

Beyond the Timescape

#Chapter 1: Living - Read Beyond the Timescape

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It was the third lunar month, the beginning of spring, in a far corner of the eastern part of the continent of South Phoenix.

The dark, hazy sky hung oppressively overhead, like an ink painting splashed onto a canvas, with the dome of heaven black and the clouds smudged across it. Crimson bolts of lightning danced among the layers of clouds, accompanied by the clap of thunder.

It sounded like the howl of a god, echoing out over the mortal world.

Blood-colored rain fell with sorrow onto the mundane world.

Lurking below was a ruined city, pounded by the crimson rain, completely devoid of any signs of life. Shattered city walls held no living things. Collapsed buildings could be seen, as well as greenish-black corpses and piles of gore. No sound interrupted the silence. What had once been bustling city streets were now desolate. In the past, people had traversed these dusty paths, but not anymore.

The only things left behind were mangled flesh, dirt, and shredded paper, mixed into a bloody paste that could only be described as shocking and ghastly.

Not far in the distance was an overturned horse cart, stuck in the mud and nearly broken to bits. Draped on the axle was a rabbit doll swaying in the wind, its white fur long since stained red with blood. Its cloudy eyes brimmed with animosity as it stared blankly at the blood-splattered cobblestones ahead of it.

Near the cart lay a young man.

He looked to be thirteen or fourteen, his clothing tattered and filthy. Tied at his waist was a sack made of animal hide.

His eyes were nothing but slits and he wasn't moving. The icy wind swept through the holes in his clothes, slowly but surely sucking the heat out of his body. Then some raindrops hit his face, and he blinked, revealing that his cold, hawk-like eyes were focused on something a short distance from him.

About twenty meters away was an emaciated vulture ripping flesh off the corpse of a stray dog, and occasionally glancing around.

These ruins were a dangerous place, and all it would take was a slight bit of movement for the vulture to fly up into the air to safety.

The young man was also waiting for his opportunity, like a skilled hunter.

It didn't take long for that opportunity to arrive, as the vulture suddenly plunged its head deep into the chest cavity of the dog.

The young man's eyes turned extremely cold, and he shot into motion like an arrow from a bow, racing toward the vulture while simultaneously pulling a black iron skewer out of his sack. [1]

The tip of the skewer glittered coldly.

Perhaps it was that, or perhaps it was the killing intent radiating off the young man. Either way, the vulture sensed it. Flapping its wings in alarm, it flew up into the air.

It wasn't fast enough.

The young man's face was completely expressionless as he threw the black skewer, sending it shooting through the air in a dark streak.

SPLAT!

The skewer pierced the vulture's head, shattering its skull and taking away its life in an instant. The force of the blow carried the vulture through the air until it smacked into the horse cart.

The blood-soaked stuffed rabbit swayed back and forth.

The young man's face was placid as he hurried back to the cart and grabbed both the vulture and the skewer. The boy had thrown the skewer with such force that, when he pulled it out of the cart, it took a chunk of wood with it.

Having accomplished these things, the young man walked away without looking back.

The wind picked up. At the same time, the blood-soaked rabbit looked like it was watching the young man as he left.

Thanks to the wind, the rain seemed even colder as it hit the young man and his tattered clothing.

At a certain point, he hunched over, frowning as he tried to wrap himself up. He let loose a grunt of exasperation.

He hated the cold.

Usually, he stayed indoors during weather like this. But right now, he hurried down the street without pause, passing numerous broken-down shops and stores.

There wasn't much time left. His vulture hunt had taken longer than he expected, and there was somewhere else he needed to go tonight.

It shouldn't be far now.

Greenish-black corpses choked the street ahead, their faces masks of fury and hopelessness. It was as if the aura of despair they exuded sought to infect the mind of the young man.

But the young man was used to it, and he didn't spare the corpses a second thought.

In fact, he kept his eyes on the sky. He seemed anxious, as though the darkening sky was more terrifying than all the corpses combined.

Eventually, he caught sight of a medicine shop off in the distance. Breathing a sigh of relief, he hurried toward it. It wasn't a large place, and there were medicine drawers scattered everywhere. The place smelled like a mix of medicine and mold, almost like that of a freshly opened tomb. The whole place was a mess. [2]

In the corner was the corpse of an old man leaning up against the wall, his skin greenish-black. He had died with his eyes open, and was staring blankly out into the world.

The young man glanced around and then started rummaging through the place.

The medicinal plants in the place matched the corpses. Most were greenish-black. Only a few looked normal.

