

Necropolis 121

Chapter 121: Tomb Realm

"Because, because...." Qing Han's heartbeat grew erratic.

Lu Yun looked intensely at him, searching his face for an answer. Suddenly, he reached out to grope Qing Han's chest.

"It's flat." Lu Yun scratched his head. "Ah, I'm thinking too much again."

Qing Han stared at his friend, aggrieved. He'd almost turned into his true form and shown his hand just now, but Lu Yun interrupted him and felt up his chest!

"You were talking to the air!" the disguised girl fumed, tender feelings and guilt vanishing from his heart.

Lu Yun was already so touchy-feely when he saw Qing Han as a man. If he saw her true form, who knew what would happen! Though Qing Yu wouldn't deny him, there was a poison in her system that even a starstone manifested by the Imperial Star couldn't cleanse.

If they really did... that, perhaps the poison would travel to Lu Yun as well.

The thought made Qing Han blush.

"Why are you blushing?" Lu Yun looked askance at his friend.

"All thanks to you!" retorted Qing Han. His skin darkened and an ugly scar crawled on his cheek again.

"You—" Lu Yun gaped. "Why do you look like this again?"

"Can't have you falling in love with me, what will I do then?" Qing Han rolled his eyes. "You keep groping my chest. Makes me wonder if you like men."

Lu Yun stared dumbly. What was he supposed to say in response to that?

"By the way, where are we?" Qing Han changed the subject to keep the governor distracted. They were in the branches of a gargantuan tree and the thick canopy of leaves around them prevented them from seeing the sky or the ground.

"Didn't you bring me here?" Lu Yun's eyes widened. "Why are you asking me?"

Qing Han scratched his head. "I think we're out of the Skandha Extinction Tomb? I followed your instructions and made my way east, which led us out of the eastern tomb."

Lu Yun paused. "My instructions?"

"Yeah." Qing Han sorted through his thoughts. "You said 'the five tombs are arranged according to east, west, south, north, and center, respectively. Most ancient tombs are built by a mountain. Since the eastern tomb is a mountainous tomb, the Skandha Extinction Tomb must be facing the west. Going east from the eastern tomb will take us out of the Extinction Tomb altogether'."

"Near the mountain, sitting east and facing west... the influence of mountains and rivers!" Realization dawned on Lu Yun. "That's it! That explains it! You're so smart, Qing Han!"

“Eh?” Qing Han was confused in turn.

“I got it!” The governor slapped his forehead. “I was wrong from the very beginning. I’ve been following the records left by my grandmaster, but this tomb is completely different from the one he explored!

“What I called the eastern tomb is indeed that, but it’s not a side tomb, it’s the main one! Built by the mountain, sitting in the east, and facing west...

“The eastern cardinal direction is the position of utmost nobility, and there happens to be an emperor buried there. It all makes sense! The eastern tomb is the main tomb and the most dangerous of the five. If we’d entered the central tomb and unravelled it first, we wouldn’t have ended up like this.”

Lu Yun could barely contain his excitement, which made quite Qing Han nervous.

“Do you... uh, you want to go back in?”

“No, no. Why would I?” He took out a jade slip with a smile and recorded what he’d experienced in the eastern tomb, then appended a conclusion to the summary of the slip. Changes are not to be feared. Ancestral teachings are not to be taken as immutable laws!

All things were constantly in a state of flux. One had to be able to adapt to any situation, rather than blindly apply the old ways without thinking. A veil seemed to have been lifted from Lu Yun’s eyes.

For the longest time, he’d fancied himself the best commandant in all of history, exceeding even the sect grandmaster himself. Only now did he see just how ridiculously wrong he’d been. He was who he was because of the accumulated experience of his seniors, and he’d only been retracing their footsteps without finding his own way.

“What the ancestors have passed down is valuable, but to become the best, I must distill the finest of my experiences and form my own judgements,” muttered Lu Yun. “Their experience is my reference, but not something to put blind faith in.”

Qing Han nodded in agreement. “Do you know where we are now?”

Lu Yun frowned. He recalled a fearsome myth, but he wasn’t sure if it was the truth. “How did we get up here?” he asked instead.

“I don’t know either.” Qing Han shook his head. “As I walked, I realized that the pressure from the tomb had gone away. Then here we were.”

“That’s it then!” Lu Yun took in a deep breath. “This is a tomb realm, a special place unique to the Skandha Extinction Tomb. It’s not inside the tomb, but it’s even more dangerous!”

Tombs were to tomb realms what formations were to feng shui layouts. Tombs influenced their surroundings, and the older the tomb, the stronger the influence. It was said that some extremely ancient tombs could give rise to a strange realm in their vicinity. It was a space neither alive nor dead, neither real nor fake.

“A tomb realm?” Qing Han had never heard the term before.

Lu Yun used the Dragonsearch Invocation and channeled his inner energy into a luopan.

Bam!

The feng shui compass shattered as soon as it appeared, prompting a deep inhalation. “Looks like my guess is right!”

The luopan was used to find dragon veins and determine feng shui layouts. Though the version he manifested with his internal energy wasn't real, he could say for sure that a real compass would malfunction here as well. It was an effect that only the fabled tomb realm could achieve.

“Can we still get out?” Qing Han asked softly.

“If we can get in, we can get out. I heard about the tomb realms a long time ago, but never thought I'd be so lucky as to enter one!” A smile tugged at Lu Yun's lips. “We didn't find anything valuable in the Skandha Extinction Tomb, so we can't pass up whatever we find in here.

“Put your hand on my shoulder and follow me.” He directed his friend. “The greater the risk, the greater the reward; maybe there's incredible treasure to be found here.”

Qing Han followed Lu Yun's directions with a hand on his shoulder. “Should we have Aoxue and the others come help?” he asked worriedly.

“They can't.” Lu Yun shook his head. “This place is completely cut off from everything else. It's up to us now.”

He'd tried to open the doorway between the two realms and summon Yuying and the others when he woke up. However, though he could open the Gates of the Abyss, he couldn't see the netherworld behind them. That was what had made him think of the tomb realm.

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“Hahaha—Qing Han! Lu Yun!!” A grating voice suddenly rang out, thick with venom and edged with insanity. “You two are finally here. Hahaha! Die, die, die! I want you dead!!”

“Qing Hongchen?” Qing Han reflexively looked up and found a young man hanging not far away above them. It was none other than Qing Hongchen, who'd been thrown into a teleportation formation from the burial mound without a set destination.

Chapter 122: The Zombie Tree

“Hahahaha. Die, die! Now that you're here, both of you will die, hahahaha!” Qing Hongchen raved on and on between laughter and tears, like he'd been tortured to insanity.

“It seems he's become one of the tree's fruits.” Lu Yun halted and looked up with a frown at the young man a dozen yards above them.

“What?” Qing Han stared at his friend in sheer disbelief. “A... a fruit, you say?”

“Yes. Whatever he is, he's not alive anymore.” Lu Yun scanned the young man with his Spectral Eye, but didn't see any living beings in front of him. What was ranting and raving wasn't Qing Hongchen, but something like a type of fruit. There was something odd about it, but given the dense miasma of vitality in the air, Lu Yun couldn't tell exactly what.

Qing Han shuddered.

“Die, both of you should die! I’ve been praying day and night to see you, and now you’re finally here. Hahahaha!” Qing Hongchen laughed so hard he cried.

“And now you’re finally here...”

“And now you’re finally here...”

“And now you’re finally here...”

Unnerving duplicates of his voice sounded from all directions as copies of Qing Hongchen rustled out from the leaves. They differed in size and color, but all of them could move and speak. Yet they were indubitably fruits of the tree. Some were ripe, some weren’t, but none of them could break away from the branches.

“Come now, the more the merrier!” The biggest of the lot laughed boisterously. Instead of teeth, Lu Yun glimpsed plant-like root stalks growing inside his mouth.

“The tree must’ve eaten Qing Hongchen after the random teleportation formation delivered him here!” The governor started. With a flip of his hand, he attached a lifeforce-concealing talisman on Qing Han, then stuck another one on himself.

Using hellfire consumed his internal energy. Since he’d yet to fully replenish his reserves, it was wiser to rely on external tools before he could determine what sort of existences lurked on this tree.

That said, he looks pretty appetizing.

The sudden thought came unbidden as he took in Qing Hongchen’s condition and the sweet scent wafting from the young man. If he could eat that fruit, he’d gain the young man’s strength and cultivation. It’d spare Lu Yun many long years of arduous training!

The more he thought about it, the more convincing the train of thought was, so he approached the nearest humanoid fruit.

“It’s... those strange zombies!” Qing Han suddenly identified a familiar aura from the Qing Hongchens, one that often appeared in his nightmares. It dated back to when he’d seen many of his clansmen turned into zombies right in front of his eyes.

“Don’t!” He grabbed at Lu Yun, but the latter seemed bewitched.

“If I eat this fruit, I’ll immediately break through to the spirit realm... So I have to eat it, I have to eat it...” Lu Yun suddenly rippled with superhuman strength and Qing Han found it impossible to stop him, even when reinforced by his combat arts.

“Let go!” the governor suddenly yelled, stopping cold.

