

# **Beyond the Timescape**

## **#Chapter 11: A Gathering - Read Beyond the Timescape**

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Late in the night, Xu Qing sped through the camp like a cat, nimble and silent.

Occasionally, he reached up and clamped his hand over his mouth to prevent himself from coughing. At first, it didn't hurt much. But as he continued to force himself not to cough, his lungs began to burn, and his face turned pale white.

Thankfully, the camp wasn't very large, and it didn't take long to reach Sergeant Thunder's courtyard, and his own cabin.

Instead of rushing inside, he stood a short distance away, trying to steady his breathing. After inhaling and exhaling, he started walking again.

Opening the bamboo gate, he looked around, then entered his cabin.

Once inside, he couldn't control himself anymore, and coughed up a huge mouthful of black blood. When it splashed on the ground, it hissed loudly. After coughing up the blood, some of the color returned to his face. Gasping, he dropped into a cross-legged position and went into meditative breathing exercises.

Time passed. Finally, he opened his eyes.

What a powerful poison!

The cloud of gas Fatmountain had used was indeed highly poisonous. However, if Xu Qing hadn't taken the action he did, Fatmountain might have been able to call for help, and that would have made things a lot more difficult. Even if Xu Qing had pretended to be injured, he doubted it would have been enough to fool Fatmountain and get the upper hand.

Once the man realized he was being followed, he had manipulated the situation perfectly. His only mistake was underestimating how strong Xu Qing was.

In the end, Xu Qing had trusted the violet crystal in his chest, and its powers of regeneration. He had braved the dangers of the poison gas, rushing forward to kill his opponent as quickly as possible.

It seemed he'd made the right choice. The violet crystal really did have the ability to neutralize poisons, and repair damage done by them. His lungs still itched, and he still felt like coughing, but those were signs that the healing process was underway.

Scavengers are more complicated than they seem. Now that I think about it, if I hadn't hit Horsefour so accurately, and if he'd had a chance to fight back, things would have been a lot more difficult.

As he sat there, he ran through both encounters and tried to identify areas where he could have done better. Later, he sighed heavily and looked over the contents of his sack. He knew that he was missing something.

Fatmountain wanted to kill me by himself because he wanted something from Horsefour's sack. He was even ready to hunt me down over it. What's so special about all these things?

He dumped the contents of the sack out in front of him, including all the spirit coins. After glancing over the collection, he began studying each item one by one. In that manner, he identified which objects were ordinary in nature. Which was basically all of them. In the end, he was left with the piece of iron. Looking at it with a furrowed brow, he tried to determine what was special about it.

Is this what he was after? It doesn't seem special at all. Is it some valuable crafting material?

After some more thought, he put everything away and decided to dig around to find more information about the iron.

Next, he looked through Fatmountain's sack.

It didn't contain any white boluses, but it did have a lot of spirit coins. There was also a large collection of bottles and jars filled with poisonous substances. Xu Qing didn't dare to open any of them.

Finally, he examined the half-crushed piece of amber that Fatmountain had been about to use before he died.

And what might this be...? He was trying to crush it right before I killed him. Realizing that he didn't have enough information to make a determination, he put it away carefully.

After finishing with all those tasks, he worked on his cultivation.

Now that he was in the second level of Qi Condensation, he found that, when he went to sleep, he would only need about two hours before he was fully rested. Because of that, he was able to spend most of his spare time in cultivation.

And now that he didn't need to shadow Fatmountain, he had even more time. For the entire following day he remained focused on meditation. It was only as evening approached that he opened his eyes and looked at the door.

At exactly the same time, he heard Sergeant Thunder.

"Kid, come out into the courtyard."

Xu Qing stood and walked out.

Sergeant Thunder had set up a table in the courtyard, and it was filled with food and drink. Altogether, there were six chairs and six sets of tableware. Sergeant Thunder beckoned Xu Qing to sit down. Given all the bowls and chopsticks, Xu Qing could only surmise that people were coming for a meal. Visit [www.v3lb.in.com](http://www.v3lb.in.com) for new novels

"Have you settled into the basecamp over the last few days?" Sergeant Thunder asked, glancing out the main gate.

"Pretty much," Xu Qing replied, looking over the spread of food.

Whether it was because of the extended session of cultivation, or the fragrant aroma, Xu Qing's belly was grumbling loudly.

Sergeant Thunder heard it and laughed. "Calm down. We're waiting for some guests."

"You mean the rest of Squad Thunderbolt?"

The old man nodded and was about to say something, when he suddenly looked back toward the main gate. Xu Qing did the same.

A burly man was there, walking in from the shadowy street.