The young man looked closely at the untainted medicine, seemingly searching through his memories. Eventually, he identified a medicinal plant used to treat incisions. Taking off his tattered shirt, he looked down at a gaping wound on his chest.

It wasn't healed, and its edges were turning black. There was also some blood seeping out.

Crushing the medicinal plant, he took a deep breath and then smeared the paste on his wound.

The pain caused his vision to swim, and he shook from head to toe and nearly fell over. He forced himself to keep smearing on the medicine, but he couldn't stop beads of sweat from popping out on his forehead and rolling down his face onto the ground. They became like blotches of ink below him.

Ten breaths of time passed. After covering the wound with medicine, the young man was out of energy. Leaning up against the nearby medicine cabinet, he took some time to breathe, then put his shirt back on.

Once again, he looked out at the sky. Then he pulled a dilapidated map out of his sack and carefully opened it up.

It was a simple depiction of the city he was currently in. The medicine shop was marked on the map, and many of the city districts in the northeast were crossed out. It looked like he'd used his fingernail to do it. There were only two districts that weren't crossed out.

After all these days of searching, at least I know it's somewhere in those two districts. He folded the map up, put it away, and prepared to leave.

Just before walking out, he stopped and looked at the corpse of the old man. And specifically... his clothing.

The old man wore a leather jerkin of such good quality that it was mostly intact.

After some thought, the young man walked over, peeled the jerkin off the old man, and donned it.

It was slightly too big, but after putting it on, at least he felt warm. He looked down at the old man for a moment, then knelt and closed his eyes.

"Rest in peace," he said in a soft, hoarse voice. Ripping one of the curtains off the wall, he covered the old man's corpse, then left.

Upon walking out into the open, he noticed a flash of light up ahead. Stuck in the mud was a hand-sized mirror.

Looking down at it, he could see his reflection.

His face was dirty, but that couldn't completely cover up his delicate and unusually handsome features. Unfortunately, the innocence one would expect to find in a teenage boy was gone, replaced instead with cold indifference.

The young man looked at his reflection for a long moment, then lifted his foot and stepped on the mirror.

CRACK!

He left the shattered mirror behind as he ran off into the distance.

Despite being in pieces, the mirror still managed to reflect the light from the sky. Up there, covering the world, and overlooking all living beings, was the half face of a broken god.

The face seemed indifferent, with its eyes closed, and hair draped down around it. It was a natural part of this world, similar to the sun and moon.

Beneath it, the living beings of the world were like bugs. Insects. And as in the Awakening of Insects, the lives of all creatures in the world were influenced by that face, and changed because of it.

Beneath the face of the god, radiance and light slowly faded from the day.

The shadows cast by the setting sun created a haze that filled the ruins, covering all the surrounding lands, as if to swallow them whole.

The rain fell harder.

As the darkness deepened and the wind picked up, sharp wailing drifted through the air.

It sounded like the cries of evil ghosts, calling out to rouse whatever grues lurked in the ruins. The sounds were spine-tingling, and would shock the souls of whoever heard them.

The young man ran through the streets faster and with more urgency as darkness fell. Eventually, he ran past a collapsed house and was about to keep moving when his pupils constricted.

Just now, he had spotted a person off in the distance. This person didn't seem to bear any injury at all, and wore fine clothing as he leaned up against a wall. Most importantly, his skin looked normal. It wasn't greenish-black! In ruins like this, only a living person could possibly look like that! *LaaTest novels on (n)ovelbi/n(.)com*

The young man hadn't seen any living people for a long time. This unexpected development left him feeling shaken. Then, a thought occurred to him, and he started breathing heavily, as though he were nervous.

He wanted to keep going, except that the darkness was closing in from behind. He hesitated for a moment. Then he committed this position to mind and hurried away.

Just before darkness truly fell, the young man reached his dwelling place in the ruins. It was a very small cave with bird feathers scattered about everywhere.

The only way inside was a crack too small for an adult to fit through. However, the young man could just barely squeeze through.

Once inside, he would cram miscellaneous items like books and rocks into the crack to seal it up.

Just as he finished sealing himself inside, it became completely dark outside.

However, the young man didn't relax. He kept his iron spike gripped tightly in his hand, and masked his breathing as he crouched there listening to what was happening outside. Soon, he heard the sound of mutant beasts howling and grues laughing.

Some of the howling grew more distinct, closer. The boy became nervous. However, the howling passed by the cave and faded away. Eventually, he breathed a sigh of relief.

