldn’t kill them all.

“Well, it doesn’t matter. My medicinal pill is going to be done soon. Once I consume that pill, I’ll be able to open my 30th dharma aperture and ignite my first life flame. Once my life flame is lit, then I can enter the profound radiance state.

“In the profound radiance state, my battle prowess will increase dramatically, and then I won’t have anything to fear from the Kid....” This thought caused the patriarch’s expression to brighten a bit. “Wait, no. According to the ancient records I read, it’s usually at an important juncture like this that something unexpected happens....”

Having reached this point in his train of thought, the patriarch’s face fell, and he pulled out an identity medallion. Flipping it over and over in his hand, he breathed a sigh of relief.

“There’s no way that the Kid reached the breakthrough point yet. Besides, now that I’ve joined the Church of Departure, I count as an adherent. The Church is just as powerful as Seven Blood Eyes, and therefore, I’ve got some good protection. I’m safe for the time being. Also, Fellow Daoist Cardfortune is still here as a guest....”

He looked down at the identity medallion that he had spent so much to acquire, and felt a bit better. However, the medallion alone wasn’t enough, so after moving his sect here, he’d taken to inviting friends to come stay in the sect for a while as guests. Of course, every guest that came needed to be given gifts.

Up to this point, he had extended invitations to everyone he knew, even if he'd barely done more than make their acquaintance.

“One mistake will ruin everything....” Sighing, he looked listlessly off into the distance.

As the sun hit him, he looked older than ever.