

## Necropolis 231

### Chapter 231: Ghostly Shadow

Hum.

No sooner had Qing Han rushed out than the tendon tied to him blazed with gold. Tremendous might radiated from it and pulled him back from midair. A pair of strong arms wrapped around him as a familiar voice spoke into his ear.

"It's okay, Qing Han!" garbled Lu Yun, his face pale and his clothes tattered. "I'm fine!"

The disguised girl bit his lip and nodded, blinking back the tears welling up in his eyes.

"What happened?" Lu Shenhou stared at Lu Yun with shock and confusion. "Didn't the monster eat you?"

"You pulled me out as soon as I broke the formation." Lu Yun sneered at the giant zombie howling within the circle of green flames. "That thing turned into a grudge corpse after being sealed inside the formation and saturated with grudges and malevolent intent for countless years. Grudge corpses are a mix of zombies and ghosts, with resentment that threatens even the heavens."

He'd encountered a grudge corpse back in the Skandha Extinction Tomb. However, that corpse had been created out of the curse that embodied the tomb, while this particular one had appeared simply because it'd been here for too long and there was nowhere else for the resentment to go.

"It's looking for a scapegoat," Lu Yun spat out, his eyes fixed on the zombie. "Grudge corpses are sentient. This one wanted me to break the formation, so it allowed the fire to burn down the coffins. That should've made it easier for it to possess me and escape!"

He hadn't known how he could break the formation, but when he restrained the two lanterns at the entrance, an errant thought had come to him, prompting him to keep their flames. Stray inspiration and experience with feng shui had prompted him to set fire to the outer-coffins.

Corpse-fostering formations not only fostered zombies, but were also a seal that trapped the zombies to guard the main tomb. The grudge corpse had planned to possess Lu Yun to regain its freedom, but Qing Han's quick actions had prevented that possibility. It was part of the formation, and the formation's destruction would bring about the corpse's doom.

Sensing its imminent demise, the grudge corpse had released its consciousness to create the illusion that Lu Yun had been eaten to lure others in. It'd been here for a very long time, and had developed a very powerful consciousness. Without the formation suppressing it, it was easy enough for it to deceive a few cultivators.

As the grudge corpse shrieked with pain in the green fire, it kept its eyes focused on Lu Yun with pure malevolence.

"Fortunately, after years of deterioration, six of the seven zombies have disintegrated, leaving behind only one," Lu Yun sighed in relief.

Zombies were creatures abandoned by heaven and earth, forgotten by life and death. They were essentially immortal, if nothing put them down. Sealed within corpse-fostering formations, however, they lived only as long as the formation did. Although Lu Shenhou had seen zombies lying inside all seven of the coffins, there'd actually only been one left.

In roughly four hours, the formation ahead was nothing but burnt remains. All that was left were two shriveled lanterns lying amidst the bone powder and ashes left by the grudge corpse.

"What was that fire?" Wu Tulong knelt down to pinch a fingerful of ashes. "It can burn zombies. Not even your Daevic Skyfire can do that."

"How do you know it can't?" Lu Yun shook his head. "The Daevic Skyfire can destroy the formation, but it'd also destroy the tomb in the process."

The three immortal fires had once burned down a giant zombie tree, which was much more powerful than the grudge corpse. However, with their powers unleashed to that point, Lu Yun wouldn't be able to control it and the fire would consume everyone.

"The fire is a ghostly fire refined from the living souls of 99,999 children born in a yin hour in a yin year. Their souls were extracted when they turned seven," Lu Yun said in an impassive voice. "All things have their natural bane, and that flame happens to be the bane of all zombies and ghosts."

Everyone shuddered involuntarily. The lantern spirits had been the living souls of children, and the lanterns themselves were made of their flesh and bones. Lu Yun had seen that all with his Spectral Eyes, and the lanterns' destruction had freed the children.

"What a foul person the owner of this tomb was." Qing Han blanched. "Lamps made of children and a corpse-fostering formation... they must have been a terrible scourge!"

Lu Yun nodded in agreement. He'd attempted to locate the tomb owner with his Spectral Eye, but there was too much information for him to parse through the great number of people who'd died here. He couldn't determine who was the original buried dead.

"Lu Yun," said Zi Chen. He'd been the quietest among them.

Lu Yun turned to him. "Yes?"

"Do you know what you're doing now is much more terrifying than your ability to refine a Heaven Descent Pill?" Zi Chen fixated on Lu Yun with his light purple eyes.

Lu Shenhou had come with more than twenty people, and many of them had died in the first chamber. By contrast, Lu Yun had easily destroyed the terrifying corpse-fostering formation and kept his companions safe.

The others shifted penetrating gazes to Lu Yun. Tomb-raiding skills were the most useful in the current world of immortals, given the plethora of tombs. Excavating an ancient tomb that'd been built for an immortal could make an average house one of the top factions in the world.

"Wanna learn?" Lu Yun smirked at them. "I can teach you, but you'll have to become my disciples."

“Pft.” Mo Qitian snorted. “In your dreams. I’m more interested in becoming an advising elder to Dusk Province.”

Lu Yun perked up. “You’re welcome anytime.”

“Let’s go. We’ve solved the first chamber, it’s time to move on.” Dongfang Hao suddenly turned to Lu Shenhou. “Will the complete cultivation path manifest in the next chamber?”

A tremor ran through the crowd. Compared to Lu Yun’s tomb raiding skills, the cultivation path was obviously much more important.

“There are three burial chambers here. I sensed the missing realm in the third one.” Lu Shenhou’s expression turned serious. “Be careful, though. The thing in the next chamber is too powerful. I only survived and entered the third chamber by pulling out my trump card.”

“What’s in the second chamber?” frowned Wu Tulong.

Confusion clouded Lu Shenhou’s eyes. He shook his head. “I don’t know. I only remember that everyone died in the second chamber. I made it to the next chamber only because of the dao immortal power the ancestor had gifted me. I can’t recall what exactly we encountered.”

That alarmed everyone. Had something within had wiped his memory clean?

“The second chamber is where the third layer of the coiled mountains lay.” Lu Yun frowned at his rotating luopan. “There’s four layers of obstacles within the Door of Demise. Every one of them is more powerful than the last, and all four layers of obstacles working in concert may result in even greater power.

“Although I’ve destroyed two layers, the third will still be dangerous. Follow me.” When the indicator settled in one direction, Lu Yun took point.

“It’s not there,” Lu Shenhou blurted out when he saw his clansman walk in another direction. “It should be this way.”

“That chamber is fake.” Lu Yun glanced at him. “The real second chamber should be an annex room with the tomb owner’s treasures or texts. Nothing but danger lies in the direction you’re pointing at.”

Lu Shenhou fell silent.

“Listen to Lu Yun,” said Wu Tulong. “He’s our leader here.”

The others followed agreeably. Lu Shenhou, however, threw a yearning glance in the other direction. It seemed like he felt a deep attachment to whatever was in that direction.

“Come... come on.... There’s treasure here...” a faint voice rang in the air. “He’s lying... there are treasures... Come, come on...”

The voice built in strength, and even Wu Tulong couldn’t help but turn to look. That was where Lu Shenhou had wanted to go. An archaic bronze door barred the way, a white figure standing before it and waving at them. “Come. Come to me...”

“Is there really treasure there?” muttered Mo Qitian, confusion flashing through his eyes. He made his way to the door.

“Don’t!” Zi Chen grabbed him and tried to turn him around.

“Let go!!” Mo Qitian roared.

“What the hell!” Zi Chen let go of his peer in shock.

Mo Qitian’s face had turned a sickly white. His mouth was now an ugly tear; something had ripped it to both sides of his ears, almost bisecting his head.

“I’m coming, I’m coming....” An eerie smile splitting his face, he walked toward the white figure.

“Freeze!” With a wave of his hand, Lu Yun attached a talisman to Mo Qitian’s head and immobilized him.

“Anyone who stands in my way... must die!!” Seeing that Lu Yun had subdued Mo Qitian, the white figure screamed inhumanely and flashed toward the governor. Its face was only three inches away from Lu Yun’s.

Lu Yun saw a pale face with a torn mouth reaching both ears.... It looked just like what Mo Qitian had turned into!

### **Chapter 232: The Living Dead**

It was a corpse—a woman’s corpse.

The long years it’d endured had left behind a rank smell of rot and decay. Bloody maw yawning open, it bit at Lu Yun’s head.

“Ahhh!!” the corpse screamed like it’d been hit hard, and its body disappeared in the next instant.

Hellfire slowly dissipated from Lu Yun’s eyes. The woman had become a ghost, and an extraordinarily vicious one at that. The energy of the Tome of Life and Death wasn’t enough to intimidate it, but hellfire was the bane of all ghosts. That was how he’d injured it.

“Watch out. That thing is thick with grudge energy....” Shock overtook his face. “What the hell?!”

Other than Qing Han, Lu Shenhou, and himself, the other four had all turned into something like the ghost. Ripped open mouths reached their ears, and two bloody sockets were found in place of their eyes. Rotting away, their eyes had fallen out of their heads.

