

Necropolis 101

Chapter 101: Enormous Willow

The layout back in Lu Yun's sect had fallen dormant after the thousand-year-old willow died, but he'd still been unable to see through or even just get a clear picture of it. The texts of his sect, however, had recorded everything about it in full detail.

As soon as he'd laid eyes on the giant willow tree in the courtyard, the thought occurred to him of replicating the mysterious layout in the world of immortals. With the blueprints from his memories, he immediately got to work.

The manor may be already encircled by the Frolicking Dragon Quintet, but Lu Yun could easily set up a layout within the layout.

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The unknown layout was inordinately complicated to lay down. Even with Feinie's help, it'd taken Lu Yun seven days to complete it.

Rumble.

Crack crack crack!

The moment the layout was finished, a tremendous noise rang through the manor. The giant tree that had sprouted from Old Willow's remains spontaneously puffed into ashes, as did the Frolicking Dragon Quintet and its corresponding formation, the Capsizing Dragon Quintet. The impact had demolished the manor again and left only rubble in its wake.

Ge Long struggled out of the ruins with his head in his hands. If his name hadn't been written in the Tome of Life and Death, he probably would've been killed in the destruction of the grand formation.

"What—what happened, milord?" He gaped at Lu Yun with a lost expression.

The governor waved a dismissive hand. "Nothing. I was just testing the formation."

Thank goodness he'd sent You Tu and the others to Duskwater City to bolster Mo Yi's forces, or the ninety-nine soldiers would've met an untimely demise just now.

Lu Yun flicked out thirty-six soybeans and summoned golden warriors to rebuild the manor.

"Why did that happen?" He frowned. "Because the layout was within another layout? ...no... not because of that. It's because the willow tree wasn't sturdy enough! There must be a stronger one somewhere in Dusk Province."

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Northern reaches of Dusk Province.

An earth-shattering roar ripped through the Skandha Range. Every living being froze stock-still and held their breaths.

"Bastard! The Dusk governor destroyed my duplicate! Die, die, die! I want him dead!"

There was a giant, furious willow tree that was tens of thousands of meters tall, its large canopy of dark-violet leaves blotting out the sun. The leaves were exquisitely delicate, like sculpted jade, hanging off branches of the same color.

An enormous human face manifested in the tree trunk and furiously snarled, "Thunderbird!"

A giant bird, dark as night, landed before the willow tree. "Thunderbird is here."

"Go to Dusk City and bring me the governor's head." The human face gradually calmed down and its resonant voice boomed through the entire Skandha Range.

"Understood!" Lightning flashed through Thunderbird's eyes.

"Wait!" An old turtle ponderously crawled out of a pond. It was enormous at a few meters in radius; the passage of time itself could be found in the marks on its shell.

"Elder Turtle, is there something wrong?" The willow looked at the turtle with deference.

It had been the turtle's idea to send the willow's duplicate to Dusk City, so that the Skandha Range could interfere in the ancient lord's heritage.

"Thunderbird is strong, but not strong enough to rival the zombie under the Dusk governor's command," the old turtle spoke as slowly as it moved.

It was known throughout Nephrite Major that the governor's trump card against the Lu Clan was a powerful zombie. The clan was now the butt of jokes in Nephrite Major, but the incident had also prompted factions around the immortal world to brainstorm a plan to deal with Lu Yun.

Although the young governor wasn't that strong himself, the strength under his command could upend the current power structure in the province and threaten the various clans and factions of Nephrite Major.

Acquiring the heritage of the ancient lord in the upcoming Dusk competition grew to utmost importance.

"Thunderbird won't be able to kill the governor even with its seal lifted," the old turtle said.

"Without the seal, Thunderbird is a golden immortal," boomed the giant willow. "It can lift the seal and make quick work of the governor before sealing itself again. The province restriction shouldn't mind."

"If I'm seeing things properly, the shadowy, crimson zombie the governor commands is a bloodcorpse," the old turtle sighed. "Even the weakest bloodcorpses are arcane immortals."

"Arcane immortals... then why did the prohibition in Dusk Tomb spare it?!" The giant human face's expression flickered uncertainly.

"Zombies are neither alive nor dead." The old turtle shook its head slightly. "Whatever restriction is in that tomb targets only living things."

The old willow fumed. It had once reigned supreme over Dusk Province as an independent third party. Even the celestial emperor of Nephrite Major had respected it and tacitly acknowledged its influence as a local lord.

Everything had changed a thousand years ago, however. Something terrible had awakened in the ancient Dusk Tomb, forcing the willow to seal its own cultivation and go into hiding in the Skandha Range.

“What do you propose we do, Elder Turtle?” the willow asked after some deliberation.

“There are two ways for us to acquire the ancient heritage,” the turtle mused slowly. “First, we can befriend the governor and work with him to uncover the heritage together. The second is that we of the Skandha Range can throw our hat in the ring for the governor election and defeat everyone, putting our own in that seat.”

“Neither will work,” the willow rejected gravely. “The Dusk governor is now working with the Qing Clan. With that clan’s ego, they won’t allow anyone else to touch the heritage. As for the second option... only humans are allowed to become the governor, which none of us are.”

“Reporting in!” A crow flew in from outside. “Immortals from the Lu Clan request an audience, Your Lordship.”

“Someone from the Lu Clan still dares set foot in the province?” The old turtle’s calm mask fractured.

The ban on Lu cultivators had been issued with the Dusk seal and was imprinted into the very energies innate to the province. Lu Yun would sense it as soon as someone broke the ban.

“Not cultivators of the Lu Clan, but friends.” A man armored in gold and a goateed old man stepped into the Skandha Range, approaching the giant willow.

“You’re...” Bemusement crossed the giant face on the willow trunk.

“A businessman.” The man in gold smiled.

“You’re the one who discovered the governor’s secret weapon and sold the information,” the old turtle calmly identified.

“That I am,” the man laughed heartily. “I’m here on behalf of the Lu Clan to propose an alliance with the Skandha Range.”

“The Skandha Range is harboring members of the Lu Clan!” A booming voice suddenly rang out, interrupting their conversation. “There will be no mercy for this crime!”

“Dusk Phalanx! Why are they here?!” The giant willow and the old turtle scowled mightily.

“Oh?” The man in gold armor smiled. “Is the famous ‘Dusk Lord’ afraid of the Dusk Phalanx?”

Chapter 102: A Million Heavenly Soldiers

The boundless North Sea, north of Nephrite Major.

Tall wave upon tall wave crashed upon black reefs.

A sweet, lilting song twirled around the waves, accompanying their continual rise and fall. It came from a charming young girl sitting on top of a reef, swinging her bare calves in concert with the waves and her voice.

Not far from her was an awe-inspiring stronghold, towering by the seaside. Its deep-navy walls seemed cast in iron, holding strong and sturdy even against the strongest waves. An enormous formation slowly circulated within the stronghold, creating an invisible barrier that spanned the entire coastline.

Suddenly, a soldier with a shrimp's head and human body popped out from the depths of the turquoise sea, carefully scanning the stronghold with its outgrown eyes.

"The seaside stronghold is empty! The million-strong Dusk Phalanx has left!" Disbelief shone out of the shrimp soldier's goggling eyes. It dove into the sea with a flip, leaving a splash on the water's surface.

"Reporting in! Reporting to the admiral, all Dusk soldiers have left the seaside stronghold! It's completely empty!" The soldier's declaration caused an uproar in the North Sea.

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The depths of the North Sea, within an enormous trench.

A monster spirit with a shark's head and strongly-built human body sat atop a coral throne. He perked up in disbelief when he heard the shrimp.

"The seaside stronghold is empty?" He stared at the shrimp with its deathly-pale shark eyes. "Are you certain?"

"This subordinate is certain of what I saw!" the soldier hurriedly replied. "The stronghold is empty of even the Dusk banners! Moreover, there is no trace of any soldier within a two hundred and fifty kilometer radius!"

The shrimp was a scout of the North Sea monster spirits and had special reconnaissance skills.

"Reporting in!" In came a monster resembling a seabird that landed before the admiral, a large air bubble around it. "Reporting to the admiral, inland scouts say that the soldiers stationed in the seaside stronghold are currently attacking the Skandha Range! The stronghold is defenseless. Please give the order, admiral!"

