

# Beyond the Timescape

## Chapter 3: May You Rest in Peace

What is this thing...?

Xu Qing's eyes shone brightly as he thought back to how the corpse had been completely intact before he took the violet crystal away.

It can keep corpses intact, and can also heal living people?

Keeping a firm grip on the crystal, he looked around the area, his heart racing. He knew that there probably weren't any other living people around, but nonetheless, he felt the need to be extra cautious.

Of course, he also knew he couldn't just stand around, so he started moving again, heading back toward his cave as quickly as possible. As he moved, he realized that not only was his wound healing rapidly, but also he felt a lot less weary.

He was currently running at a speed that, normally speaking, he could only keep up for about an hour. However, he had already run for more than an hour, and he felt fine. In fact, he was still bursting with energy.

He was even able to snatch a fallen bird as he moved along the road. He didn't kill it. Instead, he rendered it unconscious; living creatures stayed fresh a lot longer.

Finally, he reached the cave. There was still time before night fell, but he was already here.

Despite his unheard-of good mood, he hadn't suddenly become careless.

He knew that, perhaps because of the opening of the god's eye and the creation of the forbidden region, mutant beasts weren't the only things that came out at night. There were also grues. Even back in the slums he'd been raised in, he'd heard stories about grues showing up in places where a lot of people had died. The laughter he occasionally heard out in the darkness came from one such creature. [Read latest chapters on no/v/e/l\(b\)in\(.\)com](#)

Everybody knew that you shouldn't look at, touch, or even get close to a grue.

Based on Xu Qing's experience, they always came out at night. However, he had no way of knowing for sure if they could appear during the daytime as well.

Therefore, he didn't slow down when he spotted his cave in the distance. Moving at top speed, he shot inside, then quickly sealed the crack.

Only then did he sit down cross-legged and open his hands. Violet light radiated upward, illuminating the entirety of the small cave, and causing Xu Qing's eyes to glitter with the same color.

With complete focus, he stared down at the crystal.

It was long and thin, about the same size as one of his fingers, and looked like it had something soft and downy inside. In fact, the violet light was coming from that substance inside the crystal.

After a time, a thought occurred to him. Is my wound healed?

Pulling open the leather jerkin, he looked down as saw the wound was about ninety percent healed.

The parts that weren't healed wouldn't take much longer to return to normal, and the scar tissue on the edges of the wound was starting to fade away.

Given how hard he'd run, and how he didn't feel tired, Xu Qing had already come to some conclusions about this crystal. It went without saying that the item had restorative properties. It could heal wounds, restore one's strength, and replenish one's life force!

I wonder if it does anything else, he thought, his eyes shining thoughtfully.

He wasn't certain if this violet crystal had anything to do with the opening of the god's eyes, but it seemed like a good possibility.

Regardless, it was a precious treasure. He had never in his entire life heard of anything so spectacular. With something as useful as this in his possession, he might as well have a second life. However, the only reason he managed to get his hand on it was that he was the only living person in the city to find it. Once the blood rain stopped, and he left... how could he possibly keep the thing safe?

He had to think of a good way to hide the violet crystal...

After some thought, he pulled out the unconscious bird he'd picked up earlier.

After binding its beak so it couldn't cry out, he took the dagger from his thigh and sliced open a cut on the creature.

The bird struggled vainly as Xu Qing then pushed the violet crystal into the wound.

Then he kept his eyes wide open as he watched what happened.

Despite the bird's struggling, the air rippled and flowed with spirit power. In fact, there was far more spirit power at work than when Xu Qing practiced cultivation. And it all moved toward the bird.

The bird suddenly struggled with much more force than before, until Xu Qing was having trouble restraining it.

That caused his eyes to grow even wider. The bird was getting out of control.

Usually, it would only take a bit of effort to snap the neck of a bird. But this time he had to try several times in a row before it worked.

He quickly extracted the crystal from the bird's body, examined it, then closed his eyes in thought.

The bird didn't die when I inserted the crystal. Instead, it received an influx of spirit power. And it also got a lot stronger. I'd say... this crystal isn't dangerous.

A moment later, he opened his eyes and, with complete resolve, shoved the violet crystal into the still-closing wound on his chest. Pain rippled through him, but he gritted his teeth and ignored it.

There could be no safer place to hide this thing than inside his own body.

Besides, his experiment moments ago proved that having it inside him would bring significant benefits.

As the crystal entered him, the wound continued to heal, and at the same time, he felt himself trembling.

Then he saw flows of spirit power that surpassed anything from the bird experiment, rushing toward him from all directions, even out of the ground.

It was such an astonishing volume that Xu Qing's skin turned a faint green color. At the same time, intense coldness filled him from head to toe. That was because of the high level of mutagen in the spirit power.

However, Xu Qing had been ready for that from the beginning. Without any hesitation, he started using the Sea and Mountain Incantation. As he did, the spirit power that entered him separated from the mutagen.

Therefore, it was only pure spirit power that flowed through his meridians and into his body. A moment later, popping sounds rang out from inside him. It was almost as if silt that had been choking his insides was being cleared out. At the same time, his flesh and blood felt invigorated and healthy.

Within his mind appeared the image of a goblin, extremely lifelike and energetic.

Though the Sea and Mountain Incantation was a cultivation technique, it wasn't a cultivation magic, but rather, a body refinement method.

It was divided into ten levels that corresponded to the ten levels of Qi Condensation.

His bamboo slip gave a clear introduction, explaining that each level provided the strength of a tiger. The strength of five tigers ultimately combined to make the strength of a goblin. And the strength of two goblins combined to make the strength of a hobgoblin.

According to the popular saying, goblins can move mountains, hobgoblins can transport seas. And thus, the name of the technique came to be the Sea and Mountain Incantation.

The violet crystal in his chest was like a whirlpool, constantly rotating as it sucked in masses of spirit power. Xu Qing's cultivation advanced dramatically.

It was hard to say how much time passed, but eventually, the popping sounds inside of him grew more and more intense. Filth oozed out of the pores in his body and a noxious aroma filled the little cave.

As the filth emerged, Xu Qing's body glittered like the morning dew. Though his face was covered with disgusting grime, it was clearly fairer than before.

More time passed. Eventually, the flows of spirit power ceased, and Xu Qing opened his eyes.

This time, they glittered with violet light.

He looked around, stunned.

The cave was pitch black, but he could actually see everything quite clearly. Next, he looked down at himself, and an expression of utter incredulity filled his face.

This feeling....

Standing, he launched an experimental punch, and a sharp wind whipped through the cave.

The cave was too small to test how fast he could run, but based on the sensations coming from his arms and legs, he knew that he had definitely surpassed what he was capable of before.

Reaching up with his right hand, he pulled back the sleeve covering his left arm. When he saw a dark blotch the size of a fingernail there, he took a deep, excited breath.

So, I reached the first level of Qi Condensation!

According to the description in his bamboo slip, the black spot was a mutation blotch. When practicing the Sea and Mountain Incantation, that mutation blotch was supposed to appear on the left arm. Every time he advanced in level, a new blotch would appear.

Rubbing the mutation blotch, Xu Qing tried to control his excitement about getting so much stronger. Walking back to the entrance of the cave, he looked out through the crack and tried to decide if he should wait until it was light to go and do some tests.

Only a moment passed before a vigilant expression took over his face. Leaning his head closer to the crack, he strained his ears to detect any sound from outside.

It was completely dark outside, but he couldn't hear any of the usual bizarre sounds.

He had been in this place for days and had never experienced anything like this. Furthermore, even during the daytime, when the sound of the grues and mutant beasts ceased, there would still be the sound of the blood rain.

But right now, he couldn't hear the rain.

Don't tell me....

His heart pounded as he considered the implications.

He waited in silence for a time, until a dazzling ray of sunlight shot down, entered the crack in the cave entrance, and illuminated everything within.

The light caused Xu Qing to tremble.

He reached his hand out to intercept the beam of light, and when he felt the warmth, it slowly brought him back to his senses.

Sunlight....

A moment passed, then Xu Qing's eyes shone with excitement. Unsealing the crack, he slowly stepped out into the sunlight. Looking up, he didn't see any of the dark clouds that had filled the sky before. Instead, he saw the dazzling sun.

That light was like a sick old man who had a new lease on life, and was finally coming to visit the human world.

The rain... it stopped.

Xu Qing took in a deep breath of the sun-filled air, then looked around at the ruined city bathed in the morning glow.

The city seemed dazzling in a way he'd never imagined it could be.

As the sunlight shot past the crimson clouds on the horizon, it seemed like countless golden whales swimming through the sky. It swept away the sickly fog in the city, revealing the damage that had previously been concealed.

Collapsed houses were everywhere, interspersed with greenish-black corpses and ghastly pools of blood. Those were the sights that roused Xu Qing from his stupor and reminded him of the catastrophe that had befallen this place.

Mixed emotions appeared in his eyes. He had lived for six years in the slums outside the walls of this city. In other words, it had been for six years that he gazed down on this place. Though he had been in the city on numerous occasions, during that entire six years, he had only dreamed of actually living inside.

I found my cultivation technique here.

I got the violet crystal here.

I... lived here.

After a while, he sighed softly, then walked over to one of the greenish-black corpses. He looked down at it, stooped, and pulled the corpse onto his back. Then he started walking.

Eventually he reached a public square, where he put the corpse down. Turning, he went and found a second corpse. Then a third, and a fourth....

Some corpses just lay on the street, others were buried in rubble. Some corpses were intact. Others were mangled.

One by one, he took as many as he could find and carried them on his back to the square, where he piled them up into a small mountain.

Eventually, he stood in front of the mountain of corpses with a torch in his hand. He tossed the fire onto the mountain. Perhaps because of the mutagen, the flame burned hot, and the smoke rose thick into the air above him.

He stared at the smoke for a while, then walked to the city's second district. Before long, smoke rose up from that district as well, thicker... and thicker....

As the brilliant sun shone down on the city, the place became full of the smoke of burning corpses.

The smoke obscured the sun, causing everything to turn red. It was like the sun was heaving a deep sigh, and the streams of smoke were its tears. The shadows cast by the smoke were tearstains on the earth.

The final tear stain led Xu Qing to the area where he'd found the violet crystal.

He took the old man from the medicine shop and added him to a pile of corpses to burn. As he stood to the side watching the flames, they reflected in his dark pupils, flickering endlessly.

The tips of Xu Qing's long, disheveled hair curled in the heat. Eventually, he clasped his hands and bowed deeply.

"May you... rest in peace."

The flames burned even hotter, sending sparks up like dandelion wisps to float away in the breeze. However, the smoke that drifted up contained unending regret and defiance that could never be dispelled. It rose high, like scars in the sky.

Insignificant and pointless.

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Sometime later, the sound of footsteps rang out. And then, a bizarre and mystifying voice spoke from behind Xu Qing.

"I was wondering why I didn't see any corpses around here. It turns out a skinny little brat was wasting his energy cremating them. Ah, whatever. Since you miss them so much, I'll help you join them!"

Xu Qing spun in place.

#### Chapter 4: An Unexpected Guest

About seventy or eighty feet away was a group of seven men and women, spread out in a loose formation. They wore clothing of gray leather, and all of them had bags and sacks on their person. Furthermore, they all bore weapons.

Three had bows and arrows, two had sabers. The weapons were strapped to their backs but ready to use at a moment's notice.

One of them, who stood by himself in the middle of their loose formation, wore fighting gauntlets.

The person who had spoken in the strange voice was a tall, burly man who carried a battle ax. He was the closest to Xu Qing. Scars criss-crossed his vicious-looking face,

and he had a full beard. His eyes glittered cruelly, and he flashed an evil grin as he walked forward.

Xu Qing took everything in with a single glance.

Given the way they were standing around loosely, he got the impression they didn't normally work together, but rather, had teamed up temporarily for convenience.