Wobbling, they made their way toward the large bronze door.

“Don’t go. Don’t....” Lu Shenhou stumbled back, the memories he dreaded most surfacing in his mind.

Finally, he remembered what had happened after they’d entered the door. It was a terrifyingly horrible place that turned his friends, brothers, and the woman he loved into monsters, then eventually killed them.

He’d barely escaped with the power that Lu Daoling had gifted him. And now Wu Tulong and the other three had met the same fate!

“Why haven’t the two of you—” Lu Shenhou turned to Lu Yun and Qing Han.

Qing Han’s face was pale. If it weren’t for his Imperial Star and the Scroll of Shepherding Immortals, he would’ve turned as well.

Lu Yun threw a conflicted look at Lu Shenhou, then growled, “Stay here and wait for us to return! Qing Han, come with me!”

He grabbed Qing Han and rushed for the bronze door. Wu Tulong, Zi Chen, and Dongfang Hao had entered the chamber behind the door. So had Mo Qitian, after he’d struggled free of Lu Yun’s talisman.

“I’ll help too,” Lu Shenhou blurted.

“Don’t!” snapped Lu Yun. “Stay here on guard until we return!”

Qing Han turned to look at Lu Shenhou. The Lu scion stood rooted to the spot, lost and helpless.

“Will he be alright?” Qing Han asked worriedly.

Lu Yun nodded and said with certainty, “He’ll be fine as long as he doesn’t enter the third chamber.” He pushed the door open with a loud creak.

“What is this place?” Qing Han looked around with wide eyes, his gaze fearful and stunned.

“I don’t know.” Lu Yun shook his head, his expression matching that of Qing Han’s. Behind the bronze door was a vast, boundless ocean of blood!

Countless black ships drifted about, but they looked like they’d been folded from paper. Within every paper ship was a person. A stark-white lantern hanging at the bow of every ship cast the passenger’s face with ghostly white lumination.

“Is this real,” Qing Han muttered, his face devoid of all color, “or an illusion created by formations?”

Without a word, Lu Yun shielded himself and Qing Han with blazing hellfire. The vicious ghost of the woman stood by the ocean of blood. Her bloody eye sockets glowed a faint crimson as she stared at the two of them.

Four empty paper ships lay by the shore as Wu Tulong and the other three staggered their way toward them.

“This is the real Ten Yins Estuary. Inside the ships are the spirits of those who died here,” Lu Yun muttered to himself as he stared at the endless crimson. “I didn’t expect the Ten Yins Estuary to converge into an ocean of blood!”

“That little girl...” Qing Han suddenly recognized a familiar figure. A girl that looked about five years old sat quietly on a paper ship, holding a long stick of rotten candied hawthorn in her hand.

The sight chilled Qing Han to the bone, like a bucket of ice cold water had doused his head. That was the little girl he’d played with in town, the one eating candied hawthornes with an easy smile. And here she was!

Eyes wide, Qing Han saw not only the girl, but all the other residents of the town as well! Everyone sat in their own paper ship, expressionless.

“They’re all dead?” His voice trembled.

“They are,” Lu Yun said calmly. “Here at the Ten Yins Estuary, there is extreme yin and yang to be found, as well as a mysterious power that envelops the entire area. All the residents have long died, but they don’t know that. They think they’re still alive. That’s how they continue to live in the town, free of care, concerns, or fear of disease and death. They all live eternal lives of blissful ignorance.

“The residents are either mortals from the current or the ancient world of immortals. Well, more likely from even before the ancient times,” Lu Yun said quietly. “They’re alive strictly because they believe they are. If they find out they’re dead, they’ll really die, and the town will disappear.”

That was what Lu Yun had discovered with his luopan, Spectral Eye, and the Tome of Life and Death. He didn’t want to disturb the town’s serenity; even though all the residents were the living dead, he wanted to preserve their haven of peace.

Thanks to that mysterious power, they could lead normal lives just like the living. The only thing that set them apart was the fact that they’d never die.

Qing Han had been through a lot with Lu Yun, but this turn of events still caught him off guard.

“Wait....” His eyes widened. “Isn’t that— ”

“Don’t say it!” Lu Yun interjected. “If we keep quiet, he may still live. If someone says it, he’ll die for real.”

Qing Han clapped hands over his mouth and jerked his head up and down. That explained everything.

“I don’t care who you are, or what you’ve set all this up for.” Hellfire blazed even more intensely around Lu Yun. “I’m taking these four with me.”

The ghost leveled an empty gaze at Lu Yun. After a good while, it rasped in a gravelly and distant voice, “You may... but a life... for... a life.”

Lu Yun nodded. With a wave of his hand, he summoned four Infernum from the netherworld. He’d killed many people back in the Sword Pagoda, and even more when he entered Xiankan. Currently, he had enough ghostly soldiers to form an army.

After becoming Infernum, only a few particularly talented individuals would be of any help. The others were nothing but the lowest of cannon fodder. Moreover, they’d once been Lu Yun’s enemies, becoming his to command only because he’d killed them himself.

He felt no attachment whatsoever to them.

The ghost turned the four Infernum into its kind as soon as it grabbed them. Wu Tulong and the others collapsed before they could board the paper ships, and Lu Yun sighed in relief.

“You... shall not enter again,” said the ghost.

### **Chapter 233: Overlapping of Three Layers**

Lu Shenhou worried near the door. He came close to pushing it open many times, but the look Lu Yun had given him before departing gave him pause.

Creak.

The ancient door opened. Lu Yun and Qing Han emerged, each carrying two men. They'd rescued their four companions, who presently lay boneless and unconscious in their grips.

"Finally!" Lu Shenhou sighed in relief and went up to them.

"It's safe now!" said Qing Han. Lu Shenhou responded with a nod, watching the two drop the other four in the center of the chamber. Lu Yun fished out some pills from his storage ring and fed them to their companions.

"There it is again!" Lu Shenhou cried out in fear, pointing at the door with a shaking finger.

Lu Yun looked over his shoulder. The ghost had appeared by the door again and had its eerie eye sockets fixed on him, quietly observing his every move.

"Ignore it." Lu Yun only spared it a quick sweep of the eyes before returning to examine the four unconscious youths. The ghost was just there to make sure that Lu Yun wouldn't cross the bronze door again.

Hellfire was a threat to the ocean of blood. If Lu Yun gave the fire complete freedom, everything in the ocean would be destroyed. However, that was also the last thing he would do. Hellfire was too powerful. If left unchecked, it could burn down all of Nephrite Major.

Qing Han fidgeted uneasily, unnerved by the scrutiny of a powerful ghost.

It wasn't until about four hours later that Wu Tulong and the others came to, but they were still very weak.

"What happened just now?" Mo Qitian violently shook his head in confusion.

"You almost got us killed." Zi Chen remembered what had happened before he himself turned into a ghost. It didn't take much for him to connect the dots.

"Me?" Mo Qitian smiled wryly. He really didn't remember anything, as he'd lost consciousness after being turned.

Dongfang Hao remained silent. He knew that if it weren't for Lu Yun, they would all be dead. Dejection colored his face; he felt like a burden to others for the first time in his life. It wouldn't have hit him quite as hard if it'd been anyone else rescuing them, but it was Lu Yun, someone who'd defeated him head-on in sword dao.

That was a fatal blow to his self-esteem.

If Wu Tulong felt any frustration, it didn't show on his face. He simply stared at the ghost hovering by the door, his thoughts indiscernible. The air around them grew heavy.

"It was a miracle that you survived at all," Wu Tulong suddenly turned to Lu Shenhou with a sigh.

“It’s only because of the power the ancestor gifted me with.” Lu Shenhou’s eyes blazed with fervent admiration as he spoke of his clan’s ancestor. Lu Daoling was one of the most powerful immortals in the world, second only to the celestial emperors. With his power, Lu Shenhou had been absolutely safe in this tomb.

“Unfortunately, the ancestor gave me only one instance of use. I wasn’t in time to save the others.” His mood quickly dipped downward.

“Don’t blame yourself,” Wu Tulong calmly reassured him. “It’s enough that you lived to tell the tale. We aren’t here for thrill or treasure, but to complete the path of cultivation and repair the gap. Whether we can safely reach the third chamber or not depends on Lu Yun.”

Dongfang Hao straightened his back and jerked his head up, his confidence returning to him. That’s right—they hadn’t come seeking adventure or anything material. They were here to deduce the lost realm of cultivation!

He looked gratefully at Wu Tulong; it was plain that the young man’s words were for his benefit. However, they were still quite weak. Being assimilated as ghosts earlier had drained them of much of their vitality. They needed time to slowly get it all back, as it’d be suicide for them to enter the second chamber in this state. Thus, they stayed in the chamber and rested.

It took three days for them to make a full recovery.

During this period of rest, Lu Yun walked around and checked the arrangement of the tomb. There was only one feng shui layout in the place: the Door of Demise.

The area beyond the bronze door wasn’t part of the layout. On the contrary, the tomb and the Door of Demise were all part of the ocean of blood behind the door, the Ten Yins Estuary. If Lu Yun’s speculations were right, the tomb was an island floating over the surface of the ocean of blood.

