

Necropolis 111

Chapter 111: Poison Fang

Qing Han cast a nervous look at Lu Yun after his explanation.

“Accursed spirit root?” The governor paused. “That’s still a kind of spirit root, isn’t it?”

“It is,” Qing Han confirmed carefully.

No one in the world of immortals could cultivate without a spirit root. Wanfeng’s empyrean root and Yuying’s immortal root were of unusually high rank, which guaranteed a bright future in their pursuit of the dao.

The previous Lu Yun had been unable to cultivate because his spirit root was too weak to counter the yin energy gathered by the Enneaworm Coffinbearers. As a result, not only was he physically weak, his spirit root was also wilted.

If his spirit root were powerful enough, he’d still be able to cultivate despite the influence of the Enneaworm Coffinbearers, like his grandfather had accomplished.

An accursed spirit root was one of the many spirit roots in the world. However, its twisted nature meant that it came with a curse that would bring misery and misfortune to those around the bearer.

The bearer couldn’t control the spirit root. Once its power came into fruition, it would destroy everyone around them, their clan, and themselves. That made the bearer a real harbinger of destruction.

“An accursed spirit root,” muttered Lu Yun bemusedly.

Qing Han’s expression grew increasingly anxious. Though the Scroll of Shepherding Immortals was gradually eradicating the curse of the spirit root, the combination poison from the spirit root and rimesnake venom remained.

These two factors were the culprits behind why Qing Han had no friends growing up. He’d once had a few friends, but they avoided him like the plague as soon as they discovered his condition, and never again did their paths cross.

I’m so scared... that I’ll lose him like the others.

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“If it’s about the poison created by the mixture of your spirit root and the venom of a rimesnake, then we might be able to make an antidote if I extract the fang of the snake king.” Lu Yun looked up at the giant snake head above them. It was more than a regular rimesnake; it was a king rimesnake.

He’d found knowledge of these snakes in Aoxue’s memory. The venomous monsters were extremely rare, and their venom was potent enough to kill even a golden immortal. Qing Han must’ve survived because of a powerful treasure that countered the poison at the time.

Yuying, Lu Yun’s first envoy, was an unparalleled pill master and knew her way around poisons. Though she’d never dealt with rimesnake’s venom, she might be able to find a cure if she could work with the snake king’s fang.

“I’m getting that fang!” Lu Yun muttered with an intense stare at the snake king.

“Huh?” Qing Han was nonplussed. “Don’t you care about my accursed spirit root?”

“Wasn’t it negated by the Scroll of Shepherding Immortals?” Lu Yun blinked in confusion.

“But, but there should be traces of it left in the poison in my system....” Qing Han couldn’t wrap his mind around the governor’s reaction. Throughout his life, every cultivator avoided him like he was the embodiment of armageddon when they learned about his spirit root; no, he was a literal plaguelord in their eyes.

“Then we’ll find a way to get the fang and use it to fully cleanse away your poison and spirit root.” Lu Yun vigorously tousled Qing Han’s hair, to which the latter shook his head but didn’t move away.

Lu Yun didn’t know why he’d done that either. To be honest, though he hadn’t realized it, he’d never treated Qing Han as a man. The Tome of Life and Death was a supreme treasure that even exceeded the heavenly dao, and it constantly influenced Lu Yun’s subconsciousness. The starstone’s power naturally couldn’t fool the book.

So, subconsciously, he treated Qing Han as Qing Yu. The realization just hadn’t hit his conscious mind yet.

Clap!

With a twist of his hand, Lu Yun manifested a talisman shaped like a water ripple and attached it to Qing Han’s shoulder. Once the ripples faded, the Qing scion’s life essence was completely disguised.

The talisman was Xuanxi’s creation, and part of the emergency kit that Lu Yun had gathered after his adventure in the great burial mound. He had on him Yuying’s pills, Feinie’s formation disks, and Xuanxi’s talismans. The one he’d used on Qing Han would hide the young man from the undead creatures in tombs, which located living beings by sniffing out the life essence radiating from them.

“Stay here,” Lu Yun declared solemnly. “I’ll go up and take a look.”

“But—” Qing Han was cut off before declaring he would follow.

“Protect him, Feinie,” Lu Yun suddenly said in a muted tone. “Don’t let him follow me!”

A wave of black ripples undulated through the air as Feinie appeared beside Qing Han. The Qing scion smiled wryly. Lu Yun had seen right through him, of course he’d been planning to follow the governor.

To him, Lu Yun was merely a golden core cultivator, despite the many tricks up his sleeve. He was no match for the terrifying rimesnake king, whereas Qing Han was a refined spirit cultivator. He could at least protect Lu Yun with the Scroll of Shepherding Immortals and starstone. However, he couldn’t do that if Feinie kept an eye on him.

Whoosh!

Black flames burst out from Lu Yun’s body to conceal his vitality. Violetgrave morphed into flashes of purple light, lifting Lu Yun into the sky and sending him out of the layout through its cracks. The snake king looked close, but it was actually more than three hundred meters away.

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Ss ss sss!!

The snake hissed savagely, its eyes filled with confusion. It was an otherkind cultivator that had developed its own consciousness.

The unique eye structure of snakes enabled them to locate enemies through thermal imaging, as well as the vitality radiating from their bodies. With its eyes and consciousness, it'd perceived two miniscule living creatures in the formation that'd disturbed it's slumber, but they'd now disappeared, leaving only a strange ball of fire coming its way.

Ss sSs SSS!!

Powerful hisses emitted from its mouth.

The rimesnakes crawling along the walls of the chamber shot at Lu Yun in streaks of black light.

Hum.

Lu Yun made a hand seal while riding a sword. A shadowy dragon emerged behind him and seventeen swords of violet light flew out from it and launched attacks in all directions.

Nineteen Cerulean Sword Dragons!

It was an abnormally powerful sword art that would be unstoppable if he could manifest all nineteen swords.

Thud. Thud. Thud!

Seventeen violet swords arced through the air, slicing through countless rimesnakes. Their remains and dark green blood rained down from midair.

Feinie made a hand gesture to keep the flesh and blood away from them with a faint glow.

"Qing Yu seems to have a gem like this, too. It sparkles just like a star." Up close, Lu Yun finally recalled where he'd seen the cosmic treasure before when he inspected it in detail.

SssssSSsss!

A pungent smell assaulted his senses as the rimesnake king opened its maw to bite him. Lu Yun could even see the icy fangs in the snake's mouth.

No, that's not the real fang. The real poison fang is the horn on its head! Countless thoughts flashed through his mind in the span of a breath. His eyes eventually settled on the horn that was in his reach.

Swoosh!

To think was to act, Lu Yun vanished in a flash of blue.

Crack!

The snake king ruthlessly bit into nothing, snapping its fangs together with a metallic sound.

Lu Yun next appeared over the snake's head. Reeling his hellfire in, Violetgrave turned solid and slashed at the jade-like horn.

Chapter 112: Duo Dragons Execute a Snake

Clink!

The sharp sound of a physical collision rang out and a great counterforce rippled from the tip of the poison fang.

Pain exploded from Lu Yun's hand as the tremendous impact numbed his arms. The enormous snake head and its single horn were like a mountain of dark iron. His ninth-rank sword couldn't shake it at all.

"Retreat!" he called out when the snake's crimson eyes loomed into view again. A flash of blue radiance marked his disappearance. He was using a Xuanxi-crafted short-distance teleportation talisman, which allowed him to move anywhere within ninety meters.

It was most effective when his opponents didn't expect it. However, if he used the trick one too many times, it would quickly be seen through, and thus nullified.

Powerful cultivators could easily cover a hundred yard radius with their consciousness and detect minute changes within that range. Although the talisman allowed for quick teleportation, an immortal's sword could move just as quickly. If they sensed the changes in the air first, the tip of their swords would await Lu Yun after his movement concluded.

The rimesnake king, however, was trapped within the ceiling to protect the giant starstone and half of its enormous body was buried in the rock over their heads. Even if it could see through the teleportation talisman, it still wouldn't be able to catch the human.

As soon as it swiveled its head around, Lu Yun teleported away, preventing it from getting a good look.

SsSSsss!!

The snake summoned the smaller rimesnakes and sent them swarming in from all directions, covering the space around it in the span of a breath.

Lu Yun used a dozen few talismans in quick succession, flickering in and out of existence with an explosion of seventeen sword flares every time he reappeared, creating an endless rain of snake blood.

Nevertheless, there were too many of them.

"Nineteen Cerulean Sword Dragons!" Lu Yun snapped out as he came to a halt in midair.

A nineteen-yard-long violet dragon shadow took shape and coiled around his body. Sword energy morphed into violet scales that attached themselves to the dragon; it was like Lu Yun had shapeshifted into a violet dragon himself, rearing and brandishing its claws.

A complete Nineteen Cerulean Sword Dragon! The manifestation of all nineteen swords resulted in an actual dragon made of sword energy.

The sword art that Feinie had accidentally acquired was incomplete, containing only the first seventeen swords. Coincidentally, the complete art could be found in Aoxue's memory.

