

Necropolis 31

Chapter 31: Corpsefish

Lu Yun's pupils dilated slightly. He was both surprised, and not surprised, that Qing Han was here. The thing responsible for the illusions had followed Lu Yun to the stone chamber that Yueshen resided in. Naturally, the illusions at the entrance would be broken.

What caught him off guard were the seven men following Qing Han.

There were seven city lords in Duskwater Prefecture. Mo Yi had stayed outside, and two of them had died in the Duality of Dragon and Tiger. Only two of them had remained by Qing Han's side. The other five in the group were unfamiliar faces, and they were all immortals.

"A transportation portal?" The answer easily came to Lu Yun.

His command token was one such portal. He was able to instantly summon the Dusk Phalanx from thousands of kilometers away, so it only made sense for such an important noble scion to possess something similar.

However, such portals had strict limitations. Only those marked by the portals could be transported. For example, Lu Yun could only summon Yin Xuantian and his soldiers with his token.

Qing Han and his followers were a bedraggled mess. Clearly, they had encountered a great many dangers earlier. The imperial envoy's eyes blazed with fury when they settled on Lu Yun and Li Youcai.

"Your Excellency, Sir Prefect, it's been a while!" he spat at the two men.

It'd been Lu Yun's betrayal outside that prompted Li Youcai to follow suit, which had landed Qing Han in perilous circumstances.

"Should I take care of them, my lord?" Yueshen asked faintly when she sensed their hostility.

Lu Yun shook his head. "No need."

"Who are you talking to?" Qing Han blurted out, suspicious and on guard.

"No one." Lu Yun shook his head. "You misheard."

The Tome of Life and Death gave him control over reincarnation, and allowed Lu Yun to see the entities of another world, such as spirits, demigods, ghosts, and specters. No other living beings—not even immortals—would be able to see Yueshen unless she wanted them to.

"Cut your dramatics, junior!" exclaimed an immortal in red beside Qing Han. There was a slight tremor to his voice, betraying the fear lodged deep in his heart.

"Did you encounter the zombies?" Lu Yun said with a frown apropos of nothing.

At this moment, an exceedingly mournful voice came from behind them. "Sir Qing Han, Sir Envoy, this subordinate has sworn to serve you. Why did you abandon me?"

A figure wobbled toward them. With an eerie smile, he opened his arms wide, seemingly here to claim Qing Han's life. Judging from his clothes, he was a Duskwater city lord.

“This subordinate feels awful, sir. Please help me!”

“Sir Qing Han!”

“Help, young sir!” About a dozen zombies walked out of the tunnel.

They all wore clothes similar to the garb of Qing Han’s five immortals, which clearly marked them as part of the cultivators the envoy had summoned here. Apparently, almost all of them had met with an untimely demise.

Qing Han’s clouded face turned as white as a sheet. He backed away and demanded loudly, “Are—are you still alive?!”

But the zombies kept repeating the same phrases: the last words they uttered before their deaths.

“Run!” The two surviving city lords exchanged a glance. Swords suddenly manifested beneath their feet and they dashed toward the small lake behind them.

Splash.

Something broke through the peaceful surface of the waters. One after another, pale arms shot out of the lake and grabbed the two city lords as they flew past, dragging them into the water. Their tortured screams rang and echoed in the small space.

“What—what is that?” Qing Han yelled.

“Ghost Yanking Feet,” Lu Yun said in a steely voice. It was a vicious feng shui layout aimed to kill. Back on Earth, many good swimmers still ended up drowning for no apparent reason. They were all victims of the Ghost Yanking Feet.

He hadn’t expected such a terrible feng shui layout to lay hidden in this small lake. The layout he knew could only create currents in water to drown people. Here, however, it had physically manifested.

With his knowledge of formations, he could tell that the feng shui layout corresponded to a trapping formation. The pale arms had formed a trapping formation before they’d approached the city lords, immobilizing them. Otherwise they wouldn’t have been caught so easily.

“Ghost Yanking Feet?” the immortal in red asked nervously. “Do those heads in the lake belong to ghosts?”

“Heads?” After a pause, Lu Yun took a closer look at the lake. Every hair on his body bristled with horror.

Hundreds of bleached white human heads were floating in the rippling lake. Their crimson eyes stared unblinkingly at the intruders ashore. The arms dragging the city lords down were their hair!

“Corpsefish!” Lu Yun cried out. “Those who die an untimely death in water never resolve their grievances, so their bodies never decompose. Once they’re eaten by fish, the fish grow a human face, inheriting the grievances of the dead and seeking living souls as a replacement.”

It was said that such fish were responsible for the first instance of Ghost Yanking Feet.

“There are at least hundreds of them. How many people have died prematurely in this lake?!”

There had to be immense unresolved grievances for a body to not rot, and the body had to be untouched by light of the greatest yang—the sun. No matter how vicious the spirits were, as long as there was sunlight, the bodies would rot.

Every single one of the fish had devoured the resentful injustices of a corpse for it to grow a human face.

Splash!

One of them swam ashore, its pale arms reaching out for Lu Yun and the others from the top of its head. Terrified, they hurriedly moved away from the lakeside.

“Sir, young master!” The zombies had gotten close, grabbing at Qing Han.

“What should we do?!” yelled an immortal. He was at his breaking point.

Qing Han gnashed his teeth and growled, “Throw the zombies into the lake!”