"What? Dusk soldiers are attacking the Skandha Range? That's right, Zhao Fengyang is about to pass on the throne. Zhao Changkong won't be able to keep Skandha Range under control...." The admiral shot to his feet. Thick layers of light surrounded his giant body as he morphed into a three-hundred-meter black shark. "Officers! Gather the army and charge the stronghold with me!"

"Understood!"

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A storm gathered atop the North Sea.

From the vast expanse of the ocean sprang banners and the sound of war drums. Countless monsters swarmed out of the water, walking on waves to approach the shore. Thunderclouds loomed and swiftly converged over the stronghold like giant mountain ranges.

"Hahaha! The stronghold really is empty!" A gigantic black shark soared into the clouds, its giant fins propelling its body through the air like wings. His form flitted in and out of view with the clouds.

“Children, take the stronghold and break the grand formation!” A thunderous roar echoed from the shark’s mouth.

An ocean of banners rippled as an answering chorus of war drums threatened to shake the very skies. A dark mass of sea monster spirits rushed out of the water and charged the stronghold.

The seaside fortress was able to exert a chokehold on the North Sea because of the grand formation within it. It created a giant barrier that covered the entire coastline within the confines of the province, preventing the sea monsters from coming ashore.

Only by breaking through the stronghold and destroying the formation could the sea monsters make their way inland.

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“I was going to quietly slaughter a few cities to refine an origin sphere, but it seems that won’t be necessary anymore.” Perched on a smooth reef, a girl in grey cocked her head at the countless sea monsters and muttered to herself, “Did Lu Yun see through my intentions and send me here instead?” The girl gathered a drop of blood in her hands. “Why trouble yourself this way? The current Dusk Province is so poor that it can’t even raise immortals. What will you do after invading the province? Eat dirt?”

With a push, a flood of crimson light exploded from her hands.

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“Heh heh, the Dusk Lord?” The giant willow snorted mockingly at the man in golden armor. “My position depends on the apathy of His Majesty the Celestial Emperor. He could kill me with a single finger snap if he wished.”

Gurgle.

The dark violet willow widened its eyes. “You aren’t from the Nephrite court, are you? There are nine courts in the world of immortals and none of them are pushovers. No matter who ends up acquiring the ancient lord’s heritage in the end, the biggest beneficiary will be the Nephrite Court!”

The man in gold paused.

Whoosh!

Long, thin branches of dark violet swept toward him. With a snort, the goateed old man took a step forward. Reflected light flickered around him, knocking the branches back.

“An otherkind that pursues the dao. Your true form is a type of equipment, isn't it?”

The giant willow’s expression tightened and a mirror emerged before the old man to guard the man in gold.

The man burst into hearty laughter. “You don't know the half of it, Dusk Lord. His Majesty is going to pass down his position so that he may pursue that inexplicable realm. Crown Prince Changkong will take his place and be the new celestial emperor.

“His Majesty’s goal is an elusive one that will take tens of thousands of years to reach. In fact—” The man in gold didn’t finish his sentence. In fact, the celestial emperor might get lost in that realm and never emerge from closed door cultivation!

A number of heavyweights had attempted the same thing over the past hundred thousand years, but so far no one had succeeded.

The willow fell into deep thought.

“You’ve allowed the celestial emperor to walk all over you for too long, Your Lordship,” agreed the old turtle. “Given your power, it will be easy for you to gain a foothold in Dusk Province and name yourself king. High-level immortals don’t dare set foot into the province. The heritage of the ancient lord will be yours for the taking.

“With the Lu Clan on your side to grasp the province in a pincer move, the Nephrite Court wouldn’t dare challenge you! The governor might have a powerful zombie, but there are many things that can counter zombies.”

“Surrender those from the Lu Clan in thirty breaths, or everyone in the Skandha Range will perish with them,” the voice outside commanded again.

“Ha! You’re just a true immortal. How dare you proclaim that you will conquer the Skandha Range?!” the giant willow roared gutturally. “Kill, my children!”

Its black trunk exuded a dark violet light as branches hurtled out from its body. Countless monster spirits charged out of the Skandha Range with reckless abandon.

“I knew the old tree spirit wouldn’t stay put.” An immortal in black armor atop a black cloud smirked coldly when he saw the willow tree emerging from the Skandha Range. “His Majesty the Celestial Emperor is soon to step down. Zhao Changkong is simply too useless to keep a tight rein over these volatile factors. The governor is wise to destroy the Skandha Range beforehand to avoid future unrest. Men, form up!”

In the next instant, the million heavenly soldiers roared in unison. The giant banner of the Dusk Phalanx slowly unfurled in the air as a black light emitted from their bodies, creating a strange formation.

The pattern of a snake and a turtle coiling around each other formed in the air—it was the Black Tortoise, the guardian of the north.

Bam!

The tortoise image crushed the countless willow branches with a single stomp.

“The Skandha Range has hidden the Lu traitors and attacked the Dusk Phalanx. Their crimes shall not be forgiven. Kill with no mercy!” the true immortal howled and manifested a black longsword. Where he pointed the blade, so the million soldiers charged.

“The Heavenly Formation of the Black Tortoise! Are you crazy, Yuchi Hanxing?! How dare you deploy all of the soldiers from the seaside stronghold?! Aren’t you worried that the sea monsters will take advantage of this opportunity to invade?!” the old turtle shrieked to high heavens. The Dusk Phalanx

was in charge of guarding the seaside stronghold and preventing the evil spirits from the Dusk Tomb from arising.

But Yuchi Hanxing, commander of the Dusk Phalanx, had sent out the entirety of the army to attack the Skandha Range! The Skandha Range was powerful, but it couldn't defend against a million soldiers.

Bam!

The willow branches were crushed in a split second, and the mountain ranges themselves were even pulverized to fine powder. Countless otherkind cultivators held themselves still and bowed their heads before the Black Tortoise image manifested by the heavenly formation.

The man in gold and the goateed old man stared with mouths agape. Was this the true power of the Nephrite Court?

Chapter 103: The Imprint of a Kiss

The old willow spirit's true cultivation level was a peak peerless immortal. It would enter the next stage of immortality if it could pluck a dao fruit. Although it'd sealed its cultivation to peak august immortal level, limiting its power, it could still kill countless golden immortals in the blink of an eye.

Yuchi Hanxing, the strongest among the Dusk Phalanx, was but a true immortal, and the million heavenly soldiers were merely cultivators!

However, the Heavenly Formation of the Black Tortoise that was created by the million insects had not only crushed the willow's branches, but also thoroughly cowed the countless monsters in the Skandha Range.

The man in golden armor and his companion traded looks of shock.

"It seems that the nine courts have more power than we expected," muttered the man in gold. "It'll take some time to return our kind to glory."

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The once-again-reconstructed governor manor.

"Wow, so the battle's already begun. Yuchi Hanxing really isn't one to waste time." Lu Yun stood in the Mooncatcher Tower and cast his gaze northward. An epic battle was being fought there between the Dusk Phalanx and the cultivators of the Skandha Range.

He'd planned to deal with the faction ever since Qing Han reminded him to be careful. After all, it wasn't his style to wait until his enemy attacked.

The Dusk Phalanx wasn't only an army of a million cultivators, but representatives of Nephrite's will. If they couldn't even deal with the Skandha Range, then they shouldn't be given the job to defend Dusk Province.

Their leader seems to be a giant willow tree. If I move it here, maybe I'll be able to replicate the layout of my sect. Plans to rebuild his sect were never far from Lu Yun's mind.

In recent days, apart from reconstructing the manor and cultivating, he'd been compiling information, transcribing the texts of his sect from memory, and adding in what he'd seen since arriving in this world.

This was how the teachings of his sect were passed down and improved upon. Their texts recorded what all commandants of tomb raiders had seen and heard over the past thousand years.

Lu Yun fleshed out entries such as bloodcorpses, zombie kings, immortal ghosts, and Ninefilia Specter Fostering; he also added new ones about the zombies that could turn people into zombies, ways to deal with undead hags, and other entries like tombs for the living, corpse coffins, the layout of certain death, and blood dragons.

All of this knowledge was priceless beyond compare.