As he sat down in the cave, time seemed to stop. He remained in a daze for a while as his tightly wound nerves relaxed.

Off to the side was a kettle of water. He drank. Then, ignoring the sounds outside, he took the vulture carcass out of his sack.

He ate, ripping off flesh and swallowing bite by bite. It tasted bitter, but he kept eating, forcing the meat into his belly. He felt rumbling as his stomach struggled to digest the new material. Only when he'd completely devoured the vulture did he take a deep breath and close his eyes to sleep.

He ached from exhaustion, and yet he kept a firm grip on his iron spike. He was like a lone wolf, ready to wake up at the slightest sign of anything unusual.

The darkness outside covered the city like a blanket, filling the dome of heaven.

The world beneath that dome of heaven was immense. The continent of South Phoenix was only one location in the sprawling sea. No one really knew how big the entire world was. However, everyone in the world who looked up into the sky would see that broken face above.

It was impossible to say when exactly the broken face had come.

However, from passages in certain ancient records, it was known that it arrived long, long ago. The world had once been filled with the energy of immortals, and had been a glorious and flourishing place, bursting with life. Until... that immense face came from the void, devouring and destroying.

Upon the arrival of the face, all living beings in the world united to stop it. But they failed. In the end, a small group of Ancient Emperors and Imperial Sovereigns led their people away in a great exodus.

Not long after the broken face arrived to hang over the world, a nightmare began.

When hīs aura filled the world, it came to pass that the mountains, the oceans, and all living creatures became tainted. Even the spirit power used by cultivators in their cultivation was no exception. [3]

Living beings withered. Countless people were destroyed. Almost everything died.

Those few individuals who survived the calamity looked up at the half-face in the sky and called it... a god. They called their world Armageddon, and the place the Ancient Emperors and Imperial Sovereigns departed to come to be known as a holy land. As the calendar eras passed, generation after generation used these names.

There was more to the calamity brought by this god. Hīs might continued to oppress the living beings of the world, and that was because...

Every so often, sometimes once in a decade, sometimes once in a century, the god would open hīs eyes for a short time.

When that happened, the location looked upon would be infected by hīs aura.

The people there would experience catastrophe, and that location would forevermore be known as a forbidden region. Over the years, more and more forbidden regions came to exist in the world, while the inhabitable areas grew fewer and fewer.

Nine days ago, the god's eyes opened and looked down onto the area where this young man lived.

There were dozens of human cities there, and countless living things. All of it, including the slums outside the cities, were infected as a result, and turned into a forbidden region.

The terrifying pollution caused many living things to instantly explode into clouds of blood. But others mutated into mindless beasts. In other cases, the souls of the living beings departed, leaving behind greenish-black corpses.

Only a few humans and animals survived.

This young man was one of them.

A mournful voice echoed out in the darkness, and when the young man realized it was coming closer to his cave, his eyes snapped open.

Lifting his iron skewer, he looked in the direction of the crack.

The voice circled around, then moved away. He breathed a sigh of relief.

Suddenly not feeling in the mood to sleep, he felt around for his sack, found it, and pulled out a bamboo slip from inside.

It was dark, but he could feel the text carved into the bamboo, and was thus able to read without light. Sitting up, he started to breathe in a prescribed fashion.

This young man was named Xu Qing, and from a very young age he had eked out a living in the slums outside the city. [4]

Nine days ago when the catastrophe struck, he hid in a crevice. And unlike all the terrified people around him, he looked up into the sky at the god, and into those open eyes. The god's pupils were shaped like crosses, and upon seeing them, the terror in Xu Qing's heart vanished.

It was also at that moment that he saw a violet light descend from the heavens and land somewhere in the northeastern part of the city. Then he passed out. When he woke up, he was the only survivor in the slums.

However, he didn't start exploring.

He knew that when the god's eyes opened, a forbidden region would form. And when that happened, a rain of blood would fall, forming a boundary around the forbidden region. Because of that boundary, people inside the forbidden region couldn't leave. Nor could anyone on the outside come in, at least until the forbidden region was fully formed.

And that would happen when the rain stopped.

To Xu Qing, who had grown up in rough conditions, this catastrophe wasn't that bad. The slums had been filled with thugs, stray dogs, and plagues. On any freezing night, he could have lost his life. It had always been a struggle to survive.

As long as he stayed alive, nothing else mattered.

That said, his brutal life in the slums had contained bits of warmth.

For instance, there were occasional down-and-out scholars who came to teach classes to the children, and instruct them how to read.