He was taller and more muscular than Cruel Ox, to the point where he was like a small mountain. His muscles rippled with each step he took, and he radiated an intimidating air. He had a huge steel shield strapped to his back, and carried a wolf tooth club that was taller than Xu Qing. His every footfall caused a reverberating sound to echo out. When he stepped into the courtyard, the entire place seemed smaller, and he seemed so powerful that Xu Qing felt like he was in the presence of one of the huge mutant beasts back in the ruined city he came from.

"Hey, Boss, I'm back," the big man said, grinning at Sergeant Thunder. Then he looked at all the food, and his eyes lit up. He quickly took off his shield and put it to the side along with the wolf tooth club. Both made loud thumping sounds when he placed them down. He sat, and the chair made a very loud creaking sound. The entire time, the man didn't spare a single glance for Xu Qing. [1]

Sergeant Thunder grinned, but didn't say anything. And thus, the huge man just sat there looking at the food but not eating any of it.

As for Xu Qing, he glanced out of the corner of his eye at the shield and the wolf tooth club. Given the sound they made when being put down, they were obviously incredibly heavy. In fact... he bet they weighed more than he did.

Not much time passed before the silence in the courtyard was broken again. Two people appeared this time, a man and a woman.

The man was young, and had a bow on his back. He was tall and thin, and had a crucifix-shaped scar on his face that looked like it had been carved into him against his will. That, coupled with his sharp eyes, made him seem very intimidating.

The woman looked to be in her thirties. Her facial features were average, but she wore tight leather clothing that made her extremely sexy and alluring.

When they entered, Sergeant Thunder called out a greeting, and as they sat, the young man with the bow gave Xu Qing a very close look.

As for the woman, she had a curious gleam in her eye as she laughed and said, "Boss, you went out for one job and came back with a child? I had no idea you were so hale and hearty, old man. Is that why you called us all back here? To tell us you had a secret love child this whole time?"

"He's not the right age," the burly man said.

Xu Qing kept his mouth shut, but eased his left leg a bit to the side to make it easy to grab his dagger if he needed to. He had the feeling that it wouldn't help much against three people, and he could tell these newcomers were very strong. In fact, they were probably stronger than Fatmountain. That was especially true of the man with the bow, whose eyes seemed to pierce deeply into Xu Qing.

Ignoring the others, Sergeant Thunder looked at Xu Qing, then pointed at the burly man. "This is Savage Ghost. He's reached the third level of body refinement, and is a natural-born powerhouse."

Sergeant Thunder then pointed at the others and introduced them.

"Graceful Raptor is in the third level of Qi Condensation. She can communicate with animals. Most of the stray dogs in the camp are her eyes and ears. [2]

"Crucifix is at the peak of the fourth level of Qi Condensation. Few people in the same level could match him.

"And this is the Kid. He's reached the second level of body refinement."

The other members of the squad listened respectfully to Sergeant Thunder, as did Xu Qing.

“Now, let’s eat. We can talk at the same time.” Sergeant Thunder picked up a piece of meat and started to eat. Then he continued, “The reason I called all of you back is that the spring crop came in early this year, and the camp owner has announced new mission rewards. Whichever party brings in the most seven-leaf clovers will receive three dustpurging pills. And as you know, dustpurging pills are far more effective than white boluses. What do you say we head inside to that hidden patch of land we have, and start the harvest early?”

In response to his words, the other squad members’ eyes shone brightly, and they all nodded.

Xu Qing had never heard of dustpurging pills, but based on what Sergeant Thunder said, they were better than white boluses.

“Since you’re all in agreement, let’s get ready to head in. And the Kid will be coming along.”

“Him?” Savage Ghost said.

Crucifix frowned. “Boss, the second level of body refinement is too weak. It means we’ll have to look out for him the whole time. It’s just not appropriate.”

“Everybody has to have their first time,” Sergeant Thunder said, looking first at Crucifix, and then at Xu Qing. “It’s your choice, Kid.”

“I can do it,” Xu Qing replied with a curt nod.

He had five white boluses in his sack, and thus didn’t feel a huge need to get dustpurging pills. However, he already knew what life in the scavenger basecamp was like. He would have to go into the forbidden region eventually, and therefore... it made sense to go with a squad of extremely experienced people. He could learn a lot that way.

Crucifix didn’t say anything further.

“Finish eating,” Sergeant Thunder said, “then head out for the night. We’ll meet in the morning and then head off.” With that, he stood and went into his cabin.

Xu Qing stabbed a piece of meat and put it in his mouth. Then, with a final glance at the three squad members, he went back to his cabin. He never felt comfortable around strangers, and had no desire to sit around with them.