The enormous dragon twisted nineteen times, each movement a slash from a grand sword. Terrifying brilliance exploded in the upper reaches of the chamber, sweeping where the Big Dipper Formation couldn't reach and scything through countless rimesnakes.

Lu Yun moved again and brought down his sword in a straightforward attack on the snake king.

Grrrawrrrrr!!

Eyes bloodshot, the snake's hiss built up into a furious growl. The snake head struggled mightily, shaking the entire chamber and sending down an avalanche of dust and rubble from overhead. It seemed that it was about to burrow its enormous body out of the ceiling.

Hum.

Crimson light flashed through the air as an even bigger cerulean dragon barreled out of the void to combine with Lu Yun's. The two dragons struck simultaneously!

They bit viciously into the snake's head like two matchless swords merging as one.

Clink!

A metallic collision rang out again as an earth-shattering rumble ripped throughout the chamber. The snake king shrieked in absolutely ghastly pain, and translucent, pungent blood dripped from its head like venom. The Big Dipper Formation shook below them while killing energy formed by rays of starlight ran amok through the arrangement.

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Feinie had set up thirty-six defensive formations with the Formation Orb to protect herself and Qing Han, but the Big Dipper Formation had been drawing upon the stars for years, nurturing a tremendous well of killing energy.

The energy tore through the defensive formations like paper.

She hastily assumed a cross-legged position and formed several hand seals, focusing the entirety of her attention on the Formation Orb and projecting even more defensive formations.

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Back in the air, Lu Yun and Aoxue's combined attacks with the duo dragons pierced through the snake's head in flashes of crimson and violet.

Bam!

After a final death cry, the rimesnake's enormous head drooped weakly, lifeforce dissipating at great speed. In no time at all, it had thoroughly departed this world.

Noting Lu Yun's pale face, Aoxue was about to help him back into the Big Dipper Formation.

"Don't! Feinie's not going to hold!" Lu Yun sucked in an urgent lungful of air. "Get the gem!"

"Understood!" Aoxue, too, had noticed the condition below.

More than thirty of Feinie's formations laid in tatters. Only a couple still stood, and only with great difficulty. Even with the Formation Orb, she couldn't deploy formations faster than their rate of destruction! Qing Han and she would be crushed in a few breaths.

Aoxue hurriedly made her way to the hovering starstone.

"Retrieve!" commanded Lu Yun.

The Treasurefall Coin attached to the starstone pulsed brightly with a golden splendor as the eye of the coin turned into a black hole, swallowing the treasure. As the stone disappeared, so too did the Big Dipper Formation.

The brightly lit chamber plunged into darkness again.

Lu Yun's face paled. He'd exhausted the last of his energies. Weariness overcame his entire body as dizziness flooded his head. Now he knew how Qing Han had felt.

"Are you alright?!" The imperial envoy flew to Lu Yun's side to take his other arm as soon as he sensed the formation's disappearance.

"I'm fine," Lu Yun said weakly. "Help me down. I'll be alright after taking a few energy replenishing pills."

Aoxue and Qing Han helped him to the ground, whereupon the dragon princess placed a few pills in his mouth. Lu Yun closed his eyes, letting the gentle medicinal effects wash over him.

Whoosh!

A ball of black flames enveloped the snake king corpse above them and slowly set it ablaze, turning it to ashes in the end.

Within the Gates of the Abyss.

An enormous black snake three hundred meters long slowly took shape in the netherworld.

Infernum!

Lu Yun had killed the snake king with Aoxue's help and turned it into one of his ghostly soldiers!

What surprised him, however, was the snake king's strength. It could rival a golden immortal, but it wasn't one. It was just a regular beast with a physical strength and consciousness that were on par with golden immortals. It wasn't even a cultivator.

Something had broken its cultivation and scattered its power, otherwise it wouldn't have had to rely on its bite when Lu Yun charged at it. It would've smashed down with combat arts instead, making mincemeat out of the human.

Of course, that'd been the only reason why Lu Yun had dared charge the snake king.

"Now I know how you felt back then." After an indeterminate period of time, Lu Yun opened his eyes and flashed a wry smile. Maybe it hadn't been a good thing to bully Qing Han at that time.

"Good!" Qing Han twisted his lips, then asked in concern, "Are you really alright now?"

"I am." Lu Yun raised his hand and threw a fist-sized silver stone at Qing Han.

"This is a... starstone?!" The imperial envoy's eyes shot open in incredulity. He hadn't spotted the starstone at all, earlier. Or, more precisely, the starstone that was already on him had prevented him from sensing the power of another.

It wasn't until the treasure came into his hand that he got a clear look at it. So the cosmic treasure was a starstone. And wait, Lu Yun had thrown it to him just like that?

"I saw the same stone on Qing Yu," Lu Yun said weakly. "Perhaps this will be useful to her. Give it to her for me."

"Oh," responded Qing Han. He tucked the stone into his storage item, feeling a tinge of jealousy in his heart. Jealousy?

Why would I be jealous of Qing Yu?

"Or you can keep it for yourself if you want," added Lu Yun.

A sudden warmth rose in his chest, and... now he was jealous of Qing Han as well. "I'm not developing split personalities, am I?"

Both Qing Han and Qing Yu are me! Why the hell would I be jealous of myself?

Qing Han shuddered. There were indeed bodies that housed two personalities in the world of immortals. If a Qing Yu personality really awoke in him one day, he'd have no idea what to do.

"Split personalities?" Lu Yun asked in surprise. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing!" Qing Han hurried out. "The formation is broken. We can now look for the coffin here, can't we?"

Chapter 113: Like Corpse or Like Ghost?

"Oh, right, the North Extinction Coffin!" Reminded of his purpose, Lu Yun struggled to get to his feet, but was still too weak. "Go back for now, Feinie, Aoxue."

"Understood." The two envoys returned to the Gates of the Abyss, leaving no trace in the world thanks to the vitality-disguising talismans Xuanxi had refined.

"Why'd you dismiss them?" Qing Han helped Lu Yun up.

"That old turtle is watching us." Lu Yun snorted. "Heh heh, it destroyed my formation disk, but didn't stop and wonder why it was so easy to destroy."

The formation disk had been Feinie's handiwork. It appeared to be a teleportation formation, but hidden within was an ingenious surveillance formation. The destruction of the disk was the catalyst to releasing the surveillance formation, allowing Lu Yun to keep an eye on the juba.

"It's watching us?" Qing Han froze. He'd turned back into his real self in the dark!

"It's sensing the fluctuations in our life energy through a special detection method." The darkness prevented Lu Yun from seeing Qing Han's expression, so he didn't notice the young man's unusual

reaction and continued on, "If it could see underground, it would've known there's a great tomb here. It must know about the rimesnake king, but not the tomb or the treasure the snake was defending."

He made a thoughtful noise. "I told Aoxue to go back so the old turtle will doubt itself. It can't see what's going on, so it'll refrain from doing anything reckless."

The juba had arrived in the Skandha Range at least ten thousand years ago, which gave it more than enough time to study the place and discover ways to activate some of the underlying formations. It must've been the one that'd activated the Big Dipper Formation just now.

Although the formation had dissipated, there were still dangers in the Skandha Extinction Tomb.

"I'll need you to support me," Lun Yun huffed. "The coffin is nine hundred meters away on our left."

Blushing, Qing Han bent down. "I'll carry you."

"You, carry me?" Lu Yun started.

"What, you carried me once," Qing Han said, feigning nonchalance. "Why can't I do the same for you?"

"Alright. I need to recover my strength and energy anyway." Even with the pills he'd consumed, he needed time to recover. However, the Skandha Extinction Tomb was extremely dangerous; the North Tomb especially so. The longer they lingered, the more dangerous it would become. They couldn't just sit here and rest.

Thus, he accepted the offer and rested lightly on Qing Han's back. A comforting fragrance welcomed him and relaxed his nerves.

"Jealous, aren't you?" He said proudly at Qing Han's ear.

"Of what?" The Qing scion wasn't following.

"Of my toned body!" Lu Yun sounded pleased with himself. "I worked out hard after returning to Dusk City. Although I still have a long way to go, my physical strength has tripled! I told you to train up when you could, but you're still so soft." He made a round of assessment as he poked and prodded Qing Han's soft body. He was exhausted, but not completely immobile. The pills had come into effect and were slowly replenishing his stamina.

...don't kill him.

Qing Han's face flamed red, but he had to admit he didn't hate the touches.

"Man, if your chest wasn't flat, I would think you were a woman." Lu Yun's hands wandered to Qing Han's chest for a squeeze.

Don't. Kill. Him.

Qing Han gritted his teeth, but didn't dare let go. The ground here was covered in pieces of rimesnake and blood, both of which were extremely potent and fatal. If Lu Yun fell from his back, the governor would be half dead in no time at all.

“Here we are!” The imperial envoy suddenly came to a halt, his face pale. “What’s that on the coffin?” he asked quietly. The chilling, evil energy made him want to bolt.

