

Beyond the Timescape

Chapter 14: Danger Everywhere

What exactly is this violet crystal? And what was that evil encroaching shadow? Does it have anything to do with my mutation blotch disappearing?

Xu Qing really couldn't wrap his mind around it. As he sat thinking about it, the other members of Squad Thunderbolt began to pass him by.

Eventually, he calmed his thoughts, though his eyes continued to glitter brightly. The answers to his questions didn't matter right now. He was now rested, and it was his turn to fight again. He stood and wiped off his iron skewer. Then Crucifix fell back, and he jumped into the action.

With incredible speed, he bore down on the wolf pack. Agonized shrieks rang out like a horrifying symphony.

He had survived the opening of the god's eyes, and the blood rain. And this twilight battle was like a grindstone honing him into something even sharper than before. He fought even longer this time. Then he fell back, and the rest of the squad took their turns. Time passed.

The sun set, and the moon rose. In the dark night of the forbidden region, the deadly sounds of battle continued to ring out.

Until... everyone was exhausted and the white boluses had all been consumed. They had so much mutagen building up within them that they were reaching the point of mutation. That was when dawn came.

The last of the exhausted black-scaled wolves looked at them, then turned tail and vanished. Everything went quiet. Every member of Squad Thunderbolt was splattered with blood as they lay on the ground gasping for breath.

Xu Qing was no exception. The violet crystal healed his wounds, but he was so mentally drained that he felt as exhausted as everyone else.

"We finally... made it out alive," Graceful Raptor whispered. Struggling to her feet, she looked at Xu Qing. "Thank you."

Savage Ghost, despite huffing for air, looked at Xu Qing and gave him a big thumb's up.

Xu Qing's performance in the night of fighting surpassed anything Sergeant Thunder or Crucifix could have expected. In fact, without him, the wolf pack probably wouldn't have retreated, and Squad Thunderbolt might have experienced mutation.

Only Xu Qing, who lay there staring up at the sky, was full of doubts.

During the fighting, it had become very obvious to him that his rate of mutagen absorption was much slower than before. In fact, he even got the sense that the mutagen inside of him was slowly fading away.

As everyone lay there, Sergeant Thunder rubbed his forehead, then looked at the group and said, "This wasn't a coincidence. The black-scaled wolves just kept coming and coming, almost like they were after something in particular. We need to take out all of our belongings and inspect them. I have a feeling... this was the work of human hands."

The other members looked doubtful, but they did as the sergeant ordered and took out all of their belongings.

Xu Qing's heart pounded as he considered whether something in Horsefour's bag might be the reason for the wolf attack. However, that was when Graceful Raptor made a sudden cry of shock, and pointed at Savage Ghost.

Among his belongings was a tattered wooden box.

Shockingly, the box seemed to be slowly disintegrating, to the point where wisps of smoke rose up from it. Because of the complex mixture of aromas in the jungle of the forbidden region, the smell was easy to miss.

"Why is it disintegrating?" Savage Ghost asked, sounding puzzled.

Sergeant Thunder walked over, took the box, and handed it to Graceful Raptor. After sniffing it, an unsightly expression overtook her face, and she nodded.

"Where did you get it?" Sergeant Thunder asked.

Scratching his head, Savage Ghost said, "I bought it the day I got back to camp. It's an insect-repelling powder."

"It's made from butterfly-rabbit droppings," Graceful Raptor explained. "When exposed to the right stimulant, they'll ignite, and attract scaled creatures.... And of course, black-scaled wolves are scaled creatures."

Savage Ghost froze.

The atmosphere suddenly became very tense. Xu Qing's eyes narrowed as he considered the implications.

A long moment passed, and then Sergeant Thunder shook his head. "Savage Ghost got tricked. If we're talking about someone in the camp setting a trap for us, it's easy to imagine who it is."

"Squad Bloodshadow!" Crucifix said coldly.

"I'd imagine they'll have a follow-up move," Graceful Raptor said. "And we're in bad shape right now."

Looking off into the distance, Sergeant Thunder said, "Then the question is whether we proceed with the mission, or give up. What does everyone think?"

Xu Qing kept his mouth shut.

The others exchanged glances, but it was Crucifix who finally said, "Sarge, we're not very far from the harvesting point. We've wasted a lot of resources on this trip. If we go back empty-handed...."

Sergeant Thunder didn't say anything immediately. He looked at Savage Ghost and Graceful Raptor. The former had his head bowed in shame, and the latter had a defiant tilt to her jaw. Sergeant Thunder sighed.

"We keep going," he said. "Once we reach the harvesting point, we need to hurry up with the harvest. Then we split up and take different routes back. We'll reconvene in the camp."

The decision having been made, they took a short time to rest, then started moving through the forbidden region again.

Along the way, Xu Qing approached Graceful Raptor and asked her about the piece of amber he acquired from Fatmountain. She couldn't hide her shock as she took the amber and looked at it closely.

"It's the tail of a ghostface scorpion," she said. "Its venom is powerful, and it has positive medicinal properties that can release latent power hidden within the body. However, the venom is dangerous, and has to be neutralized quickly after use. Nevertheless, many people raise ghostface scorpions because of those reasons, plus the price they fetch on the market."

Xu Qing thanked Graceful Raptor and put the piece of amber away.

The group kept on high alert, but at the same time, moved ahead quickly. This time, they kept even quieter than before.

Perhaps because of the incident with black-scaled wolves, there didn't seem to be any other beasts in the area. The squad met no dangers, and soon reached a border area that marked the interior of the forbidden region depths.

The terrain was no longer just pure jungle. Now, there were rolling hills and flowing streams. Of course, the water in the streams was black, and not viable for human consumption.

A path led through the thickest part of the jungle, at the end of which was a beautiful canyon.

Upon entering the canyon, Xu Qing felt like he was in another world.

Thick vines grew overhead like a ceiling, blocking out most of the sunlight. However, there were no trees in the canyon, only flowering plants.

The flowers were roughly the size of a fist, and were all sorts of colors. The stalks, which emanated a bluish glow, had seven leaves. They looked like glittering stars, and together made it seem like the glade itself was a peaceful starry sky. It was incredibly beautiful.

This was the harvesting point Squad Thunderbolt had discovered in the past. It was a secret location that allowed the squad to live comfortably by profiting off what they could harvest there.

There was a special way to harvest the plants, so in order to save time and avoid damaging the product, Xu Qing didn't participate.

After observing for a bit, he settled down off to the side to do some breathing exercises.

Because of the previous day's battle, his cultivation base had improved, and he was nearing a breakthrough point. In order to give himself the greatest chance of surviving future dangers, Xu Qing wasn't going to waste any time. Even in the forbidden region, he continued working on his Sea and Mountain Incantation, and absorbed spirit power from the surroundings.

As the spirit power poured into him, a wind picked up in the glade.

Sergeant Thunder looked over, but didn't do anything to stop him. After all, he knew full well that they might be attacked on their way back. Right now, even a slight bit of extra power might be enough to guarantee their survival.

Some time passed, and Squad Thunderbolt was still harvesting plants. That was when popping and cracking sounds rang out inside Xu Qing.

Filth oozed out of his pores, mingling with the wolf blood that still coated him. At the same time, Xu Qing's flesh and blood began to ravenously devour the surrounding spirit power.

The sounds within him grew louder, then suddenly stopped, whereupon his mind filled with rumbling sounds.

All the blood vessels in his body swelled, and his flesh filled with astonishing levels of spirit power. A penetrating aura slowly filled him as the spirit power fluctuations around him faded.

He had reached the third level of the Sea and Mountain Incantation.

Before opening his eyes, he bowed his head. As a result, no one could see the violet glimmer in his eyes. Truth be told, there was no joy in his eyes. Rather, he had deep misgivings.

And that was because, when looking down, he saw something happening with his shadow.

His session of cultivation just now had felt... off. After absorbing the surrounding spirit power, he used the Sea and Mountain Incantation to separate the mutagen, and then send it throughout his body. But the mutagen... did not go into the mutation blotch on his arm. Instead... it flowed into his own shadow.

It was like his shadow was consuming the mutagen.

After some thought, Xu Qing suppressed his misgivings and looked up.

After first looking at Squad Thunderbolt going about their harvesting work, he turned his attention to the entrance of the glade, and the jungle beyond.

Just barely, he could see some structures off in the distance. It looked like a temple complex, sinking away into time, pulsing with an ancient aura.

Sergeant Thunder followed his line of sight and realized what he was looking at. "Nobody knows when that place was built. It marks the most distant boundary we scavengers can go to. In other words, you can't go past it. If you're in danger, it's a good place to hide out."

"Boundary, huh?" Xu Qing said.

Plucking a seven-leaf clover and putting it into his bag, Sergeant Thunder continued, "Yeah. People say that, back in those days, this particular forbidden region was formed because the eyes of the god above opened and looked upon those temples.

Scavengers have explored the place, and nobody ever found anything. There's nothing inside other than some special crystals."

"What do you mean special?" Xu Qing asked, curious.

"Crush those crystals into dust, and rub the resulting powder onto a scar, and it'll disappear. Completely without a trace. To scavengers, they're basically useless." He glanced at Crucifix. "But sometimes important people come asking for them."

At this point, Crucifix, Savage Ghost, and Graceful Raptor finished collecting the plants. After handing their portions to Sergeant Thunder, he split the collection up into five parts, handing one part to Xu Qing.

"This is yours. And now we split up. That will increase our chances of getting back safely." He pulled out a map and handed it to Xu Qing.

"I've got big plans, Kid," he said. "That's why Squad Bloodshadow is after me. Furthermore, I'm in charge, so I need to be the distraction. You get back to camp as fast as you can. Wait for me there."

Xu Qing wanted to say something to him, but before he could, Sergeant Thunder slipped out of the glade and vanished.

Crucifix clasped Xu Qing's shoulder briefly, then also left.

Savage Ghost and Graceful Raptor both gave some further words of advice to Xu Qing, then disappeared.

He watched them go. Then he put the seven-leaf clovers away and took a final look at that temple complex.

A moment later, he took a deep breath and headed out of the glade. Now that he was in the third level of body refinement, he was much faster than before. He moved through the jungle as nimbly as a monkey, moving nonstop through the trees. He didn't follow the same path they'd taken to the glade. Instead, he used the map to find a more circuitous route.

Using the techniques he'd learned along the way, he avoided danger as much as possible. He did run into a few mutant beasts, but he took care of them without any trouble.

Occasionally, he would spot his shadow, and remained convinced that it seemed strange.

By now, he knew with certainty that whenever he absorbed mutagen, whether it was from spirit power or just by breathing, it would end up in his shadow! And tracing the

timeline back, he knew that it started with the flow of coldness that emerged from the violet crystal. It had all become very obvious after he reached the third level of the Sea and Mountain Incantation. After the violet crystal engulfed the shadow of the black-scaled wolf, his own shadow... had transformed.

He narrowed his eyes at how grisly it seemed.

Rolling up his sleeve yet again, he confirmed that he only had one mutation blotch on his arm. What was more, that single mark was faint, to the point where he almost couldn't make it out.

If things kept going in this manner, then the mutagen within him would become weaker and weaker, until he was completely cleansed.

Based on what he'd read in the Sea and Mountain Incantation bamboo slip, that level of perfect purity was something only seen in elite humans in the Revered Ancient mainland.

Is it all the doing of the violet crystal?