“Out of the question!” Tears welling in his eyes, Qing Han clenched his jaw and desperately clung to his friend.

Buzz.

Purple light shone from Lu Yun's hand as rays of Violetgrave's light rested against Qing Han's neck.

"Will you let go now?" his voice was incomparably malevolent.

"Not in this life!" Qing Han's figure also shone with a violet-gold radiance that locked Lu Yun's figure in place.

"Hahaha, kill! Killkillkill!" The Qing Hongchens crowed with laughter. "Kill him, then eat me! Eat me and obtain my all. My strength, my power, my everything will be yours!"

"Hurry up and kill him! Then come eat me!" Gleeful cackles rose from the countless humanoid fruits, the same madness reflected in their faces. Their voices reverberated through the branches of the great tree as their menacing figures swayed left and right in a strange, macabre dance.

Huff!

With a violent shudder, black flames abruptly ignited in Lu Yun's eyes.

"W-what happened to me just now?!" Back drenched with sweat, he hastily sheathed Violetgrave.

"There's a formidable mental power here that almost took control of you." Qing Han sighed with relief and dispelled the Imperial Star's power, returning freedom of movement to the governor.

"Don't! Keep that lock on me!" Lu Yun shouted urgently. The compulsion and desire returned the second the violet-golden light dissipated.

At his urging, Qing Han once again enveloped him with the Imperial Star's power.

"He's not a fruit, Qing Hongchen's become a zombie!" Qing Han quickly explained. "If you eat him, you'll just take his place on the tree!"

"Wait, like the zombies in the burial mound?" Lu Yun's eyes widened. "The ones that turn you into them if you touch or kill one?"

"Exactly like those! Only, the vitality here is so strong that zombies are made into living ones! That tree is force feeding them its life force!" Qing Han's voice was laced with profound shock.

Lu Yun observed Qing Hongchen more closely this time. The former Qing scion looked indistinguishable from a normal human, so the governor had mistaken him for a fruit, but in fact... the fruits that grew on this tree were zombies!

Forsaken by heaven and earth and untolerated by the three realms, zombies lived outside the normal cycle of life and death. However, the thick amount of vitality in the air had fooled even his Spectral Eye.

Thanks to Qing Han's much higher cultivation, on top of obtaining Empress Myrtlestar's legacy, he'd reacted the moment he noticed that something was amiss. Qing Hongchen was already a zombie, but the tree's force-feeding of life force made him seem alive.

"Does that mean the tree is also undead?" Body frozen by the Imperial Star, Lu Yun's eyes lit up with the dark, abyssal light of hellfire. He was finally able to see through to the tree's true form.

It was an enormous, dried up husk exuding a sinister and ghostly atmosphere. Something else was obscuring its genuine appearance with a formidable vitality. But true as they came, the tree was a zombie tree. Apart from Qing Hongchen, other zombie fruits of various shapes and forms also hung on it.

“There’s something terrifying buried underneath the tree.” Lu Yun trembled. “Something that’s drained the tree’s vitality and turned it into a zombie tree. It’s also using its own lifeforce to conceal the tree’s aura. Then the tree transformed Qing Hongchen, and the other living things, into zombie fruit, sending their life essence down to the thing below.” He paused, then whispered, “Ahh, so that’s what hypnotized me earlier.”

The tree shook the moment his voice fell, and an ominous expression blossomed in unison on the Qing Hongchen faces.

Puff! Puff! Puff!

The numerous Qing zombies suddenly opened their mouths and shot clouds of spores that drifted toward Lu Yun and Qing Han.

1. Okay honestly, I don’t quite understand this either. Just that this tree is creepy af.

Chapter 123: Giant Ghostface Maggots

“What the hell are those things?!” Qing Han’s skin crawled at the sight of the oncoming spores. With his sharp eyesight, he could easily pick out the human faces on each one of the floating spores, all of them belonging to Qing Hongchen.

“Let go of me first,” Lu Yun said urgently, also fixated on the spores. Struggle flashed through his eyes the moment Qing Han dismissed the Imperial Star, but hellfire ignited in his irises once again to defy the mental force in the area.

“Don’t use your energy to touch those things!” he wheezed.

A cultivator’s realms were divided into the qi, core, and spirit realms, with different personal energies found at each stage. There was qi at the qi realm, internal energy at the core realm, and mystic force at the spirit realm. And once one broke through to the immortal realm, their mystic force would morph into immortal force.

The Tome of Life and Death trembled slightly as Lu Yun circulated his internal energy, disgorging Emerald Mistfire and reducing the airborne particles to dust.

“We have to leave at once,” he urged, his voice weak and face wan.

With the tomb realm disrupting the connection between the Gates of the Abyss and the netherworld, his only option was to forcibly extract power from the Tome of Life and Death in order to control the Emerald Mistfire.

But with his paltry cultivation, merely summoning the book was already an enormous burden, not to mention the hellfire he was sustaining to combat the dreadful compulsion. Deploying the immortal fire almost completely depleted his internal reserves, yet he was in no danger, thanks to Qing Han’s Imperial Star. Though the mental compulsion was domineering, it couldn’t rattle the Imperial Star.

“I’ll carry you!” Qing Han grabbed Lu Yun and swung him to the back, then turned into a violet-gold whirlwind and shot forward with a surge of mystic force. One of Empress Myrtlestar’s skills, this physical combat art more than tripled his speed.

“You have to be careful when you refine the legacy item,” Lu Yun suddenly murmured against his ear.

Qing Han’s heart pounded painfully at the feel of the governor’s breath against his cheek. He forced himself to calm down before replying, “Why?”

“An empress’ lofty aspirations won’t so easily capitulate. She can’t have simply resigned herself to death.” Lu Yun swallowed a pill to regain some lost energy. “She’s certainly hidden traps within her legacy. You might unwittingly be possessed by her.”

Qing Han shuddered.

“But that’s just human nature. Do almighty masters not yearn to dazzle as bright as the sun and stars, or live as long as the universe? Devising contingency plans to come back from the dead is just par for the course.” Lu Yun coughed. “In fact, some ancient oddities from a hundred thousand years ago have probably already come back to life through possessing someone else’s body.”

“I understand.” Qing Han compressed his lips and nodded. Tiny beads of sweat formed on his forehead as he dodged the oncoming spores with exceptional agility, while still turning an attentive ear to the governor’s exhortations.

“Find a safe spot and show me whatever you got. I’ll help you erase the hidden dangers,” Lu Yun added after thinking it over.

“Alright,” Qing Han agreed without a shred of hesitation, then promptly stopped cold and looked solemnly ahead. They’d reached the end of this particular branch. Ahead of them, the tree trunk loomed like a wall with a giant cavity in which two faint crimson lights glowed.

Behind them, the seemingly boundless cloud of spores was already upon them, the Qing Hongchen faces set in a cruel smile.

Hiss!

A black head unexpectedly shot out of the tree hole and opened wide to bite the two humans.

“Get lost!” Qing Han shouted, white sword light suddenly shining from his hand.

Clank!

Sparks flew as the sword light crashed down on the creature’s head. Even though it was larger than Qing Han’s entire frame, the head hissed in pain and fled back to its hole.

“What a big snake!” Qing Han hastily fell back and stared warily at the tree cavity, his arm numb from the impact.

“It’s not a snake, it’s a larva!” Lu Yun corrected him.

“What? A larva?” Qing Han’s eyes widened as his eyes snapped back to the dark opening. Inside, the pinpricks of red still glared at them, unblinking. Could such an enormous insect even exist?

“Ghostface maggots!” Lu Yun’s expression turned grave. “It’s a giant ghostface maggot. Do, do they grow on zombie trees?”

Qing Han’s blood ran cold. He knew of these creatures, they could devour undead hags! All of a sudden, a scorching heat rose at his back.

Swoosh!

The next moment, Emerald Mistfire condensed into a blazing vortex that reduced the cloud of spores to ashes. Lu Yun’s complexion grew even paler.

“We need to leave right this second. Since there are ghostface maggots here, there’ll certainly be corpse flies as well,” he panted, still trying to catch his breath.

Once bitten, the gruesome poison within a corpse fly’s body was almost guaranteed to turn its prey into a zombie. But in this place, the flies were more likely to simply gnaw them to the bone instead.

Those they’d previously run into were either too weak, or too deep in slumber to manifest their full potential, but he’d be a fool to disregard creatures that only millennia-old zombies could foster.

Qing Han nodded. With a leap, he avoided the tree cavity and hopped onto another branch. Lu Yun tapped his shoulder in the next moment.

“Ah?” Turning back reflexively, his lips almost crashed into Lu Yun’s face.

“You, you can ride your sword instead,” the governor reminded.

“I can’t!” Qing Han shook his head. “I tried it on the way here, but there’s something in the air that blocks me from doing so.”

With a frown, Lu Yun lifted his head and looked up. A dense network of branches filled his vision, making it impossible to see what lay beyond.

“Hahahaha, you’re dead, you’re dead! You ran inside their territory! You’re dead meat, dead meat, hahahaha...” The spores had regathered, but they kept their distance and set up a perimeter around the two humans, faces full of schadenfreude.