“That’s a grudge corpse.” Lu Yun nervously struggled off Qing Han’s back. He hadn’t expected that the dead body buried here would turn into a grudge corpse and climb out of its own coffin.

Shouldn’t this thing be in the central tomb? He had a very bad feeling about the situation. A zombie might transform into a grudge corpse if it was overwhelmed with resentment. It was neither zombie nor ghost, but it resembled both.

“Light a fire!” Lu Yun whispered.

Swoosh!

A fire rose from the tip of Qing Han’s finger, lighting up the space. What they saw raised the hair on their bodies.

A crimson coffin, eighteen meters in length and a yard in height with bloody patterns etched into its surface, gleamed in the flickering light from Qing Han’s fingertip.

“Netherfreakingwood coffin!” Lu Yun blurted out. There was actually a netherwood coffin inside the North Desolate Tomb!

Whoever had set up the five tombs hadn’t been pulling any punches at all. They’d wanted not only to destroy the clan, but also take out any intruders.

The coffin was already opened. A stark white humanoid figure sat on top of the lid, swinging its equally colorless legs. Long hair stuck together in damp, sticky strands while sickly yellow liquid flowed out of all seven of its orifices. Dark, empty eye sockets stared straight at Lu Yun and Qing Han.

The corpse wasn’t taking any action. It’d sensed something approaching, but didn’t seem to see the humans. Its eerie singing voice wound about like a sinister wind in the dark, teasing out pinpricks of horror and fright from listeners.

Regular zombies were as good as blind. They could only tell left from right when they sensed the energy radiating from living creatures. Without any outside energy to attract them, zombies would either remain slumbering in their coffin, or aimlessly wandering about.

“It doesn’t seem to see us,” Qing Han transmitted. He and Lu Yun were both using Xuanxi’s talismans to conceal their vitality.

“Regular zombies may not be able to see us, but this one’s different. It’s gained some intelligence.” Lu Yun didn’t relax. “Don’t go near it; it’s worse than the Big Dipper Formation! In fact, it’s as deadly as bloodcorpses and zombie kings!”

Qing Han shuddered and fell silent. Both bloodcorpses and zombie kings were arcane immortals capable of destroying the world.

A grudge corpse was something recorded in only Lu Yun’s sect and found only in Skandha Extinction Tombs. No other tomb raider sect had records of it. The tomb creator used the corpse as a formation to

gather all evil qi in the world to destroy the targeted clan. Imbued with an entire lineage's worth of grievances, that hapless corpse would morph into a grudge corpse.

The grandmaster of Lu Yun's sect had encountered one such monster in a set of tombs like this and barely made a narrow escape in the end. Even then, he hadn't eluded misfortune. The monster infected him and turned him into a zombie, necessitating that the elites of the sect had to take him out within sect headquarters.

Before his unfortunate demise, however, he'd recorded everything about grudge corpses and the Skandha Extinction Tomb in full detail.

Chapter 114: Violetgrave's Mausoleum

Grudge corpses were intelligent!

That was the one thing the grandmaster had emphasized before turning into a zombie himself.

The air was thick with unbearable tension. Utmost yin energy weighed down heavily on Lu Yun and Qing Han, making it difficult to breathe. The grudge corpse's empty gaze swept over them every once in a while, but its attention was always fleeting, as if it hadn't noticed them.

"What do we do now?" Qing Han transmitted carefully.

"Don't alarm it. Let's go." Lu Yun kept his eyes fixed on the grudge corpse as he retreated gingerly. I still don't know how to deal with it.

Releasing the nine bloodcorpses was out of the question. If the body in this tomb had already become a grudge corpse, then the body in the central, most powerful tomb would also be the same monster, or something even more terrifying.

If he let the bloodcorpses out, he risked attracting all five of the zombies in the tombs. They'd be in real trouble then.

Retreat was the course for now, until they could come up with a solution. He knew how to destroy a Skandha Extinction Tomb, but not these zombie variants. Although the creature's existence wasn't a surprise, he'd thought they wouldn't run into one until they entered the central tomb.

And yet, here it was.

"It's following us!" Qing Han suddenly transmitted quietly.

"What?" Lu Yun started. In his eyes, the grudge corpse was still sitting on the netherwood coffin, settling its empty gaze on the two of them without doing anything.

Whoosh.

A scroll expanded from Qing Han's hands, allowing the emergence of a giant black dragon.

Bam!!

The dragon collided with something with a great bang.

Qing Han quickly gathered Lu Yun in his arms and flew in another direction, protecting the two of them with a soft white hue. Meanwhile, an epic battle had broken out between the black dragon and something invisible. Dragon howls and raspy growls reverberated through the darkness.

“The black dragon is a peerless immortal, but the grudge corpse manages to rival it! No, it’s winning!” Color drained from Qing Han’s face.

Like the rimesnake king, the black dragon had lost its internal energy. Nevertheless, that hadn’t weakened its close combat abilities, and it was still physically powerful. Though it was a scaled wyrm, it knew many draconic fighting styles.

Yet the thing in the dark was not only matching the dragon’s might, but gaining the upper hand.

“Let’s go!” Taking advantage of the space created by the dragonguard, Lu Yun activated a dozen short-range teleportation talismans in quick succession to avoid the terrible shockwaves. He then pressed a formation disk into the ground.

Hum.

A barrier of five elements enveloped them.

Bam!

Crack crack crack!

Collision forces from the battle between the peerless immortals slammed into the Feinie-crafted formation disk, fracturing it with a crack. Tapping into his reserve of energy, Lu Yun quickly pressed a dozen more formation disks on the ground and barely blocked the aftershocks.

How did the grandmaster escape the grudge corpse?! His brain went into overdrive as he analyzed the situation. He rapidly flipped through the sect records in his memories, scanning everything related to Skandha Extinction Tombs and grudge corpses.

Grudge corpses on Earth wouldn’t be this powerful, but the grandmaster was only a mortal and wouldn’t have any treasures of the immortal world on him. The gap between the grandmaster and the grudge corpse should be similar to the gap between Lu Yun and this creature. Ergo, Lu Yun, like his grandmaster before him, was up against an insurmountable force.

However, the grandmaster had not only explored all five tombs, but also escaped the grudge corpse. Lu Yun must be missing a critical element he’d overlooked.

Bam!

A dramatic explosion ricocheted through the darkness. Something crashed into a wall with a loud thud, shaking the entire underground cavern. Agonized dragon howls rang out, followed by the sound of teeth tearing into flesh.

Qing Han’s face fell. “The grudge corpse defeated the dragonguard!”

“Recall the dragon!” Lu Yun panicked.

No matter the kind of zombie, they became more vicious and powerful after consuming flesh and blood. Feasting on the dragon would only make the grudge corpse that much stronger. Lu Yun wouldn't even have a chance to retreat back to the Gates of the Abyss then.

Qing Han hurriedly collected the dragon's bitten form with the Scroll of Shepherding Immortals.

ROARRRRR.

A furious growl snaked out of the darkness. Having its food snatched away from its mouth had enraged the grudge corpse, and it immediately came for Lu Yun and Qing Han.

Bam! Bam! Bam!

Feinie's defensive formations broke like eggs.

"Die..." muttered the grudge corpse.

A zombie that could talk! Lu Yun and Qing Han barely had any time to react before a glowing, black claw appeared in front of them.

Hum.

In the split second before the attack landed, violet sword energy exploded from Lu Yun.

A white figure abruptly appeared out of nowhere and knocked the grudge corpse away with a careless fling. At the same time, a violet coffin seemed to inch open, permitting the energy of the ninth-rank sword to gradually form a world. To Lu Yun's shock, it teemed with tombs.

"Violetgrave... so this is what the name refers to!" murmured Lu Yun.

A collection of tombs forming a collective whole was called a mausoleum, while the tombs of singular kings and emperors were later on also referred to as mausoleums due to their grand scale. Regular tomb raiders might be able to break into an emperor's mausoleum, but not a collection of tombs.

The feng shui of different tombs synergized to create a feng shui influence in a mausoleum, and all of the tombs within that mausoleum combined to form a single entity. Attacking one tomb was akin to attacking the entire collection. In order to break the mausoleum, one had to destroy all of the tombs in it at the same time.

Lu Yun didn't know if there was an emperor's tomb among the collection within Violetgrave, but the grand influence of the mausoleum had already formed.

The white figure padded out of the projection, pointing Violetgrave at the grudge corpse.

The grudge corpse stood atop the netherwood coffin, its originally empty gaze shining with bloodlust as it stared down the man in white.

Lu Yun vaguely recalled the same figure cutting Li Xing down when Qing Han pushed the sword to the fullest to save him.

"How did you two end up in a place like this, you imps?" sighed the white figure, his soft tone troubled. "This zombie is fueled by grudges and is almost invincible. How am I to deal with it?"

“Cousin?” Qing Han blinked at the figure in incomprehension.

Chapter 115: Fusang Purewood

“Why, why are you in the sword?” was the only thing Qing Han managed to say after a long, stunned silence.