During their recovery, the vicious ghost had kept its post by the door, continuously surveilling Lu Yun and not bothering the others.

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Once the four youth sovereigns had recuperated, the seven of them made their way to the second chamber.

“What’s that ahead?” Wu Tulong stared forward, on the alert. Instead of a tunnel or door past the first chamber, there was a vast patch of misty land. White mist filled the dark space, its atmosphere eerie and frightful.

He extended his consciousness to investigate the terrain within the mist, but it disappeared like a drop of water merging with the ocean.

“This is the third layer of the coiled mountains!” Lu Yun took a deep breath and continued gravely, “this is disorienting mist. If my speculation is correct, there must be an enormous maze within, at the center of which is the second chamber.”

“Can we go around it?” Mo Qitian frowned. “If the second chamber is at the center, we can go directly to the third.”



“We can.” Lu Yun nodded. “The third chamber is underground, and we can get there through the bronze door. However, we’ll be marching to our death if we leave the third coiled mountains intact.”

“We go through the maze then!” Lu Shenhou tightened his jaw. “It can’t be more dangerous than the place behind the door. It’s... well, heh.”

He’d now recalled the ocean of blood. The ghost wasn’t the only threat there; there were also a plethora of monsters more terrifying than anyone could imagine.

“Take the lead, Qing Han,” Lu Yun said, putting a hand on Qing Han’s shoulder. “Senior brothers, put your hands on the shoulders of the person before you. Shenhou, you’ll be the end of the line.”

“Remember not to look around, say anything, or do anything once we enter the mist. No matter what you see or hear, do not respond. Even if your companion seems to be speaking to you, ignore him!” Lu Yun emphasized seriously, “No one says anything!”

Qing Han shuddered as he heard Lu Yun’s instructions, recalling something terrible from his memories. “Do you mean...”

“That’s right. The maze overlaps with a pure layout of certain death. Whoever set up the tomb was just too vicious. There’s no safe route through this place.”

The layout of certain death was one of the most fatal killing layouts in all feng shui layouts. Once activated, an akasha ghost would be summoned and regular immortals would absolutely die. Although Lu Yun had made his way through a couple layouts of certain death, he was truly reluctant to face another one.

“Don’t say or do anything after you go inside. Everything will be fake, don’t trust your senses. If you do, you’ll die immediately.”

The five who hadn’t encountered such a layout before trembled and nodded.

“I’ll seal my senses and entrust you with my life,” Mo Qitian said with a wry smile. “I don’t think I can ignore all the illusions just yet.”

“Same for me,” said Zi Chen. “It’s clear from how serious Lu Yun is that the illusions are beyond realistic. Better safe than sorry.”

Lu Yun nodded, then turned to Wu Tulong and Dongfang Hao. They had a determined look in their eyes; it was clear that they considered this a trial to be attempted.

“Then let us enter.” Lu Yun said, holding onto Qing Han’s shoulder.

Wu Tulong trailed after Lu Yun with a hand on his shoulder, and the others followed suit with Lu Shenhou falling to the back of the line.

Soon, the seven of them had entered the mist.

Lu Yun had closed his eyes as well, leaving everything in Qing Han’s hands. His consciousness would be deceived by the highly dangerous mist as well. Once lost, one’s soul would be lured out and become one with it, the body doomed to forever wander within the ethereal land as an empty husk.

The combination of disorienting mist, the unknown maze, and the layout of certain death was too much even for Lu Yun.

He had to turn to Empress Myrtlestar.

As an ancient immortal empress, her consciousness was powerful enough to detect the correct route through the mist, even though she'd lost everything but a strand of her soul. Moreover, the Scroll of Shepherding Immortals could negate the power of any feng shui layouts. Thus, the layout of certain death, and the power prohibiting immortals from entering the tomb, hadn't affected the empress while she remained within the scroll.

Under her guidance, the seven of them quickly made their way to the center of the maze.

"Roar!" There was a sudden growl at Qing Han's ear, followed by the pungent smell of rot burrowing into his senses. Before he could react, a flash of violet cut the rotten corpse in half.

Lu Yun nonchalantly put away his sword.

Qing Han sighed in relief, but a tremor passed through his body shortly afterward. The power of the Imperial Star disguising him receded like the tides.

He'd turned back into Qing Yu.

#### **Chapter 234: A Tomb Burying the Path of Cultivation**

Lu Yun instantly noticed Qing Han's transformation, but he didn't dare move an inch. In fact, his eyes were still closed. Everything was so real... or perhaps surreal? He was nearly convinced Qing Han and Qing Yu were the same person.

However, he'd been taught a harsh lesson in the Skandha Extinction Tomb. There was no way he would look at Qing Yu this time. Are all certain death layouts interconnected in some way? Just like the Enneawyrm Coffinbearers....

A stray thought popped into his head. Qing Yu wouldn't come out every time if that weren't true, right? Surely this was just another attempt to delude him. The akasha ghost this layout summoned was indubitably from the same place.

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Qing Yu sighed in relief when she noticed Lu Yun's closed eyes. Deep down, she was also considerably vexed. She couldn't understand why these certain death layouts that suppressed star power always crossed her path. Her starstone hid both her actual form and her astral constitution. When its energy was stripped away, she became uncomfortably bare.

The others behind them noticed Qing Han's peculiar condition as well, but they remembered Lu Yun's instructions. Their eyes and ears remained focused on blanking out the outside world.

Boom!

Boom!

Boom!

The giant maze suddenly began trembling, as if a monster was trudging out from its depths.

“Back off! That thing is real!” Lu Yun roared, then pulled at Qing Yu to leave. But the girl’s body remained solidly planted in place, her expression of cool nonchalance.

It wasn’t her first brush with a certain death layout, and she knew what tricks they had up their figurative sleeves. If Lu Yun wanted to retreat, he wouldn’t have done anything close to this.

Seeing how Qing Yu remained stationary, the others behind Lu Yun followed her lead. The apparently frenzied ‘Lu Yun’ gradually began to calm down, even as an imperceptible shadow departed from him. The young man’s hand, however, still clung to her shoulder.

Qing Yu strode forward amidst intensifying vibrations. It seemed like there really was a huge monster stomping around within the maze.

Monstrous shadows thickened around the group as they proceeded. Violet often flickered between Lu Yun’s fingers, each flash signifying the death of a particularly dangerous enemy.

Qing Yu turned back into Qing Han and came to a stop before a great stone door after an indeterminate amount of time. A smattering of runes from another time were carved upon the slab of rock, which he lightly pushed open.

Rumble...

As soon as he opened the door, the beguiling mists receded. The whole maze trembled slightly, then swiftly contracted into a black pearl that flew behind the door, taking the certain death layout with it.

The door was entirely open, and Qing Han slowly led the way forward. When the youths made their way to the second stone chamber, Lu Yun gripped and unfurled his fingers. The others behind him finally opened their eyes.

“It’s finally over.” Restoring his senses, Mo Qitian breathed a long sigh of relief. “No one was hurt... Dongfang Hao!” he cried out with incredulous shock.

Third from the back, he had his hand on Dongfang Hao’s shoulder. Alas, the friend before him was now a headless corpse. Dongfang Hao had died in the certain death layout!

Lu Yun shook with trepidation. He turned his head toward Dongfang Hao, opening his Spectral Eye in the process.

“He... he really is dead!” He took a deep breath, disbelief flickering through his eyes. The proud, resolute youth who could cut through the heavens with a single stroke—his erstwhile sparring partner—was dead!

“I saw Dongfang Hao swinging at something with his sword back in the maze, but I thought it was just an illusion...” Lu Shenhui mumbled quietly from the very back.

The company of friends sank into silence with heavy hearts.

“Such is fate,” Wu Tulong spoke in a slightly muffled voice. “Dongfang Hao was destined to die here... the rest of us might not be too far behind.”

“Dongfang Hao’s sword intent was very strong. His will was certainly the greatest of all of us.” frowned Lu Yun. “He wouldn’t have been tricked by the certain death layout. It just doesn’t make sense.”

“That doesn’t change what actually happened. He died here, in the end,” Zi Chen murmured, then took another look at Dongfang Hao’s headless corpse.

Splurt—

Blood briefly sprayed from the neck stump before the corpse keeled over to the ground. A moment later, dust had returned to dust. Only Dongfang Hao’s sword remained. He carried no other treasures with him.

“The path of cultivation was broken before the ancient times. This is the only place where it can be reconnected.” Qing Han’s warning was a splash of cold reason. “Did you really think we’d get to the third chamber that easily?”

The others flinched at his declaration.

“All the dangers we’ve braved so far weren’t designed to protect this place. Whoever set them up wanted to stop us from ever finding the complete path to immortality,” Qing Han whispered hoarsely. “Senior brother Wu is right. We should be ready to face death head on. The path wouldn’t have broken on its own. Someone must have broken it on purpose. The fact that there’s traces here of the primeval path of cultivation... well, as we’ve seen already, it’s certainly accompanied by security of the highest degree.”