“Come on, come on, hurry up! The living are knocking on your door, hurry up and eat them!” the spores yelled emphatically.

Buzzzz.

Soon after, the commotion of vibrating wings reached Lu Yun’s ears as the emerald-green of the foliage gave way to a bloody scarlet.

Chapter 124: The Sal Tree of Life and Death

“Corpse flies!” Lu Yun blanched. He couldn’t see them yet, but he could already smell the characteristic stench of rot.

“Over there!” Qing Han pointed at a spot between the dense branches where leaves and boughs were violently shaking, as if something enormous was about to emerge.

Crash!

Vegetation shattered to make way for the extension of a giant, blood-colored leg. It was almost three hundred meters tall and had sharp spikes poking out of it. Each of its slightest movements broke branches, leaves, and bark, sending pieces raining down the zombie tree.

“Here you are, here you are! Eat them, eat them all!” The spores cheered, guiding the owner of the leg to where its prey was.

“What a huge corpse fly...” Lu Yun goggled at the sight. Just a mere leg was three hundred meters long! Could this thing still be called a fly? How gigantic would its full body turn out to be?

“Hang onto me tight,” Qing Han whispered while making a hand seal. Realization of his friend’s intentions struck Lu Yun, and he hastily pressed himself down on Qing Han’s back.

Humm—

A green glow enveloped the two, upon which their figures streaked into the emerald light and slipped into the branch beneath their feet.

Snap!

No sooner had they vanished than a blood-red, gooey mouth organ pierced down savagely on where they’d been and tore the thick branch to pieces.

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“It actually worked!” After barely dodging the giant corpse fly’s attack, Qing Han and Lu Yun fled downward along the zombie tree’s vascular vessels.

This was a wood-attribute movement art, one Qing Han had found within Empress Myrtlestar’s legacy. Dwelling in the east, the empress had mastered all the laws of wood; her wood-attribute arts were second to none.

With help from the Imperial Star, Qing Han had grasped this particular ability in no time at all. His own internal energy was now a violet-gold color and its new attribute enhanced the art’s effectiveness.

The life force that was so abundant outside the tree was nowhere to be seen on the inside. Instead, the ashen gray vessels looked dull and lifeless, and the smell of rotten wood pervaded the air. Stranger still, there was an aura of exuberant growth inside the tree, as though it was still alive.

Just as Lu Yun had surmised, this was a zombie tree, and its true nature was concealed by whatever lay beneath its roots

“Stop!” he suddenly shouted.

Qing Han skidded to a halt. “What’s the matter?”

“We’re surrounded by ghostface maggots,” Lu Yun replied sombrely.

Hundreds of them were slowly converging from every direction, ringing the two of them. Qing Han had been too focused on controlling the movement art to notice them until now.

“Dispel your art.” A fevered glint flashed in Lu Yun’s eyes.

“Eh?” Flabbergasted, Qing Han couldn’t understand how they were supposed to escape unscathed without the movement art. Wouldn’t they end up trapped inside and finally assimilated by this terrifying zombie tree?

“Do as I say.” Lu Yun’s face was calm, but the look in his eyes was almost demented. Hellfire disappeared from his irises in favor of a rising internal energy level, and he ate more than a dozen energy-recovering pills.

“Alright!” Hesitating no longer, Qing Han released his hand seal and banished the emerald glow that was surrounding them.

Crackle!

Crackle!

Crackle!

Three fires ignited around Lu Yun at almost the same time, one green, one blue, and one yellow.

“Since we’re trapped in here, I’ll set this whole damn tree on fire!” he thundered. “Let’s see if a zombie tree and whatever’s underground can withstand three immortal fires. Let’s find out, shall we?!!!”

He performed a series of fire-control hand seals and drove the immortal fires to unleash their full power. The Emerald Mistfire, Lucent Voidfire, and Daevic Skyfire blossomed at the same time and instantly broke free from Lu Yun’s control to run amok throughout the tree’s interior.

The zombie tree was gargantuan, dwarfing even the desolate willow. Moreover, it was protected by a formidable entity of vitality. Yet neither of the two could fend off the immortal fires, resulting in the tree catching fire in the blink of an eye.

The power of the immortal fires was more daunting than anyone could imagine. Thus far, Yuying had only tapped into part of their potential, staying within the limits of her ability to control them. There was nothing the immortal fires couldn’t burn if left unchecked. Such existences were potential disasters for the entire world of immortals. No one in history, not even before the great war, had ever extinguished an out of control immortal fire.

Whoosh!

Black hellfire blazed around Lu Yun, its icy yet scorching aura isolating him from the immortal fires run amok. No matter how powerful they were, the immortal fires dared not even approach the hellfire.

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The entire world seemed afire.

On the zombie tree, countless ghostface maggots, corpse flies, and living creatures transformed into zombie fruits shrieked and wailed, scurrying around for survival.

Unfortunately, there was a thick membrane around the tree that isolated it from the outside world. With nowhere to escape to, the undead creatures and evil spirits all burned to a crisp. An enormous conflagration surrounded the tree, sparing not a single leaf or drop of vitality.

“Who... dares... interrupt... my... sleep....” A prodigious sentience suddenly roused from its slumber. The earth tore apart as black, bone-like tree trunks burrowed out from the cracks.

“What... is... going... on...” the vast consciousness rippled languidly across the tomb realm. “Why... are... there... supreme... fires... here....”

Although they were abnormally slow, the consciousness’ ripples were very clear and filled with boundless confusion and shocked anger.

Crash!

The earth shook and the entire realm trembled as a giant black tree upturned all of the soil in its eruption from beneath the ground. It filled the entire tomb realm, the black fires blossoming on its branches blotting out the sunny sky and bringing down a curtain of darkness.

Even more colossal than the zombie tree, it was boundlessly vast, like a star. In comparison, the tomb realm seemed merely a part of it. Though black, it brimmed with prodigious vitality, but also the power of death!

Just like the Fusang Purewood, no leaves grew on it. Instead, drifting leaves of black flames adorned its branches and kept the three immortal fires at bay.

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“That’s... that’s!!!” Now that they were free of the zombie tree, Lu Yun had breathing space to take a clear look at the newly-emerged black tree and its flames. His eyes immediately went as round as saucers and even his breathing grew urgent.

Hellfire!

The black flames dancing on the tree were actually hellfire!

“That tree is mine!!!” A newfound, inexhaustible strength flooded out from his exhausted body.

Whoosh!

Black hellfire erupted from him in tremendous waves that echoed the flames of the colossal tree.

“You. Are. Mine!!!” he roared. “Sal Tree of Life and Death, you are mine!!!”

Buzz!

The Tome of Life and Death manifested above his head. Moving away from Qing Han, he transformed into a ball of black flame and threw himself at the giant tree.

“Stay put and wait for me. Don’t move!” He dropped a ball of hellfire onto Qing Han with a wave of a hand to protect his friend. Then, the fiercely-blazing Lu Yun landed in front of the ‘Sal Tree of Life and Death’, holding the Tome of Life and Death in his hands.

1. The sal tree contains religious significance in Buddhism, being the tree that witnessed the birth of Gautama Buddha and the death of Buddha himself. It's also a tree under which the two Buddhas preceding Gautama Buddha attained enlightenment.

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Chapter 125: Half of a Dragon Body

Legend spoke of a giant sal tree beneath the eighteenth level of hell that kindled hellfire with its own body. The pillar of the underworld, the tree shouldered the full weight of hell itself.

Or rather, the Tome of Life and Death had imparted this story to Lu Yun just moments prior, and it was now persistently reverberating in his mind. The tree in front of him was the very same Sal Tree of Life and Death!

He also finally realized what the netherworld that lay beyond the Gates of the Abyss was: Hell.

Earth's legends spoke of a world of immortals, an underworld, and the eighteen layers of hell. Having arrived in one of the legends, Lu Yun had seen no evidence of hell all this time. He'd also come up empty-handed from digging through the memories of his four envoys. Nothing was recorded in the chronicles they'd perused of times before the great war, either. Hell... seemed to have been entirely erased from history.

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A pair of giant eyes slowly opened on a humanoid face adorning the front of the sal tree. Confusion veiled the titanic eyes, so large that they dwarfed Dusk Province.

"Wait, wait, there's something wrong with it!" Lu Yun suddenly realized something. "This isn't just the Sal Tree of Life and Death. Since hellfire burns on its own body, the tree would never develop self-awareness. So what's the deal with this face?!" He gaped at the half-asleep face.

"Who... dares interrupt... this king's... rest!" an all-encompassing voice traveled from the giant mouth as its wooden eyes gradually pried themselves open.

Clasping the Tome of Life and Death and blazing with hellfire, Lu Yun didn't even amount to a spark compared to this star-sized colossus. However, the enormous eyes were firmly locked on to his figure. Or, more exactly, the book in his hand.

"That book... this tree wishes for it... Hand it over!" the giant face roared frantically, shaking the tree from top to bottom.

Tongues of hellfire converged into a turbulent sea of flames, roiling toward Lu Yun. The terrible compulsion appeared again, trying to dominate his will. But this time, the power radiating from the materialized Tome of Life and Death fully negated the attempt at mind control.