What was most valuable to him wasn't material things such as treasure, weapons, or pills, but knowledge and experience. When the various Nephrite factions vied over the heritage of the ancient lord, they too were fighting for knowledge, whether they realized it or not.

What Lu Yun gained from his Envoys of Samsara was also their knowledge. Only with knowledge would he be able to create treasures tailored for himself, and other material things.

"Milord, milord!" Ge Long rushed through the door, interrupting Lu Yun's musings. "Sir Qing Han is here!"

"What?" The governor blinked, unable to decipher what he'd just heard.

"Sir Qing Han is here!" repeated Ge Long, but there was something unusual about his tone.

"Well, tell him to come in... wait, I'll go get him myself." With a flash of violet sword energy, Lu Yun disappeared from the Mooncatcher Tower.

"Qing Han... whoa, when did you get a makeover?" He marveled at the good-looking fellow before him.

As usual, Qing Han wore a black robe with a foldable fan in his hand, but his face had gone through a transformation. His previously coal-black skin was now as fair as jade and looked supple and healthy. The centipede-like scar crawling over his face had disappeared. In fact, one would have to be blind to call him ugly now. This was an honest-to-goodness dapper and handsome gentleman.

Dapper and handsome? Why would I think that about him? Lu Yun felt like he was floundering.

Qing Han smiled bashfully at Lu Yun's gaping expression. "Thanks to the treasure you gifted me, I've been cured of my ailment. That's why my appearance recovered."

Lu Yun's eyes lit up. "You're alright now?"

"Mostly." The imperial envoy beamed.

"The reselection is four months away," Lu Yun said curiously. "Why are you here so early?"

Qing Han pouted. "What? You don't want me here?"

"Hahaha nonsense. You're welcome. You're so very welcome!" Lu Yun laughed heartily and led Qing Han into the manor with an arm around his shoulder.

“Factions in Nephrite Major and all over the world have gotten wind of your secret weapon,” his friend said, expression turning serious. “I’m afraid many have identified the bloodcorpses. There are many ways to deal with them.”

It’d been a hundred thousand years since the great war and the emergence of tombs for the fallen immortals. The world had been developing for at least seventy thousand years, so it was only natural that people would’ve accumulated at least some learnings from tomb raiding.

After his return to the clan, Qing Han had paid a visit to the library and discovered records about bloodcorpses and ways to deal with them. That was why he’d rushed back to Dusk Province to aid Lu Yun.

“Don’t worry,” his friend responded with a smile. “I’ve only let one bloodcorpse out. The nine bloodcorpses are a single entity. The methods to take out a single bloodcorpse won’t work on the nine of them acting together. Besides, Diexi is still a secret.”

“Good.” Qing Han’s smile dropped. “Then... I’ve come for nothing?”

“Of course not. I’ve wanted to drink with you for quite a while, but never had the chance to. We’re drinking until the sun comes up!” Lu Yun chortled. “By the way, did you see Qing Yu?”

Qing Han shrugged. “No.”

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It was noon when Qing Han next awoke. He felt something heavy on his chest, and his body also felt different. She yelped when she realized that the starstone’s disguise wasn’t in effect, and she’d become Qing Yu in her sleep.

Lu Yun’s head was pillowed on her chest, soundly asleep. Qing Yu frantically activated the starstone and turned back into Qing Han with a flash of mystical, silver light.

Thud!

Face burning hotly, Qing Han kicked Lu Yun off the bed.

“I... what happened last night?!” Qing Han quickly put his clothes back in order and sighed with relief when he realized that he was still wearing all of them, despite the unkempt state they were in.

“Hm? Oh, you’re awake.” Lu Yun sat on the floor, feeling lightheaded. They hadn’t used their core energy, or any arts to dispel the alcohol in their systems last night, so they’d gotten properly wasted. Neither of them remembered precisely what had happened.

“I think I saw Qing Yu last night,” Lu Yun murmured, touching his cheek. “She kissed me. Was it a dream?”

Qing Han froze, his face heating up when he saw the faint lip imprint on Lu Yun’s face.

“There’s something on your face!” He jumped off the bed and slapped the mark away with a hand.

Chapter 104: Skandha Tomb

“Is there something on my face?” Lu Yun was still a bit woozy and stared dumbly at Qing Han while the young man rubbed at his cheek.

“Don’t move!” Qing Han tried again. The mark had faded somewhat, but not completely, making the disguised girl’s face turn flaming red. Her true form had been disguised by the starstone and she hadn’t put on any lipstick, so that mark must be a result of her... sucking Lu Yun’s face!

A hickey, as modern day people would call it!

Of course, Qing Han didn’t know what a hickey was, but memories of prior night’s madness slowly came back to him. Fortunately, Lu Yun’s relatively low cultivation of the golden core realm made him a lightweight when it came to wine brewed for immortals; he believed the events of last night were a dream.

I’m never drinking with him again! If I do, I have to secretly nullify the wine’s potency. A bit of energy floated to the tip of Qing Han’s finger as he finally removed the mark completely.

“Seriously, what’s on my face?” Lu Yun blearily touched his cheek; it was cool to the touch and felt good. He blinked as his head slowly cleared up into full wakefulness. “By the way, why’s your skin so dark again?” He frowned at his friend. “Is your ailment acting up?”

“Ah, this is how I look right after I wake up,” Qing Han lied. “I’ll be fine after a while... I’m not fully recovered yet.” He’d morphed back into male form with the starstone and had opted for his old appearance in a frantic moment of habit.

“Really?” Lu Yun considered Qing Han’s face closely, unconvinced.

Thud!

Qing Han kicked the governor away again. “What’s a man staring at me for?!” He shot to his feet and shook his clothes, which reeked of alcohol. “Arrange a room for me, I need to take a bath and get changed!”

Lu Yun propped himself up and awkwardly rubbed his butt.

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Main hall, the governor’s manor.

“Reporting to Your Excellency the Governor, the Skandha Range has been razed and the willow tree and various otherkind dealt with. Please pronounce your judgement!”

Yuchi Hanxing took off her black helmet, freeing her long silver hair to cascade down to her waist like a waterfall. Silver hair framed coolly angled features, and silver brows arched over silver eyes. She was the perfect picture of a wintry beauty, but the heavy black armor had covered up her grace.

“You’re a woman??” Lu Yun looked at her in disbelief, confusion flashing across his eyes.

“Dusk Province sits in the northern reaches of Nephrite Major. Its heavenly laws are influenced by the North Sea, which is defined by water and the yin attribute. That’s why there are more female cultivators in this region. There’s actually more of a gender balance now. Before the unrest from the tomb, the

governor and city lords were all women.” Off to the side, Qing Han explained before turning to Lu Yun in shock. “You ordered the Dusk Phalanx to destroy the Skandha Range?!”

“Eh... so that’s why.” Realization dawned on Lu Yun. No wonder his envoys were all women.

Considering the environment in Dusk Province, it was indeed easier for female cultivators to progress here.

“Left unchecked, the Skandha Range would only be more trouble,” he continued. “I’d rather eliminate them now than wait for them to gather and attack me.”

“True,” Qing Han agreed.

Skandha Range had plagued the Dusk Province for a long time. Past governors had wanted to deal with it, but to no avail. Over time, the willow tree spirit became known as the Dusk Lord.

The Dusk Phalanx represented the Nephrite court, and it couldn’t leave the seaside stronghold unguarded. Even when evil spirits from the Dusk Tomb had gone on a rampage, only a small contingent had been diverted to quell the unrest, out of concern that the North Sea monster spirits would seize the opening to invade.

Lu Yun, however, had Diexi. She was powerful enough to keep the monster spirits at bay in place of the Dusk Phalanx. What he hadn’t anticipated was that not only would the zombie king defend the stronghold, she’d slaughter the entire army of monsters in an eye-popping display of ruthless violence.

He’d sent the soldiers to the Skandha Range instead, precisely because the army represented Nephrite Major and it was completely justifiable for them to crack down on traitors. It was an order that no one could criticize Lu Yun for. As long as the stronghold remained standing, even the soldiers could be forgiven for temporarily leaving their posts.

“Let’s make a trip to the Skandha Range and meet that old willow spirit.” Lu Yun rose to his feet.

He was curious about this mountain range. Five thousand years ago, the Dusk governors had all been arcane or even peerless immortals. What was it about the willow spirit that had stumped the governors before him?