“Yeah, Qing Han’s right,” Lu Yun nodded in realization, “the setup here is exceptionally dangerous and forbidding to life. There’s even a mysterious force against immortals, making this tomb very different from all the other tombs. Even the Skandha Extinction Tomb wasn’t so absolute. What’s buried here... is very likely the broken path of cultivation!”

A tomb that buried the path of cultivation?

He could scarcely believe the words coming out of his own mouth.

“Based on customary layouts, the second layer is reserved for the tomb annex chamber....” What Lu Yun meant was obvious: the annex contained the tomb owner’s possessions in life. Through their analysis, it was possible to determine exactly who—or what—was buried here.

The remaining youths refocused, forcing themselves to shake off the despondency of Dongfang Hao’s death. Zi Chen took his fallen friend’s sword as the others began scanning the surroundings.

“A tomb for dao itself... that’s a little far-fetched, isn’t it?” A shiver traveled down Mo Qitian’s spine. He gulped, stuffing his unease into the darkest corners of his heart.

The Door of Demise’s third layer had been a layout of maze and mist. Once the group had left the maze, it was automatically broken. Transformed into an orb, it floated in the middle of the chamber.

The orb was surely a treasure beyond compare, but it was also supremely dangerous. A single wrong move would turn it back into the triple layout that had proved so lethal to Dongfang Hao.

“This place looks like a study,” Mo Qitian remarked in wonder. Row upon row of huge bookshelves lined the walls, neatly stocked with all manner of archaic texts. “The funerary objects buried here... are books?”

There was mass confusion at this. Books were scarce in the world of immortals, and had been since time immemorial. Immortals preferred to store and record knowledge with jade slips, instead. Paper tomes were a rare sight indeed.

Mo Qitian walked forward, reaching for a book with his fingers.

“Don’t!” Lu Yun tried to stop him, but it was already too late.

Rustle...

As soon as Mo Qitian’s fingers made contact, every book and shelf in the room disintegrated.

### **Chapter 235: Ah, So I Was Already Dead**

It had been far too long!

The sands of time had subjected all material items to heavy deterioration, so the tiniest bit of outside interference was enough to turn it all to dust. Mo Qitian blanched, stumbling a few steps backward.

“I-I didn’t mean to...” He nearly wept in dismay.

“It’s fine.” Lu Yun gave him an encouraging pat on the shoulder. “All of these books belonged to ancient mortals. Very likely, they were records of the ideas and culture from back then. We wouldn’t have had much use for them.”

Mo Qitian gradually recovered his calm, but his expression remained forlorn.

“Any important text in the world of immortals is transcribed in a jade slip,” Qing Han chimed in with a smile. “Lu Yun’s right. The broken path of cultivation is most likely laid to rest in this tomb. The funeral objects here must have to do with its contemporaneous civilization.

“After all, books are a symbol of civilization itself. Only civilization can convey recorded history. The books’ exact contents mean far less than our understanding of the significance of their presence.”

This explanation further pacified Mo Qitian, whose expression finally lightened.

Lu Yun gave his friend a thumbs-up. Qing Han was completely correct: the only funeral goods that made sense for the path of cultivation was its relevant era of civilization. Cultivation, after all, was a product of civilization. Thus, the books to be found here would’ve recorded the civilization of immortals back then. They were mere vessels, evidence of the existence of a greater truth.

Now that all the bookshelves had turned to dust, the room was completely empty. The only thing that remained was the orb, hovering glaringly in midair.

“This chamber doesn’t hold much else of interest, the third room is the most important! The third coiled mountain is beneath us.” Lu Yun spoke slowly as he watched the floating orb spin. “This third chamber will be the most treacherous one yet. We might succeed in repairing the broken cultivation path, or we might all die in the chamber below.”

His voice matched his gravely serious expression. "Therefore, I would like one of us to stay outside. If we do end up dying here, he will be able to tell our story to the outside world." He glanced at his clansman as he said this.

"You want me to stay behind again, don't you?" Lu Shenhou bristled, remembering something from earlier. "Why me?"

"You told me to stay outside before we entered the tomb, you didn't take me through that bronze door back there, and now you're using this excuse to stop me from going further? Tell me, what's the reason for all of this?!" His face grew somber. "You don't need to worry about news of the broken path not getting out—I've already told the ancestor about it. If we really do end up dying here, he'll inform the rest of the world. Plus, he's given me three more uses of his power. You needn't worry about my safety."

Lu Shenhou looked Lu Yun straight in the eyes. "So, what's up with all this? Why do you keep preventing me from going into the third chamber?"

Qing Han looked at Lu Yun as well. He was the only other one who knew the truth.

The young man who was the object of attention sighed, "May there still be a chance left."

Lu Yun shook his head, unwilling to divulge any more. Although Lu Shenhou was a brash and nonchalant sort, he was actually quite sharp-witted. Multiple previous attempts at holding him back had tipped him off that something was awry. There was nothing else Lu Yun could do to help his clansman.

"Beardo's three uses of arcane dao power should keep him safe, shouldn't they? Why do you think he'll die?" Wu Tulong couldn't think of any other reason for Lu Yun's odd behavior, other than the young governor having calculated that Lu Shenhou's death in the third chamber was a given.

Lu Yun quietly approached a hidden door in the center of the chamber without responding. A complex pattern of runes was etched on the door, creating an occult layout that locked it tightly shut.

Anyone else would have to use brute force, which would instantly activate the floating orb's triple-layered certain death layout and render this place a deathtrap. If that happened, even Lu Yun would be completely helpless.

He couldn't do anything about the concealed trap, but he could try to figure out an alternative way to circumvent it. The young man bent down to the door to get a closer look.

"What's in the third chamber?" Mo Qitian whispered into Lu Shenhou's ear.

"I don't remember." Lu Shenhou blinked. He squinted in intense concentration, but nothing at all came to mind. There was a strange conviction that prevented him from accessing those particular memories.

"Again?" Mo Qitian snorted. "The ghost outside must've gotten you good. It takes a bit of your memory away whenever it does that." He'd forgotten something, too, but it'd come back to him if it was important.

Lu Shenhou pressed his lips together. He didn't think that was quite right, but it was the only possible explanation. "Is that why it didn't take an interest in me? Because it possessed me once already?" he murmured.

Lu Yun had hurt the ghost in the first chamber, causing it to avoid him. Qing Han had warded it off with his treasure. Although Wu Tulong and the others had been gifted instances of dao power as well, they'd been possessed all the same.

Lu Shenhou was the only one who'd remained wholly unscathed.

Rumble.

The loud grinding of stone interrupted his train of thought. Lu Yun had decoded the layout upon the trapdoor, causing it to slide open. A sinister breeze brushed past, filling the entire chamber with ghostly air. "There's a hallway below, and the main tomb should be past that."

"Come on!" The others were uniformly excited at the news, eagerly jumping down one after another.

Hum...

As the youths filed through the door, the vaguely luminous orb in midair suddenly brightened. A pale shadow slowly unfurled from the sphere, holding an antiquated longsword in his hand. He wordlessly watched the group move on to the next chamber before speaking aloud.

"Those whose daos differ must walk different paths. My dao is now different from yours, but still... I pray for your success in mending the path of cultivation." Satisfied, the figure turned to depart.

Ghostly will-o-wisps flared as the six youths landed, lighting up the lamps lining the hallway. A stone door lay at the end of the hall, its panel half ajar.

"I can feel it..." Wu Tulong suddenly trembled with emotion. "The heavenly tribulation so close to me is receding. A new realm lies before me!"

His cultivation had reached peak transformed spirit realm, with only three more years to go before he would undergo his heavenly tribulation and reach immortality. But in that moment, all of that was no longer true. A new step had materialized in front of him out of the looming trial; it was an entirely different realm!

"That realm is broken. We must develop and complete it!" Lu Shenhou shook excitedly. He could clearly sense the existence of that realm as well. "How come I didn't feel this last time?"

"You really shouldn't go in." It was Qing Han who couldn't resist this time.

"No, I absolutely have to go in this time!" A fierce look came over Lu Shenhou's face. He ran forward and pushed the door open. Jadeite radiance lit up the chamber behind the door, sparkling in its brilliance.

"That's the Lu ancestor's dao power. Using it already? You're scared of death after all, beardo." Wu Tulong bit back a smile, then followed closely after.

"That gift of dao power is still here, huh. There goes the last shred of hope I had." A great sadness overcame Lu Yun when he saw the light.

"What in the world?!" The group's eyes widened in unison after they walked in. The main chamber of the tomb wasn't large at all. An outer-coffin rested in the center of a room that was only about three dozen meters wide.

What caught the company's attention was the shimmering jade light. It came from a light curtain that'd been formed by Lu Daoling's arcane power, but Lu Shenhou wasn't the source!

A large hole had been torn through the veil, and beyond it was half of a broken corpse. It seemed that something had torn the body in two from between the legs, taking one half with it. The portion left behind bore a fairly intact head upon it. It was still possible to make out who the corpse was.