Nothing happened during the night, and there wasn't much Xu Qing needed to do in the way of preparation. He was used to living in a constant state of readiness.

The next morning, they gathered, and Sergeant Thunder led the way toward the outskirts of the camp.

An azure sky stretched overhead, and the sun shone brightly. A hawk circled overhead, seemingly watching them.

Similarly, the scavengers they passed in the camp noticed the group. Perhaps that was because of Savage Ghost's towering frame and the alluring Graceful Raptor. Even some people from the recently arrived caravan looked their way.

Actually, there were a lot of scavengers gathered in the caravan area, seemingly waiting for something.

Xu Qing hadn't been out for a full day, so he had no idea what was going on. Seeing his curious look, Graceful Raptor smiled and said, "I heard that a caravan from the Violet Lands arrived last night. They have a famous physician with them. He even healed that old pervert Lame Jackal's hip injury. Now everybody is lining up for treatment."

"That physician must make a lot of money," Savage Ghost muttered enviously.

Xu Qing felt envious too. After eyeing the scene for a bit, his attention was drawn to something else.

He wasn't the only one. Savage Ghost and Graceful Raptor suddenly looked very attentive. Only Crucifix and Sergeant Thunder looked the same as ever. However, they also noticed what was up ahead.

There was another squad of scavengers in their path.

This one had about seven or eight members, including both men and women. All of them radiated an air of brutality.

They were clustered around an old man that reminded Xu Qing of Sergeant Thunder. The man had disheveled hair and a bloodthirsty gleam in his eyes. Furthermore, he was sitting on top of the corpse of a stray dog, and was slowly chewing one of its legs.

"Go find Fatmountain and Horsefour," he said in a sinister tone. "Those bastards. How dare they show up late. Are they tired of living?"


This was Squad Bloodshadow!


The old man eating the dog meat was Squad Bloodshadow's captain, and he wasn't making any attempt to conceal his spirit power fluctuations. When Xu Qing heard him mention Fatmountain and Horsefour, his eyes narrowed to prevent them from glittering.

Meanwhile, Graceful Raptor looked at the dead dog, and her eyes flared with rage and killing intent. That was her dog!

It was at this point that Squad Bloodshadow noticed Sergeant Thunder and the others. Grinning atop the dead dog, the old man looked at Graceful Raptor and licked his lips.

"Hey, you little tramp. You raised this dog, right? I have to say, it's delicious. But it makes me wonder what you taste like."

1. I'm sure most of you know what a wolf tooth club looks like, but just in case, here's a reference image. 

2. Graceful Raptor's name in Chinese is literally "Luan Tooth." The luan is a bird from Chinese mythology, sort of similar to the phoenix, but not the same. According to Madam Deathblade, this woman's name sounds both elegant and fierce in Chinese, so instead of going with a direct translation, or even a stretch of a translation like Phoenix Beak, I'm using Graceful Raptor, which I think captures the spirit of her name. 

Chapter 12: The Dangers of the Forbidden Region *ViSiit novelbi/n(.)c/(o)m for latest novels*

The outright provocation from Squad Bloodshadow caused killing intent to surge in Graceful Raptor's eyes. But instead of taking action, she turned to look at Sergeant Thunder.

Sergeant Thunder's expression was the same as ever as he simply said, "Crucifix."

Without a single word, Crucifix took the bow off his back, nocked an arrow, and shot it into the sky. It whistled as it ascended, like a reverse lightning bolt. And a moment later, it pierced right into the hawk circling overhead. Blood exploded like red flower petals, and a miserable shriek rang out as the hawk fell. A moment later, it smacked into the ground right between the two squads.

Meanwhile, one of the members of Squad Bloodshadow staggered in place, his face turning as pale as death as he coughed up a mouthful of blood. The hawk was his. But unlike Graceful Raptor's dog, this animal was connected to him with spirit power, allowing him to control it. When it got injured, so did he.

The other Bloodshadow members glared with killing intent, but their captain gestured for them to stay in place. Getting off the dog, he ignored Graceful Raptor and looked at Sergeant Thunder.

Sergeant Thunder looked back at him with icy eyes.

The two faced off for a long moment, then both of them gave cold harrumphs.

“Let’s go,” Sergeant Thunder growled, and he led the squad forward, including Xu Qing.

To Xu Qing, the animosity between the two squads was palpable. After they were further along, he looked over his shoulder, and realized the members of Squad Bloodshadow were still waiting for Fatmountain and Horsefour. Of course, those two would never arrive.

Looking back, he followed Sergeant Thunder and the others as they left the basecamp.