Stopping for a moment on the branch of a huge tree, he stared up into the sky and rubbed the spot on his chest where the crystal was. Then he forced aside his misgivings and started moving through the jungle again.

Maybe mutagen wasn't a threat to him for now, but there were still plenty of dangers to deal with in the forbidden region.

In fact, he had just spotted two mutant bears that were even stronger than Sergeant Thunder.

Shockingly, on the back of each bear was a huge, colorful spider. Countless strands of spider silk stretched from the spiders and into the bodies of the bears, apparently allowing the spiders to control them. The bears careened about, completely unable to control themselves. They smashed trees, and even crushed other mutant beasts as they ran along.

If it wasn't for the fact that they were chasing some sort of red tiger, and thus didn't notice Xu Qing, he would have been in big trouble.

The forbidden region was full of things like this.

About two hours later, Xu Qing found himself at the top of a tree, carefully examining his surroundings. Off in the distance, he had spotted something that didn't seem like it belonged in a jungle. DiisCoover *updated novels on [n\(o\)v.e/lbin\(.\)com](http://n(o)v.e/lbin(.)com)*

It was a massive, mountain-sized jellyfish, emanating frigid coldness. It glowed faintly as it floated high in the air above the forbidden region. Because its body was translucent, it was possible to see countless rotting beast corpses inside it.

It had a host of tentacles dangling beneath it, all of them covered with gruish eyes. However, most of the eyes were closed.

As it drifted along slowly, the jungle beneath it was overwhelmed with intense cold.

Its aura was strong, far beyond Xu Qing's level of strength. In fact, he was fairly certain that the bears he'd just encountered were weaker.

Even looking at the thing from a distance, he felt stiff and cold, and could sense how dangerous it was.

Only when the giant jellyfish disappeared in the distance did he breathe a sigh of relief. It had left behind a streak of frozen land in the jungle that was clearly visible from where he was.

If that thing had come in this direction.... He gulped.

There was danger everywhere in this jungle, but because of how his shadow absorbed mutagen, he had an advantage in that he could stay inside this place longer. As he grew stronger, he had the feeling that advantage would grow greater.

After resting for a moment, he continued with more vigilance than ever.

Time passed, and eventually the sun set, leaving behind only an evening glow.

As howling echoed out in the jungle, Xu Qing checked his map. Based on his estimations, if he kept running through the night, he would make it out of the forbidden region by daybreak.

As he contemplated the matter, he heard a boom off in the distance, followed by a bloodcurdling scream. And the voice sounded familiar.

Savage Ghost?

His eyes turned sharp. Without any hesitation, he approached the source of the noise, moving stealthily through the vegetation.

Before long, he reached the point where the sound came from. Hiding at the top of a tree, he found himself looking down at six or seven corpses. And one of them... was Savage Ghost!

His skin was greenish-black, making it obvious he had mutated. At the same time, he had been decapitated, and his body was mutilated. His huge steel shield had been broken in two, creating one large chunk of metal and one small chunk. As for his wolf tooth club, it lay off to the side, covered in blood.

Obviously, Savage Ghost had, in the midst of his mutation, taken his enemies out with him.

Xu Qing looked at the scene reticently, sorrow rising up in his heart, when he suddenly noticed something else.

Some distance away, surrounded by five enemies, his body turning green as he hovered on the brink of mutation, was Sergeant Thunder!

When Xu Qing saw that, his pupils constricted. Then he tightened his hand around his iron skewer, his killing intent surging.

Chapter 15: Blood-Colored Evening

Looking around, Xu Qing realized that Sergeant Thunder was surrounded by Squad Bloodshadow!

The sun was setting, replacing daytime with the darkness of night. It wouldn't be long before everything around them was pitch black. Sinister coldness proliferated, filling the area. The sun was like a dying old man who refused to breathe his last. It struggled to illuminate the area, and was barely able to penetrate the thick, leafy canopy.

Hidden at the top of the tree, Xu Qing was different. He looked down coldly, taking in the entire tableau.

There were five members of Squad Bloodshadow present. Two of them were fighting Sergeant Thunder, while the other three blocked off any possible avenues of escape. The latter group seemed about as strong as Graceful Raptor; they were in the third level. They didn't dare to get too close to the actual fighting, and thus hovered on the periphery. That said, their mere presence was enough to keep Sergeant Thunder slightly distracted.

Of the two who were fighting, one had spirit power fluctuations only slightly weaker than Sergeant Thunder. He was in the sixth level of Qi Condensation, and he was also an old man. His hair was disheveled, and he had wild eyes. His clothes were tattered, revealing rippling muscles underneath. He was Captain Bloodshadow, leader of Squad Bloodshadow, and the same man who had feasted on Graceful Raptor's dog.

Licking his lips, Captain Bloodshadow launched attacks with lightning speed as he glared at Sergeant Thunder, whose skin was slowly turning more and more green.

“Squad Thunderbolt is going to be expunged from the listings in the basecamp,” said the captain. “Why don’t you just kill yourself, Sergeant Thunder? That would be better than mutating like Savage Ghost did. At least you’ll have a normal corpse left behind. Hey, if you just commit suicide, I’ll make sure to take care of the rest of your squad.”

After the captain finished speaking, the other fighter chimed in. “That’s right. Don’t worry, Sergeant Thunder. After you die, we’ll take good care of Squad Thunderbolt. I’ve been wanting to see what Graceful Raptor tastes like. And that kid you took in would make us a lot of money as a living treasure.”

This other person was a middle-aged man who was nothing short of ugly. He had a deformed, hunched back, and only one good eye. The other eye was nothing but a mass of scar tissue. His spirit power fluctuations didn’t reach the same level as his captain’s. That said, he was stronger than Crucifix; in other words, he was at the fifth level of Qi Condensation.

However, his cultivation base didn’t seem completely stable, indicating he’d only recently made a breakthrough.

Both of Sergeant Thunder’s opponents were trying to get him riled up. But the sergeant’s face remained expressionless, and he had death in his eyes as he attacked with renewed vigor.

The two members of Bloodshadow obviously didn’t want to kill Sergeant Thunder at the price of being seriously injured in the process, so they were keeping their distance.

Meanwhile, Sergeant Thunder was obviously intent on taking out his opponents, even if he died in the process.

Killing intent swirled in Xu Qing’s eyes.

One in the sixth level. One in the fifth level. Three in the third level.

The truth was that he could just leave. But he valued gratitude, and Sergeant Thunder had treated him well. So he wasn’t going to leave. Instead, he took another look around the area. There wasn’t a lot of room to fight, as the trees were thick here. And the deepening darkness meant that there were ample places to strike from the shadows.

Having made a decision, he crouched on the tree branch, his eyes burning with murderous intention.

Then he jumped, tapping into all his strength to shoot down like an arrow released from a bow.

The third level of the Sea and Mountain Incantation combined with the power of the violet crystal, making his fleshly body incredibly strong.

He moved with such speed that he left a string of afterimages behind him. The people below had no idea what was coming. In the blink of an eye, Xu Qing was on the field of battle.

He appeared first next to a skinny youth who was watching Sergeant Thunder through narrowed eyes and completely unaware of Xu Qing's presence.

However, when the wind brought by Xu Qing hit him, he looked over in surprise. And then... an iron skewer pierced his temple with terrifying force.

Before the body fell, Xu Qing was on the move again. Bending at the waist, he launched himself with cheetah-like speed toward the next person in his line of sight.

The second scavenger saw him coming. The man's pupils constricted, and he tried to jump away. But Xu Qing was too quick, arriving with a fist full of shocking power from the Sea and Mountain Incantation.

The punch landed on the man's chest, caving it in and causing blood to spray everywhere. In fact, an explosion of blood emerged from his back, along with the sound of shattering bones. At the same time, Xu Qing's left hand swept through the air, sending his dagger flying with terrifying speed toward the third scavenger.

When the second man's chest and back exploded, it alerted the third man.

However, despite being on guard, all he saw was a blur, along with a blast of wind that hit his face. Eyes wide, he used his last remaining bits of energy to reach up to his forehead, which was when he felt the cold dagger protruding from his face. The force of the dagger had crushed the bones, caving in the top of his face!

All of these things happened in the time it takes a spark to fly off of a piece of flint.

Xu Qing was moving so fast, and acting so decisively, that the first and third corpses dropped to the ground at the same time. A moment later, the man whose torso he'd crushed fell backward.

The toppling corpse revealed Xu Qing to the others on the battlefield. His long hair covered half of his face, and his glaring eyes made him seem like a wolf.

Sergeant Thunder and the two Bloodshadow members were all looking at him in surprise.

The wind seemed to go still.

Suddenly, the death in Sergeant Thunder's eyes was drowned out by a ripple of light as his eyes focused on Xu Qing. "Get out of here, Kid!"

Xu Qing ignored him, and instead focused on Captain Bloodshadow, who looked past him at the three bodies, his cheek twitching. He had to admit that he had made some errors in assessing Sergeant Thunder's sense of judgment. The first mistake was not realizing that Savage Ghost didn't fear death. The second mistake was underestimating the Kid.

"Kill him!" Captain Bloodshadow said with a cold snort. As of this moment, he'd decided that this fight needed to end even if he got seriously injured in the process. Energy surged from within him as he made a fist and launched a blow at Sergeant Thunder.

The middle-aged man in the fifth level of Qi Condensation grinned viciously as he turned in Xu Qing's direction. Spirit power surged as he walked forward and simultaneously cracked his knuckles.

He knew that this young man he faced was very quick on his feet. And he had just killed three enemies in the blink of an eye. But the man was still completely confident. Given that he'd just recently achieved a fifth-level cultivation base, he was certain he could kill this opponent with ease.

Xu Qing stared at him with eyes even colder than before. Based on his experience, he was confident that he could kill someone in the fourth level of Qi Condensation. As for someone in the fifth level... he wasn't sure he could come out on top.

But there was only one way to find out.

He burst into motion, tapping into all the speed he could muster as he launched a fist at the middle-aged man.

The cultivator watched him come, a disdainful smile on his face.

Almost as soon as Xu Qing started moving, the middle-aged cultivator released a stream of spirit power fluctuations, which formed an invisible barrier in front of him. Xu Qing's fist crashed into the barrier.

A boom rippled out, and cracks spread out across the barrier. However, it didn't collapse, and there was even a powerful backlash that swept through Xu Qing, causing a crack to ring out from his wrist as it was dislocated.

Xu Qing's eyes narrowed as he violently shook his right arm to force the wrist bones back into place. Then, vicious light shone in his eyes as, instead of backing up, he launched another blow.

Another boom rang out, and more cracks spread across the barrier. Then, it collapsed.

At the same time, a violent blast erupted from the other side of the barrier, causing dirt to spray everywhere as it enveloped Xu Qing.

The shattered remnants of the barrier seemed to form countless invisible blades that slashed numerous bloody wounds onto Xu Qing. He was sent staggering backward, blood spraying everywhere. The wrist he had just fixed was now dislocated again, and his arm hung limply at his side.

As dirt rained down around them, the middle-aged cultivator looked at Xu Qing scornfully and said, "Moron! You think a measly body cultivator can do a thing against someone who cultivates magic? That's not to mention I'm three levels higher than you. You've bitten off a bit more than you can chew!"

In reality, he was astonished. Never could he have imagined that his spirit power barrier would collapse after only two blows. It was a good thing he'd recently reached the fifth level, allowing him to unleash the follow up attack after the barrier collapsed. Otherwise, he could tell his opponent would have fallen upon him in fury.