Xu Qing had no problem determining who these people were. They were all... scavengers.

There was no shortage of scavengers in South Phoenix. Most of them were vicious people who had no bottom line. And they lived lives in which the weak were the prey of the strong.

Because the blood rain over the forbidden region had stopped, the barrier surrounding it had been opened, attracting these people here.

The forbidden region was dangerous even to them. But they were people who lived on the edge of a knife, and therefore, the resources available for the taking here were just too enticing. Just about everything in the city was infected, but there were still valuable things to be taken.

Mind spinning, Xu Qing turned and prepared to flee.

However, seeing that, the burly man's eyes grew crueler, and his grin turned bloodthirsty. "Trying to run? I love slaughtering brats like you. I bet you have a lot of loot in that sack of yours. This kid is mine, Sergeant Thunder!"

The burly man's eyes radiated an overwhelming ferocity that made his massive battle-ax even more intimidating. Striding forward, he raised his ax in his right hand and leaped in Xu Qing's direction.

The ax whistled through the air as it closed in.

The burly man was both strong and fast. But Xu Qing was faster. Just as it seemed the ax would hit him, he leaped to the side.

The ax passed right in front of his face, the wind brushing aside his hair to reveal his cold, wolf-like eyes.

Xu Qing dropped into a roll, and then instead of running away, shot back toward the burly man. That was when his black iron skewer suddenly appeared in his hand.

Taking advantage of the fact that he was shorter than his opponent, he jumped, stabbing the skewer toward the taller man's chin.



It all happened too quickly. A moment ago, the seemingly frail Xu Qing had made it seem like he wanted to run away, which made it easy to conceal his attack. And now, the burly man was suddenly struck with a feeling of deadly crisis.

That said, he had a lot of experience. Looking shocked, he lunged backward and threw his head away from the iron skewer. Even still, the skewer hit his chin, slicing open a large cut.

Before the man could even get angry, Xu Qing's left hand rose from his thigh with a dagger in it.

While the burly man was leaning back, Xu Qing dropped down and plunged the dagger into the man's right foot.

A poof sound accompanied the dagger's plunge into the leather shoe, through flesh and blood, and into the muddy soil below!

The burly man's face distorted as pain ripped through him, and he let loose an agonized shriek. Then, before he could counter attack, the nimble Xu Qing danced backward, slipped behind a section of crumbling wall, and crouched into hiding, waiting to see what would happen next.

The light of the fire flickered, making it impossible to make out his features clearly. However, his wolf-like facial expression was clear, and it was with both vigilance and ferocity that he glared out at the scavengers.

Everything happened so quickly, and Xu Qing himself seemed so young and weak, that the other scavengers didn't have time to react before he was out of sight.

Now, they looked around fiercely, and the three with the bows glared with very sharp gazes.

As for Xu Qing, he remained in hiding, not bothering to look at the shrieking man he'd stabbed in the foot. Looking past the three archers, he found his gaze coming to rest on the person in the middle of the group, the one with the fighting gauntlets.

He was an old man, and though he was dressed similar to the others, his eyes seemed sharper. What was more, Xu Qing could sense the fluctuations of spirit power on him. Given where the old man was standing, and the way the others seemed to be instinctively looking at him, Xu Qing had a good guess about who he was.

This old man... was the leader of his group of scavengers.

As Xu Qing looked at him, the old man looked back, his eyes flickering with a strange look.

After a moment, the old man shifted his gaze to the fire and smoke, and a thoughtful expression appeared on his face.

Meanwhile, the burly man yanked the dagger out of his foot and, eyes blazing with fury, started running toward Xu Qing.

“You brat!” he shouted. “I’m gonna kill you!”

Xu Qing’s eyes narrowed as he prepared to take action. Before he could, the old man spoke in a calm voice.

“Enough!”

His tone contained such intimidating authority that the burly man immediately stopped in place and looked back at him. “Sergeant Thunder...”

“This kid is probably a survivor from the slums. The god above let him live, so back off. Let’s go.”

“But...” the burly man said, obviously not willing to drop the matter so easily. As far as he was concerned, he’d been careless. If he kept up the attack, it would only take a matter of seconds for him to snap Xu Qing’s neck. However, before he could continue with an argument, the old man looked at him casually.

“Are you really going to talk back to me?”

The burly man struggled to regain his composure before bowing his head.

As he did, his eyes flitted to Xu Qing hiding behind the wall, and pure killing intent appeared on his face. Then he turned and limped back in the direction of Sergeant Thunder.

Sensing the man’s killing intent, Xu Qing kept his eyes on the scavengers as they left.

They only went about thirty feet. Then Sergeant Thunder stopped and looked over his shoulder. It was hard to say whether or not he was looking at Xu Qing, or at the burning corpses. Either way, he said, “Kid. Do you want to come with me?”

Xu Qing was stunned. Furthermore, it wasn’t lost on him that the old man said ‘me’ and not ‘us.’

Xu Qing wasn’t sure how to respond. As he looked at the group, though, he realized that Sergeant Thunder wasn’t rushing him for an answer. In fact, he was just standing there patiently.

About ten breaths of time passed, allowing Xu Qing to examine the group, including Sergeant Thunder and the burly fellow he'd stabbed.

Xu Qing's eyes glittered with strange light. Then he slowly stood up and, without a word, started walking toward the scavengers.

Seeing that, Sergeant Thunder smiled, turned, and continued walking. The others in the group all gave Xu Qing long, hard looks, then followed the old man.

Just like that, Xu Qing joined the scavengers as they searched through the city for items of value.

Before long, he learned that the vicious man he'd stabbed was known by the nickname Cruel Ox.

On numerous occasions, Cruel Ox looked Xu Qing up and down, a sinister expression in his eyes. However, the man obviously had self-control, and he never did anything rash. He was clearly waiting for a time when Sergeant Thunder wasn't around. Then he would make a move on Xu Qing. And he seemed fully confident he would get that chance.

While thinking about the situation, it occurred to Xu Qing that Cruel Ox was obviously a greedy man. That was when Xu Qing started taking advantage of his knowledge of the city to assist the scavengers. Acting very subservient, Xu Qing helped them find more valuable items than they could have on their own, and more quickly than normal.

Cruel Ox really was greedy. Even after getting so much loot that it surpassed his normal weight limit, he still wanted more. Despite being injured, he searched even more enthusiastically than the others, and his burden grew heavier and heavier. At first, it didn't make much difference. But as time passed, even his immense strength was worn down, and he started getting particularly exhausted.

Meanwhile, Xu Qing could sense that Sergeant Thunder had good intentions. So he didn't try to lure the scavengers into the dangerous district surrounding the city magistrate's manor.

As evening fell, the party left and set up camp in what had once been the slums outside the city. They worked with practiced ease to set up six tents that were little more than tarps hung over bare ground.

The two saber-wielders shared one of the tents, with the remainder of the tents being assigned to one person each. They spread powder around the camp to form a perimeter, and started burning incense as well.

As the sky turned dark, and the howling arose in the city, the scavengers entered their tents.

The only exception was Sergeant Thunder, who eyed Xu Qing standing off to the side. The old man pulled out a sleeping bag and tossed it over.

“The incense keeps away the mutant beasts,” Sergeant Thunder explained, “and the powder keeps the grues out. Given how much you helped us today, Cruel Ox won’t cause any problems. You’re safe here.”

With that, the old man entered his tent.

Xu Qing didn’t say anything. After Sergeant Thunder entered the tent, he snuggled into the depths of his sleeping bag. However, he didn’t zip it all the way up. Instead, he kept a crack open so he could keep his eye on the tents.

The howling continued into the depths of the night, growing more intense the entire time. And the crying of the grues echoed about, creating a completely terrifying atmosphere. From the look of it, no one had any intention of stepping out of their safe night refuge.

Except for Xu Qing...

He lay in his sleeping bag with his eyes open, unmoving, seemingly waiting for something.

Time passed, until it was in the middle of the night, the time when most people were deep asleep. That was when Xu Qing slowly crawled out of his sleeping bag.

He moved very carefully so as not to make any sound. The howling and crying in the city echoed in his ears, yet it didn’t seem to affect him mentally. Slowly but surely, he crawled across the ground toward Cruel Ox’s tent.

He simply couldn’t allow potential calamities to exist around him. It didn’t matter if they were only potential calamities, they needed to be eliminated as quickly as possible.

He had shed his own blood learning that lesson the hard way back when he lived in the slums. And it was also the only reason he’d decided to come along with the scavengers.

What was more, the reason he’d been so helpful, and the reason he’d found so much loot for Cruel Ox, was to make sure the man was both exhausted and off guard.

That was also the reason he’d acted so subservient.

It was all for this moment, the moment in which he took action. Xu Qing’s eyes were calm as he slowly neared the tent. Once there, he didn’t rush inside. Instead, he crouched outside and spent a long moment just listening.

He heard the sound of snoring. And it was sustained, even snoring, obviously not fake. Eyes narrowing, he took out his iron skewer and carefully cut a hole in the tent. Then he slowly entered.

It was dark inside, but he could still see Cruel Ox laying there asleep. Given the burden the man had carried through the day, and his injury, he was obviously completely wiped out.

Being the powerful expert he was, there was no way Cruel Ox could ever have guessed that the fawning young man from earlier would, in the presence of all the other scavengers, pose a threat during the night.

And of course, he had no idea that an uninvited guest was inside his tent.

As Xu Qing stared at Cruel Ox, his eyes seemed as calm as the deep sea. He inched closer until he was right above the man, then placed his gleaming skewer right over his throat. Without any hesitation, he plunged it in.

He moved with such speed and force he nearly ripped the head off.

Blood sprayed like a fountain.

The intense pain caused Cruel Ox's eyes to snap open, and he saw Xu Qing's expressionless face. A look of disbelief and terror appeared on Cruel Ox, and he made to cry out. However, Xu Qing's left hand snapped out and covered his mouth so he couldn't utter a sound.

Cruel Ox thrashed, his eyes wide, his body spasming.

But Xu Qing had a grip like a vice. Furthermore, he lifted his foot and placed it on Cruel Ox's throat, exerting more force to keep him in place.

As the blood continued to pour out, Cruel Ox seemed like a fish out of water. Despair filled him, and then his eyes begged for mercy.

Yet Xu Qing's face remained as placid as before. Cruel Ox fought, but the sound of his struggle was completely drowned out by the howling and screaming outside the camp.

After about ten breaths of time passed, Cruel Ox started to weaken. Finally, a tremor ran through him, and he slumped. In the last moment before he died, a look of utter despair and terror filled his eyes.

Xu Qing didn't release his grip right away. He waited, making sure the man was truly dead, before pulling his hand away. After wiping away the blood, he opened his sack. From inside he pulled out the cloth-wrapped snake head. Being very careful, he punctured Cruel Ox's skin with the viper's fangs.

As the venom spread, green blisters spread out on Cruel Ox's skin, and then he started dissolving.

After enough time had passed for an incense stick to burn, the corpse was nothing but a puddle of blood that slowly seeped into the muddy ground.

At this point, Xu Qing straightened up the tent. He also took some of Cruel Ox's items to make it look like he'd suddenly disappeared in the middle of the night. After everything was done, he left the tent.

A cold wind blew the aroma of blood off of him as he looked up into the night sky. Taking a deep breath of cold air, he slowly went back to his sleeping bag.

Back inside, he finally felt like he could relax. Having eliminated the threat, he closed his eyes and fell asleep immediately. Of course, he kept his iron skewer gripped tightly in his hand.

The night passed without further incident.

The following morning at dawn, the first rays of morning sun illuminated the lands, and Xu Qing opened his eyes. Quietly climbing out of his sleeping bag, he casually glanced over at Cruel Ox's tent.

His eyes narrowed.

Cruel Ox's tent was gone!

Xu Qing's heart sank, and his vigilance grew.