“I attached a strand of power that allows me to manifest an image of myself when you’re in danger.” The figure smiled and continued in a fond voice, “Did you really think I’d just let you travel alone without taking some precautions?”

Lu Yun stared at their savior, but could see nothing but a vague white haze. The figure turned to him. “You’re Lu Yun, aren’t you?”

The governor nodded slightly.

“My... cousin gave you Violetgrave. Interesting...” His oddly suggestive tone quite unsettled Lu Yun. Meanwhile, Qing Han’s face was flaming red. His cousin had seen right through his feelings!

Bam!

The white figure knocked back the pouncing grudge corpse with a careless wave.

“Shame that it won’t die,” the white figure said, bemused. “How should I deal with it?”

“Resolve its grievances! That’ll weaken it and cause its eventual death!” Lu Yun piped up. “If we demolish all of the layouts within the Skandha Extinction Tomb, its grievances will fade as well!”

Destroy all five tombs!

Inspiration had dawned on him about how his grandmaster had escaped the grudge corpse. Destroying the overall tomb would naturally dispel the accumulated resentment, and the grudge corpse would fade out of existence.

His grandmaster had almost torn down the tomb when he encountered the grudge corpse, which meant he’d encountered the zombie in a severely weakened state. In the end, he managed to escape after fully demolishing the tomb. That was the key.

To that end, though, they had to destroy all layouts in all five tombs, or the plan wouldn’t work. As it was, even the northern tomb wasn’t resolved yet. Although the Big Dipper Formation was broken, the tomb’s layout remained.

There was only one way to break the layout here: destroy the netherwood coffin.

Coffins were always the focus of any tomb. In fact, it could be said that all tombs were set up for their coffins.

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“Destroy that crimson coffin?” The white figure shook his head after taking a look. “The power I left on the sword isn’t enough to destroy it.”

“Then take us away from that thing!” Lu Yun said. “Southeast of this chamber is the passage to the eastern tomb, the mildest among the five. We’ll be safer there.”

“Alright.” The white figure nodded. “My manifestation can last another... thirty breaths. This is the last of the power I attached to the sword. If you encounter more dangers, I won’t be able to help you.” His tone turned serious as he continued, “I’m leaving Qing Han in your care. I will hunt you down if you hurt my cousin in any way.”

“What?” Lu Yun paused. “What do you mean you’re leaving Qing Han in my care? It’s not like we’re getting married or something...”

The white figure coughed, realizing he’d said too much when Qing Han cast a murderous glare at him. “Eh! Nothing! Forget about that.”

With a wave of his hand, the shadows of the mausoleum shrank and enveloped Lu Yun and Qing Han while Violetgrave morphed into a flash of purple light.

“Go!” commanded the white figure. He scattered into shards of light and faded as the two youngsters vanished with the dissipation of the purple illumination.

The grudge corpse’s eyes shone red. A long, thin tongue flicked out of its mouth, forked like a snake’s, and licked the dragon blood off of its lips.

“Eastern tomb... stronger, than me.” Its hoarse voice echoed in the silent darkness. “Go there, die. Hehehe...”

.....

When Violetgrave returned to Lu Yun, he could feel something different about it. It was missing something.

The power Qing Han’s cousin had left on the sword would be armed when Qing Han encountered any danger. The man could then manifest his image through the power and protect his younger cousin. Of course, he had no idea that Qing Han had gifted the sword to Lu Yun.

The first time it’d happened was in the burial mound under Myriad Formation Summit. Then it happened again earlier. Now, however, the power had completely faded. They were on their own, should any more dangers arise.

No wonder I can easily tap into Violetgrave’s power. It’s a mausoleum in the shape of a sword. Lu Yun hefted the sword and smiled. The influence of a mausoleum is the main source of the sword’s power!

A mausoleum in the shape of a sword....

Equipped with the Tome of Life and Death, he could easily tame the power of the mausoleum and wield the ninth-rank sword. However, the skills involved in refining a mausoleum into a sword were too sophisticated. Lu Yun couldn’t yet revert the sword back into the mausoleum to use its power like Qing Han’s cousin could.

Who would go to such lengths to refine a sword like this? More importantly, who was buried inside?

.....

“What is this place?” Qing Han asked in confusion. “It doesn’t look like a burial chamber.”

“Huh?” Lu Yun broke free from his reverie and looked around. They were in a lush forest brimming with vitality. He could even see a glimmering sun in the sky through the thick canopy of leaves.

“No, this is an illusion!” Expression clouding over, he activated his Spectral Eye and saw the world as it truly was.

Gone was the verdant greenery, replaced by black, withered trees. Dead trees. The sun remained in the sky, but its dim light baked the dried soil beneath their feet.

“There used to be a forest here.” Lu Yun took a deep breath and frowned. “But now... the forest has been turned into a layout. It’s so powerful, I actually can’t recognize it!”

“This is a killing formation,” said Qing Han. “I read about it in a book dug out from an ancient tomb!”

His accursed spirit root had made him an involuntary shut-in throughout his life. He spent most of his time reading books, especially those excavated from ancient tombs.

“A hundred thousand years ago, before the world of immortals shattered, there were no immortal seas, only the eastern, western, southern, and northern deep blues.

“Down in the depths of the vast Deep East was a Fusang Purewood. It could channel the power of the sun. Here... this is a killing formation with the tree as its center! It appears to be a formation of the wood element, but it contains the power of the sun!” Qing Han tensed. “Look, the sun’s not an illusion. It’s actually there!”

Chapter 116: Dragonsearch Invocation

“There’s a Fusang Purewood here?! No way!” Lu Yun’s eyes lit up with excitement and he almost jumped for joy.

“Eh? Why are you....” Qing Han was thoroughly confused by his friend’s reaction. What was so exciting about a tree?

“The Fusang Purewood is a divine wood that’s also of the fire attribute, right?” Lu Yun found the description of the tree in Aoxue’s memories. Though the dragon princess hadn’t personally set eyes on a specimen, the North Sea Dragon Palace’s libraries had contained records of it.

The tree in question was one of the most potent spirit trees anywhere in the world and had been sought after by countless ancient immortals. Any formation that used it in its nexus was rumored to be able to slay even peerless immortals.

In the ancient legends, the very sun and stars were born beneath the Fusang Purewood. It was equal parts fire and wood.

“Yeah, I guess,” Qing Han replied, still rather muddled.

“Perfect!” Lu Yun grinned with glee. “I wanted to head down south to Crimson Province to look for Fireplume Wood, so this being here saves me some time. In fact, this is the most optimal choice!”

“What do you want to use it for? To refine a treasure?” Qing Han blinked.

“No, I want to refine some pills.” Lu Yun looked into his friend’s eyes. “Pills made from the tree may be able to cure your poison.”

His last statement stunned the imperial envoy; Qing Han had absolutely no idea what to say.

“We need a bit more time to figure things out, though. Yuying and the others have only deduced that we need a fire-and-wood divine wood for the antidote and to extend your lifespan. I’d imagine a number of other things are necessary as well to cure the rimesnake poison in you,” Lu Yun mused, but then brightened. “Still, the Fusang Purewood is the main ingredient. I’m sure the others will be found in due time!”

“Are you sure? What about—” Qing Han was interrupted with a hand wave and a confident smile.

“It’s just a formation,” Lu Yun exclaimed. “There’s no formation in the world I can’t break!”

The formation in front of them both beguiled and killed; its phantasms hid a bevy of lethal pitfalls under any painted scene.

.....

“To seek a dragon of mountains coiled,

Those deathly cliffs with mysteries roiled.

I come to seek treasures unspoiled,

Let all danger be thusly foiled,” Lu Yun chanted.

Hum.

As soon as he spoke those words, a hazy light appeared all around his body. The image of a spinning taiji appeared overhead, ringed by the eight trigrams.

The Dragonsearch Invocation, his sect’s ace in the hole!

His sect spanned several thousand years of Chinese history. There were other tomb-raiding sects, but his was the strongest and most competent. Although one of their forebears had garnered the enmity of a bloodcorpse and caused the sect’s decline, it had nevertheless remained superior during Lu Yun’s life on earth.

The sect owed its success fundamentally to this invocation, which performed superbly when it came to searching for, navigating through, and judging feng shui layouts.

Tomb raiders were limited by their knowledge. When they came upon a layout they didn’t recognize, there wasn’t much they could do about it. His sect, on the other hand, could use the Dragonsearch Invocation to figure out the weaknesses in layouts they were utterly ignorant about, then leverage the weak spots to unravel the arrangement.

Generally speaking, the invocation required a luopan to use. Here, Lu Yun made up for the missing tool by using his unique qi to mimic one.

As soon as he finished chanting, Lu Yun noticed his qi circulating in a distinctive way. A shadow of the compass he'd lost had manifested above his head.

Woah, it really works!

His heart pounded with elation and eagerness. He'd just wanted to experiment whether his qi would be able to form a feng shui compass under the influence of the Dragonsearch Invocation. His attempt had succeeded!