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A giant fortress ship sped the northern reaches of the Dusk Province, vastly different from the ship that Qing Han had brought out before. The adornments alone were incredibly extravagant, making it look more like a flying palace. The formations and equipment installed were also miles ahead of those in the previous transport. Lu Yun even spotted a ninth-rank treasure twinkling among them! He could say for certain that if Qing Hongchen had rammed this ship, the only thing destroyed would be his own vessel.

“The ship is yours,” Qing Han said suddenly. “You need your own vehicle as the head of a province.”

“What?!” Lu Yun couldn’t believe his ears. He wasn’t so green now that he didn’t recognize the value of this fortress ship. It was much more valuable than a ninth-rank treasure. In fact, he wouldn’t be able to get his hands on a ship like this even if he sold the entire province!

Qing Han had already gifted him a ninth-rank sword for no good reason, and now this? This was too high a price to pay, even if the Qing Clan wanted him as an ally.

“My cousin took this ship from someone else, anyway,” muttered Qing Han. “It doesn’t cost me anything to give it to you.” He shoved something into Lu Yun’s hand—the spirit key to the fortress ship. Refining it would grant Lu Yun control over the entire ship.

“But....” The governor stared at Qing Han, slack-jawed and speechless.

“But what?” Qing Han batted his eyes. His skin was flawlessly fair again, and his scar had disappeared.

“Your cousin isn’t going to beat me up when he learns of this, is he?” Lu Yun asked with a wry smile. He remembered how much the mere mention of Qing Han’s cousin had frightened Feng Li, Lu Yuanhou, and Qi Shenghui, who’d been devoured by the black dragonguard. That man had to be some sort of character. The fortress ship obviously belonged to some great royal, and Qing Han’s cousin had simply taken it!

“He won’t!” Qing Han promised, thumping his chest. “If he beats you, I’ll beat him up.”

Lu Yun rubbed his forehead, at a loss for words.

With its tremendous speed, the fortress ship reached the Skandha Range in no time.

“This is the Skandha Range?” Lu Yun turned to the silent Yuchi Hanxing in surprise.

“In response to Your Excellency, this is indeed the Skandha Range.” She’d put her helmet back on, obscuring her face and masking her voice.

“I discover something big everytime I board a fortress ship.” Lu Yun turned to observe the giant range in front of him. “A Skandha Extinction Tomb! Torture five generations of a bloodline to death all at the same time and bury them in the same tomb, then seal the tomb with a desolate willow.... That combined will completely destroy the bloodline. Does such a vicious burial method exist in the world of immortals as well?”

Spotting dragon veins and choosing the right feng shui layout when burying the dead could guarantee a peaceful rest, but more importantly, future generations would be protected and the family legacy sustained. Similarly, one could destroy a bloodline through specific burial methods and feng shui!

Chapter 105: Trap

Lu Yun continued to observe the mist-shrouded Skandha Range with mounting concentration.

“You’re telling me that this Skandha Extinction Tomb can end a bloodline? Y- you must be joking.” Qing Han peered intently at his friend’s face, hoping the governor was only being tongue-in-cheek. Unfortunately, he only found a look of utmost seriousness aimed at the black fog around the mountain range.

The notion of a tomb that could ruin a clan’s fortune was too shocking to believe. Immortals walked the dao to seek long, even extended lives. It was very normal for five-plus generations of a single family to live in the same house. If someone bore a hypothetical grudge against the Qing Clan, they only needed to abduct five members of the main bloodline and set up a tomb complex like this to easily ruin his clan.

Yuchi Hanxing remained silent, but her face revealed that she was equally alarmed by the prospect.

“Look over there,” Lu Yun shook his head. “The black mist around the Skandha Range exists only to hide the tomb beneath it. But it’s not enough to hide the surrounding layout. This is a natural extinction influence in the terrain, the kind that this tomb requires.” The young man spoke with absolute certainty. “This tomb predates the great war, which means it’s at least a hundred thousand years old. It’s still doing what it was designed to do!”

“What?!” Qing Han’s eyes opened wide. He still found it difficult to understand what his friend was saying. A hundred-thousand-year-old tomb that was still doing... what, exactly?

Nevertheless, he’d witnessed Lu Yun’s skills in unraveling formations during their prior adventures in the burial mound and tomb for the living. Despite his current confusion, his confidence remained with his friend.

“I wonder what race has lasted this long under the tomb’s power?” Lu Yun inhaled with wonder. In the present, the world of immortals had no knowledge of feng shui. There was no way a tomb like this could be built now.

If immortals knew feng shui at all, there’d be no reason for their stumbles when exploring ancient tombs. They would’ve swiftly raided every tomb in the world long ago. His four envoys’ memories definitely didn’t contain any information about feng shui, either.

Whatever race it was, its fortunes sure were persistent. Wait, the mist is visibly dissipating at a glacial speed!

When it was all gone, the extinction layout would disappear as well, turning the extinction tomb into an ordinary one. It would also mean that the race’s bloodline was entirely snuffed out.

“Come on. Let’s go inside and take a look!” Lu Yun’s heart welled up with eagerness. He practically leaped down from the fortress ship, the two girls close behind. One of his sect’s forefathers had excavated a Skandha Tomb before, albeit one that had already done its job and ended some poor sap’s family line.

The fog was nearly solid within the mountain range. It was barely possible to see one’s fingers, whether with the eye or the consciousness. Thankfully, the Heavenly Formation of the Black Tortoise had already cleared a path through the haze, allowing direct passage into the Skandha Range.

“What a huge willow tree!” Qing Han’s eyes widened at the tree in front of them. Its trunk was practically a huge wall, and its boughs reached up into the sky. “Why couldn’t I see it from the outside?”

He hadn’t given much thought to his friend’s mention of a ‘desolate willow’ earlier. It was his first time in the mountain range, and he really hadn’t thought the tree would be anything extraordinary.

“This willow itself is a layout... er, a formation’s nexus. Of course its exterior would be hidden.” Lu Yun looked the black willow up and down. “This willow looks just as desolate as the books said it should be. It must’ve taken more than a hundred thousand years for it to grow this big!”

The Heavenly Formation of the Black Tortoise continued circulating, bringing an immeasurable amount of natural energy down on the locale. All races of otherkind cultivators in the Skandha Range, big and small alike, as well as the giant willow, had been brought to their knees.

“Governor of Dusk!” A human face suddenly appeared upon the willow’s black bark. Its humongous eyes glared vicious daggers at Lu Yun.

“You must be that so-called Dusk Lord... mm, Lord Shithead, I’d say.” Lu Yun glanced sidelong at the nearby pond as he said this.

Splash.

Any further words he had were cut short as the inky pond erupted in a ferocious wave, carrying a dusken turtle out of the depths atop a geyser. The turtle was almost half a kilometer wide! Even more surprising, it had a dragon’s head.

Sharp, bony spikes protruded from every inch of its reptilian armor, as well as its joints and tail. Its armaments cut a fearsome picture.

“A juba!” Lu Yun and Qing Han uttered in unison.

The juba was a majestic spirit with dragon blood in its veins. According to legend, it was descended from Baxia, one of the nine sons of the Dragon King. Just like its progenitor, its rippling strength could move mountains and seas.

Boom!

In the same instant as the juba’s emergence, a ball of water more than thirty-six meters in diameter barreled at Lu Yun, crackling with electricity.

“It’s a trap!” The young man paled. He’d noticed something lurking in the nearby pond, but a terrifying juba? The Heavenly Formation of the Black Tortoise, still floating in midair, seemed to have no effect on the new monster spirit.

A thick humidity permeated the air; Lu Yun could feel the claustrophobic feeling of suffocation settle in all around him, almost as if he were drowning in the sea.

“Formation, rise!” Yuchi Hanxing exclaimed forcefully. The heavenly formation descended at her command, shielding Lu Yun from the ball of power.

An explosive din reverberated through the air. Lightning and waves lit up the sky over the Skandha Range as the Heavenly Formation of the Black Tortoise shattered from the impact.

In the rippling aftershocks, countless soldiers of the Dusk Phalanx were turned to dust. Every spirit under the formation’s former influence was freed from their bonds.