At almost the same time, the other scavengers started coming out of their tents, and the first thing they noticed was the missing tent. Some of them started looking around for clues, but there were none.

Cruel Ox had completely vanished, even down to his tent. They quickly came to the conclusion that he'd gotten greedy and went back to the city to look for more loot. And even if it had been some other reason, he obviously hadn't taken the time to say goodbye.

There were always plenty of reasons someone would go missing in a forbidden region like this.

This had been a team of convenience, and Cruel Ox had been a lone wolf anyway. Because of that, the other scavengers didn't care much about what happened to him. As for Xu Qing, none of them even considered that he could have had something to do with it. And given they had no reason to investigate deeply, they quickly forgot about the matter.

However, Sergeant Thunder, upon taking back the sleeping bag, gave him a deep look.

“Are you still going to come with me?” he asked.

There was a lot of meaning in those words. Xu Qing didn’t answer the question.

Nor did the old man say anything further. Instead, he yelled at the other scavengers to hurry up and get moving now that the sun was up.

Xu Qing stood where he was, not sure what to do. He looked back at the ruins of the city. He glanced back at Sergeant Thunder. After another bit of thought, he started following.

Six scavengers and one kid walked, their shadows cast long behind them by the sun....

The wind blew from the distance, sobbing and sighing.

As they walked beneath the morning sun, Xu Qing listened to the scavengers chatter.

“This is what you call a tribulation from the god above. The whole city was wiped out.”

“There’s another forbidden region in the world now....”

“This is nothing. Didn’t you hear about that huge city to the north? About seven or eight years ago, the god’s eyes opened, and the entire city just vanished. It was like it never existed.”

Slowly but surely, they walked off into the distance.

## Chapter 5: Scavenger Basecamp

The forbidden region on this eastern part of South Phoenix wasn’t a very large place. The city ruins Xu Qing and the scavengers left behind were just on the periphery.

That was why the scavengers had entered the place the same day the sun finally came out. It was also why they left the ruins at sunset. They ran into a few mutant beasts, but the scavengers dispatched them quickly.

Xu Qing watched them at work, and was able to determine a bit about them. For instance, he was certain that he could stand toe-to-toe with any individual scavenger other than Sergeant Thunder.

They’re not cultivators, but they fight with confidence and ferocity. And they’re the kind of people who fight fearlessly in the face of death. That makes them very dangerous.

He might have a hard time fighting two at a time, and if it was three-on-one, then he would lose. With that knowledge in mind, he reminded himself to be very careful.

As they got closer and closer to the outside world, he noticed that the scavengers looked more and more at ease. They even started bantering a bit.

The only one who didn't participate was Sergeant Thunder. The others didn't mind, and in fact, they seemed to revere him. That, of course, made Xu Qing very curious about who exactly he was.

That curiosity didn't reduce his vigilance, though, not even as they were about to leave the forbidden region. The entire time, he followed the scavengers but didn't get too close to any of them. That said, he did remain close enough to listen to them talking.

It was around the time the sky was starting to get dark when Xu Qing felt warmth in the breeze. Stopping in place, he looked at the wilderness behind them, then peered at what was ahead.

It was like there was some sort of invisible barrier stretching from the sky down to the land. Inside the barrier was the forbidden region, where everything was frigid and gloomy. Outside the barrier was the ordinary world, where the weather was like springtime.

They left the forbidden region.

It was night outside, but there was a scintillating starry sky overhead, along with a brilliant moon.

The lands were still desolate, but they weren't sinister like the forbidden region. You could even hear the sounds of ordinary birds and beasts. In a distant thicket, Xu Qing spotted a rabbit looking at them cautiously as they walked along. He stared at everything absent-mindedly.

The other scavengers looked more relaxed than ever, and even Sergeant Thunder seemed less tense than before.

Once outside the forbidden region, the scavengers were completely at ease, and started conversing casually.

"We finally made it out. Things went well this time, but even so, this is probably the last time I step into one of those damn forbidden regions."

"Not go back in? If you want to stay alive in this damn world, and if you want to live a better life, then you have to risk your life in forbidden regions. Sooner or later I'm going to buy some property in one of the Seven Blood Eyes' cities!"



Xu Qing still maintained his silence, but he listened to everything carefully. So far, he had already learned quite a bit using that method.

For example, he had heard them mention Seven Blood Eyes several times, and gathered it was some sort of powerful organization. He had also heard them mention the Violet Lands on multiple occasions.

“That’s what you’re after? Seven Blood Eyes has a lot of cities. For example, Antlerville. Except, you don’t have enough spirit coins to buy resources there, and also, you need a recommendation from a Seven Blood Eyes disciple to get in the door. In any case, who wants to just buy property? I want to actually join the Seven Blood Eyes as a disciple!”

“You wouldn’t last three days in Seven Blood Eyes, so stop bragging. You might as well say you plan to cross the ocean and settle down in the Revered Ancient mainland. That’s where humans originate, isn’t it?”

Hearing this, Xu Qing’s ears perked up, as he’d seen this Revered Ancient mentioned in his bamboo slip.

“Revered Ancient mainland? If I was so badass I didn’t have to worry about all the dangerous stuff in the sea, you think I wouldn’t go?”

The two scavengers continued their conversation for a time until it started to turn into a somewhat heated argument.

Xu Qing listened the whole time, hoping to catch some new information. Eventually, Sergeant Thunder cut in.

“Getting to the Revered Ancient mainland isn’t impossible, if you really want to do it. There are four ways. You just have to decide which one is the best for you.

“First, get to Foundation Establishment by the time you’re fifteen years old, and thus be named as ‘chosen.’ Second, pay a fee of 300,000 spirit coins to the Violet Lands or Seven Blood Eyes. Or even the Church of Departure.

“Third, make significant contributions in pill concocting to humankind. Fourth, be named a successor apprentice by one of the following: a great clan from the Violet Lands; a peaklord of the Seven Blood Eyes; the leader of the Church of Departure.

“Oh right, there’s actually a fifth way. Become a living treasure. So, think about it. Which one makes the most sense for you?”

The scavengers muttered and mumbled throughout Sergeant Thunder’s monologue. And when he got to the fifth method, strange, terrified looks appeared in their eyes.

Xu Qing saw all of this, especially the part about the 'living treasure.' Back in the slums, some of his buddies had been taken away by rich folks in nice clothing. He remembered people saying they were taken to become living treasures, and a lot of the youngsters in the slums had been jealous.

Now more than ever he wondered what that was all about. Looking at old Sergeant Thunder, he quietly asked, "Excuse me... what are living treasures?"

Sergeant Thunder looked at him for a moment before responding.

"They're people whose bodies have been linked with magical treasures. Their flesh and blood absorbs the polluted mutagen from the treasures, thus making it possible to use the treasures safely. However, because of that, their bodies quickly wither up, and they die."

Xu Qing's pupils constricted, but he said nothing further.

The mention of living treasures seemed to cast a bit of a pall over the group, and nobody said anything else as they continued to walk through the night.

Some distance away from the forbidden region, they reached a sprawling plain where Sergeant Thunder decided to set up camp. This camp was set up differently than the one in the forbidden region. They still set up all the tents, but this time, they also started a big bonfire.

As the flames crept higher, they warmed the area, and provided a place to cook food. The scavengers sat around cooking their meal, and a fragrant aroma soon filled the area. The sight of their food made Xu Qing salivate, but all he had to eat in his sack was some tough jerky.

After a while, Sergeant Thunder looked at him, walked over, and pulled a few steamed buns out of his sack. He handed them to Xu Qing.

Xu Qing's eyes went wide, and he had to resist the urge to wolf them all down in one bite.

"Thank you," he said quietly.

Sergeant Thunder didn't say anything in response. He just walked back to the fire and sat down.

"Why are you treating the kid so well, Sergeant Thunder?"

"We're all losers, right?" the old sergeant answered. "I think it's fate that we met him. Why not help him out?"

There were three steamed buns, and they were still warm.

Xu Qing hesitated and looked over at the scavengers at the fire, eating their own steamed buns. Finally, he pretended to take a bite, while simultaneously keeping his eyes on the scavengers. When he saw nothing unusual happening, he finally opened his mouth and took a real bite. However, he didn't swallow, but instead kept the food in his mouth for a time.

When he was certain it wasn't some sort of trick, he chewed and swallowed.

Then he waited for a bit to make sure there wasn't some sort of reaction. When there wasn't, he breathed a sigh of relief, waited again, then wolfed down the rest of the bun. After that, he didn't hesitate at all to devour the second bun. He was still hungry, but instead of eating, he put the final bun into his sack, handling it as gingerly as if it were a precious treasure.

Soon, it was late. The scavengers all got into their tents, while Sergeant Thunder again gave Xu Qing a sleeping bag. Before walking off, he said, "Keep it."

Xu Qing looked up at him in surprise. "Why?"

"What do you mean 'why?' Three steamed buns and a sleeping bag aren't worth anything. If you want, you can treat me to something later on." Sergeant Thunder turned and walked toward his tent.

"What do you like to eat?" Xu Qing asked.

"Me?" Sergeant Thunder stopped and thought about the question. "Snakes. Those things are great."

With that, he ducked into his tent.

Xu Qing clutched the sleeping bag and watched him disappear. Then he nodded, spread out the sleeping bag, and got inside. However, despite closing his eyes, he didn't sleep. Instead, he began cultivating the Sea and Mountain Incantation, as was his custom.

When practicing cultivation, he felt incredibly cold, but that didn't make him give up. In fact, he wanted to take every opportunity he could to work hard at it.

That was especially true considering what Sergeant Thunder had mentioned earlier about reaching Foundation Establishment by fifteen years of age. Although he wasn't sure how he measured up to the 'chosen' Sergeant Thunder had mentioned, he had at least had a bit of an idea.

I'm fourteen already, he thought.

Time slipped by slowly but surely, until five days had gone by.

Xu Qing traveled with the scavengers as they crossed a mountain and walked across a prairie.

Along the way, three of the scavengers went different ways. Just as Xu Qing had guessed earlier, the group had been working together out of convenience.

On the seventh day, the two scavengers with sabers bid farewell, leaving behind only Xu Qing and Sergeant Thunder.

That night, at the foot of a mountain, they built a fire, and Sergeant Thunder sat across from Xu Qing, watching him eat. Xu Qing nibbled away at half of a steamed bun, then put the other half in his sack.

“Kid, we’ll reach our destination tomorrow. It’s the place I call home, and it’s also one of the main basecamps for scavengers around here.”

Xu Qing didn’t say anything.

Gazing off into the distance, Sergeant Thunder continued, “Scavenger basecamps are usually built near forbidden regions. And that’s why, on the other side of these mountains, there’s just one such region.

“The place you were in is a new one, while this one has been around for a long time. There are fierce beasts that live inside, and other dangerous things. The mutagen there is so strong that an ordinary person who went in for more than one day would die. Even I couldn’t last a full week inside.

“However, seven-leaf clover grows there, which is one of the key ingredients in white boluses.

“White boluses are one of the most common pills cultivators use to purge themselves of mutagen. That’s why a lot of people come here. However, being not fond of dying, and unfamiliar with the area, they usually don’t get the seven-leaf clover themselves. They pay good spirit coin to hire scavengers to do it for them.”

Sergeant Thunder looked at Xu Qing. “Do you get what I mean?”

Having heard what white boluses were good for, Xu Qing narrowed his eyes and thought for a moment before answering, “Scavengers are outlaws willing to do anything for money?”

Sergeant Thunder’s eyes widened in surprise, and then he laughed.

“One hundred percent correct. In scavenger basecamps, there’s one rule: the weak are the prey of the strong. Strength is more important than anything else.

“That said, our basecamp is a good place to live. There are markets where you can buy anything you need, and caravans come through sometimes, so there are usually nice things to buy wherever you go.

“Therefore, not just anybody gets to live there. Newbies who want to settle down first have to pass a beast trial to get a residence permit. Those are the rules set by the camp owner.