Xu Qing stood there with his brow furrowed as pain rippled through him, especially from his arm. Glaring at his opponent, he once again violently snapped his arm out to relocate the wrist.

When his opponent saw the brutal way Xu Qing treated himself, the man stopped in place with wide eyes. Then he put his hands together, performed an incantation gesture, and waved his finger in Xu Qing's direction.

The spirit power around him converged, transforming into a head-sized fireball that rushed toward Xu Qing.

The fireball moved with shocking force, causing the air around it to ripple and distort from the heat.

As it neared, Xu Qing dodged to the side, yet the fireball followed him.

Killing intent flickered in the middle-aged cultivator's eyes. Not bothering with another spirit power barrier, he performed another incantation gesture, sending a second fireball after Xu Qing, then a third.

Xu Qing could tell that the three fireballs were going to be impossible to escape. Seeing that he was right next to one of the bodies he'd just slain, he grabbed it and threw it at the nearest incoming fireball.

A whoomp rang out as the fireball hit the corpse, setting it ablaze. In only three breaths of time, the corpse had been transformed into ash.

That alone gave Xu Qing a clear understanding of how dangerous the fireballs were.

Even just the heat radiating off of them made his skin feel like it was burning. And before he could jump out of the way, the second and third fireballs closed in. Then, the cultivator's eyes turned scornful as he unexpectedly detonated the fireballs.

RUMBLE!

Flames exploded everywhere, creating a stupefying level of deadly heat.

It was impossible for Xu Qing to fully avoid the attack. He was fast enough that he managed to stay out of the way of the main blast. Even still, the heat caused blisters to break out all over his body, and his internal organs felt like they were being cooked.

"Hurry up, Flamecrow!" shouted Captain Bloodshadow.

"I know, Captain! There's no way this wolf pup can handle two more of my fireballs without becoming a corpse!"

Flamecrow grinned as he looked at Xu Qing. Eyes burning with brutality, he extended his right hand and he summoned two more fireballs and sent them flying. Fearing Xu Qing might dodge out of the way, he did the same thing as before, making sure to cut off all possible routes of escape.

The intense heat burned the ground and turned the trees into ash. Without the leaf canopy to block out the evening sun, brightness suddenly flooded the area, making it impossible for Flamecrow to clearly see the aftermath of his attack.

However, he was absolutely confident that, backed by the fifth level of his cultivation base, the fireballs would wipe out anyone in the third level or lower.

Panting a bit, he brushed off his hands arrogantly and turned to the fight between Sergeant Thunder and Captain Bloodshadow.

"Hey Sergeant Thunder," he said. "Your people are worthless!"

He laughed coldly as he walked back to join the fight. However he didn't have a chance to see any despair on Sergeant Thunder's face. All he saw was his captain's expression transform into one of shock.

Flamecrow reacted quickly and dodged to the side.

But he wasn't fast enough. A scrawny form burst toward him with two fists that slammed into his spirit power barrier.

The barrier shattered, and Xu Qing was forced backward by the backlash. However, a dagger and an iron skewer appeared in his hands, and he hurled them out.

Because the barrier provided a modicum of resistance, the dagger slowed down enough that Flamecrow managed to avoid it.

Even still, it sliced through his ear, sending blood splattering out. As for the iron skewer, it stabbed right into his chest. Blood sprayed out of his mouth. However, the injury apparently didn't hit any vital spot, and wasn't enough to kill him.

Pain fueled the fury in Flamecrow's eyes as he shouted in rage, then looked over his shoulder.

Kneeling in the flames only about twenty meters away was the bedraggled Xu Qing.

He was still covered in blisters and burns. But in the evening sun, his eyes... were as cold as ice, and raged with killing intent![Visit no\(v\)3lb/ln\(.\)com](http://www.v3l3n.com) for new *novels*

Deathblade's Thoughts

Thanks so much to Dao of Cheese, Gizrah, and Ludicrous Daoist for the reviews. Very much appreciated! 🙏

Chapter 16: You Ask When I'll Return, My Lord; I Can't Give a Time

The sight of Xu Qing illuminated by the evening sun was a complete shock to Flamecrow. He was a veteran scavenger. But if he was some other person, even someone with a superior cultivation base, he would have been astonished into immobility by this turn of events. However, despite the surprise that shook him to the core, the deadly rage he felt caused his eye to burn with killing intent.

"Okay, you little wolf pup. I'm going to rip out your teeth one by one and keep them as trophies!"

With that, he tore off his damaged shirt, revealing his wizened torso. Not paying attention to the chunk that had been sliced off his ear, he performed a double-handed incantation gesture to summon a fireball far larger than any of the previous ones.

Xu Qing's pupils constricted, then he burst into motion.

"Release!" howled Flamecrow, and he threw his hands out, causing the massive fireball to split into five parts.

Rumbling sounds echoed out as the fireballs spread out and then bore down on Xu Qing. However, Xu Qing simply went on the attack, going for the spirit power barrier with two fists.

The incoming fireballs burned him and shoved him back, but his momentum kept him going forward. And thus, he and Flamecrow started fighting fiercely in the jungle.

As the battle grew more and more intense, it became sadly obvious that Xu Qing was simply not on the same level as his opponent.

The spirit power barrier and the fireballs made it extremely difficult to get close enough to land blows. At the same time, they posed a dangerous threat.

Xu Qing's advantages were his spectacular powers of regeneration, allowing him to rapidly heal his wounds without any negative effect on his battle prowess. His body was strong, and though the endless pain had an effect on his psyche, he had grown up in the slums, and had mental fortitude that surpassed ordinary people.

Most importantly... the strong mutagen in the surrounding spirit power didn't have any effect on him. It was a different story for Flamecrow, though. The wound to his ear wasn't worth worrying about. But his chest injury was getting worse. And then there was his spirit power....

His cultivation base was in the fifth level of Qi Condensation, but he couldn't just burn through power endlessly. He had to absorb spirit power from around him to keep going.

And Xu Qing was putting a lot of pressure on him, making it impossible for him to have any time to rest. As a result, mutagen was building up within him.

Soon, Flamecrow went from being angry to being nervous. And then, anxiety became plainly visible on his face.

Things were going wrong within him with the mutagen building up, and at the same time, there was obviously something very strange going on in the person he was fighting.

Ordinarily speaking, a third level opponent like this couldn't possibly take so many hits from fireballs. In fact, even a fifth level opponent would have been killed by now.

Not even Flamecrow himself could survive a situation like this. Though the young man in front of him was heavily wounded, from the very beginning of the fight, he hadn't lost an ounce of speed or power.

Flamecrow was feeling increasingly unsettled. The mutagen within him continued to grow, and as he got closer and closer to the point of mutation, he started to get incredibly anxious.

Captain Bloodshadow was still fighting Sergeant Thunder, but at the same time, kept an eye on the other fight. At a certain point, he angrily shouted, "Flamecrow, you piece of trash, hurry up and beat him!"

He was inclined to help, but Sergeant Thunder was going all out to prevent him from doing so.

To Sergeant Thunder, it was obvious that Xu Qing was trying to force Flamecrow into mutation.

He wasn't sure where Xu Qing got his confidence from, or how he managed to keep fighting considering the pain he was obviously in. But everyone had their secrets. Sergeant Thunder knew that well, for he was the same. Instead of wondering about the details, he did everything he could to prevent Captain Bloodshadow from helping his comrade.

The fighting continued.

The increasingly frustrated Flamecrow launched three more fireballs, all the while being peppered with curses from his captain. With every moment that passed, his apprehension grew, until it turned into pure madness within him.

All of a sudden, he smacked himself in the chest with his own palm, causing himself to cough up a massive mouthful of blood. Before the blood could drop to the ground, he reached out and grabbed it.

Then he started muttering an enchantment that turned the blood black.

Xu Qing's pupils constricted, and he felt a sense of intense crisis building up within him. Lunging forward, he attempted to interrupt whatever magic his opponent was trying to unleash.

Unfortunately, Flamecrow launched the magical technique with incredible speed. Xu Qing had just started moving when Flamecrow looked up, his expression twisted and distorted with brutality as he waved his right hand out in front of him.

The black blood therein expanded rapidly into a head-sized blood sphere.

The sphere bubbled, surging with shocking power as it shot in Xu Qing's direction.

"Time to die!" Flamecrow howled. He was visibly drained after launching the technique, and as mutagen surged within him, his legs trembled weakly.

Meanwhile, killing intent raged in Xu Qing's eyes. Sergeant Thunder had guessed correctly that Xu Qing was trying to force Flamecrow into mutation. However, there was one thing that Sergeant Thunder didn't realize: Xu Qing had never given up on the idea of trying to kill his opponent before that happened.

He no longer held his dagger or his iron skewer, yet he was still looking for an opportunity to strike a fatal blow. Upon seeing Flamecrow sag limply, he knew his opportunity had arrived.

The instant the blood sphere appeared, Xu Qing pushed himself forward with even greater speed.

However, he didn't move in a straight line toward his opponent. He shifted slightly to the side, allowing him to pass Savage Ghost's corpse.

The corpse was charred and burned thanks to the fireball attacks. However it was still there, and next to it was... Savage Ghost's equipment!

His wolf tooth club, and the two pieces of his steel shield.

Xu Qing was specifically aiming for the larger piece of his shield. As he sped by, he reached down and picked it up. Using it to cover his skinny frame, he raced onward toward the black blood sphere and Flamecrow.

A huge boom rang out when the blood sphere hit Xu Qing, or more specifically, the shield. Countless drops of blood exploded out.

In the blink of an eye, the shield shattered into five pieces. Nevertheless, it still absorbed the majority of the force in the attack.

Xu Qing was hit by some of the black blood, but not enough to be fatal. Gritting his teeth, he kept moving, becoming a streak of afterimages that closed in relentlessly on Flamecrow.

A mocking gleam appeared in Flamecrow's eyes, and he didn't even bother to evade the incoming attack. His hands flashed in a double-handed incantation gesture, causing the countless drops of black blood behind Xu Qing to rise into the air, then turn into arrow-like streaks that shot toward him.

Xu Qing's escape route had been cut off, but... he was never planning to retreat in the first place.

All that did was ensure that Xu Qing didn't even have the option of retreating.

Closing in, he clenched his left hand into a fist. And yet, it was his right hand that actually delivered a punch.

RUMBLE!

Cracks exploded out onto the surface of the spirit power barrier protecting Flamecrow. Blood sprayed left and right from Xu Qing's right fist. However, it was also possible to see something scaly in the mangled flesh in his hand.

Before Flamecrow could see exactly what was happening, Xu Qing unleashed a second fist strike.

The barrier shattered, lashing Xu Qing with a backlash, forcing him away and making it impossible for him to advance. The mockery in Flamecrow's eyes grew stronger.

However!

Seemingly out of nowhere, Xu Qing managed to unleash a scrap of additional power. Unlike before, he didn't actually back up because of the backlash from the shattered barrier. Forcing himself to move again, he reached out with his right hand and viciously grabbed Flamecrow in the chest, exactly where the iron skewer had stabbed him earlier.

Apparently, Xu Qing's last scrap of energy only allowed him to do this one thing; instead of landing a fatal blow, all he managed to do was open up Flamecrow's wound a bit more, then fall back.

Flamecrow's face flickered in surprise, and he shoved himself away from Xu Qing.

However, when he realized that this move of Xu Qing's wasn't a big threat to him, he laughed cruelly and focused on his black blood attack.