“Hahahaha!” The juba roared. “The Heavenly Formation of the Black Tortoise is anathema to all monster spirits, but not I! We juba are the children of Baxia and descendants of dragons. Your pathetic formation can’t restrain me!”

Its body abruptly ballooned to ten times its original size and a claw with talons as sharp as a dragon's slammed toward Lu Yun.

Hum.

A hoary halo appeared around Yuchi Hanxing. She produced an icy halberd, jabbing it at the claw as viciously as she could. Qing Han took this opportunity to grab Lu Yun before flying back in a hasty retreat.

"Don't use that scroll!" Seeing his friend reach for the Scroll of Shepherding Immortals sent Lu Yun into a panic; he stopped Qing Han as soon as he noticed.

"But..." Qing Han colored. He wanted to say something, but Lu Yun put a hand over his mouth.

Qing Han is too naïve! He didn't know how many pairs of eyes were watching them from outside the mountain range. If he said even half a word about the scroll, he'd be cut to pieces as soon as he left the province.

"It's just a juba," Lu Yun snickered. "All yours, Aoxue!"

"As you wish," a frosty voice echoed. The scent and aura of blood unceremoniously filled the air, heralding the appearance of a figure dyed a faint crimson. "A juba who dares style itself royalty?" Aoxue's slender form came into view.

"Wait, you're...! How can this be?!" The juba gasped in shock.

Chapter 106: The True Master

The juba stared at the girl with blood-red clothes and hair in fearful recognition. Someone who'd died more than five thousand years ago stood right before its eyes!

"Are, are you human or a ghost?" it ventured in a trembling voice. The terrifying aura it was radiating suddenly contracted and it shrank back to its original size, spikes and dragon head retracting.

"You know me?" Aoxue frowned slightly. She glanced thoughtfully at the juba, who'd now assumed the form of a turtle.

"I..." The juba retracted its head, too scared to speak. It did know Aoxue, but she didn't recognize him. Long ago, it'd been one of the servants in the North Sea Dragon Palace.

Although the crimson girl before it was only a true immortal, her austere draconic aura was keeping it tightly in check. Moreover, the juba could sense a different aura beneath the surface, one that was much more formidable and sinister. A single wrong move would send it to its doom.

In the turmoil, a long-lost memory rushed to the surface of its befuddled mind.

"Stop, stop, everyone stop!" It hastily interrupted the fight that was about to erupt between the humans and the newly-freed otherkind and black willow.

"The true master of the Skandha Range has finally come. Hail, oh mistress!" The giant turtle lowered itself to the ground and slammed its head several times in a mimicry of kowtowing.

“I am the mistress of this place?” Aoxue was stunned. She looked back blankly at Lu Yun.

Having inspected her memories through the Tome of Life and Death, the young man was just as clueless as her about whatever supposed connection she had to the mountain range.

The black willow peered at Aoxue through widened eyes as well. When it sensed the sinister malevolence she carried, it, too, was overcome by fear.

“Mistress! It really is you!” The willow’s quivering form plainly communicated its awe and reverence. Evidently, it’d come to the same conclusion through a forgotten memory.

The countless otherkind remained relatively still, gaping at the great willow that was supposed to be their leader. Why was this strange woman being called their mistress?

“What is all this?” asked Aoxue. “I am the princess of the North Sea spirits, and no mistress of this place. I have nothing to do with anything here.”

The North Sea water spirits!

It was Yuchi Hanxing’s turn to reel back with incredulous shock. The water spirits weren’t the same as the monster spirits that had now made the sea their home.

Tens of thousands of years ago, Nephrite Major’s North Sea was the domain of its water spirits, ruled by a lineage of dragons from an expansive palace. Though they didn’t bow to the reign of the Nephrite court, there was a comfortable peace between the two factions.

Alas, ten thousand years ago, one of the four immortal seas neighboring Nephrite Major—the Untroubled Sea—had become restless. The dragons of the Untroubled Sea were brutally rooted out, dragging the North Sea water spirits into the conflict. Amid the chaos, the North Sea Dragon Palace fell to the monster spirits.

From that point on, the monster spirits ruled Nephrite’s northern waters, using it as a springboard to wage war upon the major time and time again.

To everyone’s knowledge, the North Sea’s line of dragons had perished alongside their water spirit subjects many millennia ago. Yet here was one of its princesses!

No wonder she could keep the juba down. The girl’s dragon blood forced the juba’s natural subservience to nobler dragonkind to emerge.

A deathly silence set in within the Skandha Range. Everyone waited upon the slender figure with bated breath, their attentions focused upon her.

“Aha! I understand now,” exclaimed Lu Yun suddenly.

“What do you understand, eh?” the black willow harrumphed; it wanted to kill Lu Yun just as much as ever.

The young man wordlessly shook his head, but he’d fully grasped the implications of his epiphany. Who Aoxue was didn’t matter as much as what she was.

Aoxue was a blood dragon. Although the Enneawym Coffinbearers had taken away the 'layout' portion of her power, she'd kept every other characteristic of her new form. She'd been a gold dragon in life, the royalty of her species. However, she was now indistinguishable from any other blood dragon.

Lu Yun transmitted his thoughts to Aoxue, who lowered her head in thought for a moment. "If I am the mistress of this place, all of you have to listen to me, correct?"

"Yes, mistress. May your will be done!" The willow and turtle said in unison.

"Then my will is for all of you to follow the Governor of Dusk from henceforth, as his subordinates. Can you do that?" Aoxue stated coolly.

"...yes, mistress!"

"Hail, Your Excellency!"

"Hail, Lord Governor!" An avalanche of deferential cries crescendoed through the Skandha Range.

Yuchi Hanxing was speechless. The cancerous Skandha Range was conquered, just like that?

The place's influence stretched as far and wide as its cultivators traveled: throughout the entire world. Its membership wasn't just limited to otherkin cultivators. Some human cultivators that followed darker paths boasted affiliation as well. The mountain ranges represented a humongous faction.

Now, all of it belonged to the Dusk governor...

It was a bit too much for her to take in.

Lu Yun wasn't in the mood for happiness, though. So the Skandha Range really was related to that bone-chilling Enneawym Coffinbearers layout!

He couldn't say exactly how terrible it was, but it'd withstood him within the gates. There, the power of the book made him invincible, so he should reign supreme. If he hadn't intervened, the blood dragon from the burial mound would've come here and taken over the reins, after its awakening.

Considering Qing Han's mention of the countless evil human cultivators affiliated with the Skandha Range, the world really would be thrown into chaos then. Moreover, the mystery of the Skandha Extinction Tomb remained unsolved.

"Where are the two representatives from the Lu Clan?" Yuchi Hanxing suddenly interjected.

"The man and the man-shaped equipment spirit?" The old turtle quickly answered. "They went to hide deeper in the mountains when the Dusk Phalanx came."

"An equipment spirit taking the shape of a man?" Lu Yun and the others were amazed.

"Yes, exactly so," replied the old turtle. "His true form is a mirror, I think."

"I see! I know who you're talking about." Lu Yun reacted to that last part immediately.

A few days ago, when he'd first returned to Dusk Province's capital, Feinie had noticed them being surveilled by a strange mirror. That must've been this equipment spirit!

“Could they have gone into the Skandha Extinction Tomb?” he wondered. The tomb’s existence particularly intrigued him. If the same person who’d done the Enneawym Coffinbearers layout had set this place up, he absolutely needed to put a stop to their plans.

A single blood dragon could bring about a tremendous calamity. There was no telling if something equally scary was here, or worse.

Dusk Province was his territory. There was no way he’d allow unstable elements to exist. When he grew stronger in the future, he intended to neutralize every potential threat in his territory, including that ancient one in the center of the province.

Whatever the Enneawym Coffinbearers wanted to destroy, he would save. In fact, the race that was the tomb’s target could very well be able to counter that layout.

“Take your men back to the stronghold, Yuchi.” Lu Yun waved to the commander.

Though Yuchi Hanxing was interested in finding out more about the tomb in the mountain range, she couldn’t disobey the young man’s orders. Her mission here was complete.

Though a hundred thousand or so soldiers had been lost, that paled in comparison with the governor’s conquest of the Skandha Range. Yuchi Hanxing wasn’t heartless, so much as she was desensitized. Such casualties were normal in the North Sea.