A bushy-haired, rough-looking man.

His eyes were as wide as dinner plates. Face frozen in the split-second of death, his expression wasn't fearful at all. It was one of excitement and confusion, like he'd discovered some great secret he couldn't comprehend!

"Ah, so I'm already dead..." Lu Shenhou's memories came rushing back when he saw the broken corpse. The force that'd prevented his recall was gone, allowing his mind to access its most dreaded secrets.

"After I escaped the sea of blood, I didn't manage to outrun the monster that lived in it... it killed me here. Before I died, however, I found out a shocking secret: the path of immortals is broken... there are four realms of cultivation, not three. There's a fourth realm before immortality!

"I want to live on... I need to live on! I need to tell everyone about this and get all the geniuses in the world to come here. We need to figure out what the lost realm is!

"The ancestor... the ancestor's invincible! His power will definitely keep me safe... I'll make it out alive! Live... and tell everyone... the secret here..."

My clan's ancestor is the mightiest below a celestial emperor. His power will protect and help me safely escape this place! I need to live... and tell everyone about the secrets here!

These thoughts had guided 'Lu Shenhou' out of the tomb and back to the Lu Clan.

"I've finally told you about the things here, young sovereigns of the world... do not let my obsession down.... Mend the cultivation path..."

Blood streamed out of Lu Shenhou's eyes. His body rapidly melted into a sanguine drop that puddled on the ground. The various treasures he carried with him clattered to the ground with the demise of their owner, as if everything had been a dream.

"Lu Yun..." Qing Han called out softly to his friend.

The remaining Lu clansman was thoroughly miserable. "If he hadn't seen his own corpse, he wouldn't know he was already dead. He'd be able to keep on living..."

"You knew the truth before we came in. That's why you kept trying to stop him, so that he would never find out." Wu Tulong had finally understood the strangeness earlier. "Then the townsfolk outside..."

"They're all dead and unaware, just like Shenhou was," Lu Yun murmured.

"This doesn't make sense," Zi Chen interjected. He squatted down before Lu Shenhou's corpse, attempting to make something out.



“A monster ripped Shenhou apart with its mouth and foreclaw. The other half must’ve been eaten... but why would it leave behind Shenhou’s head and half a body?”

His words struck a fearful chord in everyone else’s hearts.

“Unless the monster that killed Shenhou knew that he would return...”

### **Chapter 236: Avici Hell**

The thing that’d killed Lu Shenhou had known the human would return; that was why his body had purposefully been left behind. Without seeing his body, Lu Shenhou would’ve lived forever in blissful ignorance.

None of the tomb monsters or layouts could hurt him, since he was already dead. No matter where he went—even if he entered the bronze door—he would end up here, the place of his death and where his unfinished business lingered: to repair the broken cultivation path.

Leaving his body behind had triggered his death upon his return. That also meant the monster that’d shattered the arcane dao immortal power might still be around.

The group raised their guard and carefully scanned the area.

“Get back!” Lu Yun flashed over to Zi Chen and pulled the youth to his side, summoning the Sugato Sword and unleashing its energies at the same time “Something’s happening to Shenhou’s remains,” he hissed.

“What?!” The others trained their gazes upon the body.

It was reanimating.

A thick, metallic tang of blood burrowed into their noses as crimson fluid gushed out of the body to converge into a humanoid monster. When it took concrete shape, it slowly rose to its feet. Roughly seven feet in height, blood-red scales covered its lithe body and a tail dragged behind it, looking, for all intents and purposes, like a humanoid lizard. Its open maw revealed sharp teeth that were still dripping with blood.

Crack!

Suddenly, the monster lowered its head and bit into Lu Shenhou’s body, swallowing it whole.

Hum.

Crimson light receded, leaving behind inky-black scales that glowed dimly with a dark splendor.

“It’s evolving from a spirit into a living creature!” Face clouding over, Wu Tulong manifested a lance.

“Grrraw!” A low growl emitted from the monster’s mouth. It stared at the five of them with black eyes, hunger flashing within.

Devouring the living would allow it to evolve further.

“Die!!” commanded Lu Yun, pointing at the monster.

Puff!

A ball of black flame ignited on its body, swiftness spreading all over and interrupting its lunge at the humans. Briefly freezing with shock, it had time for a brief, pained shriek before turning to dust.

Where did it come from? It's accumulated so much bad karma that the karma is almost tangible! Just how many has it killed?!

He may have killed the monster with the Judgment of Life and Death, but he was still reeling from what he'd just seen. That thing could rival the akasha ghosts summoned by the layout of certain death! More importantly, the monster had left nothing behind in the wake of its destruction, and it hadn't turned into an Infernum.

It had no soul!

"That's... the technique you've used to kill Beigong Yu, isn't it?" Mo Qitian gawked in shock. In his eyes, that point was almost god-like in its power. The monster had broken through a dao immortal barrier and killed Lu Shenhou. However, Lu Yun had killed it with a single point, the same thing he'd done to Beigong Yu back in Dusk Province.

"That's one of my secret techniques." Lu Yun nodded.

The others didn't continue the line of questioning. Secret techniques weren't something to get to the bottom of.

"No one move yet," Lu Yun hurried out when the others shifted to look around the chamber. "The monster was just an accidental intruder. The real danger in the chamber hasn't manifested yet."

He spoke quickly and with great urgency, deeply worried that his companions would trigger the most dangerous thing in the tomb—the fourth coiled mountain of the Door of Demise. Fortunately, he'd broken the first three layers of coiled mountains, or he'd be helpless against the fourth. Four coiled mountains combined and the entire layout manifested would kill even the nine celestial emperors in the flesh.

Qing Han had stuck by Lu Yun's side all this time, never straying more than a step away from his friend; he knew that the safest place in any tomb was with Lu Yun. The other three quickly returned and warily scanned their surroundings.

"To seek a dragon of mountains coiled,

Those deathly cliffs with mysteries roiled.

Danger shies if mountains hide,

Yin and yang do mountains ride!"

Hum.

Lu Yun's luopan burst forth with golden light, illuminating the modestly sized chamber.

"What the hell!!!" Everyone's eyes shot wide open with shock.

Where the light reached revealed walls and floor tiles made of corpses. The entire chamber seemed to have been built with layer upon layer of dead bodies. Incomprehensibly dense, the entire room was comprised of corpses.

Gazes empty and smiles eerie, every head faced the group. It felt like they'd been buried by an endless supply of corpses.

"What was this chamber built with? What's going on?!" Qing Han's voice shook as he tightly held onto Lu Yun's elbow.

"This is the resting place for the path of cultivation." Lu Yun patted his friend's shoulder. "These people are its burial goods." He activated his Spectral Eye to read the information from the bodies.

"The realm beyond the spirit realm was hacked away. All cultivators of that realm and anyone who knew about it, be they cultivators, immortals, or even mortals were killed and buried with it. Since everyone who knew about the realm died, and all its records and methods destroyed, the realm effectively ceased to exist. Thus the path of cultivation was severed. This chamber is the fourth coiled mountain of the Door of Demise..." murmured Lu Yun. "The Avici Cell layout."

Another clue that pointed to hell existing at one point in time!

Avici was the eighteenth level of hell that hawked immortality as its worst torment. An eternity of suffering and torture with no hope of reincarnation awaited those sentenced to this level. The feng shui of the main chamber was based on the Avici Hell, and therefore possessed its power. Even the dead could continue to live!

"So the mortals in the town outside and Lu Shenhou have retained the illusion of living because of this place." Lu Yun paled slightly.

Hell had crumbled long ago, taking with it the Avici Hell. However, someone had built this chamber with the eighteenth layer of hell as a blueprint, manifesting its power in the world of immortals and creating many living dead.

Nevertheless, this didn't compare to the real Avici Hell, which allowed dead spirits to become truly immortal. This layout only allowed the dead to continue living as long as they believed they were alive. Once that belief was shattered, the living dead would fade away.

"Lu Yun, don't you think the corpses seem alive...?" Qing Han asked nervously with round eyes.

"The power of the Avici Hell has activated," muttered Lu Yun. "The dead here will come back to life as living corpses...."

### **Chapter 237: Yi Wood Cleansing Thunder**

Lu Yun's luopan shone brightly with aureate brilliance. Where the light touched revealed countless corpses, but outside its range, the chamber retained its modest and unassuming interior. It was as if the treasure's golden light had forged a new world within the chamber.

Under the illumination, the bodies began to reanimate and rise. Their empty and strange faces became increasingly lively, and bleak laughter echoed hauntingly within earshot.

Bam!

The tomb suddenly trembled, opening up the room. Everything within the entire tomb seemed to become one at that moment. Within the golden light, the two previous chambers were reconstructed—the ashes of the burned bronze outer-coffins, the faintly glowing orb, and even the bronze door. The vicious ghost with its ripped mouth and empty eye sockets once again stood by the door, silently observing the five of them.

Outside the golden light, the room remained unchanged.

“Lu Yun is right,” muttered Wu Tulong. “If we hadn’t destroyed the first three formations, we’d be doomed after getting here.”