The young man forced himself to calm down as his body trembled with power. He continued murmuring under his breath, "All feng shui layouts and formations beneath the sun are tied to one potential, two principles, three essentials, four divisions, five elements, six directions, seven stars, eight trigrams, nine sectors, and ten orientations!"

Fwoosh!

The taiji overhead began accelerating, its shape embodying the philosophy of the dao. All of existence came from one singular truth. In the same way, feng shui layouts multiplied from one to many.

Bang!

Suddenly, the taiji and trigrams brought forth the five elements, each arrayed according to its classical position. Eastern wood, western metal, southern fire, and northern water; these four surrounded the heart's vigorous earth.

The elements abruptly crumbled and gave way to yin and yang, forming the two principles.

"So it's a Duality of Life and Death! A formation based on the yin-yang relationship.

"Wood evokes life, and fire evokes death. The two opposing principles are applied to create yin and yang. Death from yin's essence, life from yang. The extremity of yin is yang, and the utmost of yang is yin."

The invocation continued acting upon his body, swelling the black qi within him like a surging river and spurring the taiji over his head ever onward.

Eight trigrams, yin and yang, and five elements were all continuously scattered and reassembled into possibility after possibility.

Qing Han felt his head spin. He hastily turned, shuffling the chaotic shapes out of sight.

"Aha! Yin and yang are feeding into each other here, converting between themselves in a cycle of difficulty that later tapers off. No, no, wait... there's more!" Lu Yun muttered to himself, making a hand seal as he went on.

The humming intensified as the taiji over his head transformed yet again, manifesting the eight trigrams again.

"Yin and yang to heaven and earth,

Land and water's spirited birth.

Water and land hearken crag and firth,
Hiding mystery in all their girth.
Above, the stony mountains loom,
Below, encircling rivers balm.
Mount and river 'round the tomb,
Winding shape of dragon's palm—
Pfft!

Suddenly, Lu Yun spat out a large mouthful of blood. The increasingly panoramic images over his head winked out of existence. The young man took three steps back in rapid succession, his face pale.

Qing Han ran forward in alarm to lend an arm to his friend. "Are you alright?" Pulling out a pill bottle, he frantically stuffed a large assortment of pills into Lu Yun's mouth.

"Ugh..." Lu Yun coughed a little, nearly choking on the medicine's sheer volume of gentle, yet extraordinarily nutritious effects. "I'm fine now... just pushed a bit too hard."

The pills he swallowed warmed his body with their energy as their potent effects restored nearly all of his spent qi and stamina.

This is the first time I've used the Dragonsearch Invocation this way. I didn't expect to decipher the entire tomb's layout in one go! He was secretly a little pleased.

This Skandha Extinction Tomb follows a layout of circulating yin and yang. It's one where adversity and hardship comes first, then they're later joined by peace and prosperity. The tomb's hidden between the mountain and—or rather, the trigrams of mountain and lake. The layout we're in now is a layout of the mountain.

The mountain part of the mountain-lake layout doesn't mean one singular mountain peak. Everything in this ecosystem is part of it: the trees, streams, wildlife, and even... that sun over there. Lu Yun raised his head up to the sky.

"The person who set this up is a true master. He used wood and fire as the nexus for a mountain layout. Without me here, even Feinie would've been tricked. If we'd tried to break through by attempting to counteract wood and fire, we'd be swallowed up by this mountain in an instant."

Chapter 117: The Imperial Coffin

Qing Han nodded, confused. He didn't understand what Lu Yun was talking about, but it sounded reasonable nevertheless.

"Then... how do you think we should break the formation?" Whether it was made of fire and wood or... whatever, he had no good solution to offer.

"We can simply ask Xuanxi to flood it with the Dusk River if it's just a formation of fire and wood," a pensive Lu Yun responded. "But the killing formation is only a symptom, not the root cause of the issue."

Even if we were to divert the river, the mountain configuration would just seal it away. The mountain and water will reassert themselves and condemn us to death.”

Qing Han gave up, these principles were too far beyond his grasp. The governor might as well have been giving a dissertation on the laws of the heavens. “So where’s the mountain?”

Inside this vast forest, there wasn’t even a hill to be seen.

“Mountains tower above water!” Lu Yun muttered. “The water configuration is at the Western Extinction Tomb. There must be a big pond over there, while we’re at higher altitude here. Ergo, the mountain configuration is right beneath our feet. Oftentimes, one can’t see the forest for the trees.”

Qing Han was thoroughly lost.

“Aiya, don’t make that face. Once I secure my governorship, I’ll teach you everything I know. We’ll raid every single tomb in the immortal world then, brother!” Lu Yun smiled at Qing Han’s expression.

“Really?” Qing Han’s eyes shone, but he still grumbled, “Who’s your brother? And aren’t you afraid I’ll divulge your secrets? You know, if the clan really came down on me, I won’t be able to withstand the pressure.”

Lu Yun’s skills were truly too outlandish. Excavating ancient tombs were always measured not by if, but rather how many immortal lives would be claimed. In fact, several dao immortals at least would be lost during a full exploration. Similarly, it should’ve been almost impossible to explore the burial mound in Myriad Formation Summit.

Yet Lu Yun had succeeded in doing so as just a mere qi condensation cultivator. He’d come back with not only the Portrait of Emptiness and the Profile of Harmony, but also the bronze outer-coffin that was at the heart of the tomb, while paying what seemed like a negligible price.

Such a fact would shock the entire immortal world, were it to become publicly known.

“It doesn’t matter; I’m the only one left of my sect in any case. If your clan were to acquire the ways of tomb raiding, that would just make it a branch of my sect. And if our teachings can be spread further to reach new heights....” Lu Yun smacked his lips. “Future generations throughout the whole world would remember my name.”

“You’d have to become powerful enough for that. No one will remember a puny golden core ant.” Qing Han rolled his eyes. “If you’re going to impart your knowledge to me, I’ll stay in Dusk Province and never go back. In fact, I’m also fond of showing off.”

Lu Yun couldn’t help but laugh at the young man’s expression, but why did he also feel a sudden urge to kiss his friend’s cheek? This was definitely an instinctive desire, rather than a conscious thought.

Oh my god, is he turning me gay? Lu Yun shuddered violently.

“What’s the matter with you?” Qing Han looked at him with innocent eyes.

“N-n-nothing!” Lu Yun straightened his expression. “If only that fatty Li Youcai were here, his Seal of Mountains and Rivers would come in handy against the mountain’s influence. In fact, we really need a few more helpers here.”

Qing Han thought briefly. “Mo Yi can probably break the Big Dipper Formation back in the northern tomb, while Li Youcai can solve the one here....”

“Precisely,” Lu Yun agreed. There was a limit to how much a single person could do; a team with a well-defined division of labor was crucial during tomb explorations. “But since we’re already inside, we can’t just leave empty-handed. Who knows what else the juba is up to?”

He pondered the issue seriously, then used the Dragonsearch Invocation once more to meticulously consider all possibilities before dispelling the compass made of qi. “Since we can’t brute force our way through the mountain configuration, we’ll have to take an indirect approach!”

Sizzle!

A green flame appeared in his hand.

Emerald Mistfire!

It belonged to Yuying, but she was his envoy. As such, her treasures were available for him to use. Only, his cultivation was still too weak, so unlike her, he couldn’t display the fire’s true might.

With a wave of his hand, he pointed the immortal fire at the dense forest. Though the trees were part of the mirage, there was a genuine, lifeless forest behind the illusion.

Huff huff huff!

The raging flames’ scorching heat instantly set the forest ablaze.

“Follow me.” Lu Yun subconsciously took Qing Han’s hand, but suddenly paused and transferred the young man’s hand to his shoulder.

Has he noticed something? Is he feigning ignorance? An agitated Qing Han’s heart pounded ferociously. Should I tell him the truth? No, he’ll definitely be mad. He just said that we’ll explore the tombs of the world as brothers. When the brother suddenly turns into a sister? ...forget it!

Qing Han’s thoughts were running wild despite himself.

The vivid-green fire raging around them wasn’t harming them in the slightest. The mountain influence’s true dangers lurked inside the verdant forest, but their potency was mitigated by the Emerald Mistfire. However, the fire’s emergence also caused them to rouse all at once in answer.

The entire world darkened, a sinister, fiendish mountain range replacing the greenery as ghostly wails howled through the air. Countless bizarre shadows surged in their direction, only to be stopped by the fire.

“Is this the forest’s true appearance?” Qing Han paled a little and subconsciously drew closer to Lu Yun. The fire continued consuming the withered trees around them as it fought back against the unidentified monsters.

“Yes.” Lu Yun’s expression was likewise solemn. The flames had broken the illusion, laying bare the place’s true nature for all to see.

“Fusang Purewood!” Qing Han suddenly cried out as he pointed at the depths of the ghostly forest.

“So that’s Fusang Purewood?” Lu Yun observed the tall tree. It was about thirty-six meters tall, its form resembling that of two mulberry trees intertwined together. But instead of leaves, balls of brilliant red flame adorned its branches.