Xu Qing also had some memories of his family. However, those memories were getting more difficult to hold on to, and he had the feeling that they would fade away eventually. At the very least, he knew he wasn't an orphan. He did have a family. He'd just lost touch with them long ago.

In any case, his dream was simply to keep on living. If he could do that, then maybe he could find his family again one day.

Given that he'd somehow survived the catastrophe, he decided to go explore the city.

He had two goals when he set out. The first was to find the city magistrate's mansion, where rumor had it there was a method to become stronger. His second goal was to find the spot where that violet light fell.

That method of getting stronger was something everyone in the slums wanted to get. They called it cultivation. And anyone who practiced cultivation was called a cultivator.

Becoming a cultivator was Xu Qing's strongest desire, other than reuniting with his family.

Cultivators weren't very common. In all his years in the slums, Xu Qing had only ever once glimpsed one off in the distance in the city. One distinctive characteristic of cultivators was that they caused people who looked at them to tremble. Xu Qing had heard that the magistrate himself was a cultivator, as were all of his guards.

Five days ago during his search of the city, he finally found the city magistrate's manor. And on a corpse there, he found the very bamboo slip he currently held in his hand. It had been a dangerous adventure, and it ended with him sustaining that grievous wound to the chest.

However, the bamboo slip also contained the secrets of cultivation that he had longed for.

He had memorized the contents of the slip, and had already begun practicing cultivation.

Because Xu Qing knew literally nothing about cultivation to begin with, he wasn't sure if the technique described in the slip was authentic. Thankfully, the text was easy to understand, and focused around visualizations and breathing.

By following the exact routine, he had already achieved some results.

The method was called the Sea and Mountain Incantation. The cultivation method involved visualizing the image inscribed on the bamboo slip, and then breathing in a prescribed fashion.

The image was strange. It depicted a bizarre creature with a large head, a small body, and a single leg. Its body was pitch black, and its face was vicious, like that of an evil ghost. Xu Qing had never seen a creature like that in real life, but the bamboo slip described it as a goblin. [5]

Not long after he conjured the image in his mind and started breathing, the air around him stirred.

Streams of spirit power flowed into him, filling his body, reaching every corner of his being. It caused icy cold to reach his bones, making him feel like he was submerged in ice water.

Xu Qing feared the cold, but he refused to give up, and continued with the session of cultivation.

Then, after continuing according to the description on the bamboo slip, he ended the session and found that he was sweating. Despite having just eaten the entire vulture, he felt pangs of hunger in his belly. Wiping the sweat off of himself, he rubbed his belly.

Ever since he started training in this technique, he found himself getting much hungrier. However, he was also a lot more athletic. Because of that, his tolerance to the cold grew greater.

Having finished with cultivation, he looked toward the crack, and beyond it, the outside.

It was still dark, and the terrifying sounds outside were waxing and waning.

He wasn't sure why he had survived the catastrophe. Maybe it was luck. Or maybe... it had something to do with that violet light.

That was why, even as he continued to train in the new technique, he had traveled all the way to the northeast of the city. However, he had not yet found where the violet light landed.

Xu Qing thought about these matters as he paid attention to the howls outside. He couldn't stop thinking about how he'd found that corpse leaning up against the wall the day before at nightfall.

That corpse had been in the northeast section of the city. And... it actually looked like a living person.

Don't tell me it has something to do with that violet light...?

1. The type of skewer described is the kind that is often used to serve skewered meat at street-side stalls in China. Such skewers might have a handle like this or they might have no handle, like this. ㄟ

2. Traditional Chinese medicine shops usually have walls filled with drawers that contain medicinal ingredients. If you're unfamiliar with that, here's a photo reference. ㄟ

3. The god is described using a unique pronoun for divine beings. It's pronounced the same as all other pronouns in Chinese, but looks different. I'm going to use a diacritical mark above the vowel in the pronoun to indicate when the divine pronoun is being used. The pronoun usage does become important later. ㄟ

4. Xu is listed #11 on the list of the 100 most common Chinese surnames. Xu also means “slowly, gently.” Qing means “green, blue, cyan.” Forgetting the tones involved, the pronunciation of Xu is, roughly speaking, like the English word shoe. If you want to be slightly more accurate, add a Y sound after the SH. In other words, “shyoo.” Qing is basically pronounced “cheeng.” Obviously, there is more nuance if you want to have completely accurate Chinese pronunciation, but saying the name as Shoe Cheeng will suffice. If you’d like to hear the name pronounced by Google, you can click [here](#) and hit the ‘listen’ button on the left-hand side. Madam Deathblade says this name sounds “scholarly,” and makes her think of a young, quiet, and well-behaved boy. Those familiar with I Shall Seal the Heavens might remember that there was a character named Xu Qing, who was the protagonist’s main love interest. Though the pinyin and tones are the same for their names, the Chinese characters are different. The female Xu Qing from ISSTH is 许清 while the young man in this novel is 许青. Both are pronounced Xǔ Qīng, but if you look closely, you can see that the given name is a different Chinese character.