“It seems safe enough outside the light,” Mo Qitian spoke quickly. “Perhaps we’ll be fine once we step out.”

“How naive of you.” Zi Chen’s face was steely. Lightning crackled around him, signalling his readiness to fight. “Senior brother Lu’s luopan is a great treasure. Its golden light reveals the truth of the scene in front of you. If you walk out of it, you’ll only be met with a grisly death.”

Rumble.

The electric current surged around him. With a push of his hands, terrible lightning shot out and struck the corpses. There were too many bodies here; if they all attacked at once, they would devour the living in an instant, bones and all.

“Wah!” Angered by the attack, the corpses roared in furious cacophony and lunged at them with claws extended and mouths agape.

“Keep going,” commanded Lu Yun. “Don’t stop!”

Zi Chen’s lightning technique wasn’t heavenly lightning, but it was still effective against all kinds of things that went bump in the night. His attack had momentarily slowed the bodies down.

“Take this, Qing Han.” Lu Yun handed the luopan to his hand. “Don’t let the light go out!”

Qing Han took it with a firm nod. Two silver starstones emerged and circled around his body, guarding the compass in his hand. The treasure revealed the fourth coiled mountain to them; without the golden light, the corpses would still exist, but they’d be invisible and intangible, which was infinitely more terrifying.

“Attack them with lightning techniques or talismans!” Wu Tulong exclaimed. He’d figured out what Lu Yun was going to do the moment the young governor had handed over his treasure. In response, Mo Qitian quickly rooted through his storage ring and flung a handful of talismans in all directions. Every talisman contained a lightning art—it might not be enough to destroy the bodies, but it’d be enough to briefly hinder them.

Rumble.

Wu Tulong joined in the fray as well, making use of the good number of lightning talismans in his possession. Lightning was the bane of all evils and ghosts, so it was only natural for them to bring many talismans of that element when exploring an ancient tomb.

However, the corpses were entirely too powerful. They'd been rendered invincible by the endless resentment within the tomb. The lightning arts the three of them released in concert were enough to destroy ten-thousand-year-old zombies, but here, the frenzied bolts barely proved to be a stumbling block.

Zi Chen channeled all of his energy into lightning and struck in all directions, while Wu Tulong and Mo Qitian continued flinging talismans around them. The three of them managed to keep the bodies about three meters away from the group.

Meanwhile, Lu Yun had taken to the air. He lifted his right arm and extended his fingers. Dark clouds gathered in the sky outside the tomb and silver bolts of heavenly lightning howled, transmuting to a strange power that entered underground and gathered at his fingertips.

Not enough! His heart sank. Lighting of this level wouldn't be enough to destroy all of the corpses. Even hellfire wouldn't work, not with the sheer amount of bitter venom coursing through them. It was the rancor of multiple generations!

The Firmament Prison had most likely been built here to concentrate the energy necessary to nurture these terrible corpses, imbuing them with enough strength to tear through any living souls foolish enough to intrude!

What a lot of investment to defend a tomb.

Compared to the fourth coiled mountain, the first three layers were child's play. This was a killing layout that'd taken generations to complete!

Resentment was the source of strength for all zombies and ghosts. The denser the grudges, the more powerful the undead. Lu Yun would have to surrender control over his hellfire and allow it to eat through everything in order to destroy the corpses. What little bit he could muster at the moment wouldn't even hurt them.

Pure and righteous heavenly lightning was the only thing that could suppress the terrifying undead and exterminate the festering malice. However, there was too much here. Countless aeons of accumulation had deposited an unfathomable amount of energy on these bodies.

Right palm dancing with light, Lu Yun continued drawing upon the heavenly lightning of the world. He'd pushed his Thunder Palmstrike to the limit.

"Dammit! If I still had the pill tribulation stored up, I'd be able to scatter half their resentment with one blow!" He ground his teeth. His death art wasn't yet powerful enough to deal with the corpses.

More bodies rose from the walls and the floor, finally breaking the three-meter protective circle Wu Tulong and the others had carved with lightning. Snarling and shrieking, the undead pounced on the humans.

“Go!” Lu Yun exclaimed. His palm strike burst forth and filled the room with snakes of silver lightning. The approaching corpses were instantly blasted back, leaving nothing within the radius of golden light.

Everyone allowed themselves a sigh of relief.

“Take these!” Lu Yun manifested handfuls of thunder talismans and threw them to Wu Tulong and the others. Xuanxi had just drawn the talismans and they would work much better than the talismans the three of them had brought with them. The group tensed when they saw the corpses enter the golden light again.

“Again!” Wu Tulong and the other two youth sovereigns held Lu Yun’s talismans in their hands, crazed looks entering their eyes.

Lu Yun took a deep breath and called upon the Thunder Palmstrike once more to summon heavenly lightning. It was a powerful technique, but it possessed a fatal flaw—he needed time to collect the lightning before he could release it, which made it far too slow!

If Lu Yun were alone, he would’ve already been swarmed by the corpses.

“Junior,” a hoarse voice suddenly rang in Lu Yun’s head. “I can pass unto you the Yi Wood Cleansing Thunder technique, which will cleanse all of the accumulated resentment here.”

“Who is this?!” The new voice was very alarming.

“I am the Azure Dragon Divine King,” the voice answered from the Scroll of Shepherding Immortals on Qing Han. “You stand a chance of mastering the Yi Wood Cleansing Thunder, since you can manipulate both connate wood energy and heavenly lightning. I can pass on the technique to you, but it’s up to you to see if you can use it.”

The dragon king spoke with great urgency. He wouldn’t be able to maintain the connection for long. A complicated lightning technique entered Lu Yun’s mind.

“I teach you my personal technique in hopes that you will one day lift the curse on the four cardinal divine tribes!” was the last thing he said before he fell silent. It would seem that his way of circumventing Empress Myrtlestar and the scroll could no longer be utilized.

“I promise!” said Lu Yun. Then, he retreated to hell.

Yi Wood Cleansing Thunder was formed by a combination of connate wood power and heavenly lightning. His Mastery of the Five Elements and Thunder Palmstrike would allow him to channel both; however, the technique itself was too complicated. It would take some time for him to master it, necessitating a trip to the netherworld to create enough temporal space to practice.

Crackle.

Connate wood power and heavenly lightning descended upon Lu Yun at the same time and intertwined in a complex manner, changing second by second. Gradually, a strand of pine-colored lightning crackled into existence around him.

Bam!

It suddenly exploded. Failure! If he weren't in hell, with the power of the entire domain running through him, the explosion would've blown him to pieces.

The signature lightning technique of the Azure Dragon King is one of his most powerful moves! It's much more difficult than I'd expected to combine connate wood power and heavenly lightning. The dragon king thinks too much of me. If it weren't for my access to hell, I wouldn't be able to learn the technique!

Lu Yun took a deep breath. The technique could be deployed through the Thunder Palmstrike, but he'd have to channel Mastery of the Five Elements at the same time. He also needed to match the frequency of the two death arts, or they would clash and result in an explosion.

It took him three years to find the right balance. Countless experimentation and adjustments occurred before he could walk the perfect line between the two death arts. Then he began combining connate wood power with heavenly lightning.

Another ten years passed!

After ten years of meditating in the same spot, he finally combined the two natural powers and created the Yi Wood Cleansing Thunder!

"Success!" Pine-colored lightning sizzled and snaked around his body. "Unfortunately, the power I've summoned through hell will fade once I leave. I'll have to coalesce the lightning again!" Lu Yun dismissed the lightning with a sigh.

Hell was not yet complete, so its power was limited to the netherworld. Lu Yun could refine pills and treasures through the power of hell, but he couldn't bring any of the power he'd gathered there outside the netherworld. He'd have to do this all over again with his own power.

### **Chapter 238: The Original Tomb Owner**

Lu Yun spent thirteen years cultivating in the netherworld, but resumed the same point in time upon returning to the real world. Nothing had changed. To the others, Lu Yun hadn't even moved from his spot.

"Power from the Avici Hell resurrected the dead and made them living corpses!"

During his thirteen years in the underworld, Lu Yun had also speculated about the origins of the living dead. Lu Shenhou and the town's residents had all been brought back to life by the Avici Cell layout in a strange manner.

"Yi Wood Cleansing Thunder can scatter their resentment, but so long as the chamber stands, the corpses will infinitely resurrect!"

Immortality was a torment of the worst kind in the Avici Hell. Even after dying to maltreatment, or tortured to ashes, residents of the eighteenth layer of hell would resurrect and undergo the cycle of suffering all over again. Here, the final peace of death was the greatest blessing.

I must identify the weakness of the layout and break it after dealing with the corpses!

"Buy me time!" roared Lu Yun. This time, he extended both arms into the air.

Crackle crackle sizzle pop...

Heavenly lightning and connate wood energy descended upon him at the same time, merging into strands of dark current snaking around him.

“Impossible!” After having recovered some of his strength, the Azure Dragon King gaped out of the Scroll of Shepherding Immortals. “He instantly mastered the Yi Wood Cleansing Thunder....”