“If you pass that test, then you can stay with me if you want.”

## Chapter 6: The Kid

South Phoenix was a big place. Seen from high above in the sky, it was roughly elliptical, and surrounded by ocean on all sides. It was separated from the Revered Ancient mainland by the Sea of Endlessness, and thus was almost like an island. However, it was big enough that most people wouldn’t be able to walk from one end of it to the other in their lifetime.

Furthermore, most locations on the landmass were places difficult for humans to enter, and were blocked off by the Mountains of Truth, which bisected the main landmass diagonally.

Southwest of the Mountains of Truth was a vast forbidden region that made up about seventy percent of South Phoenix. Only the areas northeast of the mountains were inhabited by humans.

Despite that, there was a huge human population.

The northeast was filled with a vast array of cities, both big and small. Some were huge places with mighty city walls, others were little more than villages. Regardless, the cities were built away from the forbidden regions.

Nobody who had a choice in the matter would choose to live in constant danger. Only fugitives and outcasts would do so, and the places where they gathered were dog-eat-dog camps filled with constant violence.

Just about every forbidden region had a scavenger basecamp near it. Sometimes more than one.

From the mountain peak he stood atop, Xu Qing had a good view of the basecamp below. It didn’t look very big, and if he had to guess, the population was in the hundreds.

It was early morning, but the smoke of campfires rose high into the air, and the place already seemed bustling. Even from this distance, he could hear shouting, cursing, bargaining, and unscrupulous laughter, all mixed together.

As for the 'housing' Sergeant Thunder had mentioned, it got more and more simple going from the center to the periphery. On the edges of the camp, the 'houses' were nothing more than tents.

On the other side of the camp, some distance away, was a pitch-black jungle, filled with swirling mist and, presumably, terrifying monsters. Even though the sun shone brightly, it wasn't strong enough to pierce the darkness of the jungle. The color reminded Xu Qing of the black mutation blotches that would appear on people, which was a shocking and ghastly thought.

"What do you think?" Sergeant Thunder asked.

Xu Qing thought for a moment then said, "Seems like the slums back home."

Sergeant Thunder laughed, then started walking down the slope.

Xu Qing looked away from the basecamp and focused on following Sergeant Thunder. The two of them climbed down the mountain and headed straight toward their destination.

Along the way, they encountered a few people coming and going. Most of them dressed similar to Sergeant Thunder, with their clothing being primarily gray leather. Xu Qing noticed that everyone who saw Sergeant Thunder looked at him with respect. And when their eyes shifted to Xu Qing, they became curious. Now more than ever, he wanted to know who this Sergeant Thunder was.

It was late morning by the time they finished crossing the plain and headed into the actual basecamp. There were no city walls, and the streets seemed to be laid out without any plan in place. The place was dusty, with dead leaves and trash gathered everywhere. The whole place seemed random and chaotic.

The sounds Xu Qing had heard from the mountain were now all-encompassing.

There were plenty of structures to see and also lots of scavengers. Some were like Cruel Ox, tall and burly. Some looked emaciated and sinister. Others looked like they were either drunk or asleep, but at the same time, seemed threatening. And there were even youngsters like Xu Qing, who kept out of the way and stared blankly at the sky. A small number were deformed or mutilated.

As Xu Qing walked along, his pupils constricted as he noted spirit power fluctuations coming off of many of the people.

There were individuals of all sorts, some of them shopping, some fighting, and others just enjoying the sun.

He saw a few men emerging from special tents decorated with brightly-colored feathers. As they pulled up their pants, lecherous grins covered their faces.

Xu Qing mused that, to an outsider, this place would probably seem like hell. However, though he felt the need to remain on guard at all times, this place actually made him feel at home.

It really is like the slums, he thought, glancing at the tents with the bright feathers, and the fair figures inside he could barely make out when the tent flaps parted. In fact, at one point a young woman in revealing clothing stepped lazily out from one of those tents, spotted him, and beckoned him over.

“Keep your eyes to yourself,” Sergeant Thunder said.

“I know what that place is,” Xu Qing said, looking away.

A surprised smile appeared on Sergeant Thunder’s wrinkled face, but he didn’t say anything. He just led Xu Qing further into the camp. Along the way, Xu Qing paid close attention to everything, hoping to form a mental image of the general layout of the camp. That was his usual practice. He liked to be familiar with his surroundings. That way, things were less dangerous.

Eventually, they reached a huge wooden structure set up in the middle of everything. It looked like some sort of arena for fighting beasts. Surrounding the open area in the middle were numerous simple tables.

He also heard the growls and cries of beasts.

There were some townhouses set up next to the arena as well, outside of which were a few scavengers who looked a bit more clean and well-dressed than the others.

Only moments after he and Sergeant Thunder arrived, a very thin man ambled out.

Unlike the scavengers, he wore a long robe and had a mustache and goatee. He also emanated spirit power fluctuations. After glancing dismissively at Xu Qing, he looked at Sergeant Thunder. “A newbie?”

“He knows the rules already,” Sergeant Thunder replied.

“What’s his name?”

“He’s a puny kid. Why would he have a name? Just call him... the Kid.”



“Fine, come with me. You’re lucky, Kid. There are a few others who signed up before you. We should have enough people to hold the event tomorrow.”

Yawning, the goateed man turned and headed toward one of the townhouses.

Xu Qing looked at Sergeant Thunder. The old man looked back with an expression of both hope and expectation. “Go. I’ll come back and get you tomorrow.”

Xu Qing looked him in the eye and nodded, then turned and followed the goateed man.

They stopped outside the townhouse, where the goateed man introduced Xu Qing to the scavengers there, then turned and left. Xu Qing was instructed to go inside and not leave without permission.

Upon entering, he saw four pairs of eyes turning in his direction from different parts of the room.

Three of them were young men, the other was a girl.

Two of the young men were probably a few years older than him, and they both glanced at him casually before looking away.

The girl was younger than him, and had a huge scar on her face. She was huddled off in the corner, looking around nervously. Apparently, she had arrived recently, just like Xu Qing.

The oldest young man seemed to already be a full-fledged scavenger, but had recently moved basecamps. Given his status, he looked at Xu Qing with a slightly mocking smile. Then his eyes shifted to the girl, and he licked his lips. However, given he didn’t yet have full status in the camp, he wasn’t going to do anything out of line.

After scanning the room, Xu Qing ignored everyone else, found a spot near the door, and sat down to meditate.

Time passed slowly and steadily. Perhaps because of Xu Qing’s uneventful entrance, the three young men eventually started chatting. The girl remained quiet by herself.

It was obvious that the two younger men were trying to suck up to the older one. For the most part, their conversation revolved around the upcoming trial.

Based on what he heard, Xu Qing determined that the basecamp would have trials like these every so often, when there were enough people gathered who wanted residency status.



The trial was very simple. The camp owner would gather a number of mutant beasts, and the combatants would draw lots to fight them. There were two possible outcomes: either you lived, or you died.

If you lived, then your reward was a residence permit. If you died, then you became food for the beasts.

Obviously, the trials took place in the arena outside.

When the time of the trial came, the scavengers in the camp would buy tickets to watch the blood-soaked event. They had a good time, and of course, the camp owner would open a betting hall. Everyone benefited.

In this brutal world, lives weren't worth as much as money.

That said, people who didn't qualify to live in cities, and also didn't qualify to live in scavenger camps, would have no choice but to try to survive in the wilds. And the chances of dying were even greater there.

Of course, the slums were always an option, but the people who chose to come to the scavenger camps always had a story to explain their choices.

Xu Qing sat off to the side, meditating cross-legged, and simultaneously listening to the conversation.

One topic that came up was the most recent instance of the god opening his eyes.

"When I arrived," one of the younger men said, "someone told me you were one of the survivors. Is that true?"

Xu Qing slowly opened his eyes.

When he did, he realized that the young man who had just spoken wasn't looking at him, but rather, the girl in the corner. Shivering, she nodded in response.

Xu Qing looked at her more closely.

The other young men had only heard about what happened, but Xu Qing had lived through it. Therefore, he knew full well that anybody who survived and made it to this camp couldn't possibly be as weak as this girl seemed on the surface.

Noticing Xu Qing's gaze, she turned to look at him.

He closed his eyes again and started meditating again. He wanted to spend every moment possible in cultivation; that was his best chance of staying alive.

And thus, the night passed.

The next morning at dawn, after the chaotic clamor of the camp arose, the doors of the townhouse slammed open. Sunlight spilled in, silhouetting a scavenger standing in the doorway. His shadow spread through the room, covering the girl in the corner.

“Get your things together,” he said coldly. “It’s time for your performance.”

“It took long enough,” said the oldest young man, the one who was already a scavenger. Smiling, he walked out of the door and offered greetings to those outside.

The other two younger men hurried to follow him. Xu Qing was the fourth out the door, and the girl was the last.

It seemed the scavengers outside were familiar with the oldest young man. They joked and laughed, ignoring everyone else as they walked toward the fighting arena.

As they got closer, they heard raucous shouting and yelling. By the time they entered the arena, the sound was overwhelming.

There were at least a hundred people gathered at the tables, including men and women, like a horde of devils here to watch the show. The loud noise caused the girl to tremble even more, and the two younger men went pale in the face. Only the older young man seemed excited.

Xu Qing, meanwhile, didn’t have any dramatic change of facial expression. He simply studied his surroundings.

This place isn’t very big. There’s nowhere to hide or run away to. I can’t let the fight drag out. The wooden sides are too high to take the fighting out into the stands. I see some marks that are probably for doors. And there’s a full-on passageway over there. I suppose... I could try to buy time and hope the screaming audience intimidates the beast I’m fighting. Then again, the shouting could whip the thing into a rage. I think the best thing will be to end the fight quickly.

## Chapter 7: Please, Eat

As Xu Qing looked around amidst the shouting and screaming, the large gate they had just walked through slammed shut, sending a cloud of dust out in all directions. The sound acted like a bugle call, whipping the surrounding scavengers into an even more excited frenzy.

Xu Qing also noticed a raised platform straight ahead. Walking onto the platform was a middle-aged man in a brocade robe, followed by a host of attendants.

He was so far away that Xu Qing couldn't make out much in the way of details. However, it was obvious the man was important. Despite the distance between the two of them, Xu Qing sensed spirit power fluctuations coming off of him, and they were far above the level of his own.

That alone put Xu Qing on guard. Although he couldn't be sure, it seemed highly likely this man was the camp owner. Lending further weight to this speculation was the fact that the goateed man from yesterday was next to him, whispering something into his ear.

The camp owner nodded, then sat down. The goateed man remained standing next to him, looking down into the arena.

Another huge wooden gate opened, and from within came the sound of howling animals.

At the same time, a number of scavengers appeared.

There were four groups, each of them made up of three people. And they were pulling out large iron cages, within which were snarling beasts that lunged and snapped at the restraining bars.

Xu Qing's eyes swept over the cages.

He saw two giant wolves, one larger than the other. Both had razor-sharp teeth, pitch-black bodies, and blood-red eyes. Saliva dripped down their jaws as they stared, with brutal ferocity, at Xu Qing and the other four combatants.

There was a bear with crimson fur and limbs thicker than the thighs of an adult human. A vicious expression covered its face as it repeatedly shook its cage. It took a lot of effort from the scavengers to keep the cage steady.

In the final cage was a beast that seemed less imposing than the others. It was a gibbon, its skin covered with painful boils. In a ghastly display, the creature repeatedly threw itself at the iron bars, causing some of the boils to burst.

The arrival of the beasts caused the crowd to roar.

The two young men in Xu Qing's group looked even more pale in the face, and the girl seemed absolutely terrified. Even the older young man, who was already a scavenger, seemed nervous.

How come there are only four? Xu Qing thought, looking back at the open passageway.