👉

5. The creature described here is from the Classic of Mountains and Seas. In pinyin it’s “xiao” and it’s basically described there as it is here in the narrative. Here’s a link to an artist’s depiction of this type of creature. [👉](#)

Deathblade's Thoughts

Greetings everyone! I have a few things to explain about the translation. I encourage you to read everything, but if you’re not so inclined, skip whatever you’d like!

Thanks and credits - Many thanks to the team of advance readers, proofreaders, editors, and consultants who help out before the chapters see the light of day. As of the launch, this team consists of: Hawk 9211, Jeddrick, Lorin Bucure, Saline Prune, Sara K., Senior Nepuko, Stompound, The Fiery Moth. Thanks to UnifiedDivide for volunteering to be the official proofreader. Many thanks to RWX for starting the ball rolling on this project and doing his best to make sure it happened despite all the tumultuous events at Wuxiaworld and his ultimate departure. Thanks to Grace for all her hard work. And most of all, thanks to my wife Madam Deathblade, for supporting me through the years, and also providing immense help on the language side.

Typos, mistakes, etc. - If you notice any mistakes, please let me know! I will be checking comments, but the ideal notification method would be a DM on Twitter or Discord, or ping me on my Discord server.

Footnotes (including new bonus feature!) - I’m adding a new footnote feature, and that’s an explanation of the “feeling” of the names of the important characters. I’ll do this by asking my wife, Madam Deathblade (who is a native Chinese speaker and scored at the top of her class in standardized Mandarin testing at college in China), for her no-context impression of the names of the characters. I think this will give you an added insight into how these characters are perceived by Chinese readers.

I'll also use footnotes to explain certain cultural or linguistic things. In addition, if something is a callback to roughly 10 or more chapters back, I'll include a reference footnote, as I know a lot of readers like to check those things.

Some insight into why I translate things the way I do - I hope to make the reading experience such that you experience the story as close as possible to a native speaker of Chinese. For this reason, I try to avoid translations that are wildly different from their intended perception by the reader. For instance, you will not see any "this old man will kill you" or "you dare." If you want more details about my thoughts on this, check out my book *Understanding Chinese Fantasy Novels*.

I think of translating, not as converting bits of text from one language to another, but rather, conveying thoughts. When I read, I think "what is the point of this sentence/paragraph/chapter?" And I try to make sure those thoughts come across. Because of this, if you compare my translation to the original text, you'll find that it won't match up perfectly. In line with the section below "Er Gen deputized me," I sometimes change sentence structure, paragraph structure, etc. I shift things around, nip and prune the text as necessary, and try to create something that flows well and conveys all the original thoughts.

Chinese is a high-context language and culture, which basically means that thoughts are often not stated plainly. In many cases, a reader needs to pick up on the meaning through vague context or subtext. Often, this makes it difficult for someone reading in English to understand what's trying to be said. In those cases, I'll sometimes take those vague thoughts and state them more clearly. That said, there are also occasions in which the Chinese text does the opposite, and plainly states things that are obvious from context (in my opinion, this is sometimes also related to the dao of filler). So occasionally, I'll cut those things as part of my editing process.

Along this same vein, I'll occasionally tweak the way character names are introduced. In the original text, names are sometimes used (either in the narrative or dialogue), without being introduced. Given the way names are perceived in Chinese, this isn't as jarring as it is in English. I will occasionally tweak the text so that such name introductions aren't as jarring.

How I translate cussing - Over the years I've seen comments claiming that I "censor" the cuss words. This isn't true. My simple method of translating cussing is to first determine how "bad" the language is. PG? PG-13? R? Can kids say this "bad word" at home around their parents? At school in front of their teachers? Can it be used on broadcast TV in China? Etc. I then pick an appropriate English equivalent.