Except, only a moment later, his face fell, and he looked down at his chest.

Within the flesh and blood of his wound, there was... a crushed fang and some scales.

Even as he looked down, the flesh around his wound started to rot and decay, and poisoned blood started pouring out of the wound. Then, the rotting effect began to spread. Unbearable pain surged through him, forcing Flamecrow to unleash a bloodcurdling scream. Immense terror filled his eyes.

Continuing to fall back, he looked at Xu Qing crouched some distance away, and noticed him toss aside a mass of shredded flesh and fangs. If you took that mass and put the pieces back together, it would look like the severed head of a snake. It was the very same viper Xu Qing had used to dispose of corpses in the past.

As for his left hand, it trembled slightly as he opened it up to reveal a crushed piece of amber. As the chunks of amber fell to the ground, they revealed the tail of a ghostface scorpion, pierced directly into Xu Qing's palm!

One hand contained a deadly venom used for attack, and the other gave him that slight burst of power he needed to break through the spirit power barrier!

"You..." Flamecrow growled. Then he howled in grief. He could barely talk, let alone think about escaping this battlefield alive. The terror in his eyes grew more intense as he tried to wipe the poisoned blood off of himself. However, it just kept pouring out of the wound, causing his life force to slowly fade.

Xu Qing took a deep breath as he knelt there. His battle with Fatmountain had proved to him how formidable the violet crystal's regenerative powers were. It also helped to prove definitively that the crystal could neutralize poisons.

That fact was driven home when looking at his hand, which had been infected by the snake venom, yet wasn't rotting.

This was the fatal attack he'd prepared. Standing up, he started moving toward Flamecrow.

As Flamecrow watched Xu Qing approach, the terror in his eyes turned into despair. He struggled to move away, and even managed to desperately scream, "Captain! Help!"

Looking over, Captain Bloodshadow's eyes went wide. He wanted to save his subordinate, but Sergeant Thunder was making it impossible for him to do so. He could only watch as Xu Qing closed in on Flamecrow with increasing speed.

At this point, Flamecrow's mental state collapsed, and at the same time, the mutagen within him surged out of control.

Even before Xu Qing could reach him, he went stiff. Mutagen spread through him, and then a pop rang out as... he exploded into a mist of blood. When experiencing mutation, some people turned into greenish-black corpses, and others exploded.

Xu Qing stopped in place and gazed at the spot where the blood fog was now dissipating into the air. Then he turned with cold eyes to look at Sergeant Thunder and Captain Bloodshadow fighting.

The evening sun was setting, but the dome of heaven looked different from before. Instead of welcoming the darkness of night, the entire sky seemed a strange red color.

As that red color covered Xu Qing, it combined with the wounds that crisscrossed his body, and his cold eyes, to create an indescribably intimidating image.

It was something so intimidating that Captain Bloodshadow, whose cultivation base far surpassed Xu Qing, trembled in fear. The miserable death experienced by Flamecrow had been a huge blow to him.

The sustained combat with Sergeant Thunder, and the sight of Xu Qing fighting with such vicious tactics, caused Captain Bloodshadow's mind to crack. Seeing Xu Qing approaching, he threw a punch at Sergeant Thunder and then started backing away.

He was done fighting.

Sergeant Thunder was inclined to pursue him, but then he looked up at the bizarre redness in the sky, and his expression flickered. Seemingly affected on an emotional

level, he suddenly coughed up a mouthful of blood. Then, as greenish-black coloring spread out across his skin, he started swaying back and forth as if about to topple over.

Xu Qing hurried over and offered him a steadying arm.

Sergeant Thunder gasped for breath as Xu Qing helped him over to a nearby tree and sat him down. Then Xu Qing turned and looked at the fleeing Captain Bloodshadow.

Sergeant Thunder grabbed his sleeve. "Don't go after him alone. He won't accomplish anything now that Squad Bloodshadow is wiped out." The old man looked up into the sky. "And this red sky. I feel like I've seen this before...."

"That man is a potential calamity," Xu Qing said.

He didn't like the idea of leaving loose ends around. What was more, he felt like he had an advantage in the forbidden region. If he could drag Flamecrow into death, maybe he could do the same with Captain Bloodshadow. However, Sergeant Thunder's words struck him, and he found himself looking up into the sky.

Right then....

The faint, indistinct sound of singing drifted through the jungle.

All of the howling mutant beasts out in the trees went completely silent.

The Singing grew clearer.

It was like a woman, bitterly complaining about her husband's departure. As the song echoed, a thin red fog appeared in the area where Captain Bloodshadow sped away. The fog spread, covering everything in the area.

Xu Qing shivered. And Sergeant Thunder, leaned up against the tree, also trembled. Both were looking in the direction the Singing came from.

The former seemed incomparably vigilant, while the latter... seemed dazed or even confused.

As the song entered Xu Qing's ears, he felt an indescribable coldness filling him, almost like the coldness he felt in the blood rain back in the city ruins.

Despite being in the third level of body refinement, he felt like he might not be able to take the cold. His teeth started chattering, and he felt like he couldn't move. His mind reeled as he suddenly thought back to the three dangers that Crucifix had mentioned back when they first entered the forbidden region. Visit www.v3l3t.com for new *novels*

Off in the distance, Captain Bloodshadow suddenly stopped in place and started shaking.

It was almost like some unseen figure had approached, and was draining him of the power to run.

As Xu Qing watched, streams of white energy seeped out of Captain Bloodshadow's eyes, ears, nose, and mouth, and flowed into the surrounding blood fog.

Then Captain Bloodshadow's body disintegrated, transforming into a desiccated corpse. Then the corpse collapsed into dust, leaving absolutely nothing behind.

The floating fog then rolled across the ground toward Xu Qing and Sergeant Thunder.

As it neared, Xu Qing trembled. And that was when he noticed that, in the spot where Captain Bloodshadow had died, there was... a tattered pair of red women's boots.

What...? Xu Qing's breath came in ragged pants, and his eyes were wide as he watched those boots start walking slowly toward him. Above the boots... was nothing but the bitter song, getting closer and closer.

It was as if an invisible woman wearing red boots was there, singing and walking.

What was more, it seemed like she was walking specifically toward Xu Qing.

The bizarre scene caused his pupils to constrict, and he felt the urge to flee, except he couldn't move. He was so cold he was frozen in place, his teeth chattering loudly. He could only watch as the boots neared, step by step, until they were less than two meters away. The threat of death filled Xu Qing's heart and mind. But he was stuck in place as countless blood-red strands of fog swirled toward him.

The pair of red boots took another step in his direction. But then... a hoarse, quavering voice spoke. It was Sergeant Thunder.

"Taohong... is that you...?" he asked, sounding uncertain.

The moment he spoke, the strange song stopped.

The boot, which had been about to step down, shifted direction. It made it seem like the woman had turned and was facing Sergeant Thunder.

Sergeant Thunder shivered visibly and was having a hard time breathing steadily. He was exhausted, and seemed to barely have the energy to stay conscious, yet his eyes shone with unprecedented brightness as he looked at the empty spot above the boots. It was as if his eyes were able to perceive a woman standing there, a woman who was incomparably important to him.

They looked at each other, separated by the void, by the world, as distantly as yin from yang.

Sergeant Thunder, strong and resilient, couldn't stop the tears from welling up in his eyes and flowing down his cheeks.

"You're... you're back...?" he said, reaching out with a trembling hand. The red boots slowly took a few more steps until they were right in front of him.

The invisible woman seemed to be kneeling in front of Sergeant Thunder, tenderly taking his trembling hand and putting it onto her face.

Except that Sergeant Thunder's hand wasn't touching anything.

His hand dropped. And his tears... flowed harder. He muttered something, indecipherable, yet filled with sorrow.

A long moment passed, and the woman sighed. The red boots turned around and walked away, circling around Xu Qing, and then disappeared along with the red fog.

"You ask when I'll return, my lord; I can't give a time.

"Hidden in the fog are scattered emotions; the song fades like smoke." [1]

The song continued, bitter and sorrowful, ever fading into the distance. The fog flowed past Xu Qing and Sergeant Thunder. Eventually, the Singing became too faint to hear and... the fog vanished.

Finally, Xu Qing felt he could move again. Eyes filled with shock, he turned to look at Sergeant Thunder sitting there against the tree. The old man was looking off into the distance, tears still flowing down his face.

Xu Qing didn't say anything. He didn't ask any questions.

Now wasn't the time.

After a long while, Sergeant Thunder spoke in a soft voice. "I bet you're wondering what that was about."

Xu Qing nodded silently.

"Like Crucifix said, I'm one of the few people who has heard the Singing." He continued to gaze off into the distance. "You know, most people who hear it end up dying. Those who survive are rare indeed.

“Any who live to tell the tale receive a little ‘gift’ from the forbidden region. And that is... the second time they hear the Singing, they’ll see the person they most want to see. I used to think it was just a story. And yet, it’s because of that story that I’ve stayed in the basecamp for decades, my hair turning white.... Today, I saw it.”

As the words left his mouth, Sergeant Thunder seemed to grow much older. The wrinkles on his face deepened, and weakness spread through him.

“Is there someone you’re separated from as distantly as yin from yang?” Sergeant Thunder muttered bitterly. “If so... don’t be like me. Don’t wait around this place. I saw the one I wanted to see, but now I feel empty....”

He closed his eyes, yet the tears continued to flow through the wrinkles on his face and fall onto his clothing.

Xu Qing looked back to the spot where the Singing had vanished, and felt himself being lost in memories.

There were people he wanted to see.

People he wanted to see very, very much.

1. The first line is from a poem called ‘Sent North on a Rainy Night’ by late Tang Dynasty poet Li Shangyin. The second line is written by Er Gen 🇨🇳

Deathblade's Thoughts

This chapter is unusually long. In the future I'll probably split chapters like this, but for now I'm not going to worry about it.

Thanks so much to aichaeon, Jobbie6488, and Unpale for the reviews. Er Gen and I appreciate it a lot! 🙏

Chapter 17: What Are You?

Perhaps because of the Singing, the cries of the mutant beasts never returned. That song seemed to be the sovereign of the jungle; even after it left, everything stayed completely silent.

Sergeant Thunder sat there quietly, staring off into the darkness.

Mixed emotions could be seen on Xu Qing’s face. After a while, he shifted his attention to Savage Ghost’s wolf tooth club and shattered shield. Like the other corpses, Savage Ghost’s body had turned into dust because of the Singing. He no longer existed. Most scavengers didn’t have family, so when they disappeared, few people cared. And even if they did have family, as the years passed, they would gradually be forgotten.

Xu Qing thought back to the slums, and one of the scholars that had treated him well. Before wasting away and dying of illness, that scholar had said something to the class.

“True suffering is when you can’t forget about someone you miss. True happiness is when someone else can’t forget about you.”

Back then, Xu Qing didn't really understand what he meant. But now, as he looked at Sergeant Thunder, he understood it completely. Instead of bothering the sergeant, he went over to the spot where Savage Ghost’s corpse had lain earlier. Taking out his dagger, he dug a hole in the dirt.

He hadn’t known Savage Ghost very well, nor had he spoken much to him. But Savage Ghost had taught him about the jungle, and they had fought together in the battle against the wolves. Xu Qing had also used Savage Ghost’s shield to protect himself from that black blood. So Xu Qing felt like he should do something. It was similar to how he’d cremated the corpses back in the city ruins. It took some effort, but he managed to dig a sizable hole. Inside of it, he buried Savage Ghost’s wolf tooth club and the remnants of his shield. Xu Qing’s expression was completely focused as he worked.