As he did, the four howling beasts suddenly went completely quiet, as if they'd been intimidated into silence. At the same time, an iron cage twice the size of the others appeared, pulled along by six scavengers.

Someone in the crowd shouted, "A giant horned anaconda!"

"I can't believe the camp owner brought in a giant horned anaconda! I guess it makes sense, though. As far as he's concerned, a beast like that isn't worth much."

"Whichever of these brats gets that snake is dead for sure. Even if one of us ran into that thing out in the wild, we would need a partner to take it down. And even then, it wouldn't be a sure thing."

The anaconda, thicker than an adult's waist, was dark gray, with markings that seemed to depict a host of horn-shaped mountains. It sat coiled in the cage, its huge head raised and its yellow eyes staring out coldly at the world around it. When the snake's gaze shifted to the wolves, and the gibbon as well, the other creatures trembled in fear. As for the red bear, it roared at the snake, but at the same time, slowly backed away until it was on the opposite side of the cage.

"Don't let me get the snake. I absolutely, positively must not pick the snake...." Behind Xu Qing, both of the young men shivered and muttered prayers to the same effect.

As for Xu Qing, his eyes glittered. He had seen this kind of giant horned anaconda before. Back when he lived in the slums, he remembered a hunter had brought in a dead one. According to what Xu Qing had heard, this kind of snake was so strong it could wrap itself around a tree and snap it in half. It had very tough scales, allowing it to absorb more damage, but at the same time, wasn't very fast. Furthermore, its gall bladder had remarkable medicinal properties, and could dispel filth from the body. The snake flesh itself was also very nourishing.

Having reached this point in his train of thought, Xu Qing was reminded of Sergeant Thunder and how he'd mentioned liking to eat snakes. [Get latest novel chapters on nov\(e\)l bj/n\(.\)c/om](#)

Then Xu Qing thought about how he'd often caught snakes as a child, and he licked his lips.

Along with his progression in cultivation, his mutation blotch had been growing darker. And during his session the previous night, it had even started hurting. He had the feeling that if he could eat this snake's gallbladder, it would probably help the situation.

He kept his eyes fixed on the giant anaconda as the time drew near to draw lots.

The goateed man had another scavenger bring forth five bamboo sticks, upon which were inscribed the names of the beasts.

The oldest young man was the first to draw. When he saw which beast he was to fight, he breathed a visible sigh of relief.

Next were the two younger men, and then the girl.

The two young men seemed to pray fervently as they drew their lots. Afterwards, they had pained expressions on their faces.

The girl simply looked despairingly at her result. She had drawn the giant horned anaconda. The last bamboo stick was left to Xu Qing. It was for the smaller of the two wolves, which was clearly the weakest of the five beasts. Looking at the stick he'd drawn, he frowned.

The scavengers left, and the combatants were taken to a small pen off to the side where they could watch safely. The crowd roared as the first battle was announced.

The first to engage in battle was one of the younger men. Trembling, he stepped out into the fighting arena to face the red bear.

The battle went quickly. The young man wasn't a match for the bear at all. He held his own for only a few blows, then fell to the ground and was torn to pieces.

Blood sprayed everywhere. About half the crowd cheered, while the other half hurled curses at the dead combatant for losing them money.

The sight caused the other young man, who was supposed to fight next, to shake with fear, and ask if he could back out of the trial.

The crowd hissed in displeasure as a scavenger took the young man away.

Third in line was the young man who was already a scavenger. He had been paired with the larger of the two wolves. Given his experience as a scavenger, he was much more ruthless than an average person.

After several shocking rounds of combat, he gained the upper hand and killed the wolf, though he was gasping for breath by the end of it. Thus, he became the first victor in the trial. The gate opened, and he left, doubled over in pain.

Fourth in line... was the girl.

As the giant horned anaconda was released from its cage, she gritted her teeth and walked past Xu Qing, despair in her eyes.

Before she could walk out into the arena, though, Xu Qing said, "Let's switch."

The girl stopped walking and stared at him in shock. Before she could do or say anything, he handed her his bamboo stick and took hers, which had the words 'giant horned anaconda' inscribed on it. Not even taking note of the gratitude in her eyes, he walked out toward the snake.

The crowd howled, as many of the spectators had been paying attention to the order of combatants.

That said, other than the people who had already placed bets on either him or the girl, no one cared very much. The camp owner didn't mind and was content to let things play out as they happened.

Xu Qing kept his eyes on the huge snake as it slowly crawled out into the open, its scales grating against the iron bars as it did.

Though it instinctively focused on him, he was different from the prey it was used to. As a result, it didn't immediately attack him. Instead, it coiled up outside the cage, then lifted its head high into the air as if trying to decide what to do with him.

The cheering of the crowd grew louder, while the jeering faded.

Xu Qing's expression remained the same as ever as he strode forward. Perhaps because he had entered the snake's strike range, or perhaps because of the atmosphere generated by the crowd, the giant anaconda's yellow eyes seemed to grow colder. It smacked the ground with its tail, causing a boom to echo out in the arena, then struck, its mouth opening wide to reveal rows of razor-sharp teeth. A noxious aroma blasted out as it lunged toward Xu Qing to devour him.

Xu Qing looked coldly at the incoming snake. Just as the beast was about to hit him, he jumped to the side. He didn't immediately launch a strike; instead, he ignored the giant head as it passed him, then focused like a skilled hunter on the snake's abdomen.

The massive jaws snapped onto nothing but air.

Then the snake growled as it slashed its tail at Xu Qing. Acting on instinct, it sent its head and tail into movement as if it were hunting in the wild, making a circle as it seemingly attempted to wrap itself around him.

Xu Qing remained quiet and focused on the abdomen. As the tail neared, he clenched his right hand into a fist and struck out.

**BAM!**

He had only trained in the Sea and Mountain Incantation up to the first level, but even that gave him a significant boost to the strength of his fleshly body. He struck the tail, sending it flailing off to the side. The anaconda was clearly hurt, but it wasn't a fatal

blow. In fact, it seemed to make it angry. Eyes burning, it struck again at Xu Qing with its massive jaws wide open.

However, that was when Xu Qing's eyes glittered as he found the opening he'd been looking for, and he stepped right toward the snake.

With his right fist, he unleashed a vicious punch. Then a second, and a third....

Fists rained down furiously!

His onslaught forced the snake into retreat. Then it shrieked as it tried to wrap itself around him. However, his punches were so forceful it had no hope of succeeding.

Finally, the blows landing on its abdomen, caused the weak scales there to shatter, and blood to spray out. The thing was obviously badly hurt.

Seeing this, Xu Qing didn't give it a chance to shift positions.

Eyes flashing coldly, he used his left hand to pull out his dagger, which he plunged right into the anaconda's flesh.

Then he ripped the blade through the creature.

Blood sprayed everywhere as the giant horned anaconda shrieked. A shocking and ghastly wound opened up on the serpent's belly, revealing the gallbladder inside.

The snake was huge, but that was because of its mutations. As a result, the gall bladder was actually small, roughly the size of a chicken egg.

Without the slightest hesitation, Xu Qing plunged his hand inside, grabbed the organ, and ripped it out. The snake howled.

Blood rained down onto the sandy soil underfoot.

Ignoring the gore, Xu Qing held the gallbladder for a moment as he looked around at the scavengers. Then he put the organ in his mouth and swallowed it.

Meanwhile, the snake, which was still alive, thrashed about, howling. Eyes wild, it once again lunged at Xu Qing, as if hoping to swallow him alive.

He looked at it coldly, and at the very last minute, jumped up. Then, in midair, he extended his right hand, within which was a black iron skewer.

Eyes burning with killing intent, he dropped down and used his own momentum and body weight to back the skewer, plunging it right into the spot where the snake's heart was.

The skewer shattered the scales like a hammer crushing an ice cube.

Rumbling echoed in the arena as the giant horned anaconda trembled wildly. Then its head and tail slumped to the ground as it made a final, despondent cry. Finally, it smacked its tail a final time on the ground.

As the sound echoed out... the dust settled, and the crowd of scavengers looked down, astounded.

Quite a few of the spectators were on their feet, staring at the young man with the iron skewer, standing atop the corpse of the anaconda. They wouldn't have reacted this way if the snake had been killed by an adult. But this was a skinny kid who had efficiently extracted the gallbladder, then killed the snake, all the while maintaining a cold and indifferent facial expression.

Even in a scavenger basecamp, this was an unusual thing.

The little wolf and the red bear, who were still in their cages, were so terrified that they just huddled there, shaking.

It was almost as if this wasn't a trial, but a hunt.

As the spectators looked on, Xu Qing put away his iron skewer, stuck his hand into the gaping wound on the snake to pick it up, then walked toward the exit, leaving behind a long trail of fresh snake blood.

Upon reaching the exit gate and seeing that it wasn't open, he looked over his shoulder.

A moment later, the goateed man who stood on the platform above waved his hand, and... the gate rumbled open.

Outside, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed, was Sergeant Thunder. He gave Xu Qing a grin.

"Can I stay at your place?" Xu Qing asked.

"Sure."

With a nod, Xu Qing tossed the snake corpse onto the ground between the two of them.

"You like snake meat, right? Please, eat."

Sergeant Thunder gaped for a moment, then threw his head back and laughed heartily. Picking up the snake corpse, he led Xu Qing back toward his house.

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Xu Qing was gone, but the crowd in the arena was still cheering. Meanwhile, in one corner of the arena was an old man in a violet robe. Next to him was an expressionless middle-aged man who looked like a servant, and had a pentagram tattoo on his forehead.

Whether it was their clothing or their bearing, they were obviously different from the people around them. In fact, no one seemed to even notice their presence, not even the camp owner.

The old man had a ruddy complexion, and also seemed to radiate destructive power. He obviously wasn't an ordinary person. As he sat there watching Xu Qing leave, a smile broke out on his face.

"What an interesting young man."

Deathblade's Thoughts

Some of you might have been following my work for years, others might be new. So I figured I would do a quick intro and update about the Deathblade Clan. We consist of:

Deathblade. I also go by the pen name Jeremy Bai.

Madam Deathblade (MDB). My wife, born and raised in North China. Her favorite things are: Chinese palace drama TV shows; good food; me.

Battle Boy. My son, who was originally called Baby Deathblade (BDB). He's now 7 years old going on 12. He's a very chill kid who loves reading, gaming (especially Minecraft), Naruto, Adventure Time, and many other things. He picked the online gamer handle Battle Boy, so that's what I'll call him for the time being.

Princess Deathblade (PDB). My daughter who is 2 years 11 months going on 16. Unlike her brother, she's a fireball of destructive energy.

Chapter 8: Set for Three

Bright sunlight shone down onto Sergeant Thunder and Xu Qing as they walked through the scavenger basecamp. One was tall, the other short. One was old, the other young. Yet from a distance, they seemed to belong together. Despite the brutal world they lived in together, they seemed like close companions.

Perhaps because of the snake corpse that Sergeant Thunder carried, any locals present who didn't go to the arena... didn't even think about causing problems for them.

Xu Qing reveled in the sensation. Maybe it was the upcoming chance to eat the snake, or simply the warmth of the sunlight. Either way, he felt wonderful and eager.

What was more, the way the sunlight shone on the snake's scales made him salivate.

He also loved eating snake.

Sergeant Thunder's place was in the middle ring of the camp.

The inner ring had brick houses with tile roofs, and the outer ring had simple tents. The middle ring featured wooden cabins collected into groups of three. The cabins weren't very big, but they were a lot better than the places Xu Qing had lived in the slums.

What was more, Sergeant Thunder even had a small courtyard with a bamboo gate, which wasn't common. Sergeant Thunder opened the gate and stepped inside. Xu Qing followed, looking around to get his bearings. Sergeant Thunder, carrying the snake corpse, headed toward the kitchen. As he did, he pointed at the second cabin of the three.

"You stay there, Kid. Look around. I'll let you know when the meal's ready."