In many cases, the author will use euphemisms. For example, he'll use the equivalent of darn/dang instead of damn, or shoot instead of sh*t. In some instances, he'll use words that aren't "bad words" at all, but are still insulting. Sometimes they're archaic. Sometimes they're inventive. Regardless, I try to match equivalent words that will come across to the reader in a roughly similar way as they do in Chinese. To be clear, I'm not

averse to using cuss words. One fan-favorite character in my original cultivation novel is a guy who cusses nonstop.

Warning, this is a “live” translation - Because this novel is ongoing, it’s possible that later plot revelations might change some translation decisions. The author sometimes lets hundreds of chapters go by without explaining what some things mean. Although I’m in contact with the author, I can’t pester him with endless questions. I reserve the right to make changes based on later information. If that happens, I’ll explain the decision in a chapter note or footnote.

Er Gen deputized me - The author, Er Gen, has given me permission (and even encouraged me) to make minor changes to his writing to conform to western fiction conventions and cultural aspects. I’m sure ISSTH fans remember the “seafood song.” That song was based on a popular Chinese song at the time, and Er Gen suggested to completely change his version and use a popular Western song as the basis instead. By the time he made that suggestion, I’d already translated it and it had become “a thing,” so I didn’t see the need to change it. But the point is, he’s fine with making some cosmetic changes to make the story more accessible and enjoyable to Western readers. And that brings me to the next point....

I hate muttering - Years ago when I was translating ISSTH, I made a decision (backed by a reader poll if I remember correctly), to not have the characters constantly muttering to themselves. This is a common trope and of course you also see it in comic books, anime, etc. I’m talking about the characters literally talking to themselves out loud constantly to advance the plot, provide exposition, etc. In many cases, I’m changing that to italicized internal dialogue. I do keep some “muttering” because, of course, there is the genre trope of muttered dialogue occasionally being overheard by others. Is the author okay with this? Read the previous point if you haven’t already.

Chinese idioms - Chinese has many four-character idioms, also known as chengyu, as well as folk sayings and expressions. In many cases, I will translate them directly and put them in italics so that you, the reader, will know that they’re Chinese idioms. I also started doing this because of a reader poll back in the ISSTH days. The vast majority of readers liked to see the direct translations of the idioms, and also have them “flagged” with italics so they’re easy to spot.

Translation continuity - As much as possible, I want to maintain continuity with my previous Er Gen translations. So in most cases I’m going to use the same terms as the other novels, even if there is a better option. In some cases, though, I will use an updated term. In those cases I’ll explain in a footnote.

Spoiler chapter titles - If a chapter title contains a big plot spoiler, or spoils something that happens at the end of the chapter, I will use the spoiler title option. This won’t happen very often.

Splitting very long chapters - There are some chapters that are unusually long. In some cases, I'll split these chapters and release them as separate chapters. This is because it takes as much as double the time to translate them. In the early chapters, this only happens a couple times (for instance Chapter 1, though I'm not splitting it), but then the author settles into a rhythm of normal-sized chapters. Later on, the author has more unusually long chapters.

Chapter 2: Mutagen

If that's a living person, maybe he's also after that violet light. Or maybe it's a trap.

In the days Xu Qing had spent in this ruined city, he had come to deeply understand what happened when the god's aura infected living beings; it turned them into mutant beasts. They became incomparably vicious, and profoundly strong.

However, perhaps because this area hadn't fully transformed, most of the mutant beasts spent daylight hours sleeping. The only exception was if they were disturbed, such as when he went to get that jade slip. Normally speaking, as long as you were careful, you didn't have to worry about them.

Truth be told, Xu Qing was leier of living people than the mutant beasts. After all, sometimes people were a lot more treacherous than animals.

After thinking about the matter for a bit longer, his eyes gradually turned even colder. It didn't matter if there was a living person there. And it didn't matter if it was a trap. He had to go back there.

That said, he knew that if he planned to do so, he had to be completely prepared.

With such thoughts on his mind, he looked at the bamboo slip in his hand.

He had been training for days now using the slip, and it had done a lot more for him than improve his stamina and confidence. It had firmly fixed the cultivation technique into his mind, and also provided him with some general information about cultivation.

Cultivation had a history that went back into ancient times, before the arrival of the broken face of the god.

Although some things had changed since the old days, the system was mostly as it had always been. It was broken into Qi Condensation, Foundation Establishment, Gold Core, and Nascent Soul.

Whatever was after Nascent Soul, it was too advanced, and the bamboo slip didn't talk about it. However, the slip did explain how difficult cultivation was for cultivators.

The god's aura tainted spirit power. To living beings, that taint was the same as a deadly poison.

At some point in the past, people took to calling the god's aura 'mutagen.'