Chapter 107: Betrayal

Yuchi Hanxing left with the remaining eight hundred thousand and some soldiers. Lu Yun knew that their numbers would be replenished soon.

“Talk,” Lu Yun declared to the giant willow and the juba. “What’s the deal with this place?”

The otherkind cultivators within the Skandha Range had scattered and returned to their homes. They were called otherkind because they were nonhuman lifeforms that walked the path of cultivation, but hadn’t materialized a new form yet. They weren’t monster spirits, but cultivators on their way to becoming one. They possessed the intelligence of regular human beings, unlike simpleminded monsters.

“What place?” The juba and willow exchanged a befuddled glance.

Lu Yun frowned. “I mean the ancient tomb on this site.”

“There’s a tomb here?” yelled the juba. It moved its giant head around, attempting to find traces of said tomb.

Lu Yun started. “You didn’t know?” He’d thought the otherkind and the sentient desolate willow must’ve been put here to guard the great tomb.

Ah, that’s right. If I didn’t identify the feng shui layout and know there was a willow tree here, I wouldn’t have deduced that there’s a Skandha Extinction Tomb at the site. There’s probably no one in this world who can see through to the true nature of this place.

The willow spirit didn't know why it was here, either. To it, it was merely a tree blessed with the fortune to grow here and become a cultivator. As for the juba, it'd escaped to the Skandha Range after the fall of the North Sea water spirits. Under the faction's protection, it survived and became its strategist.

Neither of the two knew why the Skandha Range existed.

"Let's take a look. Qing Han, Aoxue." Lu Yun waved his two companions over and made his way further into the Skandha Range.

The juba fell into step behind them like their personal guard. Other than the otherkind cultivators, there were many other dangers within the Skandha Range: poisons, traps, venomous creatures... any of which could easily kill an immortal. Without the guidance of a local, even Lu Yun would lose his way.

Finally, they came to a stop after fording a giant swamp. Sitting before them was an enormous hill; before it rose a cliff about the same height, bringing to mind the image of a tombstone.

"Those two have entered already." Lu Yun frowned, staring at the tomb qi that was only now scattering from the peak of the hill. The cloud of qi was just starting to lose its form, and some of it still remained in the tomb. That told him the two men had only just entered.

In long-sealed tombs, especially ancient ones, energy from the dead and the darkness of yin would combine to form a kind of tomb qi that would dissipate as soon as it encountered living things. A tomb raider could use that to tell if a tomb had already been excavated.

Lu Yun had previously encountered the Exalted Immortal Sect in Yuying's tomb, yet the tomb qi had remained intact because those men had been in the tomb for centuries. They also practiced a special method to merge their presence with the tomb. The energy he'd observed had actually come from the Exalted Immortal Sect, and not Yuying's remains.

When it came to this particular sect, the patriarch of House Ge had disappeared after being possessed by one of their members. If Lu Yun's speculation was right, he would see the man after four months, on the day of the governor's re-election.

"Those two idiots entered with an earthbending technique. Aren't they worried that they'll be buried underneath it forever?" A trace of mockery flashed through Lu Yun's face when he looked at the undisturbed earth around the tomb. "Follow my instructions and dig a hole here, Old Turtle."

A thieves' tunnel was the safest and most practical way to enter a tomb, both on Earth and in the world of immortals.

"Is there really a tomb here?" The juba wasn't convinced. Though the hill and cliff were something, they still didn't look like a tomb.

"Just do it," Aoxue said with a frown. "Cut the nonsense."

"Right!" the juba hurried out. One of its feet turned into a dragon's claw and dug at the ground where Lu Yun had pointed. In a dozen breaths, it'd created a tunnel running a few hundred meters to the tomb.

Waves of malevolent yin energy gushed out, catching the juba's dragon claw and eating away the flesh, leaving only its skeleton.

“What is this?!” The horrified juba hurriedly retracted its now-skeletal claw.

Such malicious yin energy. If I get hit directly, I’ll turn to ashes before I can even use my hellfire. Lu Yun’s expression darkened. “The Skandha Extinction Tomb really does live up to its reputation as a bloodline-ending burial method.”

I have to let others dig tunnels for me in the future. I need some new laborers... Li Youcai’s not a bad candidate! The flesh mountain of a man resurfaced in the Dusk governor’s mind. With Yueshen assuming control of the fatty’s body, the man was a natural talent at manual work. I’ve got to bring him with me the next time I explore a tomb.

Incidentally, Yueshen would also be able to safely enter tombs if they brought along Li Youcai. His vitality would disguise her origins as a ghost from another tomb. Otherwise, it was an extremely bad idea for an immortal ghost to enter someone else’s tomb. The same went for zombies born in another locale.

When Lu Yun had summoned the nine bloodcorpses in the tomb for the living to fight Diexi, she’d temporarily lost her mind and didn’t recover until she returned to the abyss.

It’d always been a taboo to have a ghost or zombie enter a tomb that wasn’t their own. To do so was to trigger a terrible fight, or something even worse. Undead creatures were incredibly territorial.

Last time, Lu Yun had simply been curious who would win in a fight between bloodcorpses and a zombie king, and banked on his knowledge that a zombie king was the most powerful thing in a tomb for the living.

The Skandha Extinction Tomb in front of him, on the other hand, was an unknown entity. Setting loose bloodcorpses and immortal ghosts inside would very likely result in unexpected repercussions.

The Skandha Extinction Tomb in the sect’s texts was a dead, useless tomb. Even though the feng shui layouts and other mechanisms had lost their functions, a talented grandmaster restored the feng shui and recorded the layouts’ effects.

Without being able to call on the bloodcorpses or Yueshen, Lu Yun had to rely on his own knowledge to survive the tomb.

Once the terrible yin energy had dissipated, Lu Yun approached the tunnel with Qing Han and Aoxue. Before entering, he placed a formation disk in front of the juba with great seriousness. “Take this and wait outside. Protect it no matter what happens.”

The juba nodded and put the formation disk away, watching Lu Yun and the others enter the tunnel.

.....

“Master of the Skandha Range?” Mockery suddenly crept into the juba’s expression. “It’s that willow spirit who swore fealty to that master, not me. That year, the North Sea water spirits abandoned me and left me to rot. I will not follow you.”

The juba took the formation disk out and shattered it with a slap. It then lumbered over the freshly dug tunnel and filled it back in, leaving a restriction to keep it sealed.

1. I'd say Miao is otherkind, based on this description. She hasn't been able to present as anything other than fox, thus far. I'm not counting the human projection since that was an illusion, and seemed like an overextension of her current strength.

Chapter 108: Origin Sphere

The Skandha Extinction Tomb was more sinister than any tombs Lu Yun had encountered thus far in his career. An endless bitter chill, darkness, and despair weighed down on them, making it difficult to breathe. Qing Han summoned a faint fire on his fingertip to illuminate the vicinity.

"This isn't the main tomb," Lu Yun said as he considered their surroundings through the dim light. "A Skandha Extinction Tomb is composed of a central main tomb, and adjacent tombs to the north, south, east, and west. This is the North Extinction Tomb, where the youngest of the five generations was buried. The main tomb should be right under the willow tree."

Qing Han nodded.

"Sir, did you purposefully let the juba bring us here?" Aoxue asked suddenly.

"You also pretended not to know it, didn't you?" Lu Yun responded. They exchanged a conspiratory smile.

Qing Han fidgeted uneasily. He knew where Lu Yun had found the dragon princess. Miao had once mentioned that a dragon was buried in the bronze outer-coffin of the layout of resurrection. That must be this princess of the North Sea water spirits. Was it Lu Yun who resurrected her, or the layout of resurrection?

The Qing scion considerably refrained from asking his friend.

"The jubas are the traitors of the water spirits. They're the ones who sold intelligence about the weak spots of the dragon palace." Aoxue's gaze turned frosty. "That juba may be loyal to the master of the Skandha Range, but never to me. It wishes for my death with every fiber of its being."

At that time, the palace had been close to collapsing, but there was still a sliver of hope. The draconic youth could've been sent to the Untroubled Sea, thereby ensuring the survival of the dragon lineage.

However, the jubas sold out their lieges for their own gain and survival. In the end, monster spirits had broken into the dragon palace and slaughtered all of the dragon clan.