Unbeknownst to him, Sergeant Thunder eventually turned his attention from the depths of the forest to Xu Qing. He had the same surprised expression on his face as when he’d first laid eyes on Xu Qing in the city ruins. After watching him bury Savage Ghost’s equipment, he realized Xu Qing was looking for something to act as a gravestone.

“Scavengers don’t need gravestones,” Sergeant Thunder said quietly. “Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. That’s the life of a scavenger. We struggle in life, so in death... there’s no reason for a ceremony. Being able to rest in peace is more than enough.”

Sergeant Thunder was getting weaker. His injuries were very serious, and he had a lot of mutagen in him. Only moments after speaking, he closed his eyes and lapsed into unconsciousness.

Xu Qing walked over, pulled out some seven-leaf clover, and shoved it into the old sergeant’s mouth. He wasn’t sure if it would do anything, but he knew that it was an ingredient in the white boluses. Even if it dispelled a tiny bit of mutagen, it might help.

Having accomplished that, he managed to get Sergeant Thunder onto his back and tie him in place with some strips of torn cloth. Taking a deep breath, he started running through the jungle.

Upon passing the spot where Captain Bloodshadow had died, he noticed an animal hide sack, which he grabbed. Unfortunately, it contained random items and no medicinal pills.

About an hour later, Sergeant Thunder regained consciousness. It took him a moment to realize he was on Xu Qing's scrawny back, and that they were running. With his eyes open, he could only see the side of Xu Qing's face.

He said nothing.

However, Xu Qing could sense that he was awake.

"Feeling better?" he asked. "You can keep sleeping. It'll be a few more hours. I think we can get out of the forbidden region by daybreak."

Sergeant Thunder didn't respond immediately. He was old, and it was getting harder to hide how weak he was. With some effort he looked up at the dark sky, but it was hard to see. He could tell that he would pass out again soon.

"Kid," he murmured, "do you know why I took you with me when we left that city?"

Continuing to run, Xu Qing shook his head.

Voice even fainter, Sergeant Thunder asked, "Remember what you were doing when we met?"

"I remember." Xu Qing ran up a fallen log, then jabbed his hand out to grab a mutant lizard hiding in the shadows. Continuing to move, he threw it out in front of him. As soon as the lizard smacked into the ground, a host of writhing vines reached out and wrapped around it. The vines stabbed into the lizard's armor-like scales and began sucking out its flesh and blood.

Taking advantage of the situation, Xu Qing leaped over the vines and continued on his way.

Sergeant Thunder continued talking, but his voice was getting so faint it was hard to hear him.

"When I saw you cremating all those bodies, with the fire shining on you, it seemed like... you had brought a bit of warmth and kindness into this brutal world."

Xu Qing stopped running for a moment. Sergeant Thunder again fell into unconsciousness.

After taking a few deep breaths, Xu Qing once again ran through the depths of the jungle.

Time passed. Before long, two hours had gone by.

Xu Qing managed to avoid all dangers, and continued onward to the periphery of the jungle.

When the night sky was at its darkest, the cold in the forbidden region reached its peak. Thankfully, Xu Qing was constantly on the move, which kept his body warm, and fought back against the iciness.

And yet... the coldness grew more intense. After enough time had passed for an incense stick to burn, Xu Qing felt like the encroaching cold was overpowering the heat within him. Expression grim, he looked at the road ahead.

In front of him was a wall of thick fog. It was different from the blood fog that had come with the Singing, and didn't seem oppressive and dangerous. However, he could tell that once he got into that fog, it would be impossible to see anything clearly.

The darkness of night made it even worse. Xu Qing wished he could avoid it, but even after running parallel to it for quite some time, he saw no end to it.

He knew what this fog was.

When he first entered the forbidden region, Crucifix and Graceful Raptor had spoken of the dangers here, and one was called the Fog of Confusion. Anyone who entered that fog would end up lost inside of it. Once it formed, it would take a long time for it to dispel naturally.

Xu Qing had the feeling that he could just wait out the fog, since the mutagen in him wouldn't cause a problem. But Sergeant Thunder was getting weaker and weaker. If the sergeant got stuck because of the fog, it was possible he could experience mutation and die.

As a result, Xu Qing had no choice but to back up and keep trying to find a way around.

However... the fog was just too all-encompassing. Despite moving as quickly as possible, he eventually reached a point where he couldn't get out of the way of the expanding fog, and it swept over him. Yet, before long, the fog in the area immediately surrounding him grew thin, until he was left standing there looking confused.

He looked down at his feet.

He couldn't have a shadow in the middle of the dark night, but he could sense that the surrounding fog was being sucked into the area beneath his feet.

It was as though he had an invisible shadow that was now a vortex, pulling in everything around it.

The speed involved wasn't incredible, and after a short time, his shadow seemed to get full. At that point, the fog around Xu Qing grew dense once again.

However... after his shadow was finished absorbing the fog, power rebounded through Xu Qing, traveling to his eyes. After that, the fog became transparent to him. Or maybe it wasn't that he could see what was around him, but rather, could sense it!

The fog was still there, and it was incomparably dense, but his senses had reached a level that he didn't feel lost within it.

He looked at his feet again, yet still didn't see any shadow.

"What... are you?" he murmured.

After a moment, he looked around for a moment, then started moving again, trying to maintain top speed as he slipped through the fog like a specter.

Before long, he saw other living people in the fog. They were two scavengers that he remembered seeing back in the basecamp. They were clasping hands as they moved like blind people through the fog, slowly but surely feeling their way ahead.

However, Xu Qing could tell that what they thought was forward movement was actually leading them in a circle. Perhaps they knew that, too, as they were sweating profusely and seemed to be in the midst of despair.

After glancing at them, Xu Qing looked away and prepared to move on. He was not the kind of person who overflowed with sympathy. He lived in a brutal world, and wouldn't save people unless there was a reason. He had seen many situations in the slums in which the person being saved turned around and harmed their rescuer.

However, though the fog blocked sight, it didn't block sound, and the two scavengers detected the sound of Xu Qing's footsteps as he passed.

Nervous expressions overtook their face, as they couldn't tell if the footsteps belonged to a human or an animal. One of them suddenly released a ferocious howl, apparently hoping to frighten away the newcomer.

In contrast, the other scavenger cried out for help. And in a show of good faith, he pulled out a white bolus and some spirit coins from his sack, offering them as payment to be led to safety.

Xu Qing stopped moving and looked at the white bolus. Sergeant Thunder seemed very weak laying there on his back.

After some thought, he reached to his own sack and pulled out a candle. When he lit it, the flame was weak, but it was enough to push away the fog.

Putting the candle on the ground, he backed up a bit and then looked back toward the two scavengers.

“Walk seven paces to your left,” he said, “then ten paces to your right.”

Upon hearing his voice, the two scavengers trembled. Looks of wild hope appeared on their faces as they immediately followed Xu Qing’s instructions.

Thanks to Xu Qing, the two men threaded their way past some dangerous areas, and were soon in the area where the flame of his candle had dispersed the fog in the immediate area.

Upon entering that area and seeing the candle, they rushed over excitedly to stand next to it.

Xu Qing was a few paces off, still visible, but deep enough in the foggy darkness that the two scavengers couldn’t make him out clearly.

“Give me that white bolus,” he said coolly.

The one with the bolus shivered. Given that he’d just been given a new lease on life, he took out the bag of spirit coins and white bolus and tossed them to Xu Qing, offering his thanks along with it.

The other man also seemed about ready to pull out a medicinal pill. But then he looked at Xu Qing and suddenly seemed to change his mind. Although he couldn’t see Xu Qing clearly, there was enough of him visible to make it obvious he was a scrawny young man with an unconscious person on his back.

The scavenger’s eyes glittered, and he smiled. “I already consumed all my white boluses, young friend. But don’t worry. Once the fog is gone, or if you have a way to get us out of here, I’ll make sure to repay you.”

His eyes flashed as he looked at Xu Qing, as if he was thinking about making a move.

His companion was also seeming to have second thoughts at having handed over his pills and coins so quickly.

Xu Qing looked at the white bolus, and then the scavengers. He didn’t say anything. Instead, he waved his hand, causing a wind to blow out and extinguish the candle. Instantly, darkness and fog returned to the area.

Approaching the man who’d just spoken, Xu Qing grabbed his sack away from him.

“Never mind,” Xu Qing said. “You can just stay here.” Fôllôw *n*ew stories at [no/v\(e\)lb/in\(.\)com](http://no/v(e)lb/in(.)com)

“Wait. Wait! I’m sorry. It was a mistake. You can have my white boluses. I...”

He reached out as if to grab his sack back, but his foot caught on a protruding root, and he fell to the ground. Climbing back to his feet, he panted and looked around with regret in his eyes. “Let me explain, young friend! I...”

Xu Qing ignored him and walked in the direction of the man who’d given him the white boluses, who looked alarmed at being thrust back into the fog.

As Xu Qing passed him, he coolly said, “Follow the sound of my footsteps.”

Without another word, and without looking back, he continued on his way. Behind him, the man followed, now rejoicing that he’d been so quick to hand over the requested items.

That was especially true when he heard the mournful cries of the other man, and how they soon turned into wild curses. No matter what that man said, he couldn’t remove the despair from his voice. As the follower continued after Xu Qing, he trembled, and felt deep respect growing within him.

Deathblade's Thoughts

Many thanks to SquidDragon, Asura_va, Kaining, mlavarius, Zero Life Night Vision, and EvilFruit for the reviews! It's very much appreciated! Seriously, y'all are amazing, and have blown me away with the reviews. Thank you!

Chapter 18: Grandmaster Bai

Xu Qing didn’t pay attention to the man following him. As he continued through the fog, he fed the white bolus to Sergeant Thunder.

Whether it was because of the pill or the seven-leaf clover, the greenish-black color had stopped spreading across his face. However, there was still too much mutagen within him. Not even the white bolus was enough to reverse its effects.

Because of that, he remained unconscious. What he had experienced in this mission in the forbidden region had been too much for him.

And thus... in the depths of the night, Xu Qing continued through the fog. Along the way, he encountered more scavengers, with whom he traded white boluses in exchange for safe passage out. All they had to do was follow his footsteps.

There were some fools who didn’t cooperate. They became stark examples for the people who agreed to follow Xu Qing. And the respect in the latter group grew. All of them had come to the conclusion that Xu Qing was one of those rare people born with

psychic powers; after all, that was the only type of person who could deal with the Fog of Confusion.

Graceful Raptor had told Xu Qing about people like that. When he'd traded for the white boluses, he was also thinking about this, and let the misunderstanding happen so as to conceal his real secrets.

After giving Sergeant Thunder over a dozen white boluses, his complexion had improved. Instead of being greenish-black, it was just greenish. He also seemed to have an easier time breathing.

At the same time, Xu Qing realized that his shadow couldn't feed power into him for very long.

As he moved onward, he realized that the fog wasn't as transparent as before. Things started getting hazy until, eventually, he was seeing the same thing as everyone else.

Thankfully, he was already close to leaving the fog.

Despite losing his ability to see clearly, he moved even faster than before. Darkness was fading from the sky, and the morning sun peeked over the distant horizon. As the light of dawn spilled over the lands, Xu Qing finally emerged from the foliage with Sergeant Thunder on his back.