Terrifying hellfire crashed upon the governor in giant, successive waves. He steadfastly endured it all, unmoving, in an imitation of an eternal reef by a seashore. Twin flames danced in his eyes as the Tome of Life and Death absorbed the surging hellfire like a whale guzzling water.

“Wait wait wait, the sal tree is sending me this hellfire of its own volition!” Astonishment struck Lu Yun. “A daunting existence must’ve latched on to the tree as a parasite and is slowly fusing with it.”

Though the Sal Tree of Life and Death wasn’t self-aware, it still possessed base instincts. Since the entity leeching off the tree was using hellfire to attack Lu Yun, the tree itself poured all of its strength into directing the hellfire to the Tome of Life and Death!

Though the sal tree could house hellfire, the fire wasn’t part of the tree itself. Instead, the flames originated from the Tome of Life and Death.

Lu Yun was immune to hellfire to begin with, but conversely, the sal tree would weaken once it was deprived of the black flames. That would also mean the parasite would no longer be able to feed on the tree’s life force.

Crack crack crack!

The tree suddenly moved, countless black branches converging into a pair of giant arms that slammed at Lu Yun even as the torrent of flames beat a hasty retreat back to the sal tree.

The mighty existence attached to the tree understood by now that hellfire was worthless against the human. Although it didn’t know what the Tome of Life and Death was, it could sense the tree’s secret yearning for the book, like one might long for one’s home.

Hence, the book was certainly a supreme treasure.

“I understand now. Your own body suffered critical damage, so you had no choice but to meld with the tree.” Lu Yun remained stoic in the face of the oncoming giant fists. “But you’ll never be able to use this tree to injure me!”

Boom!

Hellfire erupted from all around him and set the very air of this miniature world aflame. It instantly shattered the arms woven from the sal tree’s branches.

“Let’s see what kind of abomination you are, you damn parasite!” he roared. Tremendous energy surged from the Tome of Life and Death once more, as Lu Yun transformed into a ball of fire and brutally slammed against the star-sized tree.

.....

On the ground, Qing Han stared unblinkingly at his friend, his heart leaping into his throat. Violet-gold light slowly glimmered between his brows as he readied himself to assist at a moment’s notice.

Bang!

Bang!

Bang!

A series of blasts sounded from within the tree, as though it’d been hit by a barrage of explosions. The very foundations of the tomb realm shook from the giant face’s howls.

A hazy silhouette suddenly slipped out of Qing Han's body and stared in astonishment at the sal tree.

"I had long sensed a ghastly presence dwelling inside this world born from the tomb, yet I find myself surprised to see it is a tree!" the violet shadow exclaimed softly.

Qing Han shook from head to toe. "A—aren't you supposed to be dead?"

The figure, namely Empress Myrtlestar, shrugged.

"Your little paramour already saw through my plans. If I kept hiding, he might truly locate my presence and erase me forever." The empress sighed faintly. "As he said, such is human nature. I, too, wish to be reborn."

Qing Han fidgeted in an awkward fashion and subconsciously moved away from this empress.

"Why don't we conduct a transaction?" offered the empress with a smile.

"What sort of transaction?" Qing Han replied cautiously.

"Although your little sweetheart can restrain the tree itself, I can clearly see that he is no match for the one occupying it. Even on the verge of death, it can snuff out your lives like blowing out a candle the moment it emerges." The empress smiled brightly. "Allow me to live inside your Scroll of Shepherding Immortals. In exchange, I shall destroy this creature. What say you?"

"Once inside the scroll, I'll become another of the painting's creatures, similar to the dragon and tiger spirits already inside. I will no longer be a threat to you, and can guide your cultivation. In return, you will help reforge my soul and restore my body. As for reclaiming the honor of my kin, that will be left to me. Are we agreed?"

"We are!" Qing Han accepted without hesitation. There was nothing he could do to help Lu Yun at the moment, making the empress his only option.

"Here, this starstone belongs to you!" He took out the stone that'd been solidified from the Imperial Star's power and handed it back to the empress, but Myrtlestar shook her head.

With a wave of her hand, a soul fragment emerged from the Imperial Star and sank into Qing Han. The latter could feel a small gap cracking open on the Scroll of Shepherding Immortals to allow the soul fragment inside, whereupon it transformed into the picture of a noble and graceful woman.

"The current you will perish the moment you part ways with the Imperial Star. You can return it to me after you find a way to prolong your life."

Qing Han nodded wordlessly.

"The one who drew this scroll was an old friend of mine; I wonder if he is still alive." Empress Myrtlestar took in a deep breath, summoning the energy of this world to her being. Her illusory form instantly took on the appearance of flesh and bone. Moments later, she lifted her head and observed the giant tree towering close by.

Bang!

The enormous tree shuddered before the trunk cracked open in a cloud of black hellfire and broken branches.

“Awoooooo!!!!” A lengthy dragon roar resounded in the air, followed by the figure of a dark azure dragon barrelling out of the tree into the vast expanse of the sky. Its terrifying aura spread to every nook and cranny of the tomb realm, but upon closer observation, it was only half of a dragon’s body. Neither the lower half nor the hind claws were anywhere in sight. Someone had split it right across the middle, and one could even see dark blue flesh constantly wiggling inside the wound.

The half-dragon roared with fury the moment it emerged from the tree, its one pair of dragon claws furiously trying to grab Lu Yun’s figure as one would try to capture a spark.

“So you’re still alive, Divine Azure Dragon King!” Empress Myrtlestar shouted as she arrived in front of the dragon in a stream of light, bathing the tomb realm in violet-gold radiance.

“Empress Myrtlestar!!” The azure dragon shrieked with terror the moment he witnessed her violet-gold halo.

Chapter 126: Rebirth

Empress Myrtlestar calmly took a position in midair, violet-golden light shimmering around her and the same hue reflected from her originally jet-black locks.

“As I thought, it is you, Azure Dragon King.” Soft and gentle, her voice nevertheless carried a hint of supreme majesty.

“Impossible, that’s impossible!” the dragon bellowed. Violent agitation of emotions burst his wound open anew, spraying dark azure blood across the void. “Empress Myrtlestar is dead, destroyed together with her race! How are you still alive?!”

“Nothing is impossible.” The indifferent empress coalesced the faint shadow of a sword in her hand.

.....

“So that’s Empress Myrtlestar?” Lu Yun floated to a slow landing beside Qing Han, grasping a black seed in his hand. “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine.” Qing Han shook his head with a wry smile. Judging from Lu Yun’s vigor and liveliness, there was no need to worry about the governor’s condition. In fact, he seemed to have chanced upon a tremendous opportunity.

“What you said before, was all that meant for her ears?” The disguised girl suddenly recalled Lu Yun’s words back on the zombie tree.

It’s just human nature—of all living things, really—to want to live on. Isn’t the very goal of cultivation to obtain greater strength in order to live a longer life?

“Yeah.” Lu Yun nodded gently. “Alright, this is a good opportunity. Watch over me while I refine the seed.”

He waved the black seed in front of Qing Han's eyes. This was all that was left of the Sal Tree of Life and Death after it'd reentered the cycle of rebirth.

As an existence that'd once shouldered the entire netherworld, Lu Yun might be able to rebuild hell by growing it anew, but he hadn't the foggiest clue as to where exactly to begin. It was a goal for the future; for now, refining it and making it his was the only thing he could do.

The special structure of this tomb realm could conceal all auras. If he were to bring the tree's seed into the outside world, who knew what might happen?

"Alright!" Qing Han gripped his sword and took a stance by Lu Yun's side, shielding his friend from the formidable flows of energy in the surroundings.

Apart from the sal tree and the zombie tree, the tomb realm was also populated by numerous other horrifying zombies and other dead spirits. However, the three immortal fires had laid waste to all these dangers.

They rampaged still through the surroundings, but their energies also counteracted much of the clash between the divine dragon and Empress Myrtlestar, safeguarding the realm from the devastating fallout.

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The seed of the sal tree landed in Lu Yun's dantian, glowing brilliantly with the hue of a black pearl. He could sense a lifeforce inside of it, but no matter what he tried, he couldn't rouse or make it germinate.

"Once we leave this realm, I'll have to see if the soil of hell can help it take root." Lu Yun finally opened his eyes after an indeterminate period of time.

"Hahaha—Empress Myrtlestar, at the end of the day, you're just a dead soul while I live on. That's why you're not my match, even if I only have half of my body left!" In the sky, the divine dragon king guffawed with self-satisfaction.

"Is that so?" retorted the empress in her soft, yet imposing voice.

Moments ago, the dragon had smashed her body with its claws, scattering the energy she'd summoned and forcing a return to her incorporeal appearance. After all, she wasn't even a soul fragment, merely a strong remnant of thought—an obsession.

"Scroll." Her lips curved into a smile as she looked down and motioned to Qing Han. He quickly grasped the empress' intentions and floated the Scroll of Shepherding Immortals to her hand with a wave of his.