Xu Qing remembered thinking the forbidden region wasn’t very far away, but it took longer to get there than he imagined. They hiked for about an hour before the black jungle appeared in front of them. The trees spread out as far as the eye could see in both directions.

It was already late in the morning, and the sun shone brightly. But the jungle appeared to be a different world altogether.

Storm clouds filled the sky above the jungle, complete with lightning bolts that fell occasionally. All-in-all, the forbidden region seemed like a mysterious and dangerous location.

Xu Qing took it all in silently as he followed Squad Thunderbolt. The squad also maintained silence. However, as they neared, Xu Qing could sense them getting tense. He felt the same.

At a certain point, he felt a strange sensation, like he’d suddenly stepped into an area of frigid coldness that sucked all the warmth out of his body. That was when he knew he was actually inside the forbidden region.

Simultaneously, all extraneous thoughts from the outside world were purged from his mind. The familiar, sinister coldness seeped into his bones, immediately reminding him of the ruined city and the blood rain.

He took a deep breath and maintained full vigilance, keeping a tight grip on his iron skewer. Just like back in the ruins.

One main difference was that the city was full of crumbling buildings, whereas this place....

Twisted trees loomed like evil ghosts. The mud beneath their feet was as rotten as the soil of the Yellow Springs. Leaves clawed toward the sky like fangs and talons. [1]



The members of Squad Thunderbolt took it all in stride.

With weapons strapped to their backs, they walked carefully along what was obviously a familiar path. Some areas seemed completely ordinary, but they avoided them. And some areas seemed very dangerous, yet they walked right through them. In this manner, they avoided numerous hazards.

Xu Qing kept pace, paying close attention to everything.

One strange thing he noticed was that Sergeant Thunder didn't always take the lead. Sometimes Savage Ghost was in front, other times it was Graceful Raptor. They seemed to be taking turns. They moved forward steadily, and despite the occasional howl of a beast, Xu Qing felt relatively safe.

Occasionally, venomous insects would appear, whereupon Graceful Raptor would light some special incense to drive them away.

After two hours of hiking without a single word spoken between anyone, they took a break next to a muddy marsh.

Xu Qing watched as Graceful Raptor took out a medicinal powder and threw it out over the mud. Moments later, a host of venomous insects burrowed out, and though they seemed about to attack, Graceful Raptor calmly took out another type of powder and scattered it over them. The insects scattered in all directions, and a moment later, the marsh was quiet.

With that accomplished, the squad members began taking mud and smearing it on themselves.

"Did you commit everything to memory?" Sergeant Thunder asked Xu Qing. "All the details so far?"

Xu Qing nodded as, without any hesitation, he scooped up mud and smeared it on himself.

"We avoid any areas where the fallen leaves are piled up," Sergeant Thunder continued. "The reason being we know the beasts avoid those parts, otherwise the leaves would be crushed.

"We follow paths where we can see animal droppings. Obviously, the animals will instinctively pick safe paths. At the very least, there won't be a lot of hazards or deadly quicksand pits.

"Savage Ghost has a very acute sense of smell. He can detect the scent of dangerous mutant beasts, allowing us to avoid them. Obviously there's a lot for you to learn. Just remember as much as you can."

When Savage Ghost was mentioned, Xu Qing looked over at him. The burly man looked back at him and flashed a grin.

Continuing to spread mud over himself, Sergeant Thunder continued, “Years ago, we discovered that this marsh contains the shed skin of night lizards. By smearing the mud on us, we can conceal our aura and also repel many other dangerous creatures.

“North of us is the Poisonous Dragon Pond. This forbidden region has been explored enough that we scavengers have divided it into distinct regions. One of those regions is the Poisonous Dragon Pond. But we’re not headed there today. Instead, we’ll keep going straight.”

By this point, Xu Qing was finished with the mud. At the same time, Crucifix walked past. Yesterday, Crucifix had spoken against Xu Qing’s involvement. But now he offered a bit of advice.

“Pay attention to your mutation blotches. Forbidden regions have a lot of mutagen. If you surpass your mutation limit, nobody will be able to save you.”

Xu Qing nodded, though the advice was unnecessary. He had already come to sense how strong the mutagen here was. It was weaker than it had been back in the city ruins, but he knew he had a high concentration of mutagen built up within. Even when he wasn’t practicing cultivation, just breathing was enough to cause the mutation blotches on his arm to throb.

Taking out a white bolus, he put it in his mouth and let it sit on his tongue to slowly dissolve.

Eventually, everyone was coated with mud, and they started moving again.

However, the path they followed was very different from any of the paths they’d traveled so far. They moved slowly, and everyone kept their weapons in hand and ready to use.