The brutal monster spirits didn't care about the jubas' gesture of goodwill. They tore through the traitors as an afterthought, leaving only a few survivors who ended up escaping with Aoxue. Knowing that the jubas had betrayed the dragons, she abandoned them.

The juba in the Skandha Range was one of them.

Realization struck Qing Han, and he asked without skipping a beat, "Do you mean that the giant turtle led us here on purpose?"

There were five connected tombs here. The juba couldn't see the tombs, but it knew where the dangers in the mountain range were. Tombs for immortals tended to reside in extremely dangerous places, and the North Extinction Tomb was located in the most dangerous of them all.

The juba didn't dare kill Aoxue itself. Its only option was to lead Aoxue and her companions to danger and wait for the tomb to kill them.

"That's right." Lu Yun nodded. "The northern tomb is the most dangerous adjacent tomb. The power of the Big Dipper rules supreme here, and it represents death. The possibility of living beings surviving a jaunt here is slim.

"Go back, Aoxue. Qing Han, follow me closely and don't make a single wrong step."

Aoxue paused, not understanding why Lu Yun trusted Qing Han so much. With a final bow, she slowly vanished from view.

Qing Han pretended not to have noticed, but he knew if danger struck, even Yuying, Feinie, and the river god could appear out of nowhere, much less Aoxue. He kept close to Lu Yun as they made their way forward.

The North Desolate Tomb had no tunnel or annex room, just a singular main chamber. However, it was ridiculously large. Their entry spot was more than five kilometers away from the center.

"Aren't you worried that I'll leak your secret?" Qing Han suddenly asked.

The Dusk governor paused. "What secret?"

"I checked the records when I returned to my clan." Qing Han bit his lip and continued after great hesitation, "The city lord who died under Myriad Formation Summit five thousand years ago was called Fei Nie."

"Tsk." Lu Yun shrugged and didn't answer.

"You trust me too much." Qing Han made a face.

As an experienced tomb raider, tomb raiding wasn't Lu Yun's only forte. He'd met a great number of people in his line of work, and could easily tell a person's character. Otherwise, he would've long been exploited to the death by blackhearted antique dealers.

Qing Han had risked his life many times to save Lu Yun. There was no reason for him not to trust the young man.

"If you realize one day that I've lied to you, would you be angry at me?" Qing Han asked.

"What are you hiding from me?" Lu Yun came to a stop and turned around, fixing a solemn look on his friend. "You must be hiding something with a question like that!"

"I..." The disguised girl stared blankly back, at a loss of words.

"You haven't fully recovered, have you? How long do you have?" Lu Yun's eyes abruptly shone with a black light. There was a thick concentration of death in Qing Han's body, circulating and eating away at his vitality. If there wasn't a force countering the death energy, the Qing scion would be long dead already.

This was the first time Lu Yun had used the Spectral Eye on his friend.

Qing Han lowered his head. "I don't know.... My cousin said that I had at most two more years to live, and three to five if I had the Portrait of Emptiness."

"Don't you already have the Portrait of Emptiness?" Lu Yun frowned, but suddenly recalled something. "Did you use a forbidden art to summon Qing Yu back then? You sacrificed your lifespan, didn't you?"

When Qing Yu had appeared in the burial mound and swept the titanic undead hag away, Qing Han had been on the brink of death.

Under Miao's guidance, Lu Yun had saved him by combining the three paintings. However, the power of the Scroll of Shepherding Immortals wasn't a real source of life. The treasure might have prolonged his life, but Qing Han was still meant to be dead.

If I take full control over the Tome of Life and Death and write his name down, Lu Yun calculated quietly, I can grant him immortality...

Qing Han quietly nodded.

"Your cousin told you how you can live longer, didn't he?" Lu Yun asked, considering his friend's face.

"I'd rather die than use that method." Qing Han broke into an unconcerned smile. "We all have our destinies. Death is inevitable for everyone, the only difference is when."

Lu Yun stared at him wordlessly.

"Fine..." The Qing scion sighed with resignation. "An origin sphere refined from the blood of a hundred million beings can grant me ten more years, but I'd rather die than sacrifice that many lives just to live a little longer." He was quite serious. "My cousin was going to slaughter a monster spirit village to prolong my life, but if he dares do that, I'll suicide right in front of him."

Chapter 109: A Ditz

"Origin sphere?" Lu Yun fell into deep thought.

"Alright, let's not go into that." A bright smile tugged at Qing Han's lips. "At least I'm alive for now!"

Lu Yun sighed and dropped the subject. There must be a way for the Tome of Life and Death to manipulate death. I'm just too weak right now to possess that death art. Determination flashed through his eyes.

The northern tomb was pitch black without any sources of light. The further Lu Yun and Qing Han went in, the thicker the murderous atmosphere grew. A thin layer of goosebumps covered their skin as the pressure on them grew heavier.

"Don't move!" the Dusk governor hurriedly protested when he noticed a white light emanating from Qing Han; his friend was preparing to use the Scroll of Shepherding Immortals again.

"What's wrong?" Qing Han quietly asked. "There's no one else here this time."

"The Big Dipper formation mustn't be attacked by outside forces, or its full power will be unleashed and sweep over every corner in the layout. There are no blind spots here," Lu Yun said seriously. "Your scroll is powerful, but it can't counter the power of the seven stars."

Qing Han paled.

“You have to follow my instructions from now on,” Lu Yun emphasized. “If I tell you not to do something, don’t do it. Put out the fire on your fingertip and place your right hand on my shoulder to follow me.”

“Alright!” Qing Han did as Lu Yun said.

“If only Mo Yi were here. She knows the Big Dipper Formation like the back of her hand. Although this formation isn’t the same as the one in her manor, there’s more similarities than differences.”

If Mo Yi were here, she would easily break the formation, resulting in the layout dissipating as well. Lu Yun could see through the layout and avoid any fatal traps, but he wasn’t strong enough to unravel it. This layout wasn’t one of the earth, but of the sky and the countless stars.

If his knowledge of feng shui hadn’t extended to the stars, he would’ve been in the dark as well.

There was a treasure hidden in this tomb that could channel the power of the Big Dipper to create the layout. But the treasure wasn’t part of the layout, so he couldn’t see where it was.

“Where is the cosmic treasure?” Lu Yun closed his eyes and expanded his consciousness to target the cosmic energy, trying to track it to its source.

Qing Han paused. “The cosmic treasure?”

“That’s right,” responded the governor. “The cosmic treasure is the key to this layout. If we find it, we can break this arrangement.”

“Do you remember the treasure you took from Li Xing?” Qing Han reminded him. “Heaven knows where Qing Hongchen found it, but it can even expose an item over ninth-rank.”

Lu Yun paused. “Oh?” He remembered now. Back in the burial mound under the Myriad Formation Summit, a Yueshen-controlled Li Youcai had attacked Li Xing with his Seal of Mountains and Rivers. However, Li Xing had knocked the fatty’s treasure away with a strange coin.

With a flip of a wrist, a palm-sized coin with a pair of small wings appeared in Lu Yun’s hand, glowing faintly of gold.

The Treasurefall Coin.

“This is it!” Qing Han’s eyes lit up. “It can not only knock down other treasures, but also seek out treasure! ...Er, have you not refined it yet?”

Lu Yun’s awkward expression was answer enough. “I haven’t.” He smiled wryly. He actually hadn’t touched the item at all. If Qing Han hadn’t reminded him, he would’ve forgotten all about it.

“Refine it now,” Qing Han said. “I’ll keep watch.”

“Okay.” Lu Yun accepted the offer and sat down cross-legged to refine the treasure with a taming method.

Li Xing was obviously Qing Hongchen's man. Qing Han had kept a low profile when he made his way to Myriad Formation Summit, so no one but a handful of followers should've been able to find him.

It was Qing Hongchen who'd pointed Li Xing to Qing Han's fortress ship. The man had gone there with the treasurefall coin, aiming to acquire the Portrait of Emptiness, but he'd unfortunately ended up possessed by the spirit of the portrait and ultimately dead and scattered.

The coin was now ownerless, so Lu Yun was able to refine it without difficulty.

"It really can seek out treasure!" The Dusk governor perked up when he received the information from the refined coin.