“They say that sunfire surrounds a Fusang Purewood’s treetop. But this one...” Qing Han muttered hesitantly as he observed the flickering tongues of flame on the tree. They were a far cry from the wreath of glorious sunfire that was described by ancient manuscripts.

“Because it’s no longer a Fusang Purewood.”

Whoosh!

Hellfire ignited around Lu Yun as he suddenly grabbed Qing Han’s waist and hugged him tight, covering him in hellfire as well. Qing Han twisted briefly before meekly settling against the governor.

“Someone’s transformed the tree into a coffin,” Lu Yun murmured. “Fusang Purewood as the coffin, mountains and rivers as feng shui configurations, heaven and earth as the layout, and grudge corpses as servants. Could an immortal emperor be buried in this place?”

“This tree is an imperial coffin?” Qing Han’s eyes widened.

“Yes, yes it is.” Lu Yun took a deep breath. “Only an emperor is worthy of such a coffin! The feng shui here is also clearly signaling an imperial tomb. What clan is this Skandha Extinction Tomb cursing? They gave birth to an emperor!”

An imperial coffin was no common item. The grandeur and ambitions of a monarch were difficult to erase, even after death. As such, they could only be laid to rest in an imperial coffin.

Chapter 118: Judgment of Life or Death

In Aoxue’s memories, the Fusang Purewood was hundreds of millions of yards tall, reaching up to the heavens and rooted deep beneath the earth. Every bit of kindling on its branches was a sun in its infancy.

This particular specimen was clearly on the brink of death, and someone had sculpted its trunk into an imperial coffin. The nine dragons etched on the coffin evoked a strange order, exhibiting the grandeur of the emperor but suppressing his heart at the same time.

“Nine dragons...” Lu Yun widened his eyes. “The dragons are arranged like the Enneaworm Coffinbearers! That should’ve occurred to me sooner!”

He slapped his forehead. “Since ancient times, all dragon patterns etched on imperial coffins have been the nine dragons of this feng shui layout! They might differ in appearance, but the influences they give rise to are all the same.

“Is the coffin carried by the Enneaworm Coffinbearers an imperial coffin as well? Are the nine dragon lords supposed to be suppressing the coffin? Judging from the way the dragons carry it, they obviously failed to maintain their dominance and become the coffin’s slaves, instead.”

The more Lu Yun thought things over, the more his theory made sense.

“Let’s go take a closer look!” He slowly approached the Fusang Purewood with a hand on Qing Han’s unusually soft waist.

Hellfire blazed all around their bodies to disguise their lifeforce. Having lost their target, the zombies held off by the Emerald Mistfire gradually calmed down. Eventually, they simply remained unmoving, allowing the fire to rove over them as it would.

Meanwhile, Lu Yun’s envoys stayed on high alert within the Gates of the Abyss.

“Stop!” a voice sounded from the Scroll of Shepherding Immortals. It was the Dragon Prince.

While inactive, the scroll was closed off, blocking the senses of the Dragon and Tiger Princes. But now that Qing Han had activated the treasure, a window was opened that granted them access to the outside world.

It was similar to how the Gates of the Abyss worked. When Lu Yun applied the art of the two realms to himself, it permitted the envoys to come and go between the two worlds as they pleased. If he stopped deploying the art, the gates would be shut.

While in the burial mound, he’d kept the doorway between the two realms open at all times. The power needed for that art was supplied by the Tome of Life and Death, exhausting none of Lu Yun’s own energy.

The Dragon Prince felt compelled to speak before Lu Yun and Qing Han could make their way to the Fusang Purewood.

“You know something’s wrong here?” Qing Han scoffed. “Then why didn’t you say so earlier?”

“We... we only just noticed ourselves.” The Dragon Prince smiled apologetically and silently transmitted, “Your disguise will fail if you approach there!”

Qing Han stopped in his tracks.

“What’s wrong?” Lu Yun couldn’t hear the conversation between Qing Han and the Dragon Prince, but Qing Han had reached out and stopped him from going further.

“Do you remember the formation in the corpse coffin that can dispel your disguise, master?” the Dragon Prince said seriously. “There’s a formation like that near the Fusang Purewood, and it’s even bigger in scale.”

Qing Han frowned. “Do you mean the layout of certain death?”

“That’s right! That’s the formation!” The Dragon Prince didn’t know what feng shui layouts were, so he called the arrangement a formation.

“What did you say? A layout of certain death?” Lu Yun’s face clouded over when he heard Qing Han muttering. If there was such a layout here, why couldn’t he see it?

Qing Han nodded. “Yeah, that’s what the Dragon Prince said. It’s near the tree.” He scanned the area with his consciousness, but didn’t notice the layout either.

Lu Yun knew about the two princes, they'd been the ones to tame the black dragon in the abyss. "If that's the case, the layout must be hidden from the naked eye." He flicked three soybeans to the ground, turning them into three armored warriors. The golden warriors shook themselves awake and carefully approached the tree.

"Hm? Is that... His Majesty the Divine Emperor?"

"All hail the Divine Emperor—" The three warriors suddenly stopped and got on their knees.

Thud!

Three heads fell off at the same time, followed by bodies toppling to the ground and returning to three halved soybeans.

The warriors were half gods summoned from an outer realm by Lu Yun's death art. They were divine spirits, yet not of the divine race.

Well... he wasn't entirely sure what they were.

"It really is the layout of certain death! Believing whatever's inside and reacting accordingly will be the end of you!" Lu Yun's expression darkened. Since he couldn't see the layout, he'd sent the bean soldiers ahead as scouts. Where the three of them had died was the starting point.

"Let's go!" The governor set his jaw grimly and strode toward the entrance of the formation.

Qing Han followed closely after and muttered, "Be careful. There's not only illusions within the layout, but also something invisible.... It was that thing that triggered the power of the Scroll of Shepherding Immortals back in the burial mound." He still recalled that terrifying, stark-white face.

"Okay." Lu Yun glanced at him and solemnly reminded, "Be careful not to believe anything you encounter. I'll determine if something is real or not."

"What if I turn into a woman again?" Qing Han asked nervously.

"Um..." Lu Yun paused. "I won't believe it."

Qing Han sighed with relief.

Hum.

A sudden buzz emitted from around them, heralding the abrupt appearance of a ghastly-pale zombie with corpsewater dripping out of its seven orifices. Its pungent, rotten smell viciously assaulted their senses.

A grudge corpse!

"It's fake!" Lu Yun exclaimed with determined eyes.

Qing Han took his hand and followed without a word.

Puff!

The grudge corpse scattered and the two continued onward. Monsters upon monsters, both real and fake, emerged around them.

Lu Yun had concealed their vitality with hellfire. As a result, all of the real zombies ignored them, while only the fake monsters attacked them.

Qing Han had been nervous at first, but after a while, he just screwed his eyes shut and followed the governor with a hand on his elbow.

“Hm?” Lu Yun came to a sudden stop because he smelled a familiar fragrance near him.

He turned without thinking and found a stunning girl by his side, her jade-like hand wrapped around his elbow. Red dusted her cheeks, and her bashfulness whispered of a seductive charm.

It was Qing Yu.

Judgment of Life or Death

“Why did Qing Han turn into Qin Yu again?” The familiar feeling gave Lu Yun pause, making it difficult to tell if the person in front of him was real or not.

If, if... I talk to her and survive, then she’s real. The thought came to him, unbidden.

“Did I turn into a woman again?” sounded a pleasant, lilting voice. “I’m a guy. I haven’t turned into a woman. I haven’t! Don’t believe it. You’ll die if you believe it! No believing! We’re, we’re going to adventure through the world together and raid all of the ancient tombs...” the voice garbled out a litany of words that almost sounded like an incantation.

Lu Yun chuckled wryly and cold sweat drenched his back. The voice belonged to Qing Yu, but the way it spoke was all Qing Han.

Thank freaking feck Qing Han helped me out. Otherwise... With the Tome of Life and Death, Lu Yun’s envoys would never die, but the same didn’t apply to their master. He could definitely die in this layout.

Qing Yu opened her bright, expressive eyes and stared at Lu Yun.

Lu Yun met her gaze.

“Can the layout sense my feelings? Is that why it keeps turning you into Qing Yu?” Lu Yun laughed at himself. He kept his mind firmly on the notion that he was talking to Qing Han, not Qing Yu.

“Look into my eyes and find your eyes in mine!” Qing Yu took both of Lu Yun’s hands in hers and stared steadily into the latter’s eyes.

Their eyes would serve as mirrors, and the reflections within wouldn’t lie. Lu Yun saw his own self in Qing Yu’s stunning eyes, and he saw Qing Han within the eyes of his own reflection.

It was Qing Han, not Qing Yu.

The girl in front of him, and her captivating fragrance, were illusions that the layout had created by influencing his thoughts. But Qing Han was still Qing Han, nothing had happened to him. He cleared his throat to mask his embarrassment. He’d almost wavered and fallen for the layout’s tricks!

“What should I do if I meet Qing Yu for real?” Lu Yun asked suddenly.