He felt a bit emotional as he sped out into the outside world and left the jungle behind. No longer was he surrounded by sinister coldness. Instead, he felt a gentle breeze and warm sunlight.

In fact, the sun forced him to squint as he stood there, taking in great breaths of fresh air.

Those who had been following him also emerged, and were finally able to see their surroundings clearly. They had all lived through a perilous ordeal in which they almost died. Every member of that disparate group was excited. One old man even dropped onto his hands and knees, and kissed the dirt.

It was only at this point that they were able to see who they had been following. It was young Xu Qing, carrying Sergeant Thunder. Only a few of them recognized the former, but all of them were familiar with the latter. This was a sight they wouldn't forget, and Xu Qing himself had made a deep impression on them.

"Kid!"

"Sergeant Thunder!"

Then Xu Qing glanced back at them, and they instinctively closed their mouths.

Truth be told, the way Xu Qing had dealt with the evil-hearted scavengers he had encountered left this group of survivors with feelings of awe. Visit www.v3lb.com for new novels

Ignoring the followers, Xu Qing was just about to start running again when he saw two figures racing in their direction.

They were none other than Crucifix and Graceful Raptor. They had not returned to the basecamp, but had instead been waiting anxiously just outside the forbidden region. And they had already decided that if Sergeant Thunder and the rest of the squad members didn't emerge soon, they would go back in to rescue them.

Then they saw Xu Qing off in the distance, and raced to his side.

When Crucifix laid eyes on Sergeant Thunder, his pupils constricted. Then he looked at Xu Qing, and his gaze softened. Graceful Raptor also looked shocked, and killing intent burned in her eyes as she glared at the people following Xu Qing.

The group shrank back, panting in anxiety.

"They weren't involved," Xu Qing said. "In fact, I have them to thank. Without their aid, Sergeant Thunder wouldn't have made it."

Graceful Raptor's killing intent faded, and the followers breathed sighs of relief. Clapping hands and bowing in both respect and thanks, they went their own ways.

After they were gone, Crucifix stepped forward to take Sergeant Thunder off of Xu Qing's back. Xu Qing stopped him.

"Let him sleep," he said. "I'm fine."

"Fine," Crucifix said. "Let's get back to the basecamp and get the sarge to the physician." He took out another white bolus for Sergeant Thunder. Then the three of them raced toward the camp.

Along the way, Graceful Raptor seemed to be working hard to keep her mouth shut. But finally, she couldn't help but ask, "What about Savage Ghost? Is Squad Bloodshadow still following you?"

Xu Qing took a moment before answering. "Savage Ghost experienced mutation and died in battle."

Crucifix and Graceful Raptor stopped in place. Though they had been prepared for an answer like this, they couldn't prevent their eyes from filling with grief. Graceful Raptor looked downright despondent.

However, the next thing that Xu Qing said left them completely astonished.

“Squad Bloodshadow was wiped out.”

“That’s how the sarge got hurt so bad,” Graceful Raptor muttered, “and also why his mutagen levels are so severely high....”

Graceful Raptor seemed content with the explanation. But Crucifix had a dubious expression on his face, as though he suspected there were more to the story. He even gave Xu Qing a deep look. However, he didn’t ask any further questions.

Nor did Xu Qing offer any explanations, or mention the Singing. That was Sergeant Thunder’s secret to keep, and it wasn’t Xu Qing’s place to make decisions about revealing it.

The three of them raced back to the basecamp, immediately heading to the caravan area in the middle, where the famous physician was taking patients.

When Squad Thunderbolt appeared, the others waiting in line could sense their somber and desolate mood. And when they saw the unconscious Sergeant Thunder, they moved out of the way. Thus, Squad Thunderbolt took the first place in line outside the physician’s tent.

It was a big tent that emanated a medicinal aroma. Guards in plate armor stood by in the tent, where the physician was examining a scavenger who had a pained expression on his face.

The physician was a skinny old man wearing a clean gray robe. He had a wrinkled face, but his eyes were lively and full of wisdom. In fact, they sparkled like stars, making it seem like he could see into the heart of whomever he looked at.

He was flanked by a young man and a young woman.

The young man seemed about the same age as Xu Qing. He wore a blue silk garment and his hair was tied with a black jade headband. Hanging at his waist was a piece of fine jade carved into the shape of a dragon, with a golden tassel that spread out on the cushion he sat on. He was handsome and well-kempt, but seemed like he was barely awake. His chin currently rested in his palm, and though he had an alchemy textbook in the other hand, he wasn’t even looking at it. Instead, he kept yawning.

On the other side of the physician was a young woman of about sixteen or seventeen years of age. She wore a long, blue skirt, and had a waterfall of black hair that framed a perfect, oval face. Her skin was as fair as snow, and her facial features were outstandingly beautiful. Her eyes, bright and clear, sparkled like the stars, and when she glanced at her companion and saw him dozing off, she smiled, then returned her attention to the medicinal codex she was studying. When she smiled, her eyes became

like crescent moons overflowing with lingering charm. Her facial expression seemed noble, ensuring that anyone who looked at her would marvel at her grace and elegance.

This lovely young pair exuded a purity that scavengers rarely saw. In their presence, Graceful Raptor felt a bit self-conscious, and Crucifix couldn't hold back from glancing at them repeatedly.

As for Xu Qing, he was mostly interested in the medicinal books they were studying. Upon seeing them, his eyes glinted with envy. Then he forced his eyes away from the books and focused on the physician.

The physician was currently explaining a few things to his scavenger patient. The scavenger offered profuse thanks, then left, whereupon the physician washed his hands in a copper bowl off to the side, then looked at Xu Qing and the others.

His gaze stopped briefly on Xu Qing, and he looked a bit closer at him, then went on to look at Sergeant Thunder.

"Put him down here," he said.

For some reason, Xu Qing felt nervous when the old physician looked at him. It was the same feeling he remembered when attending class with the scholars back in the slums.

With Crucifix's help, he set Sergeant Thunder down carefully in front of the physician.

Sergeant Thunder's eyes flickered open, and he looked around in surprise. Then he saw everyone around him, and was about to struggle into a sitting position.

"Lay still," the physician said coolly.

Sergeant Thunder looked up at him, and their eyes met. Then Sergeant Thunder continued to struggle up. Crucifix hurried forward and helped him to his feet. When Sergeant Thunder was able, he clasped hands to the physician.

"I got hurt, so they brought me here. I don't want to cause you any trouble, Grandmaster Bai. I'm fine."

"You know me?" the old physician asked curiously.

Sergeant Thunder nodded and respectfully said, "A few years ago I had a chance to see you from a distance."

Grandmaster Bai looked at him deeply for a moment. "Your injury isn't severe. And the mutagen in you has already been suppressed. But your mental state is an issue. You've obviously had some big ups and downs emotionally, and it's damaged your heart and

blood vessels. Combine everything, and it's troublesome. I can treat you, but... the real issue doesn't have to do with the recent injuries.

"You sustained internal injuries years ago, didn't you? Someone crippled your cultivation base, though you managed to rebuild it over the years, which is quite an accomplishment.

"However, when you combine everything that's happened to you, you can say that you've overtaxed your system in a way that common herbs and minerals can't treat. Not even I have the ability to fix you. I'll give you some medicine that will help a bit. The rest will be up to luck.

"There's one thing you need to realize. Going forward, you cannot practice cultivation or do breathing exercises. If you do, the mutagen will cause your old internal injury to flare up. And then... you'll die beyond the shadow of a doubt."

Crucifix and Graceful Raptor took in Grandmaster Bai's words without comment. Clearly, they were aware that Sergeant Thunder's cultivation base had been crippled in the past. But it was Xu Qing's first time hearing of the matter. Looking at Sergeant Thunder, he thought back to the Singing, and the blood-colored women's boots.

"There's nothing else we can do?" Crucifix asked gloomily.

"There is," Grandmaster Bai replied. "If you could find a precious material such as a lifespan flower, he might get a new lease on life. A few years ago, I heard that the forbidden region here produced one such flower."

Crucifix didn't respond, and Graceful Raptor seemed worried. But when Xu Qing looked at Sergeant Thunder, the man looked calm, and he even gave a faint smile.

"It's not a big deal," Sergeant Thunder said, "just an old injury. I'm sorry for bothering you, Grandmaster Bai." Clasp hands once again, Sergeant Thunder gathered Xu Qing and the others to leave.

After everyone had offered formal thanks, they took the medicine prescribed by Grandmaster Bai and left.

As for Xu Qing, he had the feeling that, when they had clasped hands upon leaving, Grandmaster Bai had been looking closely at him.

After leaving the physician's tent, the surviving members of Squad Thunderbolt didn't say anything to each other.

They returned to Sergeant Thunder's residence, where both Crucifix and Graceful Raptor seemed like they wanted to say something. Sergeant Thunder interrupted and told them to leave.

When they were gone, Sergeant Thunder got some tobacco from his cabin, took a pipe out of his sack, and started smoking. As the smoke drifted about, he sighed and looked at Xu Qing with an expression of concern.

Waving away some of the smoke, he smiled and said, "I couldn't even think about smoking in the forbidden region, but now we're back. This feels great. Smoking is much better than any kind of medicine."

Xu Qing opened his mouth to reply, but Sergeant Thunder cut him off.

"What do you want to eat? I'll cook. And... we can drink together."

From what Xu Qing could tell, Sergeant Thunder wasn't interested in talking about the recent events. After a moment, Xu Qing nodded. "Let's eat snake."

Deathblade's Thoughts

Thanks so much for the review, Penguinos! Long live the F5 Sect!!!

Chapter 19: Life

The scavenger basecamp was known to have everything required for day-to-day life. Also, it had a lot of meat. Because of its proximity to the forbidden region, scavengers came and went on a daily basis, and they needed to eat. Meat. So there were vendor stalls set up for just that purpose.

Upon hearing that Xu Qing wanted to eat snake, a vibrant smile broke out on Sergeant Thunder's wrinkled face. It wasn't lost on him that Xu Qing obviously remembered his love of snake meat.

Before Xu Qing could go out, though, the old man blocked his path.

"There are a lot of crafty people in this camp," he said. "And you're not familiar with all the mutant beasts that live in the forbidden region. More than likely, you'll end up getting scammed. I'll buy the meat."

Upon hearing the word 'scam,' Xu Qing subconsciously rubbed his iron skewer, thought for a moment, then said, "Nobody's gonna be scamming me."

Sergeant Thunder eyed the skewer, then laughed involuntarily. Without another word, he walked out.

After the old man was gone, Xu Qing went to the kitchen, carefully cleaned everything up, and then set the table. The last thing he did was place a third set of tableware down. As he put the extra bowl and chopsticks out, he suddenly realized something.

“The third set... is for someone who’ll never come.” Thinking back to those words, he moved the third set of tableware next to Sergeant Thunder’s place at the table.

He did the same with the third chair.

Having accomplished these things, he looked back out at the courtyard. It was evening, and a cold wind blew a few snowflakes along with it.

In the eastern part of South Phoenix, the end of the third month was when warmth returned to the lands. Plants bloomed and animals awoke from hibernation. But winter rarely relinquished its hold willingly, and used the occasional snowfall to remind everyone it was still around.

As dusk grew deeper, the wind carried more and more snowflakes into the courtyard. As they fell from heaven into the world of men, however, they landed on the ground and melted.

Eventually, everything was muddy.

No matter how high of a vantage point one could attain, and no matter how clean that person was, it was impossible to avoid the reality that the human world was filled with filth that could never be wiped clean.