Sergeant Thunder disappeared into the kitchen, and it wasn't long before the sound of chopping rang out.

Xu Qing swallowed his hunger as he went into the cabin Sergeant Thunder had pointed to. It had a bed, a blanket, and a table. Nothing else.

The floor was swept and the desk didn't have a spot of dust on it. Clearly, someone kept the room clean, and opened it often to get sunlight.

Xu Qing couldn't have been more pleased. He didn't like big rooms; he preferred places he could take in with a single glance. He felt safer that way.

After looking at everything, he glanced at the neatly made bed, but decided not to get on it. Instead, he sat down on the ground.

Closing his eyes, he started working on his daily cultivation.

As the spirit power poured into him, he heard the faint sound of cooking oil popping and hissing in the kitchen.

Before long, a fragrant aroma drifted in through the cracks in the wall, filling his small room and making his stomach grumble. *All newest chapters on [n.o./velbi/n/\(\).com](http://n.o./velbi/n/().com)*

It smelled wonderful. At a certain point, his throat twitched, and he opened his eyes. He had lived for years in the slums, and couldn't remember ever smelling something this wonderful. Trying hard to ignore the cries of his stomach, he closed his eyes again and went back to cultivation.

Just like that, time slipped by slowly but surely. Eventually, evening came.

He was just finishing his cultivation when Sergeant Thunder called to him from outside. His eyes snapped open. Rising to his feet, he walked out and saw the old man beckoning at him from the kitchen.

Xu Qing stopped at the door and looked inside to find a table filled with seven or eight dishes. There was fried snake, braised snake, steamed snake, snake soup, and more. It really was a serpentine banquet.

Sergeant Thunder clearly was a master of the culinary arts. Everything looked and smelled amazing. In fact, Xu Qing's eyes went wide looking at it all. Sergeant Thunder chuckled, turned, and began to set the table.

Xu Qing walked inside, the aroma growing stronger around him as he did. However, he didn't sit down. Instead, he waited for Sergeant Thunder to set out the bowls and chopsticks. When he did, he set the table for three.

The sight of three sets of tableware caused Xu Qing to momentarily stop focusing on the amazing food. Looking cautiously at Sergeant Thunder, he quietly asked, "Is someone else coming?"

"Don't worry, it's just a habit of mine. The third set... is for someone who'll never come."

A flicker of reminiscence passed through Sergeant Thunder's eyes a moment before vanishing. He sat down.

Xu Qing nodded and also sat. Unable to restrain himself, he reached out and grabbed a piece of fried snake and shoved it in his mouth. It was burning hot, but it tasted amazing. Very juicy. Swallowing a bite, he licked his lips and reached for the braised snake.

Sergeant Thunder cleared his throat. "Use chopsticks."

"Oh."

Xu Qing took a pair of chopsticks, fiddled with them briefly, then stabbed them into a piece of braised snake.

Neither of them talked as they ate. They just enjoyed the meal.

Sergeant Thunder ate slowly, taking only two or three bites from each dish. It seemed at odds with how scavengers usually acted. On the other hand, Xu Qing ate like a ravenous wolf, consuming far more food than Sergeant Thunder.

Seeing how Xu Qing was eating, Sergeant Thunder eventually said, "How come you aren't picking at it like you did with the steamed buns?"

Xu Qing swallowed a chunk of snake meat, looked up, and said, "The steamed buns were yours. This snake meat is mine."

Sergeant Thunder wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry. He just sat there watching Xu Qing stab things with his chopsticks and slurp the snake soup. However, he also noticed that Xu Qing left plenty for him to eat, yet didn't hold back in devouring his own portion.

"That snake was big," Sergeant Thunder said. "I think it'll take half a month to eat it all. Plus, the skin and bones are worth quite a bit...."

"I'll pay the rent in full," Xu Qing said. "Don't deduct the value of the snake."

As far as he was concerned, the snake meat would make up for the steamed buns and the sleeping bag. And the skin and bones would cover Sergeant Thunder's silence regarding the fate of Cruel Ox. That wouldn't leave any extra for the rent.

In terms of Sergeant Thunder taking him out of the ruins and to the basecamp, he would treat that as a favor. Paying back a favor with material things didn't seem right, but Xu Qing wouldn't forget it.

Sergeant Thunder looked at him for a moment, and could see how serious he was. Xu Qing was obviously a person who knew whom to show gratitude to, and whom to feel resentment against. Sergeant Thunder nodded.

"I bet you have some questions about who I am, right, Kid?"

Xu Qing didn't respond, but he slowed down in eating.

"People call me Sergeant Thunder. That's not my real name, but it doesn't matter. Nobody in scavenger basecamps uses their real name." Sergeant Thunder picked up a chunk of steamed snake and put it in his mouth. "The reason for the name is that I have a group of friends here that I trust with my life. We call ourselves Squad Thunderbolt. I know, it's not the most inventive name.

"We take whatever work we can get, and it's only when we get something really difficult that we work together. Including me, there are four members. As of right now, the other three are out on assignments.

"However, they'll be back soon, and I'll introduce you to them. I want you to be our newest member. That's how you'll earn money to live on and resources for your cultivation."

Apparently, Sergeant Thunder was full, as he set his chopsticks down and looked at Xu Qing.

Xu Qing wasn't surprised that Sergeant Thunder knew he practiced cultivation. If he could tell that Sergeant Thunder was a rogue cultivator, it made sense that the man had noticed the same thing about him.

"Okay," Xu Qing said with a nod. He had no reason to hesitate. In fact, he felt relieved. Living in the slums, he had long since learned that people didn't give you things or offer help without wanting something in return.

"Keep eating," Sergeant Thunder said. "I'm old, so if I eat too much, I have digestion problems." Clearing his throat, the old man stood up and stepped to the door. "Spirit power is like poison. If you rush it, you won't get far without the mutagen spreading within you. You should really go for slow and steady over fast and aggressive."

Xu Qing didn't say anything in response.

Sergeant Thunder looked back at Xu Qing and shook his head. "That said, focusing on cultivation is the right thing to do. The forbidden region next to this basecamp is different from the place you came from. The reason so many fugitives and rogue cultivators gather in this area is because of the resources to be found there. If you're going to live here, you'll have to go inside eventually. So you really do need to work on your cultivation."

With that, the old man left.

Left alone, Xu Qing finished all the snake meat. However, he didn't just go back to his cabin. He collected all the bowls and chopsticks, cleaned the kitchen, and then returned.

Sitting down cross-legged, he started cultivating again.

Xu Qing knew that if he didn't want to be weak, if he didn't want to struggle through life, and if he didn't want his survival to be controlled by other people, then he had to get stronger.

There were a lot of rogue cultivators in the scavenger basecamp. In fact, there were more here than he'd seen in the past six years combined. And they weren't good people. If the slums had been a kennel of dogs, this place was a den of wolves.

If he didn't get stronger, he'd die at the hands of a scavenger before he died from mutation. He would be dead and buried at the hands of another person.

Thanks to the information in his Sea and Mountain Incantation bamboo slip, Xu Qing knew that there was a medicinal pill that could alleviate the effects of mutagen.

Though that method was treating the symptoms but not the root cause, it was still the best option. Thanks to his time on the road with the other scavengers, he knew that the pill was called a white bolus.

And the forbidden region near the camp was where you could find some of the ingredients to make it. Given that, it seemed obvious that this camp would have places that sold white boluses.

With such thoughts on his mind, he rubbed the spot on his chest where he'd inserted the violet crystal. He already knew that the crystal gave him powers of regeneration, but also, made him faster and stronger. What was more, though he had only reached the first level of the Sea and Mountain Incantation, he could sense that he already had more strength than that described in the bamboo slip. The first level had the power of a single tiger, but he was beyond that.

I could kill multiple tigers, he thought. Based on the spirit power fluctuations within him, he was certain that his focus on cultivation while traveling had pushed him close to the second level. I'm going to get there tonight!

His eyes shone with determination before he closed them and started his breathing exercises.

Before long, spirit power rolled toward him from all directions. Thankfully, there was a lot less mutagen outside of forbidden regions than within, which meant his cultivation advanced more quickly.

Opening himself up, he used his breathing exercises to absorb large amounts of spirit power. As he did, his chest beneath his clothing glittered with violet light.

Time passed. Soon, popping and cracking sounds rang out from inside Xu Qing, and black sludge oozed out of his pores.

As his flesh and blood was nourished, he grew tougher, and the energy within him built toward an explosion point.

\*\*\*

It was night outside, and the girl from the beast trial was approaching.

Standing outside the courtyard gate, she hesitated for a moment. Finally, she mustered her courage and knocked. The sound was so weak it didn't seem capable of passing through the gate and into the rooms beyond.

What was more, the moment she knocked was when the popping sounds inside Xu Qing reached a crescendo.

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A roaring sound filled his mind, and his eyes snapped open. Violet light twinkled within, and a pleased expression covered his face. Looking down at his arm, he saw a second mutation blotch.

He had reached the second level of Qi Condensation!

Chapter 9: Consequences of a Threat

I finally broke through.

Xu Qing stood, made a fist, and launched an experimental blow. A cracking sound rang out, and a strong gust of wind blew through the room. His eyes went wide. Even just standing there, he felt a lot stronger than he had earlier.

If he had to fight the same giant horned anaconda, he was certain he could destroy the thing with a single blow to the abdomen. Not only that, but he could also tell that his senses were sharper. He could see clearer and also hear better; and that was when he noticed someone knocking softly on the bamboo door.

Surprised, he walked over to the door and looked out. Just barely, he could see the girl standing in the moonlight outside the courtyard's bamboo gate. She looked hurt, and she was also shaking visibly.

He frowned, and decided just to ignore her. However, she persisted in knocking.

Finally, he opened the door and stepped out.

The girl looked nervous to see Xu Qing suddenly standing there on the other side of the bamboo gate, but she didn't back away. Instead, she just stood there looking at him.

"Can I help you?" he said.

Stammering a bit, she answered, "I... I g-got my residency permit. And... and I got work in the camp."

"Good to know," he replied, then turned to go back into his room.

"Wait!" she blurted. "Thank you. I came here because I wanted to thank you."

"No need for thanks. I wanted to eat that thing. It had nothing to do with you." He went back into his cabin.

Looking at his back, the girl raised her voice and said, "It doesn't matter. I still want to thank you. And... I'll repay you one day."

Turning, she staggered a bit as she walked off into the night.

Xu Qing watched her leave then closed the door, unconvinced she would follow through on her words. Inhaling deeply, he took some more time to examine the changes inside of him. He now felt a lot more confident in being able to survive.

However, the pain in his arm, which he presumed was from the mutagen, was more intense. Not even eating the snake's gallbladder had done much to alleviate the mutagen effects.

It was quiet this late at night. He didn't hear any beast sounds echoing across the camp. Walking to the bed, he looked down at the clean blanket, and then at his filth-covered clothing. After some thought, he took the blanket off, rolled it up, and put it to the side. Then he lay down on the wooden bed slats.

Acting on instinct, he pulled out his black iron skewer and tried to get to sleep.

That skewer was his most trusted companion. He had found it years ago while rifling through a pile of trash. Thinking that it seemed sharp and strong, he'd kept it at his side ever since, and it was now his preferred weapon.

I need to find a place that sells white boluses.

He rubbed his sack, which contained all of his belongings and savings, including a few gemstones he'd found back in the ruined city. That said, he wouldn't keep a lot of gemstones on himself. That was just a way to get in trouble. He'd learned that at a young age.

Wrapped up in his thoughts, he eventually closed his eyes.

However, he never released his grip on his iron skewer.

The night passed, and eventually sunlight seeped in from outside.

Xu Qing woke. Stepping outside, he looked over at Sergeant Thunder's cabin only to realize the old man was gone. Noting his absence, Xu Qing headed out into the camp. Perhaps because of his performance in killing the snake, a lot of eyes were fixed on him as he walked around.