Qing Han froze, but didn’t say anything. He wasn’t sure if that was the real Lu Yun, or the layout’s illusion.

“I’ve only seen her twice,” Lu Yun murmured when Qing Han didn’t respond. “But she gives such a familiar feeling; it’s like we should know each other. Is this what love at first sight feels like? Or have I developed an unrequited love?”

“Didn’t expect myself to pine over someone one day.” He glanced at Qing Yu, whose eyes widened and she immediately turned away, averting her eyes.

They’d obviously reached the point in the layout where the starstone failed. The image reflected in Lu Yun’s eyes now would be Qing Yu instead of Qing Han.

“Strange,” Lu Yun frowned, also noticing that something was amiss. “You suddenly feel different now. Oh, you’re a guy again...”

“Don’t talk to me!!” Qing Yu yelled in panic. With the starstone’s malfunction, she was still Qing Yu! But Lu Yun said she’d turned back into a man, an obvious sign of being cheated by the layout.

“At last, you’ve finally fallen for my trick.” An eerie voice whispered into Lu Yun’s ear. A white ghost face slowly floated to him from some unknown, distant place.

“What the hell?!” Lu Yun’s heart sank from the familiar feeling. This was how he’d felt back when he died in the layout of certain death on Earth!

“You’re mine—”

“Piss off!!” Qing Yu exclaimed.

Hum.

The starstone on her chest burst into a ball of silver radiance and wound about the Scroll of Shepherding Immortals, guiding it to cover Lu Yun like a shield.

“You defeated me last time, little girl,” the hoarse, sinister voice echoed within the entire layout. “I’m not going to make the same mistake twice.”

Bam!

The layout exploded into dots of light in the next instant and a pallid, white figure slowly padded out of it.

“Little girl? What’s going on? Is Qing Yu here?” Lu Yun’s thoughts were a jumbled mess. With the layout broken, Qing Yu had turned back into Qing Han. Lu Yun saw him as that familiar young man with delicate features, clad in black robes.

The young man hovered in the air, facing off against the pallid figure while two starstones threw off silver cosmic rays in front of him.

Lu Yun wanted to help, but to his horror, found a pair of black chains manifested over him. The chains weren't to lock his body, but his soul. Even the perennially active realms of yin and yang failed him in this moment.

Within his dantian, the Tome of Life and Death glowed faintly, fighting the chains along with the Scroll of Shepherding Immortals. Otherwise, the chains would've long whisked Lu Yun's soul away.

Silver starlight thickened around Qing Han, morphing into the patterns of a dragon and a tiger. The two princes physically manifested with the aid of the cosmic rays, bringing with them a power that exceeded that of a peerless immortal.

"The cosmic dao realm! Its power lets us use the strength of a dao immortal!" they roared, seemingly accompanied by tens of thousands of beasts.

"An akasha ghost!" exclaimed the Dragon Prince as a frightening memory resurfaced in its mind. "This kind of formation is set up by an akasha ghost!"

"Come on! It can't kill us!" Dragon and tiger growled and howled as they lunged at the white figure.

Lu Yun struggled to look up, staring at Qing Han hovering in the air. The young man had his back to the governor and was still wearing a black brocade robe, but his hair had come undone and floated down to his hip in a straight wave. His entire body was bathed in silver starlight.

It's the starstone's power. Isn't that supposed to be on Qing Yu? Oh, right, I gave Qing Han one as well. Having opposing forces tearing at his soul made Lu Yun too dizzy to judge the situation clearly.

"So it's an akasha ghost!" a clear voice traveled into his ears.

Bam!

The pallid figure scattered the starlight manifestations of the Tiger and Dragon Prince just as Qing Yu made her identification. Whimpering, they retreated back to the Scroll of Shepherding Immortals and refused to come back out.

"Don't you dare go near him!" She blocked the akasha ghost's advance with the starstones.

The vicious ghost made quick work of this new obstacle and only took an eyeblink to severely injure Qing Yu, but she stood resolutely before Lu Yun and refused to back down.

That's Qing Yu's voice. Did Qing Han use the forbidden art again? Or am I still under the influence of the layout? And what's an akashic ghost? Thoughts gnarled into knots in his mind, growing and growing and growing until his brain ached with confusion. He felt as if he'd become a mortal again—deathly sick and wandering between the state of oblivion and wakefulness.

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A drop of... blood? Blood... landed on the Scroll of Shepherding Immortals.

Was that... a figure, slowly falling from midair, desolate in its beauty?

Death, despair, despair and death seized the governor's heart.

Whoosh!

The Tome of Life and Death in Lu Yun's dantian burst into flames. He looked up with two rays of fire shooting from his eyes, subconsciously reaching out to point at the ghost with his right hand.

"Judgement..."

"Of Life..."

"Or Death!"

Chapter 119: Myrtlestar

Reaching out his right hand, Lu Yun pointed a finger at the akasha ghost in midair.

Fwoosh!

A fierce black flame swirled atop his fingertip, circulating into a huge vortex.

"What is this... how is this?!" The ghost howled in despair, cowed by the crushing aura that emanated from the youth below.

At this moment, Lu Yun seemed like a lord of creation. The fate of every being was at his whim.

"You sin-steeped thing dares approach me? Heh... hehehe... die." Nevertheless, it was a struggle for him to force out these words.

Hum.

The Judgment of Life and Death took full effect.

The ghost shrieked once more, this time in pain; its body caught on fire and disintegrated into ash in the blink of an eye. An ominous force rose from the afterimage of its charred shadow, blasting into Lu Yun with vicious spite.

The Tome of Life and Death rose to block this harrowing attack, a last gasp before its master slumped to the ground.

.....

"Lu Yun..." Qing Yu stumbled to her feet with great difficulty and hobbled her way over to pull her friend into her arms. "Y-you can't die, can't die...."

Lu Yun's face was deathly pale, even transparent. The flame of life in his body flickered like a candle in the wind, ready to be snuffed out at any minute. Qing Yu poured every ounce of energy she could extract from the Scroll of Shepherding Immortals into his body, trying to stabilize him as best she could.

Despite his damaged soul, Lu Yun had expended every bit of his qi in order to force out the Judgment of Life and Death. There were even cracks on his golden core. The parting blow the akasha ghost had dealt him was the straw that broke the camel's back. Although the Tome of Life and Death had shielded him from the worst of it, he was nevertheless grievously injured.

"This is all my fault, all my fault!" Tears trickled down her cheeks. If she didn't have so many reservations about telling him the truth, he would've never been deceived by the layout of certain death. He wouldn't have fallen into the trap and the akasha ghost wouldn't have come.

It was too late to change the past, there was only a deep-seated regret that threatened to consume her.

A milky light emanated from the scroll, enveloping Lu Yun's body. Unfortunately, it seemed to have little effect on him. Death's shadow was already creeping over his nearly translucent face.

Qing Yu bit her teeth together with almost painful force, coming to a resolution. The silver starstone on her chest began to grow in radiance.

"Do you want to save him?" a gentle voice suddenly sounded at the girl's ear. Instinctively raising her head, Qing Yu saw a carmine figure before her.

It was a woman of such unspeakable nobility that nothing could further enhance her. A violet-gold crown sat atop her head and red robes flared around her like brilliant flames. Her bearing was defined by regal elegance, and an aura of magnificent dignity wreathed about her movements. She loomed like the center of this local world, all life circulating around her to bow down in worship.

"Can you save him?" Qing Yu wiped away just enough of her tears to address the woman.

"I can," responded the incomparable empress.

"But why should I believe you?" Qing Yu shook her head. "You're the person buried in that imperial coffin, aren't you?"

"Yes," the woman nodded, "but I can indeed save him. Whether or not you believe me... is up to you."

"Then I'd rather not, thanks." Qing Yu's response was surprisingly adamant.

"You wish for him to die?" The empress blinked in surprise.

"I can save him myself." The girl stood up with Lu Yun in her arms, easing her friend onto her back before turning around to leave.

However, the woman with crown and mantle appeared in her way again.

Hum—

The starstone and scroll unleashed their energies at the same time, rays of silvery radiance cascading over Qing Yu's petite frame. At the same time, her black clothes morphed into her customary downy-yellow silk dress. Barefoot once more, she slowly drifted into the air.

"Such a potent spirit. You wield the power of a dao immortal as a mere cultivator. You must have a prestigious background." The fiery empress was a little startled, but quickly smiled in approval. "You were wise not to return to this form earlier. The akasha ghost would have swallowed you whole, and the strange arts of the boy on your back would not have been able to do much either."

"What do you want?" Qing Yu's voice turned chilly, but she didn't dare do anything reckless for fear that she'd accidentally hurt Lu Yun.

"I want to save him so that you will owe me a favor." The woman smiled. "Ah, my name is Myrtlestar. Long ago, many called me Empress Myrtlestar."

"You want someone not long for this world to owe you a favor?" Qing Yu found this rather unconvincing. The akasha ghost had just demonstrated one thing: Lu Yun possessed an incredibly valuable treasure that it wanted to possess at any cost.