It was hard to say if the coldness of the wind caused the snowflakes to appear, or if the appearance of the snowflakes caused the wind to become colder. Either way, as the wind blew across the lands, through the basecamp, and into the courtyard, Xu Qing felt chilled to the bone.

He was a cultivator, but still couldn’t forget the deep-seated fear of the cold that he had harbored for years. As such, he felt uncomfortable.

Eventually, he noticed a figure lurching along through the cold wind and snow. When the figure opened the gate to the courtyard and stepped inside, he was smiling.

“We got lucky, Kid. Look at this. It’s a safflower snake. Their meat is exceptionally good. You just wait, I’m going to show you how good I am in the kitchen.”[DiisCoover updated novels on n\(o\)v./e/lbin\(.\)com](http://DiisCoover.updatednovels.on(n)o.v./e/lbin(.)com)

With that, Sergeant Thunder carried the dead snake inside. When he saw how clean the kitchen was, and how the table had been set, his smile widened. Looking at Xu Qing, he asked, “Want to learn how to cook a snake?”

“Yeah,” Xu Qing replied, his eyes shining. He loved learning new things, and besides, he already knew how well Sergeant Thunder could cook.

Smiling, Sergeant Thunder beckoned Xu Qing to his side and started working, explaining as he did.

“You know, most people think you should cut off both the snake’s head and tail when you cook it. Well, the snake’s excretions come from the tail area, so you do need to remove that part. But not the head. As long as you’re careful to remove the venom, the head will add a lot of flavor to the dish as a whole.”

Sergeant Thunder absolutely loved talking about cooking. Xu Qing watched and listened carefully as Sergeant Thunder cleaned the snake, skinned it, removed the offal, then prepared the meat.

“Remember, Kid, if you just eat the meat plain, it won’t have any flavor. You need a good broth to go along with it.”

Sergeant Thunder started boiling some water in an earthenware pot, then added numerous herbs and spices. Finally, he put the snake head in.

Before long, a fragrant aroma filled the air, and Xu Qing started salivating. Seeing this, Sergeant Thunder laughed heartily, took out a clean wok, and stir-fried the rest of the meat. Hissing and popping sounds filled the kitchen, and the fragrant aroma grew so strong it drifted outside.

The frigid coldness was driven away, and Xu Qing’s stomach rumbled loudly. As he looked at the sizzling snake meat, his eyes grew wider and wider.

Finally, Sergeant Thunder finished frying the meat, whereupon he dumped it into the earthenware pot and closed the lid.

“Are you going to remember all that?” he asked.

Xu Qing eyed the earthenware pot and nodded. The process didn’t seem very hard as far as he was concerned.

Sergeant Thunder smiled, left the kitchen, and came back with two flagons of liquor. One he gave to Xu Qing, the other he kept. Taking a sip, he sighed.

“Meat’s easy to find in this camp. But liquor... ahhhh. It’s a lot more rare.”

Xu Qing lifted the flagon and looked at the cloudy liquid inside. He’d never consumed alcohol before. According to Sergeant Thunder, liquor was rare. And Xu Qing remembered that alcohol didn’t even exist back in the slums; only adults in the city had drunk it. Seeing how much Sergeant Thunder seemed to enjoy it, Xu Qing put the flagon to his lips and drank a mouthful. It burned, but he forced himself to swallow. Warmth slid down his throat and into his belly, where it seemed to explode, sending out

a current of heat into the rest of his body. He exhaled, nearly coughing, and could smell the alcohol on his own breath.

“It’s disgusting,” he said, looking at Sergeant Thunder.

The old man threw his head back and roared with laughter. Pointing at Xu Qing, he said, “You’re too young to appreciate the flavor of liquor. You’ll like it when you’re older.”

With that, he reached out to take the flagon from Xu Qing. However, Xu Qing pulled it away.

“Let me try again.” He took another drink, and though he frowned, he felt like he was already getting used to the unusual flavor.

Time passed as they drank together, Sergeant Thunder poking fun and joking with Xu Qing the entire time. Eventually, the meat was done.

When Sergeant Thunder put the earthenware pot on the table and removed the lid, the delicious aroma billowed out. Xu Qing felt his throat twitching. Putting the flagon down, he waited for Sergeant Thunder to take the first piece of meat. Then he used his own chopsticks to stab a piece and put it in his mouth. As before, he couldn’t hold back from wolfing down the food like he usually did.

And thus, as the snow fell outside and the wind blew, an old man and a young one ate and drank together, warmth filling them.

As Sergeant Thunder watched Xu Qing awkwardly work with the chopsticks, a tender look appeared in his eyes.

He’s a good kid. It’s too bad he lives in such a brutal world.

The cabin had cracks in it, which allowed bits of snow to blow inside. When they landed on Xu Qing, it didn’t matter that he was sweating from the food, he still didn’t like the cold sensation, and huddled in on himself a bit.

Sergeant Thunder noticed, but didn’t say anything.

Time passed. Xu Qing watched how Sergeant Thunder drank and learned from him, taking a sip, then exhaling the fragrance of the alcohol. At a certain point, he looked at this old man who had taken him out of the city ruins, and said, “Your injury...?”

“I’ll be okay. I’ve dealt with it for years now. I won’t die easily. I’m fine.”

Xu Qing nodded. He’d wanted to ask about how Sergeant Thunder’s cultivation base got crippled to begin with. But after thinking back to what happened in the forbidden region, he held his tongue.

They enjoyed the meal for quite a while, until finally Sergeant Thunder finished his alcohol. At that point the old man stood, his eyes a bit cloudy as he returned to his cabin. Xu Qing suddenly realized that the trip to the forbidden region had taken away some of the sergeant's previous imposing manner.

He sat alone for a time before getting up to clean the kitchen and wash the dishes. When the work was done, he went back to his cabin. Sitting on the bed, he watched the snow falling outside the window, and eventually curled up and took out the sack that had once belonged to Captain Bloodshadow. There were no medicinal pills inside. But there were a lot of spirit coins, as well as some random things.

There was a set of black gauntlets made, not from leather, but metal. Xu Qing tried them on and found that they were very tough, and would be a big advantage to his defenses. He threw a few experimental punches, and was very happy with the results. Taking the gauntlets off, he sat down and went into some breathing exercises.

The night passed without incident.

It was still snowing in the morning, but it was warmer than the previous night. However, there was enough leftover cold that the snow stuck.

Upon walking out of his cabin, Xu Qing saw the snow on the ground and wrapped his clothes a bit tighter around him. Glancing at Sergeant Thunder's cabin, he left the courtyard. His goal for the morning was to find some white boluses to buy for the sergeant.

His feet crunched in the snow as he headed toward the general store.

Along the way, he passed by Grandmaster Bai's tent, where he heard the voices of that young man and woman from the day before. They were reading books aloud, which caused Xu Qing to stop and listen enviously.

After a short time, he looked away from the tent and continued to the general store.

As he neared, he saw the girl from the beast trial, working hard to sweep the snow from the front of the store. Her garments were tattered, her hands were red, and her breath puffed in front of her as she worked. He hadn't seen her for a few days, but it seemed that she was already used to life in the basecamp. She looked tired, but she was working spiritedly.

The snow still fell, but she swept anyway. In the morning light, the scar on her face seemed even more prominent. She noticed him as she approached, and looked up. She smiled.

"Morning!"

“Morning...” Xu Qing mumbled back. He wasn’t used to calling out greetings. Nodding at her, he looked into the store. Perhaps because it was early, or perhaps it was the cold, but either way the store was empty.

“What do you want to buy?” the girl asked. “I’ll get it for you.”

He looked at her. “White boluses.”

Placing her broom against the wall, she led Xu Qing inside. Running to one of the counters, she rummaged around and pulled out a few sacks. Looking through them, she picked one specific sack and handed it to Xu Qing.

“The owner said we can only sell five per day,” she said, looking a bit sheepish.

Xu Qing took the sack and looked through it carefully. To his surprise, the white boluses inside were of a much higher quality than the ones he’d purchased before. In fact, three of them didn’t have any green coloration at all, and emitted a faint medicinal aroma.

Thinking about how the girl had been so specific about which bag to take out, Xu Qing looked up at her.

She blinked a few times, smiled, and then said, “Don’t worry about it. I’m allowed to do this.”

“Thank you.”

She flashed a radiant smile. “No need for thanks. I should be thanking you. If it wasn’t for you, I wouldn’t be alive right now.”

Her words seemed to remind her of something, so as she escorted Xu Qing to the door, she quietly said, “I heard the shop owner mention that a lot of young people have gone missing in the forbidden region recently. And based on his expression, I got the impression he didn’t think it was because of the forbidden region itself. More like... people are responsible. Just... be careful.”

From the look in the girl’s eyes, she seemed to be genuinely concerned about him, and Xu Qing wasn’t really sure how to respond. Nodding, he thanked her and left.

Some distance away, he looked over his shoulder and saw that the girl once again was sweeping the snow. For some reason, her scar seemed very prominent on her face.

All of a sudden, Xu Qing remembered Sergeant Thunder’s story about how the temple in the forbidden region had some sort of crystal that could remove scars.

If I have a chance, I’ll get one of them for her.

As he walked away, he left a trail through the snow. Behind him... the snow fell harder.

Deathblade's Thoughts

Thank you to Deathwalker, DaoistFilth, Slayer Kh, Eric Rasputin, The Last Daoist and Venerable Tengoku for the reviews. Very much appreciated!!! I'm really taken aback by all the reviews.

Incidentally, it's been a while since I posted on Wuxiaworld. I like this "favorite chapter" feature. I'm adding this one to my list.

Chapter 20: Home?

Xu Qing walked through the wind and snow back to the courtyard. Before he even entered, he heard Sergeant Thunder laughing from inside. He also heard the sound of barking. Pushing open the main gate, he saw about a dozen stray dogs in the courtyard. They froze in place, looking at him coldly, and he looked back. He didn't do anything threatening, just look at them, yet they still growled and backed away from him, their hackles raised.

He heard talking coming from Sergeant Thunder's cabin, then the door opened and Crucifix and Graceful Raptor walked out. Upon seeing Xu Qing, and then the stray dogs, Crucifix grinned.

Kneeling, Graceful Raptor patted the head of the nearest dog, smiled, and said, "They're saying you have a very strong baleful aura, Kid."

Xu Qing didn't respond, but instead looked over at Sergeant Thunder, who was also walking out of the cabin.

The old man wore a thick leather jerkin and had a pipe in his hand. Gesturing at Graceful Raptor, he said, "My little girl Graceful Raptor said that, because of my injury, she's worried about my safety in the camp. So she assigned these dogs to guard the courtyard."

There was additional meaning to Sergeant Thunder's words that Xu Qing picked up on. Because Xu Qing hadn't told anyone about how they heard the Singing, Sergeant Thunder had returned the favor and not revealed the details of what Xu Qing had accomplished.

Xu Qing nodded, then pulled out the bag of white boluses and tossed them to Sergeant Thunder.

The old man glanced at them and smiled. "Alright, alright. I have to admit I need these things. But from now on, don't go buying them for me. I have enough money saved up

to buy them for myself. Crucifix.” He looked at the man. “Now that the Kid’s back, you can tell him.”

The smile left Crucifix’s face, to be replaced by a more somber expression. “We came for two reasons. The first was to bring that special medicine for the sarge. Graceful Raptor and I bought enough to last for a month. Once that supply is used up, we’ll get more.” At this point, Crucifix pulled a sack of animal hide out and placed it off to the side.