Xu Qing couldn’t help but study those weapons.

Savage Ghost had his steel shield and wolf tooth club. Sergeant Thunder had his fighting gauntlets. Crucifix had his bow. And Graceful Raptor carried a gleaming sawtooth dagger.

Xu Qing’s days spent following Fatmountain hadn’t come without benefit. His sharp sense of hearing had enabled him to listen in on quite a few conversations among various scavengers. And he had learned quite a bit.

For example, he knew that weapons were generally classified as being magical treasures, talisman treasures, or prized treasures.

Magical treasures were exceedingly rare and legendary items. Supposedly, all such items were polluted with mutagen of varying levels. Using such treasures would increase their mutagen levels, essentially making them nonrenewable resources. And as such, they were extremely precious. Magical treasures were also the reason living treasures came to be. Sometimes, people were raised from childhood for the express purpose of diluting the mutagen in magical treasures.

Sergeant Thunder had said as much.

After the magical treasures came the talisman treasures and the prized treasures.

Talisman treasures were also rare, but compared to magical treasures, they were easier to acquire. Prized treasures were the most common of all, and could be crafted from special materials. Because of that, even ordinary people could sometimes get them.

Xu Qing's iron skewer was a prized treasure, and so were the weapons wielded by Squad Thunderbolt.

Time passed as Xu Qing followed the group deeper and deeper into the forbidden region. On a few occasions, they ran into small groups of mutant beasts that Savage Ghost handled by himself. A few stronger beasts were taken out by Crucifix's bow. Graceful Raptor relied mostly on magical techniques, and could intimidate beasts into freezing in place.

Xu Qing had a taste of the action when a viper attacked the group from behind. He simply grabbed the thing and crushed it to death.

Eventually, Crucifix seemed to realize that Xu Qing wasn't making any amateur mistakes, and the disdain in his eyes slowly began to fade. He even started teaching Xu Qing a few things.

"The forbidden region seems dangerous, Kid, but to experienced hands like us, there are basically only three things to worry about. Commit all this to memory.

"The first is that in the depths of the forbidden region, you're likely to run into mutant beasts you've never seen before. But that rarely happens on the periphery, which is where we normally operate. If it happens, it can be very dangerous. We know how to deal with the mutant beasts we're familiar with. However, the forbidden region is huge, and there are all types of beasts inside with all sorts of powers. A lapse in concentration can be deadly.

"The second thing is the Singing." A look of fear suddenly appeared on Crucifix's face. "People say that you can sometimes hear a type of music inside the forbidden region. If you hear that Singing, you're almost certainly going to die. I've never heard it myself. In fact, nobody in our squad has except for Sergeant Thunder."

Xu Qing looked at Sergeant Thunder. The old man didn't say anything, but as he looked out into the jungle, mixed emotions could be seen in his eyes.

"I'll explain the third danger," Graceful Raptor said, smiling at Xu Qing, "which also happens to be the most common. And that's the Fog of Confusion. When it appears, you can hardly see a thing, and it's easy to get lost. It usually sticks around for an extended period of time, and if you lose your way inside, you won't make it out easily. And if that happens, mutagen will build up inside you, which, in turn, means you're on the way to dying.

"There are two ways to deal with the Fog of Confusion. The first is to dispel it with fire. The second is to have someone born with psychic powers, or someone who's worked hard to cultivate them. Using fire is treating the symptoms but not the root cause. It will clear a small area of the fog. However, this is a gruish fog, and you can't keep a fire going forever in it. Eventually, when the fire goes out, the fog will return. In terms of people with psychic powers, our basecamp only sees one such person every few decades. And they don't stay around long. They usually leave quickly to develop their powers elsewhere."

Savage Ghost, who was taking the lead, looked over his shoulder and said, "There's a fourth danger. And that's other scavengers. Especially if they set up an ambush."

Graceful Raptor was about to say something in response, when Sergeant Thunder's expression flickered as he looked off into the jungle.

"Quiet!" he said.

Crucifix immediately nocked an arrow to his bow. Graceful Raptor looked around with flashing eyes, and Savage Ghost's muscles rippled. As for Xu Qing, he felt his hair standing on end, as though something incredibly dangerous were nearby.

Moments later, scattered bits of cold, sinister light could be seen out in the dark jungle.

Eyes.

Numerous eyes staring at them. As the eyes grew more distinct, they saw black, scaly skin. Huge wolves were approaching, each one as large as an ox.

At a glance, Xu Qing could see dozens of them, and there seemed no end to them. Maybe there were even hundreds. Every single wolf radiated spirit power fluctuations of the second level. All of the squad members looked worried.

"It's a pack of black-scaled wolves!"