Empress Myrtlestar was likely no different.

The girl's aura continued increasing in strength; even her long tresses sparkled with glistening starlight now.

"Enough!" Empress Myrtlestar interjected, releasing an enormous violet-gold star from between her brows that kept Qing Yu down.

The latter grit her teeth in defiance of the star's power. It was plain to see that the violet-gold star between the empress' brows was also a starstone, but much more perfect in shape than Qing Yu's was.

"If you increase your power any more, even the Scroll of Shepherding Immortals will not be able to save you!" Empress Myrtlestar's crimson royal robes suddenly morphed into violet shot through with a golden hue. A sovereign presence poured out from her form as she reigned over all.

"I'm willing to exchange my life for his!" Qing Yu smiled grimly. Though the violet-gold star restrained a portion of her power, her energy continued flowing. Her starstone was now the color of purest silver.

Unbridled vitality flooded into Lu Yun's body from her own. After all, it'd been her starstone that'd saved her from the rimesnake poison in her youth.

"Foolish girl!" The empress waved a hand, conjuring a swell of vast, overwhelming power that forcibly cut off Qing Yu's link to her starstone.

A deep helplessness overcame the girl as she gently descended back onto the ground.

"Your starstone was formed from the energy of the Red Star. It can save your life, but it can also bring you disaster. Ah, never mind," sighed Myrtlestar. "I am already dead. What use have I for a junior's treasure? Be at ease. I don't seek whatever he has anymore."

Qing Yu continued staring down the empress from sheer stubbornness. She hadn't believed a word from start to finish. From the very beginning, she'd noticed the very faint air of malice the woman held toward Lu Yun. Saying that she could save Lu Yun was only an excuse she'd used in order to search him.

"Isn't your body inside that imperial coffin? Why are you appearing over here?" The girl refused to budge an inch.

"Do not go over there, lest you disturb my corpse." The empress turned abruptly serious. "My body has already transformed into a dread zombie. If you open the coffin, you and that boy will die at its hand.

"As for myself... I have long faded from this world. What you see here is only a shadow, born from an obsession that is unwilling to die." The woman sighed once more. "An obsession that does not wish for the end of my people and will not disappear until the bloodline is carried on once more."

Chapter 120: Heritage of an Empress

“Are you a divine obsession?” Qing Yu paled.

“Divine obsession?” Empress Myrtlestar shook her head. “I am not a divine spirit, and neither is my obsession. This tomb is filled with the air of resentment, which my will gathered to create this body.” She sighed again, noticing the girl’s lingering wariness. “Do you still not trust me?”

“Too many burdens have been laid on my shoulders since I was young. I came to Dusk Province for one thing only: freedom,” Qing Yu replied with great sincerity. “I’d rather give my life to Lu Yun than bear the weight of carrying on some bloodline. This life is already too tiring.”

The empress looked at the girl with some confusion. “But he will be sad if you die.”

“No.” The girl smiled back brilliantly. “Time heals all wounds. As long as I erase my body and every other trace of my existence, he’ll forget me in no time. Plus, he doesn’t even know I’m a girl.”

Myrtlestar laughed at the answer. “You are quite like me back in the day. It is a pity I wasn’t nearly as decisive and clear sighted as you. If I had been... if I had refused to take on what I did not need to... my people would not have been snuffed out.

“This Imperial Star contains my full heritage. It is my gift to you, freely given. I don’t need you to revitalize anything or carry on a bloodline. Just live your life well.”

The empress sent the violet starstone into Qing Yu’s forehead with a flick of her fingers.

The girl felt a stream of gentle healing energy coursing through her veins, slowly replenishing the lifeforce that had been fading fast mere moments ago. The compounded rimesnake poison was still present, but it would no longer threaten her life.

Having given her star to Qing Yu, Myrtlestar’s body grew a little undefined.

“You...” Qing Yu stared at the empress, unsure of what to say. “That’s right!” She brightened. “Lu Yun told me that the Skandha Extinction Tomb hasn’t completely extinguished your clan just yet. As long as the tomb’s destroyed, your kin will live on.”

“If the bloodline of an imperial people is to be severed and its descendants slip down to mere mortals... then it would be better to vanish on the wind,” Myrtlestar wistfully shook her head. As if on cue, her body began crumbling into dust.

“Don’t touch the dread corpse zombie inside the coffin. It will bring calamity to the world.

“A leaf from the Fusang Purewood will save his life. Place it in his mouth.

“The akasha ghost persists. You’ve destroyed one of its copies, but it will return. You must be careful.” There was nothing left of the empress now save her echoing voice. “Leave this place, and live well...”

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“My head... hurts real bad...” An indeterminate amount of time later, Lu Yun opened his eyes with a start. He leaped to his feet, alertly scanning the surroundings.

“Wait... what’s this I taste?” Smacking his lips, he found a sticky sweetness in his mouth as well as a faint, familiar fragrance.

“You’re awake.” Qing Han sat on the other side. There were a few wounds on his body that he was intently tending to. A number of powerful zombies had defended the tree’s perimeter, and taking them all out had taken quite an effort.

“You alright?” Lu Yun hurried to his friend’s side, looking him up and down. He breathed a sigh of relief when he realized the injuries were only skin deep.

Qing Han fidgeted uncomfortably in response.

“Where are we?” The governor finally had time to examine his surroundings. They seemed to be atop a giant tree. Tendrils of mist obscured vision in every direction, making it impossible to see their surroundings.

“We’ve already left the Skandha Extinction Tomb.” Qing Han bit his lip, nearly blurting out the truth to his friend. Alas, the words still remained stuck in his throat; no matter how much he struggled, he couldn’t get them out.

I’m supposed to be decisive, but I still don’t have the courage to tell him....

“We’re out? What about that thing called an akasha ghost?” Lu Yun stared back blankly.

“You poked it to death,” Qing Han answered with a hint of panic. “Don’t be so reckless next time. You could’ve escaped!”

“Oh yeah. I used the Judgment of Life and Death, I think... that akasha ghost had a lot of bad karma attached, so I pretty much had it in the bag,” Lu Yun reminisced. Sneaking another glance at Qing Han, he felt something about his friend was... very different. He couldn’t quite put his finger on how, but, hmm?

The young man smacked his lips again. The sweetness in his mouth was fading fast.

Qing Han immediately reddened, hastily turning around to hide his face.

The Fusang Purewood’s leaf was like an ember of vital energy. Lu Yun’s mouth had remained stubbornly closed no matter what Qing Han had tried, so he’d had to resort to a more... intimate method of transmission.

His tongue was still a little numb from being sucked on.

“I really didn’t expect this kind of tomb to be that scary. I couldn’t do anything about the north, and almost died in the east...” Lu Yun laughed helplessly.

He’d thought his tomb raiding skills were more than up to par, especially coupled with the Tome of Life and Death. The world should’ve been his oyster—or at least, its tombs. To think he’d fail here today!

“You’ve done really well already. You’re only at the golden core realm, after all,” Qing Han reassured him. “Any faction in the world would’ve had to pour several dao immortals’ lives into an ancient tomb like this one before breaking it apart. And sometimes, they don’t even get anything out of it.”

“Well, it’s not like we got anything out of it either, no?” Lu Yun sighed.

“Who says we didn’t?” Qing Han took out the starstone they’d collected from the rimesnake king. “This starstone contains a Big Dipper Formation that can be used as soon as it’s activated. It’s much more useful than most formation disks!”

He carefully put the starstone made from the energies of the Big Dipper back into his bosom. After all, it was a gift from his friend.

“There’s something else that I don’t want to take out here. A heritage from a senior....”

His hesitation was quite reasonable. If he took out the Imperial Star here, something unexpected could happen. Though the second was also a starstone, it drew its energies from a completely different celestial body.

“The heritage from that imperial coffin?” Lu Yun’s eyes lit up.

“Yes!” Qing Han answered. “When we get somewhere safe, I’ll share it with you, too.”

“Whoa, don’t do that!” Lu Yun jumped back in shock. “This tomb’s definitely existed since primordial times. The emperor inside the eastern tomb was far stronger than the majority of the ancient immortal emperors. You can’t let a single hint about that heritage slip before you’re strong enough to hang onto it. Not to me, not to your cousin... keep it all to yourself!”

Qing Han nodded helplessly.

“Oh yeah, there’s one more thing I want to tell you!” The dark-complexioned youth became startlingly sober for a moment.

“What’s up? Looking at your face, it must be serious,” Lu Yun smiled.

Qing Han bit his lip, then drew a sharp breath. “Q-Qing Yu told m-me that, er, she’s also, uh, started liking you after seeing you a few more times.”

Well, it certainly isn’t love at first sight. I don’t know when I started liking you either.

“Ah... ha... huh?” Lu Yun’s mouth gaped, positively astounded.

“I summoned Qing Yu here during our fight against the akasha ghost. You must’ve noticed, right?” It was Qing Han’s turn to smile.

“Qing Yu... weird.” Lu Yun frowned. “Why did our conversation trigger the layout of certain death? Why did that akasha ghost come?”