“The second matter,” he continued, “is this: because Squad Bloodshadow was completely eliminated, our squad brought in the biggest harvest of seven-leaf clovers. Other scavengers brought in bits and pieces, but nowhere close to us.

“Yesterday, Graceful Raptor and I went to hand our collection in to the camp owner, and we got a big reward. However... the camp owner is as stingy as ever, and instead of giving us three dustpurging pills, he only gave us one.” Crucifix looked at Graceful Raptor.

She pulled out four sacks, put one off to the side, and also took out a wooden box. Upon opening the box, Xu Qing could see a pigeon-egg-sized medicinal pill inside, cyan in color. The medicinal aroma that wafted off of it was vastly superior to that of a white bolus.

“Savage Ghost didn’t have any family, so I split his share between the rest of us. These four bags are the spirit coin reward. And as for the dustpurging pill....”

Crucifix looked at Sergeant Thunder, obviously waiting for him to make a decision about what to do with it.

“Give it to the Kid,” the old man said coolly. At that moment, there was no question that he was in charge of Squad Thunderbolt.

Crucifix nodded. Graceful Raptor looked surprised, then thoughtful. Both of them had asked Sergeant Thunder what happened in the jungle, but the sergeant never answered their questions. But given his decision regarding the loot, it was now fairly obvious.

“As for Savage Ghost’s share... you split it up right. After all, we’re his family.”

With a sigh, Sergeant Thunder picked up his share of the reward, as did Crucifix and Graceful Raptor. Xu Qing followed suit.

Then Graceful Raptor offered Xu Qing the dustpurging pill. Xu Qing glanced at Sergeant Thunder first, and from the look in his eye, realized the old man was very serious about his decision. Xu Qing took the pill.

There was some further chatting, primarily between Crucifix, Graceful Raptor, and Sergeant Thunder. Xu Qing remained silent as usual and just listened to the conversation.

That said, Crucifix and Graceful Raptor didn't ignore him, and even asked him a few questions now and then. Time passed. Eventually, it was noontime, and the snow had stopped falling temporarily. Crucifix and Graceful Raptor bid farewell and prepared to leave.

Just before leaving through the main gate, Crucifix turned to Xu Qing and said, "Kid. Graceful Raptor and I took a mission. We'll be gone for a while, so... you take care of the sarge while we're away." Then he pulled out a dagger which he handed to Xu Qing. "Your old dagger is too rusty. Use this one instead. It's sharp."

Next, Graceful Raptor gave Xu Qing a whistle.

"Kid, you're strong. But you need eyes around the camp sometimes, and maybe even other help. This whistle will give you rudimentary control of the stray dogs in the camp. When you need them, blow the whistle. They're smart, and they'll be able to figure out what you need."

Then the two of them offered him some more advice and warnings. Finally, they clasped hands to Xu Qing and took their leave.

Watching them leave, Xu Qing put the whistle away and tucked the new dagger into his boot. However, he didn't throw his old dagger away.

Eventually, Crucifix and Graceful Raptor disappeared from sight, so Xu Qing turned back to look at Sergeant Thunder's cabin. Then he made his way past all the dogs into his cabin. There, he sat down cross-legged to meditate.

The wind screamed outside, and more snow fell. The snow in the sky seemed to merge with the snow on the ground, seeping through the cracks in cabins and tents alike, startling those within.

Sergeant Thunder was resting in his cabin, but he had long since grown used to the freezing wind, and hardly noticed. However, the old man couldn't help but recall the image of Xu Qing huddling in on himself because of the cold. He glanced over at Xu Qing's cabin, then after some thought, put on a leather snow hat and walked out.

In the blink of an eye, three days passed.

During that entire time, the snow fell hard. Every time it seemed like it would stop, it came back with renewed vigor. The snow didn't have time to melt, and eventually, it built up thick on the ground. It was nasty weather, but scavengers lived harsh, cold lives anyway, and it couldn't compare to that.

The population in the camp seemed to be growing slowly. Some people visited the physician, others headed to the forbidden region.

Eventually, people noticed that Squad Bloodshadow hadn't returned. Rumors swirled. Then, a story started to spread that the squad had been wiped out in the forbidden region. At first, few people believed that story. After all, every member of Squad Bloodshadow was formidable and well-known. That was especially true of their captain, who was one of the strongest experts in the camp. The squad had been into the forbidden region too many times to count, so it seemed unlikely that they would suffer a complete defeat.

However, after two days passed in which there wasn't a hint of anyone from Bloodshadow coming back to the camp, people started to believe the rumors. Then people connected the fact that Sergeant Thunder had returned to the camp unconscious, and that Savage Ghost had seemingly disappeared. At that point, people started putting the puzzle pieces together.

Regardless of the truth, Bloodshadow was gone, which meant that Thunderbolt was the strongest squad around.

Because of that, whenever Xu Qing went out into the camp, he noticed the respectful looks given to him by the other scavengers.

Of course, they were giving respect to Squad Thunderbolt, not him personally. Either way, he was starting to get a bit suspicious as to why Sergeant Thunder was leaving early and coming back late every day. He seemed to be busy with some task, but Xu Qing wasn't sure what.

Of course, Xu Qing knew that people had a right to privacy, so he didn't ask any questions. Furthermore, he had a lot of his own goals to work on. For one thing, he spent most of his time in his cabin working on his cultivation. Due to his hard work, his cultivation base improved, slowly increasing both his strength and speed.

He also put time into studying his shadow. So far, he couldn't identify anything different about it. However, it did absorb the mutagen, which caused the mutation blotch on his arm to fade even further. His body felt pure and clean, which in turn made his cultivation progress even more quickly than before.

Two days later in the afternoon, when he was sitting in meditation and preparing to stabilize himself after his recent progress and possibly attempt a breakthrough into the fourth level of the Sea and Mountain Incantation, he frowned, then opened his eyes.

He heard dogs barking outside, and then realized someone was knocking on the main gate of the courtyard.

Upon leaving his cabin, he checked to confirm that Sergeant Thunder wasn't around, then looked at the gate. Standing there was a scavenger with a hesitant expression on his face.

It only took a moment for Xu Qing to realize that this was one of the handful of people he had saved from the Fog of Confusion in the forbidden region. Upon seeing Xu Qing, the scavenger clasped hands and bowed.

"Brother Kid, it's me! Boneblade!"

"How can I help you?" Xu Qing replied in a cool tone, his face completely expressionless.

"Er..." Boneblade said. He hesitated briefly, then seemed to make up his mind. Gritting his teeth, he continued, "Brother Kid, I want to buy insurance from you. Here are five white boluses for the payment." He tossed a sack to Xu Qing.

Xu Qing didn't catch it. Instead, he let it fall to the ground and looked suspiciously at the man. Around them, the stray dogs stared but didn't approach.

Sensing Xu Qing's suspicious attitude, Boneblade launched into a further explanation. As he talked, Xu Qing gradually understood what he meant by 'insurance.' The man was planning a trip to the Poisonous Dragon Pond in the forbidden region. If he didn't return in three days, he wanted Xu Qing to come rescue him.

"Brother Kid, I'm not worried about the mutant beasts in the forbidden region. If they kill me, that's just fate. But I'm terrified of the Fog of Confusion. I really don't want to die in that fog."

Xu Qing had a somewhat odd expression on his face. He was really taken aback that Boneblade would ask for something like this. After some thought, he said, "What happens if you don't run into the fog during those three days? What if you make it out fine?"

"You can keep the pills. I'll consider them a payment for peace of mind." Boneblade clasped hands and bowed deeply to Xu Qing, a pleading expression on his face.

Thinking about it some more, Xu Qing opened the bag with the tip of his foot and examined the contents.

There were five white boluses inside, and of course, he didn't need them. However, they were treated as currency in the camp, so in the end, he decided that he might as well take them.

He nodded. Discover new stories at

Upon seeing that Xu Qing was agreeing to the offer, Boneblade heaved a sigh of relief. Offering profound thanks, he bowed again and then left.

Xu Qing picked up the bag and looked at it again through narrowed eyes. He was a vigilant person by nature, and didn't completely trust Boneblade. However, it didn't seem like this was a trap.

If the fog didn't arise, he wouldn't have to do anything. And if Boneblade had the ability to predict when the fog would appear three days in advance, why would he need to hatch plots against people like Xu Qing?

That said, Xu Qing didn't let his guard down, and would worry about dealing with the fog if and when it became an issue.

Going back into his cabin, he started meditating again. The night passed quickly.

The next morning at dawn, he finished his session of cultivation, and looked out into the courtyard. The dogs were barking again.

Heading out, he was met with a strange sight. Sergeant Thunder was packing his belongings into a number of packages and parcels, which he then tied onto the backs of the dogs. The dogs' tongues lolled out, and some seemed about to buckle under the weight.

Wiping the sweat from his brow, Sergeant Thunder said, "Finished with your cultivation? Let's go. I want to take you somewhere."

Smiling, he patted the head of the nearest dog, then opened the gate and beckoned for Xu Qing to follow him.

Xu Qing was confused, but went along. The dogs followed them as they headed into the central part of the basecamp.

When they passed from the middle ring to the inner ring, they walked past more shops. Most of the houses were built with tiles and brick, and seemed very sturdy.

Eventually they reached a large courtyard residence. Around the courtyard were four freestanding rooms with brick walls and tile roofs. They were much better than Xu Qing's old cabin, being well-built against the elements.

Xu Qing looked inside, then turned to Sergeant Thunder.

"From now on, this is our home," the sergeant said with a smile.

"Home?" Xu Qing was stunned. After all, the word 'home' was something that felt very unfamiliar to him.

“I worked hard my whole life to save up money. Now that my health is failing, I want to live in comfort.”

Laughing heartily, Sergeant Thunder walked into the courtyard, followed by the dogs. He immediately started taking the packages off their backs.

Xu Qing stood there for a long moment, then slowly walked inside. Even the ground was paved with blue-gray bricks. He was just staring around absent-mindedly when Sergeant Thunder called to him for help.

They worked for hours, until night fell. It was still cold and windy, but when they got a fire going in the stove in Xu Qing’s room, warmth filled the place. There were no cracks in the walls, making it impossible for the wind to shove the coldness in. Xu Qing felt himself warming up.

“Not cold, is it?” Sergeant Thunder asked with a smile.

“Nope. Not cold.” Xu Qing looked at Sergeant Thunder, his eyes shining in the light of the fire.

He really wasn’t cold. In fact, he was warm. And it caused him to tremble to the core of his being.

Some time passed, then Sergeant Thunder left for his own room, leaving Xu Qing alone in front of the stove.

“Home?” he murmured.

Meanwhile, Sergeant Thunder was in his own room, the smile still on his face. However, his face seemed flush. He coughed lightly, then swallowed to get rid of the acrid flavor it brought. Sighing, he looked out the window toward the forbidden region, reminiscence in his eyes.

“I wish... I could see her one more time.”

Deathblade's Thoughts

Hey everyone, I have a minor surgical procedure today. It's no big deal, but it will put me on bedrest for at least a day, maybe two. The chapters will keep coming, but I'm not sure if I'll be able to check comments or give shoutouts to reviews like I've been doing. Once I'm fully back online, I will definitely give shoutouts to any reviews, and also check through comments! I honestly don't know how painful it will be post-op. Maybe I'll be able to use my laptop to check things out while in bed. Or maybe I'll just watch movies all day. We'll see!