No longer did people look at him as a child to be bullied. People recognized him. And some seemed wary of him. What was more, the young people roughly his same age who lurked in the alleyways seemed envious.

The only way to get respect is to earn it.



While looking for a shop that sold white boluses, Xu Qing familiarized himself with the camp.

There were a lot of stray dogs, most of whom snarled and snapped over food. Many were skinny and emaciated, but a few looked healthy and strong. Xu Qing kept his eyes out for dogs as he explored.

Eventually, he had a general understanding of how the camp was laid out. And it was in the inner ring of the camp that he found the shop he was looking for.

It was a fairly large place, with a lot of customers going in and out.

He took a few minutes to just watch from the outside, which was when he realized the same girl from last night was working as an assistant. She seemed to be doing miscellaneous jobs, hustling about, her forehead dripping with sweat.

When Xu Qing finally entered, she noticed him almost immediately, and was about to say something when a scavenger asked her about some of the goods for sale.

At first, Xu Qing didn't look around at the wares. Instead, he studied the other customers.

There were seven people present, some of them looking through the items for sale, some standing around in thought, others haggling. There were two people who seemed to be there together, a fat fellow and a skinny fellow.

The fat one was round, the skinny one had a horse face, and both seemed tough, with strong spirit power fluctuations. The skinny one was currently yelling at the girl for not answering his question in a satisfactory way. As the girl apologized over and over again, Xu Qing started browsing the wares.

Based on what he was seeing, this was a general store. There were medicinal pills, weapons, clothing, food, and just about everything else. After looking around, he walked up to one of the sales counters, behind which was a shopkeeper smoking a long pipe.

"How much are white boluses?" Xu Qing asked.

The shopkeeper opened his eyes and looked Xu Qing up and down. Perhaps because he recognized him from the fight yesterday, he responded in a relatively polite manner. "Supply's limited. I only get about five in per day, and today I already sold two. Ten spirit coins each."

Xu Qing had been ready for a high price, but to hear that they cost ten spirit coins made him frown.

His entire life savings consisted of twenty-three spirit coins. However, the mutation blotches on his arm, and the pain they radiated, prompted him to immediately pull out twenty spirit coins and hand them over.

The shopkeeper accepted them, opened the cabinet, and took out a cloth-wrapped bundle that he handed to Xu Qing.

Xu Qing opened it to find two white medicinal pills inside. He frowned again. The pills were already turning a bit green, which was not their original color. They weren't fresh, and they didn't even emanate a medicinal aroma. They were clearly low-quality pills.

"White boluses in the basecamp are all like that," the shopkeeper said with a wooden smile. "We don't have good quality stuff here. They might be on the verge of going bad, but they still work. Don't worry, they're safe to consume."

Xu Qing was too cautious to do that. Instead, he decided to take the pills back to Sergeant Thunder and ask for more information. Putting the pills away, he prepared to leave. However, he suddenly dodged to the side.

In that same instant, a hand snatched down onto the exact spot where he'd been standing.

Looking over coldly, he saw the horse-faced scavenger who'd been yelling at the girl shortly before. Looking surprised, the man pulled his hand back. At the same time, his rotund companion sidled over to the shop entrance, blocking the exit and staring at Xu Qing with a toothy grin.

The other customers in the shop saw what was going on and immediately reacted.

"It's Fatmountain and Horsefour from Squad Bloodshadow!" someone remarked.

Then the shopkeeper coldly said, "That kid came back with Sergeant Thunder. I know Thunderclap and Bloodshadow don't get along, and I don't plan to interfere. But don't waste time. I have business to do."

Passersby outside noticed the commotion and craned their necks in interest. The girl looked very anxious, but wasn't sure how to help Xu Qing.

"Don't worry, this won't take long," said Horsefour, looking at Xu Qing with cold eyes and a colder grin. "Kid, I've killed a lot of giant horned anacondas, so I don't plan to cause problems for you. But I need white boluses. Give me the two you just bought. If you do, you can leave quietly. But if you don't, I'll break your neck and take the pills from your corpse."

Xu Qing's eyes darkened. His eyes flitted to the man's throat, then to his fat companion. And finally he glanced at the crowd gathering in the street. Both of these people had

strong spirit power fluctuations, and both looked like they were in the second level. He was confident that, one on one, he could defeat either of them in ten breaths of time or less.

If they came at him together, he was still confident he could win, but it would take longer.

That wasn't to mention that this was a public market; if fighting broke out, there might be fellow members of their squad who would come to help them.

Xu Qing wasn't going to rest everything on the hope that Sergeant Thunder would come to his rescue. That was just the kind of person he was. He didn't like relying on others, and would rather control his own fate.

Once again glancing at Horsefour's throat, he took out the package with the white boluses and threw it at him. The man caught it, looked at him, and laughed complacently. His partner Fatmountain also threw his head back and laughed. Meanwhile, Xu Qing simply started walking.

The crowd both inside and outside the shop seemed to take all of this as a matter of course. Everyone knew that the weak are the prey of the strong. It was a natural law. And when the weak could adapt to circumstances, it meant that they knew how to stay alive.

The girl sighed in relief, wiped the anxious sweat from her brow, and continued working.

As for Fatmountain and Horsefour, they swaggered out of the shop, joking and laughing with each other as they walked down the street.

However... neither of them noticed that they were being followed. Xu Qing stayed behind them in the shadows, patiently keeping pace, being careful not to reveal his presence. His eyes were like those of a wolf stalking its prey.

Time passed. Eventually, evening arrived.

Fatmountain and Horsefour visited a number of locations in the camp. Not once did they ever realize they were being shadowed.

Soon, the moon hung high in the sky, which was when they finally parted ways.

Fatmountain sat down at the bonfire near their residence, while Horsefour strolled toward the periphery of the camp and the feather-covered tents, a licentious grin on his face.

Just before he arrived at his destination, he heard a sound in the darkness behind him. He looked over his shoulder suspiciously, but saw nothing. Then surprise filled his face and he made to move, except it was too late.

A small hand reached out and clamped down over his mouth. Another hand appeared, a dagger in it. Without any hesitation, the owner of the dagger slashed it across Horsefour's throat.

A swishing sound could be heard, and a spray of blood shot out into the night. Horsefour's eyes went wide.

He tried to struggle, but the hand was too powerful. Then, the person holding him dragged him backward.

He flailed his feet, but they found no purchase on the ground. Moments later, he was being dragged like a chicken onto the ground in a dark alley.

The hand kept its grip on his mouth, and after a short time, he couldn't struggle any more, choking as he was on his own blood. Finally, he was thrown onto the ground.

That was when, in his despair, he saw a cold-faced young man standing above him in the moonlight.

All he could do was make a sobbing, choking sound. How could he ever have guessed that the young man who had meekly handed over those white boluses earlier in the day... could be so ruthless?Gét latest *novel chapters* on [nov\(e\)lby/n\(.\)c/om](http://nov(e)lby/n(.)c/om)

He wanted to speak. He wanted to say he'd only been making a threat. That he wasn't actually going to kill anyone.

But the blood clogging his throat made it impossible for him to speak. He could only gag as he looked hopelessly at the young man rifling through his pockets.

Eventually, Xu Qing found his white boluses, plus five more. He also found some spirit coins and a few other random items. After taking them, he ignored Horsefour's terrified expression and pulled out his severed snake head. After carefully opening it, he exposed the fangs and pierced Horsefour's skin with them.

Horsefour started convulsing. Then the skin surrounding the puncture marks started to melt as agony spread through him.

Eventually, Xu Qing reached down and closed his eyes. From then on, Horsefour saw nothing else of the world.

His body melted, becoming nothing but blood that soaked into the ground.

Having learned from past mistakes, Xu Qing took out a sack into which he put Horsefour's clothing. Then he turned and left.

Shortly thereafter, two people suddenly appeared on the spot where Horsefour had been killed.

It was the same violet-robed old man and his servant who had been invisible to the crowd the day before. The old man looked down at the ground, then at Xu Qing walking away in the distance.

"The boy has potential," said the old man. "He's patient, but kills decisively. At the same time, he's ruthless. He also cleans up after himself. Not bad at all."

The servant seemed surprised. He had served this old man for years, and rarely heard him say 'not bad at all' about others. Already, he'd praised this young man twice.

"An interesting young man indeed," the old man said with a smile. Then he casually asked, "How long until Grandmaster Bai arrives?" [1]

Looking away from Xu Qing, the servant said, "Master Seventh, according to Grandmaster Bai's itinerary, he should be here in a day or two."

"So he's almost here. In that case, I'm going to do my best to convince him of the truth. Over in the Violet Lands, they're always jabbering on and on about following the rules. He'd be much better off joining us in Seven Blood Eyes." The old man laughed contentedly as he watched Xu Qing disappearing in the distance. "Let's go. I want to see what this wolf pup does next."

1. This Bai is a somewhat rare surname that doesn't appear on the list of the 100 most common Chinese surnames. It also means 'cedar, cypress.' In mainland China, it's pronounced Bai, but in Taiwan it's pronounced Bo. I happen to know this because, when I lived in Manhattan Chinatown, I knew some fellow non-Chinese students of Mandarin who had been given this surname, and it always caused confusion, because some people would call them Bai, and other would call them Bo. It's not the same surname as Bai Xiaochun. 📧

## Deathblade's Thoughts

Thanks to UnifiedDivide for joining the team as official proofreader! He has a sharp eye for mistakes and typos, hopefully this will up the quality.

As always, if you notice any mistakes, please do notify me in whatever way works the best for you (usually a DM is best, as it's easy to miss comments on WW)

## Chapter 10: New Clothes

It was the third lunar month, so the weather was starting to get warmer. However, it was still cold. To someone who just emerged from a forbidden region, that level of cold wasn't even noticeable. But after staying outside in it for long enough, it would slowly cause frigidness to seep into the bones. Of course, the nights were icier.

However, Xu Qing didn't let the frigid wind slow him down. He just wrapped his leather jerkin around himself a bit tighter. He still had a matter to attend to, and thus, he moved carefully through the shadows of the basecamp.

He ran into occasional stray dogs that bared their teeth at him, but upon seeing the bloodthirsty look in his eyes, they scurried away. Xu Qing didn't bother them after they fled.

Eventually, he reached a cabin in the middle ring. Crouching in the darkness across from it, he sat unmoving and watched.

A fizzling bonfire let up a few wisps of smoke.

Xu Qing hadn't forgotten what Horsefour left to do when parting ways with Fatmountain. So for now, he was just planning to wait for Fatmountain to come back out.

Icy wind bit into him, but he remained as unmoving as a stone, waiting patiently. Find updated novels on [novels on novelfbin\(.\)com](http://novels.onnovelbin.com)

Behind him was a building with a prominent roof, atop which crouched Master Seventh and his servant. Looking down at Xu Qing, Master Seventh smiled.

"Just as I predicted. The little wolf pup is on a killing spree. Now I'm very curious to see how he performs when he goes into the nearby forbidden region."

Time slipped by. About an hour later, Xu Qing frowned. After some thinking, he turned around and slipped back into the night like a specter. He didn't immediately return to Sergeant Thunder's residence. Instead, he circled around it to make sure the coast was clear.

Only then did he enter, quietly passing through the courtyard and into his cabin.

Taking a deep breath, he rubbed his hands together to drive the cold from his body. Wiping himself clean of blood, he sat down cross-legged on the bed to think.

Scavengers come and go randomly whenever they get work, and that Horsefour is obviously a lecher. It will take a bit of time before anyone realizes he's missing. During that time, Fatmountain won't be on guard. To wrap this matter up properly, I need to get rid of Fatmountain.

It was the same as when he'd killed Cruel Ox without hesitation. Having been raised in the slums, he simply couldn't allow threats to his own life to exist around him. He'd killed Horsefour, not only because the man stole from him, but also because he was a threat. And he needed to get rid of Fatmountain for the same reason.