"They normally roam in areas deeper in the forbidden region. What are they doing out here?"

Crucifix looked around through narrowed eyes, and Graceful Raptor's face looked wan. To them, a single black-scaled wolf wouldn't be anything to worry about. But dealing with a large number like this was going to be difficult.

Of even greater significance was the fact that the mutagen here was strong. Once they started running low on spirit power, and were forced to absorb spirit power from the surroundings, things would get dangerous. In the heat of battle, there wouldn't be time to extrude the mutagen from the spirit power, which meant that their own corruption would increase rapidly.

Xu Qing found himself gasping for breath as the pressure exuded by the wolves weighed down on him.

"Everybody withdraw," Sergeant Thunder said. "I'll hold them here."

He started walking forward, spirit power fluctuations rolling off of him that surpassed Crucifix's by double.

The wolves stopped walking and glared at Sergeant Thunder.

1. "Yellow Springs" is one of many poetic Chinese terms for hell or the underworld 黄泉

### Deathblade's Thoughts

"Gruish" is an invented word that I'm using as the adjective form of "grue." The Chinese word is a relatively common word that simply means "bizarre" or "strange." However, as we have already seen, it's being used in the story to describe a specific kind of monstrous being. When used as an adjective, it usually is supposed to connect to the monster, and I want to maintain that connection. Thus, I'll translate it as "gruish" when it makes sense.

### Chapter 13: Vile Shadow

"Let's go!" Crucifix said, glancing at Sergeant Thunder then backing up. Graceful Raptor and Savage Ghost did the same.

Xu Qing looked at the sergeant heading toward the wolf pack. The wolves seemed cowed by the explosive spirit power rolling off of him. But Xu Qing didn't move. Instead, he stood in place and lifted his iron skewer, which glittered even in the dim light.

"Kid, do you know why Sergeant Thunder is in charge?" Crucifix said, even as he flew backward. "It's not just because his cultivation base is in the sixth level of Qi Condensation. It's because of his sense of judgment, and how he takes responsibility in times of crisis."

At the same time that Crucifix's words reached Xu Qing, a loud rumbling sound echoed out. An arrow from Crucifix's bow had struck a huge tree about six hundred meters away, and it toppled to the ground.

Savage Ghost and Graceful Raptor also took action to fell one tree after another, creating a wall with only a small opening in it like a gateway. After it was done, Crucifix and Graceful Raptor continued to retreat. DiisCoover updated novels on [n\(o\)v.e/lbin\(.\)com](http://n(o)v.e/lbin(.)com)

Meanwhile, Savage Ghost stood in place in front of the opening, looking like a mountain, his shield in one hand and his wolf tooth club in the other.

Up ahead, Sergeant Thunder suddenly exploded into motion, his hands shining radiantly as he lunged toward the wolves. As he moved, he struck out, and each wolf he hit exploded into a cloud of gore.

However, there were so many wolves in the pack that Sergeant Thunder soon disappeared within them. The rest of Squad Thunderbolt could only hear the sound of explosions and the cry of the wolves.

"Kid!" shouted Crucifix. "Get back here with us. You'll have your chance to fight soon."

Squad Thunderbolt obviously had a battle plan in place, so Xu Qing backed up toward Savage Ghost.

Savage Ghost grinned at him and hiked his thumb toward the opening in the makeshift wall of trees. Xu Qing slipped through, then followed Crucifix and Graceful Raptor.

Six hundred meters past Savage Ghost, he caught up with Graceful Raptor, who had also piled up trees to create a barrier. Right in front of the opening, she'd taken out some more powder, scattered it around, and had just bitten her thumb to draw blood. With the blood, she traced a complex symbol on the ground.

Upon sensing Xu Qing approaching, she looked at him and gave him a look that said 'keep going.'

Xu Qing passed her and continued toward Crucifix, who was crouched in a tree another six hundred meters away. The tree was huge, giving a great view of the entire area. Looking down as Xu Qing approached, Crucifix said, "You're in charge of the area behind me. Fall back six hundred meters."

Xu Qing nodded. By now, he realized what Squad Thunderbolt had in mind.

After racing past the tree, he ran six hundred meters and then looked around. Confirming the area was clear, he found a patch of mud by some bushes, where he went into hiding.

This was just like when he would hunt for food in the city ruins.

After getting into place, he remained completely motionless. Shortly thereafter, the booming explosions off in the distance grew more intense.

Because of all the trees blocking his line of sight, he couldn't see what was happening twenty-four hundred meters away. However, he could sense that there was fierce fighting going on.