"Haste!" The wings attached to the coin lit up in response to his chant and the coin vanished in a flash of light.

"Come with me!" Lu Yun grabbed Qing Han and made his way through the layout.

Qing Han blushed when Lu Yun took his hand. The governor's consciousness was glued to the coin, and since it was pitch-black around them...

Qing Han quietly dispersed the starstone's power and turned into Qing Yu, letting Lu Yun lead her through the endless darkness.

Lu Yun was none the wiser. His sole focus was on controlling the rankless coin in search of the cosmic treasure hidden within the darkness.

"Why are you quiet again, Qing Han?" Lu Yun asked absentmindedly.

Qing Yu followed him without a word.

"Here it is!" Lu Yun came to a sudden stop, causing the girl to tumble into his arms in a moment of distraction. The fragrance assaulting Lu Yun's senses temporarily entranced him.

Qing Yu hurriedly backed away and activated the starstone. "We're here already?" He was somewhat disappointed.

"Hm?" Lu Yun was still distracted. He'd definitely felt a soft body falling into his arms just now. "Was that you, Qing Han?"

"No!" Qing Han quickly responded.

Lu Yun tensed. "Is there someone else here?"

"Well..." Qing Han cursed himself under his breath. Serves me right for dispelling the disguise. How big of a ditz can I be! I could've just followed him quietly! He abruptly found himself in the same pair of arms.

"Soft... I forgot how little tempering you've got. You have no muscle at all." Lu Yun scratched his head and reached out to stroke Qing Han's chest. Yep, it's flat. Doesn't feel like there's any binding there. He really is a "he".

Qing Han flushed a bright red. Fortunately, the place was too dark for Lu Yun to see his expression, or the governor would've noticed something.

"What... what are you doing, groping a man's chest?!" Qing Han repressed the urge to move away. Jaw set stiffly, he snarked something he would regret for a long time, "You haven't fallen for me, have you?"

Chapter 110: Accursed Spirit Root

"What?!" Qing Han's unexpected comeback left Lu Yun speechless. He hurriedly snatched his hand away from his friend's chest. "I haven't!" he blurted.

"Really?" insisted Qing Han.

"I..." The governor was at a loss for words.

"Or do you wish I'd turn into a woman so you can fall for me then?" Qing Han batted his eyelashes, his tone clearly exuding 'you are such a perv'.

"No!" Lu Yun was truly taken aback by the line of questioning. He hadn't expected such a hair-raising sentiment to come out from the usually mild-tempered and sometimes sardonic young man.

"Then why do you keep touching my chest?" The Qing scion glared at him. "You touched me back in the Myriad Formation Summit burial mound, too!"

"Well..." Lu Yun puffed his own chest out and rested his hand on Qing Han's chest. "There's nothing to be touched anyway. We're both men. What's a little encouraging tap on the chest between friends?"

Qing Han froze and reflexively turned to dodge the hand.

"We're both men. What are you afraid of?" Lu Yun couldn't resist the urge to take another step forward and placed his hand on his friend's shoulder. To deal with someone like Qing Han, one had to be tougher than him and take the initiative, or the young envoy would get too full of himself.

Qing Han was dying inside and had no idea what Lu Yun was thinking.

"Enough fooling around. There really was a woman in my arms just now, and it wasn't an illusion." Lu Yun grew solemn. "I'm worried that there's something I don't know about in here."

The Skhanda Extinction Tomb was too dangerous, prompting each step to be taken with the utmost caution and alertness, though they hadn't met with any particular danger up until now.

Face flushed, Qing Han bit his lip and kept quiet, worried that Lu Yun would notice something.

If the disguised girl were a normal person, if she could live as long as regular cultivators, she would absolutely tell Lu Yun the truth.... But now she might die anytime; she couldn't be that selfish.

The Scroll of Shepherding Immortals had resolved what the Qing Clan feared the most, but she had even more concerns now. It seemed best for her to hole up in a hidden place some day and quietly die alone.

"Did you find the treasure?" he hastily changed the subject.

"Yep, it's above us." Lu Yun's tone was slightly stern. He was still thinking about the woman who'd knocked into him.

Qing Han looked up and saw a pea-sized spot of golden light floating about three hundred meters above them. It was the Treasurefall Coin.

“Don’t touch that coin!” he warned, alarmed. “Summon people to help. A creature has awakened.”

“Huh?” Breaking out of his reverie, Lu Yun could also smell a pungent, disgusting odor in the air. It was from a creature’s gaping mouth.

Hiss.

Raspy hissing sounds suggested the presence of snake-like entities.

“No need!” Lu Yun shook his head. “We’re within the Big Dipper Formation, while the creature is guarding the treasure outside. It doesn’t dare enter the formation.”

This formation, or layout, was remarkably fatal as established through the power of the Big Dipper. Both the layout and the formation were deadly enough on their own, but when combined, their synergy could destroy anything with no hope of survival.

If Lu Yun hadn’t seen through the layout, they wouldn’t have made it here. Since the creature had to remain on guard around the treasure, it wouldn’t easily enter the formation.

“Okay.” Qing Han nodded. “Now what?”

“Follow me and retreat slowly.” About to take Qing Han’s hand again, Lu Yun changed his mind and put Qing Han’s hand on his shoulder.

The two slowly backed away; Lu Yun didn’t even retrieve the coin. Although the creature wouldn’t enter the formation, it could influence the arrangement through other means.

Both of them were on edge. They could feel a weighty gaze piercing through the darkness from above their heads and settling down on them.

Hum.

A sudden hum marked the activation of the Big Dipper Formation, casting the chamber in a snowy-white glow. Qing Han shuddered, his face draining of color.

The originally enormous chamber abruptly shrunk down to roughly thirty-six meters in radius. Innumerable small, black snakes writhed and crawled along the walls. They were all roughly a foot long and a thumb-length wide.

Above the two humans reared a black, triangular snake head about a yard in radius. Its crimson eyes stared coldly at them as frosty light glinted off a white, jade-like horn atop its head. Lu Yun’s attention, however, was on the silver stone above the enormous snake’s head. It sparkled with celestial radiance, and there was something familiar about it.

“What the—” Qing Han’s terror was apparent in his trembling body and bloodless face.

“Don’t worry, this is just a reflection created by the formation,” reassured Lu Yun. “The snakes are actually very far from us.”

“Okay.” Qing Han’s face was still pale.

“You’re afraid of snakes?” Lu Yun looked at his friend in surprise.

“This is a rimesnake, a tremendously venomous beast.” Qing Han tried his best to tamp down his fear. “I was bitten by one when I was little. That venom is responsible for the way I am now.”

Once bitten, twice shy. The experience of youth had planted the seed of abject terror in his heart.

Although the snake was deadly, the Qing Clan had ways to negate the poison. However, everyone in the clan at that time considered Qing Han to be an inauspicious harbinger of disaster that would destroy the clan, so many of them had wanted him dead on the spot.

In other words, it wasn’t a coincidence that Qing Han was bitten by the snake.

When Qing Buyi and Chen Xiao found him, the venom had already traveled bone deep and merged with the thing the clan was most afraid of. That made the resulting poison even stronger, and it was now eating away at Qing Han’s life.

Neither Chen Xiao nor Qing Buyi could cleanse him of the poison. For that, the two devils created rivers of blood in the clan, killing at least ten thousand immortals in a fearful bloodbath.

From then on, clan members hadn’t dared to lay a finger on Qing Han, even though they despised him. For instance, Qing Hongchen may have wanted Qing Han dead, but he had to do the deed in Myriad Formation Summit, and had to ensure his end was inconspicuous.

“It’s no big deal if it’s just snake venom.” Lu Yun’s eyes lit up. “I’ll be able to save you if I can get a snake fang!”

“That won’t do anything.” Qing Han shook his head. “There’s something else in me that’s mixed with the venom to create a new poison, and my life essence has been long devoured by the poison.”

Lu Yun frowned and asked, “What else is in your body?”

“Would you abandon me if you knew?” Qing Han asked in a shaking voice.

The governor shook his head with a smile. “No.”

“It’s... my accursed spirit root,” Qing Han said quietly. “It’s the most evil spirit root of extreme yin in the world. Just like the Skhanda Extinction Tomb you speak of, it can destroy my clan and bring misfortune to everyone I’m close with.”