Xu Qing wasn't sure about the details. He just knew that whenever he practiced cultivation, he felt very cold, and that was probably because his spirit power was infected with mutagen.

When enough mutagen built up inside a cultivator's body, they would experience mutation. In some cases, they would explode in a cloud of blood. Other times, they would transform into mindless beasts.

When the god's eyes opened to look at an area, the mutagen there would instantly become more concentrated. In turn, that would accelerate the mutations.

Cultivation was inherently dangerous, but avoiding it wasn't possible.

Xu Qing lived on the world of Armageddon, which was infected by the aura of the god, a world in which the lifespan of humans had a limit, and disease was rampant. Living here was like living in the Nine Serenities. Few people here died peacefully in their sleep. [1]

Without any other options, cultivation became a path that most people had no choice but to follow.

For countless years, people had passed down legacies and used them to develop cultivation techniques.

The traditional method nowadays was to absorb spirit power and use cultivation techniques to isolate the mutagen in a specific part of one's body. That part of the body came to be called the mutation blotch.

Because of that, the amount of mutagen a technique could isolate became an important standard in determining the hierarchy of techniques.

The techniques that isolated high quantities of mutagen were controlled by powerful groups and clans. Such techniques were those organizations' biggest asset. Of course, a similar state of affairs would have existed whether the god came or not.

Because of the differences in cultivation techniques, and the different ways of isolating mutagen, the location of the mutation blotches could vary.

Regardless, as long as one practiced cultivation, one had to deal with mutagen, and because of that, would gradually develop a mutation blotch.

Mutation blotches could never be truly eliminated. Some medicinal pills could dissolve them, but that was only treating the symptom and not the root cause.

That said, Xu Qing's bamboo slip did mention there was a way to completely cleanse a mutation blotch. On Armageddon, there were other locations besides South Phoenix. One of them was a massive continent called Revered Ancient. It was considered the mainland of the world. That was where humans originated, and though it was also infected by the aura of the god, they had apparently discovered a way to cleanse themselves of it.

That said, whatever the method was, it couldn't be widely practiced. Only very important people could use it. For ordinary cultivators, it was just a dream.

And as for the endless numbers of rogue cultivators, they didn't have a chance at all. Rogue cultivators had the lowest and weakest techniques of all, which made their practice of cultivation difficult, and put them at high risk of mutation.

Even despite those dangers, cultivators were still a common sight everywhere.

That included Xu Qing. After all, he also counted as a rogue cultivator.

With his bamboo slip, he was like all the other cultivators on Armageddon, walking a dangerous path of no return. They were like mortals who swam into a deep sea toward an unreachable shore on the other side. Most would run out of energy and die long before laying eyes on that legendary distant shore.

Xu Qing, who had grown up in the slums outside the city, knew that all it took was one fight gone wrong, or one bout of sickness, and his life could be over.

Wondering if I might mutate someday in the future is better than wondering if I'll live through tomorrow, he thought, rubbing absently at the wound on his chest as he looked up into the sky.

It would be light again soon, and the howling and screaming outside was already starting to fade.

If this blood rain keeps up, and I can't find that violet light, then I should think about leaving. Maybe go to a different city to look for medicine.

He looked down at his wound.

Because of the god's aura and the endless blood rainfall, virtually everything in this city was deeply infected, and that included the medicinal plants. The supplies here were deficient at best.

Xu Qing brushed as much of the blood-infused water away from his wound as possible.

Face pale, he took a deep breath as he removed his upper garment from beneath the leather jerkin, used it to wrap up his wound, then steeled himself and waited for dawn.

Not long thereafter, the howling and screaming grew even fainter.

When it was completely gone, Xu Qing peered out through the crack and confirmed that the sky was completely bright.

Based on his past experience, he knew that it was safe to emerge. However, he didn't immediately go out. Instead, he got to his feet and started stretching out his stiff joints.

After he was warmed up, he unsealed the crack, then took advantage of the light to open his sack and look inside.

Taking out a rusty dagger from inside, he strapped it to his thigh. Then he equipped his black iron skewer. Finally, he pulled out a severed snake head, which was carefully wrapped up in a cloth. After opening the cloth to inspect it, he put it back in the pouch.

Having accomplished these things, Xu Qing closed his eyes and took a few deep breaths. When he opened his eyes again, they were hard and cold.

With that, he stepped out into the open.

Outside, he looked around carefully, and seeing that the coast was clear, started moving beneath the brightening sky.

Blood rain continued to fall from the overcast sky, so there was no sun or sunlight.