Empress Myrtlestar frowned slightly at him. She didn’t know when the dragon king had taught Lu Yun the technique.

“There will be trouble if the survivors of your tribe find out,” she said coolly.

If she’d known the dragon king was going to teach Lu Yun the technique, she would’ve stopped him. Lu Yun had an even more powerful trick up his sleeve, and didn’t need this to get him through the situation. In contrast, seeing the technique in action would push the dragon king’s descendents to madness. It was, after all, the dragon king’s personal combat art.

The dragon king didn’t respond.

“Are you using Lu Yun as bait for your descendents to rescue you?” Empress Myrtlestar asked quietly.

“The Skandha Extinction Tomb cursed not only your people, but also the four cardinal tribes!” The Azure Dragon King’s halved body trembled. “Other than the little white tiger, all of the other survivors are sinners with tainted blood. I simply want to draw them out and kill them all.”

Empress Myrtlestar started.

“The Skandha Extinction Tomb is more terrifying than you can possibly imagine! No cardinal divines could’ve survived its curse, other than traitors who betrayed their tribes. They must all be exterminated!” His scowl gained an edge of insanity. “I trust my descendents will never make a move against someone who possesses my combat art. Only the sinners will attack Lu Yun! Those who set up the Skandha Extinction Tomb to curse the four cardinal tribes through sacrificing your people are our common enemy!”

After a pregnant pause, Empress Myrtlestar asked, “What if... he isn’t their match? Besides, are not you worried that he will turn against you for dragging him into the mess?”

“I’ve already incorporated my essence into the scroll. Soon, I will become nothing but a guardian spirit of the treasure, watching over the little girl.” The Azure Dragon King smiled. “You yearn for another life so that you may realize your ambitions in this era of great tribulations, but the only thing I wish is for my tribe to live on.

“Once the traitors find their way to Lu Yun, I’ll kill them myself through the scroll. I’ve long set aside the issue of my continued survival.”

“You are indeed a worthy ancestor of your tribe,” Empress Myrtlestar sighed.

“And you are a worthy empress for your people,” the dragon king responded with a smile.

.....



Seeing that Lu Yun was about to deploy a more powerful technique, Wu Tulong, Mo Qitian, and Zi Chen flung out thunder talismans with reckless abandon. Violet lightning swarmed the entire area, forming a great net of electricity that kept the endless corpses outside. Meanwhile, connate wood energy and heavenly lightning continued gathering, and the form of lightning around Lu Yun grew ever stronger.

Crackle.

Finally, an enormous pine-colored lightning solidified after a dozen breaths.

“Break!!” he roared.

Violet-black lightning shot out of his body in the shape of dragons, enveloping the entire room with frenzied chaos. Countless corpses disintegrated under the terrifying might, their dense miasma of resentment dispersing with them. Almost all of the living corpses were destroyed in a short instant.

“This is the power of the Yi Wood Cleansing Thunder!” Even Lu Yun himself was startled by its might. Exhaustion washed through him, and his knees gave out. Qing Han grabbed him before he could fall.

“Hand me the luopan!” He swallowed a few pills and extended a demanding hand toward Qing Han, who hurriedly handed him the compass.

“Maybe you should rest for a while,” Mo Qitian said earnestly when he saw Lu Yun’s almost translucent face. “The corpses have all been destroyed.”

“Destroyed? This is the Avici Cell layout. The corpses are ever-enduring. Once the layout’s power descends again, the corpses will reappear.”

Chills ran down everyone’s spine. The young governor had exhausted almost all his power to destroy the corpses with a powerful technique, and it was clear that he couldn’t manage a repeat performance in a short time.

Lu Yun struggled to his feet and activated his luopan.

"To draw the patterns of mountains coiled,

Those deathly cliffs with mysteries roiled.

Danger shies if mountains hide,

Heaven and earth do mysteries toil."

Whirr.

The luopan in his hand rotated at great speed again. Its three indicators continuously overlapped and separated, looking for the heart of the fourth coiled mountain.

“Here they come again!” exclaimed Mo Qitian. A living corpse crawled out of thin air and rose to lunge at Lu Yun.

“Back off!” Starlight descended upon Qing Han as he threw a punch, hurtling the corpse off its feet with a flash of silver light. However, more and more living corpses emerged.

"I've used up all my talismans... Well then, today looks like a good day to die!" Wu Tulong brandished his lance and charged at the enemy, sweeping them off their feet in one smooth motion. Blood streaked down from the corner of his mouth as the backlash recoiled into him.

Shock flooded his face. Apart from Lu Yun, he was the strongest youth sovereign. The corpses weren't yet immortals, but they were absolutely his rival in power!

Zi Chen and Mo Qitian, meanwhile, were slowly beaten back by the onslaught.

"Got it!!" shouted Lu Yun, his eyes fixed on the indicators of the luopan. They all pointed in one direction—the bronze door. More precisely, the ghost standing by the door.

"So it's you! You're the anchor to the Door of Demise. You're the dead that was originally buried in this tomb!" He stared at the ghost in white and commanded, "Disperse the fourth coiled mountain or be destroyed instead."

Here lay the remains of the path of cultivation, but for a tomb to be a tomb, there had to be a dead person buried to grant it a purpose. Otherwise, the place could only be considered an underground palace, no matter how many died there.

The ghost was the original owner of the tomb. Someone had removed their body once the tomb took shape and refined it into the fourth coiled mountain to guard the buried cultivation path.

The ghost leered, revealing sickly white teeth. "Die."

Bam!

The tomb shook again as an enormous skeletal foot dropped down from the sky. It was so big that it almost covered the radius cast by the golden light of the luopan.

They'd all heard the heavy footsteps when passing through the maze. It'd sounded like there was a giant walking within the tomb, and that giant had now shown itself. Lu Yun and the others scrambled to dodge the foot, but another bony extremity slammed down.

Rumble.

Grossly nauseating blood streamed down from the two feet. Patently, the giant had crawled out from the ocean of blood.

As if following the giant's lead, increasing amounts of crimson monsters walked out from thin air. Countless living corpses rose as a new tidal wave of death. Despair blanketed the group, thick and overpowering.

"Take this, Qing Han." Lu Yun threw the luopan at his friend with a quick wave of his hand. The imperial envoy hurriedly caught it as Lu Yun charged at the ghost, blazing with hellfire.

"Wah, wah, wah!" It screeched incessantly, summoning crimson monsters and corpses to mob its attacker.

When the hellfire next flickered, Lu Yun's life energy vanished. The monsters and corpses came to an immediate halt, looking around in a befuddled daze after losing sight of their target. Confusion flickered

through the eyes of the ghost in white, as well. No living soul should be able to conceal their own life energy so completely; not even the most powerful immortal. However, the human in front of it was stripped of all life energy, like a corpse.

Lu Yun dashed to the ghost and wrapped his hand around its throat.

“Wah wah wahhhh!!” It shrieked in high-pitched pain.

Lu Yun’s hellfire couldn’t destroy it, but could inflict quite a bit of misery. The living corpses and crimson monsters shifted their targets to Qing Han and the others when they heard the ghost scream.

“Realms of Yin and Yang, open!” boomed Lu Yun. Activation of the death art opened the Gates of the Abyss, into which their master jumped, ghost in tow.

### **Chapter 239: The Great Flower of Dao**

The heart of a tomb was the original body laid to rest within it, which then granted the tomb its purpose, and the ghost in white was the heart of this particular tomb. Endless malevolence from the Firmament Prison had fueled its transformation into the anchor of the Avici Hell—the fourth coiled mountain—defending the Door of Demise.

Sending it to hell naturally disrupted the fourth coiled mountain. The power of the layout remained, but the living corpses and the monsters from the blood ocean disappeared. The chamber returned to normalcy under the luopan’s light. All threats had vanished, as if they were nothing more than a passing nightmare.

“Is—is it over?” Mo Qitian asked with pale lips. His sunken rib cage and mouth that oozed blood marked the severity of his wounds.

“It is.” Lu Yun collapsed to the ground, panting heavily. He’d returned to the real world immediately after throwing the ghost into hell; he couldn’t be bothered to deal with it just yet. With the fourth coiled mountain ceasing its operation, the Door of Demise was no longer a threat.

Qing Han, Wu Tulong, and Zi Chen sagged to the ground in ungraceful heaps, relieved and grateful to be alive. Their demise would’ve been guaranteed in this tomb, if it weren’t for Lu Yun. This was no place for a cultivator!

Yet the characters emblazoned in the air of the first chamber had forbidden immortals from entering.

“I’m following you from now on, Boss Lu!” Mo Qitian turned to Lu Yun. “Count me in if you ever find yourself raiding a tomb!”

Though they hadn’t gained any treasures during this expedition, it’d been a tremendous learning experience. Mo Qitian wasn’t the weakest among the five youth sovereigns, in terms of strength, but he was the most weak-willed. This experience had absolutely tempered his mindset and honed his will.

Meanwhile, Wu Tulong and Zi Chen quietly settled in to recover from their injuries. After some time, everyone rose to their feet and focused their gazes upon the sarcophagus at the center of the chamber. It’d been the coffin of the ghost in white, but now, it held the missing realm of the severed cultivation path!