"You would have been safe from the scroll, had you refrained from fighting so desperately against me. Fortunately, now that I have exhausted the last vestiges of the tree's energy in you, this painting is sufficient to subdue you." She gently unfurled the scroll.

"The Scroll of Shepherding Immortals! Why is it here?! Wasn't it separated into three paintings, each sealed by an immortal flame?" Intense fear flashed through the dragon's eyes. As the name, Divine Azure Dragon King, might indicate, he was a divine! This scroll that illustrated the divines' origins was also his race's worst enemy!

“Ah yes, the three uniquely-colored fires you see around here happen to be the immortal fires you speak of!”

Despair filled the dragon’s eyes.

Swoosh!

Pointing languidly with her finger, Empress Myrtlestar bathed the tomb realm in the milky white light from the fully unfurled scroll. The radiance inexorably dragged the dragon’s five-thousand-kilometer long body into the scroll, a process marked by ghastly screams of misery.

Little by little, the image of a half-body azure dragon materialized in the painting, baring its fangs and brandishing its claws.

At the same time, the Dragon Prince, Tiger Prince, and black dragonguard that were initially part of the scroll pictured vanished from sight, leaving behind only half of a dragon’s body and an empress in all her resplendent glory.

She, too, faded away from the tomb realm, becoming a violet shadow that filed into the scroll and fell silent as the painting gently settled back into Qing Han’s hand.

“Damn it, we have to run!” With a sudden shout, Lu Yun grabbed Qing Han and pelted off in the opposite direction as the tomb realm began collapsing.

.....

Thunder and lightning streaked across the Skandha Range, echoing the desolate willow’s painful screams as sections of his body exploded one by one, his inky, jade-like leaves scattering in every direction. As for the juba, it tucked its head and limbs inside its shell, too afraid to expose itself.

What’s happening, what’s happening? What in the heavens is happening?! Countless thoughts whirled in the horror-stricken juba’s mind. Is it the rage of Skandha Range’s mistress? Did that so-called mistress find out about my betrayal?

Chaotic energies tore through the mountain range; lightning and thunder vied for supremacy while cracks and fissure opened up in the earth. Yet despite all of the commotion inside the mountain range, just a single step away from was a picture of utter calmness and serenity, fully undisturbed by all the pandemonium.

Boom!

An explosion suddenly shook the heavens, marking the immediate collapse of half the mountain range. An enormous dark hole slowly yawned open in the middle of the sky, ejecting two miserable figures from it.

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“Aoxue!” Sensing the realms of yin and yang connect the second they tumbled out, Lu Yun hurriedly sent for the dragon princess. Without her, he and Qing Han would certainly be beset by the legions of otherkind inhabiting these mountains.

In answer to his summons, the dragon princess materialized and caught Lu Yun and Qing Han, then brought them safely to the ground.

Huummm.

A droning sound came from mid-air as the giant hole rippled shut with a black flash and vanished without a trace, signaling the demise of the tomb realm born from the Skandha Range. Its fate had been sealed the moment the sal tree perished.

As peace returned to the mountain range, countless pairs of eyes from speechless otherkind swivelled to the three of them.

“M-mistress,” the startled Old Willow stuttered as he watched Aoxue descend from the sky.

The dragon princess ignored him, instead fixing a frosty look on the turtle. “Juba, do you know your crime?”

“This old servant knows, this old servant knows!” The juba stuck its head out of its shell and crashed it against the ground, desperately begging for forgiveness. It’d truly been scared out of its wits by the strange phenomena just now.

It’d arrived in these mountains almost ten thousand years ago, but this was its first time witnessing such a terrifying occurrence. Therefore, it immediately associated this event with its plotting against Aoxue.

The desolate willow stared in disbelief, still confused by the strange turn of events. How would the juba dare plot against the mistress of the Skandha Range?!

Aoxue’s eyes smoldered crimson as she approached the juba, her murderous aura intensifying with each step. Echoing her rage, the mountains shook once more, filling the air with a somber, oppressive atmosphere.

“Aoxue,” Lu Yun called out all of a sudden. “Spare its life. I can still use it.”

The juba’s true strength was that of a peerless immortal. He would gain a formidable fighter, if he could bring it to heel. Even if it remained too afraid to call upon its actual cultivation level, ordinary august immortals still wouldn’t be its match. Most importantly, the fact that the cultivators in these mountains could seal their cultivation meant that immortals from around the world could do the same to enter Dusk Province....

Lu Yun needed more helpers.

“As you command.” Aoxue came to a halt and warned coldly, “I will spare your life for the time being, but do not hope for the same leniency next time.”

“Of course, of course! Many thanks for your mercy, Your Highness. Thank you for sparing me, Lord Governor!” The juba smashed its head repeatedly into the ground, eyes filled with terror.

“Hm?” Lu Yun suddenly blinked as a strange, yet prodigious energy flowed from the juba into his body, whereupon it was absorbed by the seed of the Sal Tree of Life and Death. Soon after, an emerald brilliance bathed his dantian in lush green as a thin, tender shoot extended from the black seed, releasing limitless energy that merged with Lu Yun’s own in the process.

The “Method of Life and Death” began frantically circulating by itself.

Bang!

A tremendous explosive note rang from Lu Yun’s figure as his cultivation suddenly broke through the golden core realm and entered the life core realm.

Chapter 127: Heaven-Defying, To Raise from the Dead

Lu Yun stared into space, thoughts swirling in his mind.

Goodwill! The identification finally hit him.

Just like retribution, goodwill was a force born from thought, yet the two of them were diametrically opposed: one was good karma, the other, bad karma.

Objecting to the execution just now had earned him the juba’s gratitude. In turn, these grateful thoughts transformed into goodwill. Sporadic goodwill was of little use for ordinary cultivators, the exception being when the goodwill of thousands upon thousands of people was directed to one person at a given time. Then, that goodwill would transform into virtuous merit.

While bad karma, in the shape of retribution, could trigger or strengthen heavenly tribulations, goodwill and virtuous merit would instead reduce their strength. Legends even spoke of some cultivators who, after accumulating great amounts of virtuous merit, had even received the blessings of heaven instead of a trial of lightning during their tribulations.

However, those were just folktales at the end of the day.

Bad karma was a persistent ailment and retribution the gangrene, but goodwill and virtuous merit were the complete opposite. The latter was fleeting by nature and most cultivators never perceived their existence, to say nothing of making use of them.

But goodwill was the fertilizer of the Sal Tree of Life and Death. In the process of absorbing goodwill, it provided Lu Yun with tremendous energy as a byproduct, enhancing his cultivation.

The juba’s goodwill had resulted in the seed’s germination, but Lu Yun himself had also greatly benefited from the resulting energy, propelling him into the life core realm. Soon after, a new death art emerged from the Tome of Life and Death and passed into his mind.

Resurrection.

If one died within the past seven days and their body was kept whole, this art could reforge their soul and raise them from the dead.

Stunned once again, Lu Yun shook uncontrollably. This was plainly a forbidden art, one that went against the laws of heaven! Reviving the departed and bringing them back from the land of the dead? Even with a seven-day limit, such an art was an incredible taboo.

His envoys were only a pale imitation of resurrection, but already spent their days on the edge for it, changing their names and not daring to show their true forms. Or they simply pretended they never died, using the pretext of having to feign death to buy enough time to heal after grievous injuries.

Yet the book had thrown him another heaven-defying ability: resurrection in the truest sense of the word.

If anyone else were to learn of this, every immortal in the world would hunt him down, either to kill him outright or confine him and use him to revive certain people!

I can never, ever tell another soul about this. I have to hide this, even from Qing Han and my envoys! He was so unnerved by this ability that he could feel the veins on his forehead pop.

“Lu Yun, why did your expression turn so ugly all of a sudden?” Qing Han asked urgently when he noticed his friend’s condition.

“It’s nothing.” Lu Yun waved it off and forced himself to shove this matter to the back of his mind.

Since he’d been shielded by the Tome of Life and Death during his breakthrough, no one had noticed anything untoward.

I never enjoyed the process of cultivating anyway, sitting in meditation all day long is way too boring. This is much more convenient. I just need to imitate Mother Teresa and do good deeds, then kick back and watch my cultivation skyrocket!

He inspected his body once again, relieved to note that the energy provided by the sal tree hadn’t affected his foundations. In fact, it was indistinguishable from the energy he gained by personally cultivating.

To master life and death and walk the land as a living king of hell is way too OP. That’s probably why the heavens created the Sal Tree of Life and Death.

Exerting control over the Tome of Life and Death and wielding the authority of hell implied that he’d one day develop into a paramount existence that ruled over the life and death of all creatures. The wheel of reincarnation, the fate of every realm and of all those who lived within... everything would be at the mercy of his thoughts.

Had he been a vile, wicked man, it would spell utter disaster for the immortal world and all life, hence the reason for the sal tree’s existence. By increasing his strength only with the goodwill it received from others, the tree encouraged him to be virtuous in his actions.

Lu Yun actually had no objection with this arrangement. He was no knight in shining armor, but neither was he a villain. He’d often acted charitably on Earth, helping old ladies cross the street or donating half of his tomb-raiding income to various charities.

As tomb raider commandants would say, what goes around comes around.