The early morning light seemed like the turbid gaze of a sick old man, slowly piercing the scattered remnants of night fog. And that old man's exhalations were the dawn breeze, packed with the cold flavor of death.

If Xu Qing hadn't taken the time to warm up earlier, that breeze would've had him trembling. Thankfully, he had enough warmth in him to be unaffected.

Maintaining a good speed, he headed toward where he'd seen that living person the day before.

From a high vantage point, he could be seen slipping through the empty ruins like a leopard, moving with fluid grace as he occasionally leaped over crumbling walls.

Keeping pace with him high above was a flock of birds. As he ran, Xu Qing looked up at them and licked his lips. Unfortunately, they were too high for him to reach.

For some unknown reason, when the god's eyes opened, all living beings were infected, and most died. That included the animals. The only exceptions were the birds.

In the past few days, Xu Qing had been hunting birds just like that, in the hopes of alleviating the aching hunger in his belly.

Although birds would occasionally get caught in the blood rain, for the most part they were instinctively capable of finding safe places to stay. For example, the cave Xu Qing had been staying in was a place he'd found when tracking down some birds.

Truth be told, places like that weren't completely safe. However, the grues and mutant beasts tended to overlook them for some unusual reason.

Actually, it was only one of two noteworthy locations he'd identified. The second was the city magistrate's manor.

Right now, he ignored the birds, forgot about the manor, and headed toward the spot from yesterday.

As he got closer, he decided not to simply approach directly, but instead, to circle around a hill that overlooked the area.

After carefully climbing to the top of the hill, he stayed on his stomach and kept his eyelids as slits to prevent the flash of his eyes from revealing his position. With that, he looked down.

Instantly, his pupils constricted, as he yet again saw the person he'd seen yesterday!

As before, he sat next to one of the crumbled walls, wearing fine clothing, his skin completely normal. Most importantly... everything about him, from his posture to his position, were exactly the same as Xu Qing remembered. It was as if he'd spent the whole night without moving an inch.

That made no sense.

If this guy was alive, he couldn't possibly have just ignored the dangerous things that lurked in the night in this city. And if he was dead, his uninfected corpse would have been devoured by mutant beasts.

Xu Qing lay there quietly, thinking the matter over and not moving. Having grown up in the slums, he had long since learned patience.

Time slipped by slowly but surely as he simply remained in place observing the situation. Eventually, noontime came and went.

Only after waiting for six full hours did Xu Qing finally reach out and pick up a rock, which he threw in the direction of the man.

It hit the man with a thump. He swayed back and forth, then toppled over like one would expect a corpse to do.

As he fell, a wisp of violet light appeared in the spot he'd been sitting. The sight of it caused Xu Qing's eyes to glitter. For days now, he had been searching for a violet light that he'd seen falling into this city.

He had to hold back from rushing forward instantly. And even with all his self-control, he could only last for a few seconds before bursting into motion. He seemed to be running with all his might, moving with the speed of a falcon toward whatever was emitting the violet light. *LaaTest novels on (n)ovelbi/n(.)com*

Reaching the light, he grabbed the object, spun in place, then sprinted away.

It all happened very quickly. And it was only when he was about thirty meters away that he stopped, huffing and puffing, to look down at the violet object in his hands.

It was a beautiful crystal, sparkling and translucent.

Xu Qing's heart pounded in his chest as he looked back at the toppled corpse. Perhaps because the violet light no longer protected it, the clothing was already decaying, and the corpse's skin was turning greenish-black.

Seeing that, Xu Qing instinctively clutched the violet crystal tightly against his chest. Then he turned in the direction of his cave and started running.

After a time, he slowed down and looked around, seemingly confused.

Pulling aside the flaps of the leather jerkin, he looked at his chest.

There was no pain anymore. Instead, the spot only itched a bit.

Eyes filling with suspicion, he untied the garment he'd used as a bandage. When he looked at the wound on his chest, his expression flickered dramatically.

Last he'd checked, the wound was still festering, with blackness building up on the edges....

But right now, the wound was almost completely healed, with only some light scar tissue on the edges. He didn't see any blood at all.

What...? Panting, he looked down at the violet crystal in his hand.

1. "Nine Serenities" is one of many poetic ways in Chinese to describe hell/the underworld. ☹️

Deathblade's Thoughts

By the way, the Chinese characters in the title that I'm translating as "timescape" form a poetic and uncommon word that simply means "time." I chose to translate it as "timescape" for various reasons that will come to light much later....