Just beyond the range of Xu Qing's sight, Sergeant Thunder was indeed battling the wolves. Though he was in the sixth level of Qi Condensation, given that he couldn't waste energy, he wasn't able to do anything extraordinary. Thankfully, he had incredible control over his spirit power. Taking advantage of that, he was now leading the black-scaled wolves toward Savage Ghost.

With a nasty grin, Savage Ghost lifted his wolf tooth club overhead. Then Sergeant Thunder zipped past him, and he smashed it down toward the incoming wolves.

High in the tree, Crucifix had his bow at the ready. Streams of spirit power in the form of arrows screamed forth, leaving behind streaks in the air as they shot toward the wolves.

Howling filled the air again as Sergeant Thunder left Savage Ghost behind and raced toward Graceful Raptor's position. Now, Savage Ghost stood there alone, a living mountain blocking all enemies.

It was around this point that Xu Qing, from his position hidden in the mud, spotted Sergeant Thunder racing toward him and away from the fighting.

Sergeant Thunder passed him at high speed. The old sergeant made eye contact, but had no time even to nod. Moments later, he was six hundred meters past, where he dropped down cross-legged, pulled out a white bolus, and began meditating. There he would remain until it was his turn to fight again.

This was Squad Thunderbolt's basic battle strategy.

Sergeant Thunder was the strongest among them. He held the enemy off while the others fell back and took up positions. Savage Ghost was the next line of defense. When he grew tired, Graceful Raptor would step up. And behind her was Crucifix.

By taking turns holding off the enemy, they could have time to rest and recuperate. That was the ideal way for a small squad to fight in the forbidden region, where the mutagen was strong.

Of the group, it was Sergeant Thunder and Crucifix who worked the hardest. The former had to fight for the longest, kill the most wolves, and buy the most time for his companions. As for the latter, he not only had to do his best to keep the wolves at bay,

but also, he had to take advantage of his spot up above to keep the other squad members safe.

That said, everyone had an important role to play, and they all had to trust each other and cooperate.

So this is what a scavenger squad is like... Xu Qing thought, a look of determination growing in his eyes. He remained in place, unmoving, for quite a while. Then he saw Savage Ghost retreating from the fight, his chest heaving as he breathed.

Not long after that came Graceful Raptor, who looked very pale, and had her hands clasped at her chest.

Finally, Crucifix passed Xu Qing.

The man had a grave expression on his face, like usual. However, Xu Qing could sense that his spirit power fluctuations were very weak. Behind him was an endless horde of wolves. Crucifix seemed hesitant to leave Xu Qing there to fight.

"I can handle it," Xu Qing said grimly.

Crucifix didn't respond. He kept moving, and the wolves closed in.

An acrid breeze hit Xu Qing. Looking out, he saw about a dozen wolves leading the charge, their bodies covered in black scales, their eyes crimson. As they charged toward him, they radiated brutality and madness.

Obviously, the initial clash with Squad Thunderbolt had left many of them dead and injured. But the smell of blood had driven the rest of the black-scaled wolves into further levels of ferocity. Apparently, the wolves didn't notice Xu Qing at all, and were intently focused on Crucifix.

However, as they passed, Xu Qing's dagger flew out and stabbed into the head of the nearest wolf.

The wolf let loose a brief howl of agony before dying. Even as its body fell, Xu Qing blurred into motion.

His black iron skewer glittered as he stabbed it into the eye of another wolf. Then he clenched his left hand into a fist and launched a blow into a third wolf. That wolf exploded, showering Xu Qing with blood.

In the briefest of moments, he had killed three wolves.

He was as nimble and deadly as a rakshasa as he dashed through the wolf pack, his eyes cold and his attacks decisive. One black-scaled wolf after another fell to his iron



skewer, filling the area with agonized shrieks. Soon, he was soaked in sticky blood, but he kept his grip on his skewer, which was now red instead of black.

And yet, the wolves were so numerous that, before long, some of their attacks made it past his defenses. One by one, fang and claw wounds built up on him.

Thankfully, he managed to avoid most of the attacks. What was more... the regenerative powers provided by the violet crystal also worked wonders.

Flesh wounds would heal up in a matter of a few breaths of time, and even the more serious wounds would at least stop bleeding rather quickly. That said, he was so splattered with wolf blood that it wasn't possible for the other squad members to see what was happening.

Because of his terrifying ability to heal himself, he was able to keep fighting far longer than anyone thought possible. Wolf corpses piled up, and Xu Qing's eyes grew colder. Eventually, he had held his ground longer than any of the other squad members, to the point that the wolf pack now seemed wary of him.

From a distance, the faint bits of light that pierced through the canopy fell on his blood-splattered form, making him look even more terrifying.