“Are we opening it?” Under his companions’ questioning glances, Lu Yun turned to examine the puddle of blood on the ground left by Lu Shenhou. His late clansman’s treasures, storage ring, and three uses of arcane dao immortal power were quietly hovering above it.

He deferentially bowed thrice to what the man had left behind. “Shenhou, rest assured that we will finish what you started and repair the path of cultivation!”

“Qing Han,” Lu Yun turned to his friend, who checked the luopan without missing a beat. All three indicators pointed at the sarcophagus, but the second layer, which hazarded a guess at the future, showed a bad omen.

Qing Han frowned; Lu Yun had seen the result as well. After a pensive moment, he flicked out seven soybeans. Seven soldiers in golden armor appeared at the center of the room with a flash of gold.

“Here we go again on another suicide mission.”

“We’re mighty and unparalleled. We’re supposed to be scything through enemies, shedding blood, and fighting to our deaths on the battlefield. But every time this kid summons us, we’re either cheap labor or cannon fodder. The most bullshit thing is, we can’t even say no!”

Grumbling nonstop, they approached the sarcophagus.

“Open!” they shouted in unison, their hands gripping the lid.

Rumble.

The coffin cracked open.

Hum.

A ray of hazy white light shot out, brimming thickly with the power of decay and reducing the seven soldiers into ashes. They didn’t even have time to scream.

Terror flashed through Lu Yun’s face. The soldiers were dead! They hadn’t simply returned to wherever they’d come from; their very souls were exterminated!

“Whatever was inside nullified my death art,” he muttered. The soldiers’ souls should’ve been protected by his death art and survived the destruction of their bodies. Unless, that was, it failed.

“What’s inside? What is the severed cultivation path buried in?” Lu Yun’s body shook slightly.

The other four didn’t notice anything wrong. They thought Lu Yun had used a regular technique that could summon strange spirits from another world, which wasn’t unheard of in the world of immortals.

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“It’s the great flower of dao, it’s the Dao Flower!” Empress Myrtlestar and the Azure Dragon King exclaimed at the same time from within the scroll. According to legend, the Dao Flower embodied the dao of the world!

“The symbol of cultivation has wilted. No wonder the path is incomplete!” Empress Myrtlestar shuddered. She had been born an immortal and never walked the path of cultivation herself. Hence, no one in her era had ever noticed that the path was broken.

It was common knowledge that there were three cultivation realms—qi, core, and spirit. After the transformed spirit realm came immortality.

However, the Dao Flower now told them otherwise.

“It is no surprise that the dao of immortals cannot be fixed.” Empress Myrtlestar frowned. “Cultivation is the foundation of immortal dao, and contemporary immortals have never experienced the fourth realm of cultivation. With a compromised foundation, it is impossible for anyone to ascend beyond dao immortal realm.”

“Without anyone ascending beyond dao immortal realm, the immortal dao will never be fixed,” the Azure Dragon King whispered. “If the Dao Flower blooms again, there’s a chance for the cultivation path to be repaired.”

“The flower of cultivation is buried here. Where is the flower of immortals then? Has it wilted as well?”

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“The Dao Flower.... How do we make it bloom again?”

White brilliance fading, the power of decay had come from the flower. It embodied the decline of the path and despair of the heavenly dao. No wonder it’d been capable of destroying Lu Yun’s death art.

Qing Han relayed to the others what he’d learned about the flower, and the group pensively considered his words. To repair the path of cultivation, the flower had to bloom again. Otherwise, even if they could figure out the fourth realm, it’d be nothing but a reflection of what had once been. They would still directly ascend to immortality and possess a wobbly and incomplete foundation in the realms to come.

“Civilization.” Realization dawned on Qing Han. He remembered what was buried within the second chamber. “Civilization is what’s needed for the flower to bloom again!”

## **Chapter 240: The Last One**

Civilization!

Cultivation was a product of civilization. Irrigating the Dao Flower with civilization would cause it to bloom once again!

The air of decay dissipated once the sarcophagus was laid open. A small, translucent white flower appeared before them. Palm-sized, its structure, seemingly made of light, painted it with an ethereal, dream-like quality. Though it was shaped like a flower, a closer look showed that it continuously changed and morphed in every moment.

The Dao Flower carried the weight of civilization itself! It floated out of the coffin, exuding a ghostly white radiance.

“It has indeed wilted,” Wu Tulong confirmed gravely after taking a good look.

Although the flower itself seemed lively and intact, its stem and roots were ash-white and its pistil a lifeless gray. It seemed to be blooming, but only in appearance.

“How are we to water it with civilization?” murmured Zi Chen.

“Civilization is everywhere. This very world is the civilization that our generation has pioneered.” Qing Han stared at the flower, as if in a trance. “Once we break the isolation of this tomb and reconnect it with the outside world, the presence of civilization will pour into the flower and revitalize it.”

Civilization was intangible, ineffable, and inexplicable. Likewise, the Dao Flower wasn't a real flower, but a concept given form. Though it was visible to human eyes, no one could touch it, let alone bring it outside.

“There does exist a cultivation realm in the Dao Flower, but it's dead!” Mo Qitian considered the flower and inhaled deeply. “The realm we sensed when we entered the chamber came from the flower.”

Finally, the truth was revealed.

The Firmament Prison, serving the different incarnations of the heavenly court in the past, had not only gathered an endless supply of resentment, but also formed an isolated space from the rest of the world.

The Ten Yins Estuary combined endless yin energy with boundless rancor, thoroughly detaching the Dao Flower from the outside world. Without access to civilization, the flower had lost all hope of resurrection and entered an eternal slumber.

Perhaps it would completely cease to exist after another period of time, erasing with it the dead cultivation realm. Both would then vanish from the world forever and be forgotten to history.

“We'll destroy the tomb then!” Lu Yun said with determination. He didn't dare touch the fragile flower, lest the disturbance destroy it.

Destroying the tomb seemed to be the only way.

“No!!” a singularly plaintive voice screamed into Lu Yun's mind. “Don't destroy the tomb, or the outside world will be destroyed as well!”

It was a sorrowful and earnest plea, making Lu Yun's heart flutter and almost captivating his mind. With a thought, he returned to hell.

The ghost in white was now a pale girl who looked to be about seventeen years old, infused with a strange vulnerability that inspired protectiveness. She was also one of the most breathtaking women Lu Yun had ever seen.

At this moment, the beautiful face was twisted with pain. “You can't destroy the tomb. It buries not only the cultivation path, but also a terrible existence. If the tomb is destroyed, it will tear down all worlds in the cosmos. Let me out and I can make the flower bloom again.”

Lu Yun looked at her without a word. She looked completely different from the vicious ghost with a ripped mouth and bloody sockets for eyes. Dispersing the malevolence on her had allowed her to recover her sanity.

“Who are you?” Lu Yun asked calmly. “You’re definitely no ordinary person, if you were buried to establish a tomb for the path of cultivators.”

Gloom darkened her face. “I am the last survivor of my era. I personally witnessed the great war between the immortals and gods, when blood stained the earth and painted the heavens. Everyone died, and their ghosts drifted on the boundless ocean of blood in ships folded from black paper.”

Lu Yun frowned. “Isn’t the ocean formed by the Ten Yins Estuary?” Everyone in hell had gathered to hear her out.

“I don’t mean that ocean of blood, but the real infinite ocean in the fabled hell,” murmured the girl. “I saw my people, family, lover, and all my friends in small paper ships, forever meandering the crimson ocean. So I hate the world, I curse life itself! I decided to make everyone suffer the same fate as them.”

As a vicious ghost, she’d lured trespassers into the ocean behind the bronze door, having them board black paper ships and float aimlessly over the ocean. Those who entered the tomb weren’t her only targets; the once-inmates of the Firmament Prison had fallen under her sway as well.

Such was the source of her bitterness.

“You know the legends of hell?” Lu Yun said after a long stretch of silence.

“Yes.” The girl nodded. “It’s a tale with no concrete evidence. They say that the overlord of life and death resided there, holding the lives of all in the world and determining their reincarnations with a single thought. However, hell was destroyed a very, very long time ago.”

Here was a being who’d seen countless aeons, but even in her time hell was already an insubstantial legend.

“When my era fell, I saw the real ocean of blood. It devoured every living being but me, so that I could be buried here for the path of cultivation. My tomb then became the path’s resting place.” She slowly told her tale.

“Who was it?” demanded Lu Yun. “Who built the tomb? What’s the terrible thing you mentioned?”

“I don’t know... I didn’t see anything. I know nothing. I don’t know, I don’t know, I don’t know!! I know nothing!!” She clutched her head and screamed in pain as thick resentment once again blanketed her body. Clawing and scratching at her face, she ripped her mouth open and blinded herself, transforming into the vicious ghost.

“Hehehe...” An eerie, empty smile split her face. “This is... hell.” Strands of black smoke encircled her body when she rose to her feet. “My people and family are here.... They’re here....”