I’m the governor right now, so as long as I contribute to Dusk Province and make it more powerful, I can gather goodwill from all over the province. I’ll be able to nurture the seed so that it can hold up the eighteen levels of hell, one day. Plus, I can also increase my cultivation by the same method! He clenched his fists tightly.

.....

“There’s no need to look at me like that—I’m okay, really. I was just refining the seed. By the way, I broke through to the life core realm!” Lu Yun beamed brightly when he noticed Qing Han was still worried about him.

“You really did break through!” Qing Han’s eyes shone as he took in his friend’s higher cultivation level. There were still four months left until the governor’s reselection, and the faster Lu Yun’s cultivation grew, the greater his chances would be.

“Aoxue, stay here and consolidate the Skandha Range. It might look powerful on the surface, but it’s honestly a complete mess.” Lu Yun surveyed the mountain range with some dissatisfaction.

“Understood!” Aoxue agreed on the spot.

The desolate willow looked at Lu Yun, alarm plain on his giant face. There was an aura about the governor that made him subconsciously want to submit to the human. Right now, he venerated Lu Yun even more than Aoxue.

Is Dusk Province’s governor the true master of these mountains? Perhaps Her Highness is merely borrowing his glory?

The old tree spirit had lived for countless years, but he couldn’t help his imagination running wild at this juncture. However, it remained unaware that the imposing aura he sensed from Lu Yun actually belonged to the Sal Tree of Life and Death, an ancestral existence from hell.

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“Hm?” Just as Lu Yun and Qing Han were about to leave the mountain range, the governor looked down and took out his command token.

“My lord governor, there’s trouble brewing at the seaside stronghold. Please hurry and come oversee the situation in person.” Yuichi Hanxing’s urgent tones emitted from the token.

“What’s the matter?” Lu Yun frowned. Yuichi Hanxing had attempted to contact him many times already, but the token had been isolated while the pair were inside the tomb realm.

“The girl you sent to the stronghold has caused quite a commotion. Milord, if you don’t come very soon, the monster spirits will turn this place upside down.” Yuchi Hanxing’s voice brimmed with helplessness. She might be an immortal, but in front of that girl, a true immortal like her was nothing but the leg of an ant.

“Diexi...” Lu Yun blinked before turning to Qing Han. “You should go ba—”

“I’m coming with you.” With the flip of a hand, a token appeared in the latter’s hand. “Don’t forget, I’m an imperial envoy.”

Lu Yun chuckled dryly. He could already guess what had transpired at the North Sea; zombie kings were savage by nature. Diexi wasn’t entirely devoid of humanity, but once provoked, her vicious streak would certainly cause a gruesome bloodbath. The North Sea monster spirits wouldn’t easily let the matter drop, this time.

“Juba.” He looked at the turtle cowering in its pond. “Do you want to make amends for your past mistakes?”

“I’m at your disposal, milord!” the juba hastened to say.

“Follow me to the seaside stronghold!” With a wave of the governor’s hand, a door appeared out of thin air. The command token not only summoned the Dusk Phalanx to his side, but could also be used to travel to the seaside stronghold.

“Understood!” The juba acquiesced immediately as Qing Han and Lu Yun hopped on its back.

“The juba race once betrayed the dragons. I will not forgive a second betrayal,” Aoxue’s frosty voice sounded before they set off.

The juba froze, then slowly crawled through the great door made of light.

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“Mistress, should we also go and lend a hand?” the desolate willow asked urgently.

“The Skandha Range is one of the young master’s hidden aces; do you want him to reveal it so soon?” Aoxue raked the old tree with a sidelong glance, cowing him into silence.

She knew full well that Lu Yun wasn’t asking her to unite the cultivators dwelling in these mountains. Instead, he wanted her to investigate its secrets—not only the Skandha Extinction Tomb, but the Enneaworm Coffinbearers as well.

Chapter 128: Unwelcome Guests

Dark clouds loomed outside the seaside stronghold. The ocean seemed undisturbed and tranquil on the surface, but a heavy weight pressing down made everyone short of breath.

Diexi stood atop a reef by the shore, solemnly staring at the thunderclouds over the water. Crimson light winked in and out of existence around her body.

“General Yuchi, my recklessness has brought trouble down upon you,” the zombie girl sighed morosely.

Yuchi Hanxing blinked and shook her head without a word.

“Yuchi Hanxing!” a solemn voice sounded ponderously from the sky. “You have one hour. If you don’t serve up five hundred thousand heads by then, my monster spirit army will assault the stronghold!”

“Kill!”

“Kill!”

“Kill!”

Roar roar roar!

Tall waves rose from the ocean, powerful monster spirit soldiers howling and gibbering incessantly in every one of them. They were all immortals, incomparable to the regular soldiers that Diexi had

slaughtered. Likewise, the remaining eight hundred thousand Dusk Phalanx in the stronghold wouldn't be able to withstand the new attackers at all.

"In your dreams!" Yuchi Hanxing spat out, her jaw set.

"The Nephrite court ripped up the treaty first, Yuchi Hanxing," the voice responded. "You sent in an arcane immortal and killed ten million of our kind. I demand only five hundred thousand of your soldiers in return—a generous enough concession, isn't it?"

Yuchi Hanxing gnashed her teeth. With the increasing pressure from the sky over the ocean, she couldn't make a sound even though her chest was violently heaving in an attempt to form words.

If the monster spirits wanted her head, she would cut it off without hesitation. But five hundred thousand Dusk Phalanx soldiers.... Their death would dispel the Heavenly Formation of the Black Tortoise, and even the grand formation in the stronghold would be affected. The monsters could then charge straight into Dusk Province.

Unlike Dusk Province, there was no restriction against powerful immortals in the North Sea. However, the North Sea monster spirits had an agreement with the Nephrite court. This locale was to be a mutual training ground, and both sides were prohibited from deploying immortals that were too powerful.

The Nephrite court couldn't send their heavyweights to slaughter the monster spirits, and the monster spirits were prohibited from sending in anyone beyond golden immortal realm. Under those circumstances, if the monsters could still seize the fortress and conquer Dusk Province, the province would be theirs.

Over time, the seaside stronghold became a sparring ground for both sides. Both Nephrite Major and North Sea monster spirits sent budding youths here for training via life and death encounters. Among the ten million that Diexi had slaughtered, the majority were young geniuses of great potential, here for tempering through combat.

Losing them to an arcane immortal enraged the senior counsel of the race, so they wanted half of the Dusk Phalanx dead! There would certainly be geniuses from Nephrite Major in that half, which made for a fitting retribution.

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"Cut the crap and fight." Diexi stepped in before Yuchi Hanxing and manifested an orb. "I crushed your weaklings to refine an origin sphere. If you want revenge, come at me. Do you have to be so nauseating and involve the stronghold?"

She slowly took to the air and placed herself in front of the stronghold. Boundless oceans of blood and mountains of corpses could be found in her eyes.

"An origin sphere?! You used the blood of our children to refine an origin sphere!!" The authoritative voice exploded with rage. Something enormous shifted in and out of sight behind the clouds. It seemed to be a black dragon, or perhaps an enormous black snake. "Die, die, die! I want you dead!"

“You’re just all bark and no bite at the end of the day,” Diexi scoffed. “The pack of ants you’ll send ashore won’t even be enough for a swat. And you, a peerless immortal, don’t dare set foot on land. So why are you wasting our time here? Scram!”

Her last exclamation almost manifested physically. A tremendous bolt of thunder and lightning crackled over the North Sea, melting countless monsters into pools of blood.

Everyone shuddered. Yuchi Hanxing hadn’t expected Diexi to suddenly turn so forceful, either. The lady had hit quite a sore spot.

Monsters beyond the golden immortal realm didn’t dare make landfall, and those below that level didn’t even warrant a slap from her. Diexi was somehow an exception, an arcane immortal that the restriction within the ancient Dusk tomb allowed to freely walk about.

“You... you can’t stay here forever!” the powerful entity in the air growled with rage. “The moment you leave is the moment this stronghold will be destroyed!”

“I’ll say the same about you,” Diexi sneered and gave as good as she got. “If you leave, there will be no monster spirit left in the waters where the North Sea borders the Dusk Province.”

“You...!” The voice was completely overtaken by fury. The dome of dark clouds looming over the sea suddenly shrank, revealing an enormous black snake coiled in the air. Surrounding it were swarms of monster spirit soldiers treading on waves.

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“A blackwater snake!” Lu Yun murmured from his vantage point in one of the stronghold’s towers, staring at the thirty-thousand-meter-long snake. “One that has reached the peerless immortal realm!”

Blackwater snakes were among the preeminent immortals in the North Sea, capable of manipulating water and controlling the ocean. Their arrival was always accompanied by waves that touched the sky. They were no lesser than the dragon race that used to inhabit the area.

In Lu Yun’s memory, it was the blackwater snakes who’d led the attack against the dragons and replaced them.

“Blackwater snakes.... They’re ancestors of the rimesnakes!” muttered Qing Han. His eyes then lit up with eagerness. “Should we work together to destroy the North Sea monster spirits and help Aoxue reestablish the dragon palace, Lu Yun?”