Six hundred meters behind him was Sergeant Thunder, and high in the trees above, Crucifix.

Both men were completely shocked at Xu Qing's level of ferocity, and his ability to stand and fight.

"Kid, get back!" Sergeant Thunder finally yelled.

Xu Qing still wasn't tired, but he could sense that he was getting dangerously low on spirit power.

The violet crystal could restore his body and heal his wounds, but it couldn't make up for lost spirit power.

Thankfully, he practiced body refinement, so unlike Graceful Raptor, being low on spirit power didn't mean he couldn't fight.

But it still affected him. He had to breathe, and that meant commingling mutagen with his spirit power. And the mutation blotches on his arm throbbed more than ever.

Therefore, when he heard Sergeant Thunder's command, he unhesitatingly fell back. Just as he started moving, a wolf lunged toward him that, unlike the others, had black eyes instead of red.

Xu Qing's iron skewer became a streak of red as he thrust it into the wolf's head, then prepared to keep falling back. However, that was when....

The wolf corpse's shadow suddenly twisted and distorted. Xu Qing wasn't sure if he was seeing things. Given the dappled sunlight in the area, it was possible. But it seemed like the shadow was moving toward him.

The sunlight was dim and scattered, making it impossible to see exactly what was happening. And before he could determine for sure, the shadow touched him. A tremor passed through him, and he felt an unspeakable evil suddenly fill him from head to toe.

Before anything else could happen, though, the evil reached his chest, and the violet crystal there that, up to this point, had done nothing else other than heal Xu Qing.

In that instant, he trembled again as an icy flow erupted within him.

A moment later, that sense of encroaching evil vanished.

The icy flow quickly ceased. In the blink of an eye, it was like it had never existed, and the violet crystal went back to normal.

Xu Qing stared down at himself in shock. However, now was not the time to ponder the situation. Body healing, he flew backward, wondering if Sergeant Thunder or Crucifix were aware of what had just happened.

As Xu Qing fell back, Sergeant Thunder strode forward, a surprised expression on his face.

"Good job. Now get back there and rest up. Black-scaled wolves live in the depths of the forbidden region where the mutagen is strong. They hate places such as this, where the mutagen is weaker. All we have to do is hold out for long enough, and they'll eventually just back down."

With that, Sergeant Thunder continued forward, surging with spirit power as he attacked the wolves Xu Qing had just disengaged from.

Savage Ghost appeared. He had been waiting further back for a while now, and seeing Xu Qing covered in blood as he left behind the piles of wolf corpses, reached out with an arm of support.

"I'm fine," Xu Qing said, brushing his arm away and continuing away from the front line. Savage Ghost watched him go, a look of respect in his eyes.

When Xu Qing reached Graceful Raptor, it was obvious she'd been told about his fighting, but she still seemed shocked by his appearance. A moment later, she produced a leather pouch which she handed to him.

He accepted it, and could feel from the shape that it contained medicinal pills. Thanking Graceful Raptor, he continued past her until he spotted Crucifix high up in a tree.

Crucifix didn't say anything, but he gave Xu Qing a nod of approval.

Xu Qing returned the nod silently. Finally, he found a spot in the very back where he expelled a breath full of impure vital energy, then took out three white boluses. As the pills did their work, he started absorbing spirit power to replenish himself.

About an hour later, he opened his eyes. He was no longer exhausted. Furthermore, he was surprised to find that the mutagen within him... seemed negligible.

Then he pulled up his sleeve and looked at his left arm, and to his shock, he found that one of the mutation blotches was gone! However, he was still clearly in the second level of body refinement. He hadn't weakened at all from the fierce fighting, and after recovering, he even found that he had made some progress.

He clearly remembered that, while fighting, he had been forced to absorb some surrounding spirit power, and had felt the two mutation blotches on his arm throbbing. He had consumed white boluses before, but they had never been this effective. Yet there was no other explanation for what had just happened to him.

Other than... that coldness which had flowed through him thanks to the violet crystal.

That shadow felt vile. Then the crystal sent that coldness out....

His eyes narrowed as he thought back to the gruish scene from earlier.

He was absolutely certain that he had seen that shadow moving, and that it hadn't been a trick of the light. And the stream of coldness from the violet crystal had also been real. It was like it had fought back against the encroachment of evil, and had sucked it inside.

Did it... consume it?

All he had now were suspicions and speculations.

Deathblade's Thoughts

Many thanks to vqid, JustNa, Apujanata, and Ryu980 for the reviews. Reviews help a lot, so if you're enjoying the story and inclined to do so, please leave a review! I won't bug y'all about them all the time. Just every once in a while! 😊