After mulling the matter over, he dumped Horsefour's items out onto the bed in front of him and looked through them.

They were all random things. For instance, there was a palm-sized chunk of iron that somewhat resembled a box. It seemed to be nothing more than a crafting material. There were also about seventy spirit coins, which was quite a haul for Xu Qing.

After taking stock, Xu Qing compared the white boluses that Horsefour had taken with the ones he'd already possessed. All of them were in poor condition. Because of that, his trust in the shopkeeper's words increased a bit.

After more consideration, Xu Qing consumed one of the pills, then closed his eyes to experience the effects. He felt something warm flowing through him and eventually gathering at the mutation blotches on his left arm. It was a pleasant sensation. Sometime later, the feeling faded. Xu Qing opened his eyes and looked at his arm. The two mutation blotches looked lighter in color, and they didn't hurt as much.

It worked, he thought, looking pleased.

He took out a second pill. The same feeling filled him, and when it faded away, it took all of the pain with it. He felt cleansed and comfortable, as though his flesh and blood had been purged. Furthermore, he felt even stronger and faster than before.

He didn't consume any more of the white boluses, but instead packed them away into his bag. Then he closed his eyes to work on his cultivation.

The night passed without incident.

The next morning, he opened his eyes and prepared to face the day.

Out in the courtyard, he could see that Sergeant Thunder was in his cabin, sitting cross-legged and doing breathing exercises. Xu Qing didn't bother him. Quietly opening the main gate of the courtyard, he stepped out, closed it behind him, and headed off into the camp.

The wind seemed even colder than the night before, hitting Xu Qing so hard that he shivered. Even the stray dogs were hiding in their holes.

There was also a thick fog, which brought up bad memories of life in the slums.

He hated the cold.



To street urchins, a cold wind was like a catastrophe that you had to struggle against just to survive.

Because of that, as Xu Qing made his way through the cold wind and happened to pass a clothing shop, he stopped walking and looked over. Inside that shop were stacks of clean, freshly folded new clothes.

Patting his bulging bag, he turned and walked in. There weren't many other customers, so he felt comfortable taking his time examining the garments for sale.

The shopkeeper behind the counter glanced at him, then looked at the salesgirl and said, "Go into the back and straighten up a bit. If there are any custom orders that haven't been picked up for a month, bring them out to sell."

"What if the people who put the order in come back?" the salesgirl asked.

"Come back? People go missing in this camp all the time. Some die in the forbidden region, others just up and vanish. Nobody will come back for those clothes other than ghosts. Hurry up."

Waving his hand, the shopkeeper shooed the salesgirl into the back.

Xu Qing kept browsing, but didn't find anything he liked. Around that time, the salesgirl returned with an armful of clothes that she started arranging for display. Looking over, Xu Qing's eyes flashed when he saw a dark fur overcoat among the items.

After enough time had passed for an incense stick to burn, Xu Qing walked out of the shop wearing the overcoat. It wasn't very heavy, and did a great job of keeping out the cold. At the very least, he felt a lot warmer than he had with the other coat. That said, the large overcoat didn't quite fit his small frame, so it looked a little odd.

Xu Qing didn't care. In fact, he was so happy about the new overcoat that he went out of his way to avoid any mud in the street as he walked.

His first inclination was to go find Fatmountain, until he noticed some sort of commotion on the periphery of the camp. In fact, many scavengers were heading in that direction.

Xu Qing looked over.

Beneath the rays of the rising sun, he saw a dozen or so horse carriages majestically approaching.

The people riding on the outside of the carriages seemed to be nothing more than drivers and guards, but they were dressed lavishly. They had ruddy faces and sparkling eyes, and all of them radiated astonishing spirit power fluctuations. It was impossible to tell who was inside the carriages, but Xu Qing had to guess that they were important.



He had heard Sergeant Thunder mention that caravans like this would often come to the basecamp. Usually, they were merchants who dealt in seven-leaf clover, which was used to create white boluses.

Fatmountain was in the crowd who'd assembled to look at the carriages. After noticing him, Xu Qing didn't pay any attention to the newcomers, and instead narrowed his eyes and started following the rotund man.

The arrival of the carriages threw the entire camp into high gear. It turned into a market day, and thanks to the commotion, Xu Qing didn't find any opportunities to deal with Fatmountain. Late that night, he could only watch as Fatmountain went back into his cabin. Tucking his dagger into his sleeve, Xu Qing left.

He hadn't found his chance, but he was a patient person. Returning to his cabin, he sat down in his new overcoat to meditate. Later, he fell asleep with the overcoat on.

It wasn't until the next morning at dawn that he actually took the coat off. As he prepared to go out into the camp, he put on his old, ratty jerkin from the ruined city. Looking at his new overcoat laying there on the bed, he wondered if he'd been too impulsive the day before.

Clad in the old threadbare garment, he headed into the basecamp, browsing market stalls and peering at the area where the horse carriages were stationed. Of course, the reality was that he was looking for Fatmountain.

Off in the distance, Master Seventh sat on a rooftop yawning. Looking at the carriages, then Xu Qing, he asked his servant, "Did you send the invitation to Grandmaster Bai?"

"Yes, Master Seventh. He replied that he fell ill recently...."

"Fell ill? He's a doctor! Isn't that... wait." Looking surprised, Master Seventh said, "The Kid was wearing new clothes yesterday. Why did he change back to the old outfit?"

Even as Master Seventh puzzled over the matter, down in the crowd, Xu Qing caught sight of Fatmountain and started following him.

And that was how the day passed.

As night arrived, just when Xu Qing was thinking Fatmountain would return to his cabin, he instead found the man was heading toward the outer ring of the camp. Relatively speaking, it was a remote location.

Did he notice me?

Frowning, Xu Qing looked into the fog through narrowed eyes. Instead of following, he glanced around to make sure he himself wasn't being followed, then took a different route that got him to the outer ring before Fatmountain.

After making sure he wasn't being led into some sort of ambush, he found a shadowy area to conceal himself.

A moment later, Fatmountain arrived. He stopped walking.

"I realized yesterday that you were following me, whoreson," he called out. "Step out into the open. This place is remote enough that it's easy to get rid of bodies here. If you don't face me now, then next time, I'll come after you with friends. You might have Sergeant Thunder watching out for you, but Squad Bloodshadow has ways to deal with you regardless."

Given the man's words, Xu Qing saw no reason to keep hiding. He stepped out.

Fatmountain looked at him. "Horsefour didn't accept some secret job. You killed him, didn't you? I guess I underestimated you." Smiling wickedly, he took a step in Xu Qing's direction. "That's fine. I never liked Horsefour. If you hadn't killed him, I would have done it myself sooner or later. Therefore, I should be thanking you. I couldn't care less that he's dead, except, I happen to know his sack had something really amazing in it. And now you have it."

Fatmountain eyed the sack at Xu Qing's waist, his eyes glittering with greed. Not even waiting for a response, he lunged forward, his rotund frame exploding with speed that surpassed the second level of Qi Condensation. Intense spirit power fluctuations rolled out of him, making a stream of magic that swept ice-like air toward Xu Qing.

Fatmountain definitely wasn't in the second level of Qi Condensation, but rather, the third. Because of that, and because of the item in Horsefour's bag, he wanted to take out Xu Qing by himself.

Xu Qing's eyes narrowed. This was his first time facing a cultivator in battle, and his first time seeing someone externalize their spirit power flows. However, he had faith in his own strength and speed.

Even as Fatmountain started moving, Xu Qing lunged forward explosively.

In the blink of an eye, he evaded Fatmountain's attack, leaving the rotund man visibly surprised. Then Xu Qing spun behind his opponent, clenched his right hand into a fist, and launched a blow.

Xu Qing had never unleashed his full strength in a fight.

His fist slammed into Fatmountain, releasing a huge cracking sound. A massive tremor passed through Fatmountain, and his external energy flow shattered. At the same time, his internal organs shivered, and a great glob of blood exploded from his mouth.

The killing intent in Xu Qing's eyes grew stronger.

Next, he pulled out his iron skewer and jumped toward the retreating Fatmountain, aiming the skewer toward his head.

However, right at that moment, Xu Qing's face fell, and he immediately lunged in the opposite direction.

At the same time, a vicious gleam appeared in Fatmountain's eyes.

Two black streaks of light shot out from his ears, screaming through the air toward Xu Qing, one after the other. The two black streaks were winged centipedes that moved with incredible speed. As they neared, Xu Qing slashed out with his dagger, chopping them in half. Even still, one of them got within about seven inches of his face, and the danger of the situation caused his killing intent to grow even stronger.

Because Xu Qing was forced to back up, Fatmountain had a moment to stabilize his internal organs.

Falling back even further, he performed a double-handed incantation gesture, which made his face turn red. Then he exhaled sharply, spitting out a huge cloud of poison gas. [1] [2]

The gas roiled out into a cloud that shot toward Xu Qing, accompanied by sharp hissing sounds.

Afterward, Fatmountain's face was pale white, and he even seemed less fat than before. He took another step back, his eyes containing both fear and hatred.

Xu Qing was obviously a lot stronger than he'd anticipated.

Fatmountain had never considered that, given he was in the third level of Qi Condensation and had numerous poison-related attacks, he would actually be threatened by someone like this. That poison gas was a trump card of his. If he didn't finish the fight quickly, then he would have to call for help. That was how dangerous this opponent was.

Hanging over all of this was the fact that if he cried out for help, he wouldn't get Horsefour's stash.

He did have one taboo item left, a piece of amber that he pulled out, just in case. However, he hesitated to use it, and instead peered at Xu Qing as the cloud of gas roiled around him.

To his shock, the gas suddenly parted, and Xu Qing shot out from inside.

He moved so quickly that Fatmountain saw nothing but a blur. Heart pounding, he made to smash the piece of amber and took in a breath to let out a shout. But he was too slow.

A pitch-black iron skewer stabbed into his head, piercing his skull like a hot knife cutting through butter. Blood sprayed out onto Xu Qing.

Fatmountain went stiff, then slowly dropped to the ground.

Ignoring the corpse, Xu Qing looked around, gasping for breath. They were in a remote part of the camp, but that didn't guarantee that no one had noticed the sounds of fighting. Not seeing anyone around, he hurried to Fatmountain and grabbed his bag.

He was about to dispose of the corpse with his severed snake head when he noticed something in Fatmountain's hand. Pulling the fingers straight, he found a half-crushed piece of amber. It didn't look particularly special, other than the scorpion tail inside.

Xu Qing carefully picked up the piece of amber. Then he turned the corpse into a pool of blood like he'd done with the others. Afterward, he sped off into the night. Behind him, the blood soaked into the ground, leaving behind no trace of what had occurred.

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Master Seventh and his servant stepped out from the darkness.

Master Seventh watched Xu Qing go. He had been there observing the fight the entire time, and looked like he had just realized something.

"I get it. The Kid didn't want to get blood on his new clothes. He's been traumatized by living in poverty, and can't bear to ruin his new outfit."

His servant sighed.

Master Seventh had been pondering this issue for the entire day, trying to determine why Xu Qing didn't wear his new clothes. Now he had his answer, and could stop wondering.

1. I sometimes see people ask why I use 'incantation gesture' instead of something simple like 'hand sign.' The simple reason is that Chinese has a word for 'hand sign'

and this is not that word. Furthermore, most C-E dictionaries mention the English word 'incantation' in the definition of this term. ㄟ

2. Since this is the first chapter that goes into "poison" attacks, I would like to point out that I'm aware of the nuances of the words poison, toxin, venom, etc. in English. In Chinese, all of these words can be described using one character, and that's a character frequently used in fantasy novels. As a result, I am going to use the general word "poison" in virtually all instances, regardless of whether a substance would more precisely be a toxin rather than a poison. I'll occasionally use "venom" when it makes sense. ㄟ