“What?” Lu Yun stared dumbly at Qing Han, caught off guard by his friend’s ambitious idea.

The two of them had arrived at the stronghold a while ago and were watching the conflict unfold from the safety of a tower. The juba followed them in the shape of a tiny turtle; it was Lu Yun who’d put the words in Diexi’s mouth just now.

She’d only just left the tomb for the living and didn’t know the ways of the world yet, so she couldn’t possibly have come up with all that herself. Yuchi Hanxing, on the other hand, was too intimidated by the monster spirits to even think properly, or she wouldn’t have asked for Lu Yun’s help.

“Calm down, Qing Han!” Lu Yun shuddered. “Don’t think we’re invincible just because we’ve dealt with a few big guys in tombs. Outside of those ancient tombs, I’m nothing, at least for now.”

“No, I can do it!” Qing Han smiled. Before he could explain, though, the governor cut him short.

“Don’t!” Lu Yun said hurriedly. “There are things you mustn’t put into words, or others will know! I know you have a lot of tricks up your sleeve, but the North Sea monster spirits are no joke.

“They couldn’t have eliminated the dragons on their own ten thousand years ago. There must have been another faction supporting them! I know what you’re capable of, but don’t go there unless it’s a life or death situation!

“The empress in the tomb held sway over the world, but even she died and her clan almost went extinct!”

Qing Han nodded in resignation at Lu Yun’s solemn expression. The imperial envoy was at an age when youths were most boastful. Even though he was a cultivator, he was still a teenage boy—well, girl.

Lu Yun sighed in relief when he saw the excitement fade from his friend’s face. He looked out of the stronghold and muttered, “Diexi’s existence will attract a lot of attention. If she wants to stay by my side and walk openly in the world of immortals without being treated like a monster, she has to make a substantial contribution to the Nephrite court. This is a good opportunity.”

Qing Han nodded in agreement.

Diexi couldn’t stay hidden in the darkness forever, after coming back to life, or else she’d slowly lose her humanity and become a true killing machine. If she could live openly and be accepted by everyone, the zombie king would become a real person.

.....

Another fearsome fight broke out over the sea as Diexi’s words enraged countless monster spirits. The tremendous army charged at the stronghold with waves that touched the sky.

Diexi burst into crimson flames, the color echoing in her irises and the blood-red hair flying wildly behind her. When she lifted her hand, an infinity of crimson light converged at her fingertips.

Bam!

A sudden explosion rumbled out as an enormous gate pierced the land before the stronghold, its gentle power keeping the army of monsters at bay.

“Please hold, fellow daoists of the North Sea.” An aureate figure sparkled in the sky. “This woman is a fiend born of an ancient tomb. She brings untold violence and great suffering wherever she goes. I am here to execute the decree of His Majesty the Celestial Emperor and take her down.”

Hum.

A terrifying might radiated from the jade gate and suppressed Diexi, the color drained from her face as a thick line of blood trickled out of the corner of her mouth.

Chapter 129: The Skybearer Gates

The doors brimmed with an aura of solemnity and holiness. A gentle, yet extraordinarily potent jade brilliance pressed down ruthlessly on Diexi, forcing her ramrod-straight figure to bend. Even her crimson hair turned black again.

“As I thought, a zombie king from the legends....” Shimmering with golden light, the old man’s eyes shone with almost visible glee. “A zombie that returned from the dead as a peerless zombie king. According to the ancient records from a hundred thousand years ago, these creatures can evolve all the way to peak dao immortal, or even break through to that mythical realm!”

If I refine her as my second body and second nascent spirit, then I, too, might reach that realm one day! I came to Dusk Province to quell that little bastard Lu Yun, but to think I’d unexpectedly run into such a fantastic opportunity! He forcibly resisted his delight and feigned a scowl.

“You say she’s not an immortal from Nephrite Major, but an evil spirit from an ancient burial mound?” The blackwater snake blinked.

“Correct. She’s an evil spirit through and through. How else can she manifest the power of an arcane immortal inside Dusk Province? Fortunately, my Skybearer can restrain all things evil and is a perfect counter against her,” the old man responded righteously. He then cupped his hands and saluted the snake. “This old man is called Lu Qishan. Fellow daoist, might I ask your name?”

“So the venerated elder of the Lu Clan has come.” A black halo flashed around the snake as it transformed into a middle-aged man with a somewhat sinister expression. Mimicking the Lu elder, he also cupped his hands before glancing subconsciously at Diexi. Seeing the zombie king unable to lift even a finger in the face of the jade-colored gates was guarantee enough to relax.

If a creature that could fully deploy its fighting strength without fear of the province’s restriction were to appear, then the North Sea monster spirits would have no choice but to retreat.

“This king is Beigong Zhen, King of Southern Subjugation, a servant of the immortal emperor of the North Sea.”

“Beigong Zhen, King of Southern Subjugation... to think we’d alarm your distinguished self!” Dread immediately filled Lu Qishan’s face. “That evil creature originates from Nephrite Major, so of course we should compensate your noble race for your losses. I hereby announce that we will gift the North Sea Court with two hundred million immortal crystals, and also move this seaside stronghold fifteen hundred kilometers southward. What say you?”

“Fifteen hundred kilometers southward? Can you decide that on your own?” Beigong Zhen’s eyes lit up. The immortal crystals meant little to him, but the second part was an extremely tempting proposition.

Dusk Phalanx’s seaside stronghold was Nephrite Major’s northernmost tip, marking its border with the Northern Sea. To move it would not only impact the borders of Dusk territory, but also the sea borders of the neighboring provinces, while implicitly expanding the North Sea’s domain by five thousand kilometers.

“As the emperor’s direct emissary, I can naturally make this decision.” At this moment, Lu Qishan’s only preoccupation was to dispatch these monster spirits as soon as possible, so he could find a place to refine this zombie king into his second body.

As for the immortal crystals, or moving the stronghold, the misbegotten Lu Yun would be the one to deal with that headache. He was the province's governor, in any case; it was his fault for losing the stronghold.

Lu Qishan was a venerated elder of Clan Lu, a distinguished peerless immortal. Who would dare cause difficulties for him?

Most importantly, the celestial emperor was currently in seclusion, and the young crown prince was about to take the imperial throne. Would he pay attention to such a trivial matter on the eve of his coronation?

"Lu Qishan?" Lu Yun's voice traveled from the stronghold at this time. "Your surname is Lu? From Nephrite Capital's Lu Clan?" The governor smiled coldly at the old man sparkling with golden radiance.

"Lu Yun? So you're also in the stronghold, you little bastard?" The governor's appearance gave Lu Qishan pause. "All the better, then. Hurry up and use the provincial seal to summon the power of the land and move the stronghold."

With a flick of the hand, he activated the jade-colored gates again to take Diexi away, when—

Boom!

An enormous water ball crackling with lightning shot out of the stronghold and crashed directly on the jade gates.

Bang!

The gates shook as the impact scattered its sacred aura, releasing Diexi from their pressure. Freed, the latter turned into a streak crimson light and vanished into thin air.

"I've long heard of Lu Clan's precious Skybearer Gates, doors that can quell all evil. What an honor for me to see it in person today." A turtle about a mile wide crawled out of the stronghold. "Who the hell are you?" Lu Qishan was beside himself with rage, seeing his prize snatched away right from beneath his nose. He'd suppressed his cultivation with a supreme treasure in order to enter Dusk Province, so he brought the gates with him to combat Lu Yun's bloodcorpse. Although he was a peerless immortal, his cultivation was merely peak august immortal realm at the moment. If the zombie king were to come back for him, he wouldn't be able to fend her off, so he hastily waved the Skybearer Gates back to his side as a defensive measure.

"Me?" the old turtle slowly replied. "I am not a 'who', but a 'what'. What part of me looks human?"

Standing by Lu Yun, Qing Han asked coldly, "You are an imperial envoy?"

Lu Yun furrowed his brow. This celestial emperor seemed to have quite a number of envoys. First Qing Han, then Feng Chi, and now another one had popped out of the woodwork.

"Hmph!" A pale Lu Qishan scanned around him, searching for Diexi and also glancing down at the old turtle that had shaken Skybearer.

"Do you have an imperial token?" Qing Han continued questioning.

“And who might you be? Is an imperial token something a junior like you is worthy of beholding?” Lu Qishan snorted with derision, full of disdain for this insignificant character. If not for the turtle deterring him, he would’ve attacked Lu Yun on sight. Since the zombie king had run off, he couldn’t be bothered with the local affairs anymore and his priority had shifted to capturing Lu Yun.

A token appeared in Qing Han’s hand, the aura of the Nephrite celestial emperor radiating from it causing Lu Qishan to stiffen.

“By the looks of it, you’re no imperial envoy. Tsk tsk.” Lu Yun’s expression turned playful. “What was it I said? Anyone from Nephrite Major’s Lu Clan who dares take half a step into Dusk Province will be summarily executed! Kill!”

As his voice fell, the old turtle below swiftly expanded in size and returned to its form of a juba. Soon after, an enormous water ball a full mile in diameter fired at Lu Qishan, bolts of electricity streaking across its surface.

“You bastard! Break!” the ashen old man roared. A giant beam of sword light blossomed from his hands and ruthlessly slashed at the ball of water.

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“Stop, stop!!” Yuichi Hanxing bawled urgently. “Do you people want to destroy the stronghold?!”

Both human and turtle were august immortals, but the energy they exuded was even more powerful than that of ordinary golden immortals.

Shockwaves reverberated from their clash, careening in all directions and shaking the stronghold’s foundations. As a fort that protected the north from the monster spirits of the North Sea, the stronghold should’ve been invincible.

And invincible it had been... a thousand years ago. Not even a battle between dao immortals would’ve rattled its mighty ramparts back then, to say nothing of peerless immortals whose cultivation had been sealed.

But it’d also been destroyed during the disturbance arising from the Dusk tomb, a thousand years ago. A new stronghold had been erected in its place, but it was a far cry from the old one.

“Destroy the stronghold?” Beigong Zhen resumed his snake form, an eerie smile flashing across his face as he observed the battle between the two powerhouses. “Children, as soon as the stronghold breaks, we shall make an immediate landing and conquer Dusk Province! The legacy of an ancient lord? It’s time for us North Sea monster spirits to get our hands on such a treasure!”

Chapter 130: The Form of the Black Tortoise

An epic battle between two powerful immortals commenced before the seaside stronghold. Whenever the juba soared into the air, it brought stunning water energy with it, kicking up wave after wave to threaten the sky.

“That’s a juba... a member of the extinct giant water spirits!” Changes rapidly flickering through his expression, Lu Qishan retreated back into the ocean in a series of flashes.

Wham!

A golden beam almost three hundred meters in radius rose from his body and pierced through the clouds. The ocean exploded, evaporating countless monster spirit immortals.

“Let us battle!” Lu Qishan roared. “Juba!!”

Grappling with the creature on land had left him frustrated and furious, stymied by the inability to exert his full strength since his cultivation was sealed. Above the ocean, he could finally put away the treasure sealing his cultivation and unchain his power as a peak peerless immortal. He cast a greedy gaze at the juba. Wouldn't it be wonderful if he could take this creature for his pet as well?

“Then battle we shall,” the juba spoke in its ancient voice as it entered the ocean.

Boom!

Black radiance flickered across it, transforming it into a giant creature resembling both a dragon and a turtle, one that rivaled the blackwater snake in size. The clash between two peerless immortals began in earnest, intense shockwaves reverberating outward as both of them called upon their full strength.

Bam!

The ocean shook and trembled as tremendous amounts of seawater evaporated from the fight's energies, then returned in the form of torrential rain.

“Stop!” called out a frantic King of Southern Subjugation. “Stop it!!”

It'd been ready to invade and conquer Dusk Province as soon as the stronghold fell. However, rising tempers had resulted in two peerless immortals lifting their seals over the ocean and engaging in a no-holds-barred fight. The colossal battle reduced countless monster spirits and monster immortals to ashes.

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“See, crisis averted.” Lu Yun smiled at the earthshaking battle taking place over the ocean. The stronghold remained unaffected, since its grand formation had created an enormous barrier of an invincible wall of air that blocked the terrible shockwaves.

“You have to think before you act,” the governor pointed at his own head, “or else your brain will get rusty.”

Qing Han rolled his eyes. He's obviously talking to me.

“Am I truly an evil fiend that will bring about endless disaster?” asked Diexi. She came to Lu Yun and Qing Han, her ruby-like eyes filled with confusion and body shaking ever so slightly. Lu Yun had said she was human, so she considered herself one and tried her best to behave accordingly. However, some part of her faith had been shattered by the denouncement from the Lu Clan elder.

“Pfft!” Lu Yun snorted with laughter. “What are you thinking? An evil fiend that will bring about endless disaster?”

Qing Han understood what Lu Yun wanted to achieve, so he didn't pipe up. Meanwhile, Diexi stared dumbly at the governor.

"Just look at him." Lu Yun pointed at Lu Qishan, now raising monstrous waves above the ocean. "He's the evil spirit. He kills countless monster immortals with a twist of the hand. He has taken many more lives than you."

Diexi looked at the ocean, words eluding her.

"As for the Skybearer Gates.... Everything in the world has its natural bane; its power just so happens to counter yours." Lu Yun put his hands behind his back. "What is good and what is evil?"

"You killed ten million monster spirits to save countless lives in Dusk Province. And when faced with their enormous army, you stayed to protect the stronghold alone, rather than run away. Whoever called you evil is the evil one."

"Look at him again." The governor pointed at Lu Qishan. "When the monster spirits invaded, he didn't face the enemy by your side, but instead attacked you and forfeited our territory and wealth. He is the shame of Nephrite Major! I would kill him even if he weren't from the Lu Clan." He suddenly asked, "Did you record what happened just now, Feinie?"

"I have, sir," Feinie's voice rang out.

"The Lu Clan better leave me alone, or I'll make them regret it. The young emperor won't have time for problems like these after being newly installed on the throne? Wrong. He has to personally oversee these kinds of issues to stabilize his rule, or all of Nephrite Major will lose confidence in him." He looked over at the battle and muttered, "Do it."

"Understood." Dressed in black, Feinie started etching formations to reinforce the stronghold.

"It was Feinie who'd set up the formations in the fortress that was destroyed a thousand years ago. This grand formation was completed by her too." Lu Yun sighed, watching his envoy get to work. If she hadn't been chosen by 'Wayfarer' as burial goods for the blood dragon, she'd probably be able to kill the two peerless immortals with a casual twitch of an eye.

Qing Han looked blankly at Lu Yun, not knowing what to say. Though he'd guessed that Feinie was the Truewater city lord from five thousand years ago... what was Lu Yun doing, being so frank like this?

Is Lu Yun just going to tell me all of his secrets? The disguised girl's heart pounded fiercely. Doesn't he... trust me too much?

Only Lu Yun, Feinie, and Diexi occupied the tower at this point. Yuchi Hanxing and the other Dusk soldiers were arranged in the Heavenly Formation of the Black Tortoise to defend against the violent storms raging over the ocean.

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The fight lasted for a full month. Only the juba and Lu Qishan struggled against each other at first, but Beigong Zhen was also forced to join the fray in the end.

The battle shook heaven and earth, its reverberations reaching half of the North Sea. All of the monster immortals serving the King of Southern Subjugation, including a few arcane immortals, were dusted in the battle between the three peerless immortals.

During that month, Feinie continuously set up formations to reinforce the stronghold, doing her best to restore it to how it had been a thousand years ago. Meanwhile, Lu Yun and Qing Han observed the battle from atop the fortress walls.

Everything peerless immortals did contained the laws of the world. It was three lifetimes worth of fortune for cultivators like them to watch this fight unfold at such a close distance. Toward the end, the Dusk Phalanx dismantled their battle formation, noting that the stronghold was now under the protection of an even more powerful formation and the waves from the ocean no longer threatened the stronghold.

Under Yuchi Hanxing's orders, they gathered atop the walls and observed the fight as well.

Many cultivators in the vicinity had noticed the battle in the sea, but hadn't dared draw too close. Even a stray strand of energy could kill a golden immortal.

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"Look, Yuchi," Lu Yun pointed at the grappling giants in the depths of the sea. "What does the intertwined juba and blackwater snake look like?"

"Ah? What should it look like?" Yuchi Hanxing had been observing every move of the three peerless immortals by Lu Yun's side and turned to the governor with bafflement when she heard the question.

Lu Yun rubbed his forehead. Yuchi Hanxing appeared like a frosty, aloof beauty, and she was indeed short on words. But in reality, she was... a bit of a dork, wasn't she? Her cool facade seemed only to be a protection.

"The Black Tortoise!" He answered seriously. "The Black Tortoise isn't just a deity born in the north, all patterns and changes resembling it can be considered to be a part of it as well!"

"The juba and the blackwater snake have combined to unintentionally form a Black Tortoise, fueling their concerted attacks with the power of the divine beast. Lu Qishan is doomed. If you commit the form of the Black Tortoise to memory, the Heavenly Formation of the Black Tortoise will gain the same strength!" Lu Yun said seriously.

Yuchi Hanxing nodded rapidly, widening her eyes and staring intently at the two giant beasts.

Lu Yun hadn't even finished speaking when Lu Qishan's shrieks of terror rang out. "No, no!"

No sooner had the Black Tortoise formed than the shadows of death loomed over the Lu elder. He screamed, trying in vain to break free of the tremendous might.

"Skybearer Gates, open! Open!!" Golden light shimmered over Lu Qishan's body as the gates emerged again, triggering a swath of waves and creating a thirty-thousand-meter tall giant in an attempt to counter the Black Tortoise.

Bam!

The concerted attacks of the Black Tortoise swept over and broke apart the seawater giant, and the impact pulverized Lu Qishan. His nascent spirit rose with a golden light to seize control of Skybearer to make his escape, but a powerful wave slapped into him and destroyed his soul as well.

Then, a giant black dragon shot out of the ocean and dragged both the juba and Beigong Zhen down into the water with its giant body.