“That’s right! The zombies are creepy, but they aren’t that strong. We’ll throw them into the water!” The immortal suffering a mental breakdown rushed a zombie and hurled it toward the lake. However, he screamed as soon as he touched it. His body quickly rotted and assimilated into a zombie himself, falling to the ground.

Hearts sank.

All the color had drained from Qing Han’s face, and Lu Yun felt a knot in his stomach. Anyone who touched one of the zombies would become one of them. What manner of monsters were these?!

“Allow me.” A cool voice came out of nowhere. A scenic panorama slowly unfolded, allowing a beauty to stride onto the scene. Dressed in white, her long hair framed a frosty expression on her face.

Whoosh!

Emerald fire blazed, instantly reducing the zombies coming their way to ashes.

Yuying landed beside Lu Yun and bowed slightly. “Sir.”

Lu Yun sighed in relief. “Turns out fire is the zombies’ bane. You did well.”

“Thank you for the compliment, sir.” Yuying’s lips curved into a joyful smile, driving away the heavy atmosphere of the terrible burial mound.

“That’s Emerald Mistfire,” muttered Qing Han.

Chapter 32: A Terrifying Speculation

Sensing the Emerald Mistfire’s terrifying might, the corpsefish slowly fell back. Tentacles that had already reached the shore withdrew as well. Even so, the fish kept their heads afloat, their crimson eyes opened wide as they fixed spooky looks at the humans.

“Now tell me, where are we supposed to go?” Qing Han asked Lu Yun after regaining his composure.

“So you don’t want to kill me?” Lu Yun had been ready to let Li Youcai go on a murderous rampage; Qing Han’s question came rather out of the blue.

“Why would I do that?” sneered Qing Han. “You seem familiar with this place, so be a good boy and lead the way. If I get my hands on the treasure, I might even spare your life.”

Lu Yun rubbed his nose and didn’t comment, instead glancing at Yueshen beside him. The girl pointed at the lake’s opposite bank, quietly saying, “You have to cross the lake if you want to reach the heart of the tomb.”

“We have to get past this small lake to reach the center of this tomb and find the coffin buried within,” Lu Yun repeated, a little hesitant as he looked at the fish.

“You, what are you waiting for? Go and clean up these creatures!” The red-clad immortal standing beside Qing Han shouted at Yuying, his eyes lingering covetously on her figure. If not for Qing Han’s presence, he might’ve given free rein to his base desires.

“Are you stupid or what?!” Lu Yun’s temper flared the moment he heard the man. A little peeved, he snarled, “Each fish is the equivalent of an immortal-grade trapping formation. My shadow servant is just at the spirit realm. You’re sending her to her death if she faces them.”

Yuying was his trump card. He wouldn’t have let her appear except as a last resort, but there was no telling what might’ve happened earlier if he’d let those zombies get too close to him. The urgency of the situation had compelled him to call on her to eradicate them.

Yuying was a full-fledged immortal. She hadn’t yet fully recovered her powers, but her Panorama and seven swords made her an immortal’s match nonetheless. Even so, Lu Yun would rather not have her show the full extent of her abilities.

Rather than waste time arguing, the red-clad man barked at another immortal at his side. “Then you go. Tidy up those fish!” He was clearly of higher status than the other immortals, if he was able to order them around right in front of Qing Han.

Though the envoy’s face betrayed his displeasure, he didn’t gainsay the red-robed man.

“Err...” The blue-clad immortal hesitated. When someone had killed one of those strange zombies earlier, they’d turned into a zombie themselves... who knew if these so-called corpsefish weren’t the same?

“Don’t worry. Those fish might be spooky, but they aren’t zombies... You can slaughter the lot in any way you see fit,” Lu Yun explained when he noticed the man’s qualms.

The blue-clad immortal nodded, then took a deep breath. His sword streaked into a brilliant ray and flew into the sky. Once above the lake, it burst apart in a downpour of radiance that ruthlessly slammed into the water.

The lake’s serene surface instantly frothed with bloody waves as an endless rain of sword light made short work of the fish.

The onslaught stopped after a dozen breaths, leaving the lake fully pigmented with a scarlet hue. The corpsefish had been exterminated to the last, their corpses floating belly up.

“Hurry up, let’s go!” Lu Yun yelled all of a sudden. Helped by Yuying, his figure swiftly flew past the lake.

Li Youcai was one step even faster. Murmuring nonsense like “give me back my treasure!” or the like, he also reached the opposite shore in the blink of an eye.

“Let’s go!” Although startled, Qing Han reacted fast enough. A dim purple sword light enveloped him, bringing him to the other side.

“Wa-wait for me!” After deploying his sword art, the blue-robed immortal proved a smidgen too slow to react. He hastily retracted the sword light and rushed forward, but...

Boom!

The entire lake erupted violently with the appearance of an enormous human head. A kilometer wide at the very least, it clogged the entire width of the lake.

Thick arms danced above the enormous corpsefish’s head. No sooner had the blue-robed immortal reached the lake’s center than the tentacles twined around him, dragging him into the fish’s waiting mouth.

His blood-curdling shriek was echoed by the soul-numbing sound of chewing. Horror raked over the assembled group.

Hiss hiss hiss!

The fish produced a sibilant sound resembling that of a snake. Above its head, pale arms stretched toward the bank.

“Break!” shouted the red-clad immortal. Scarlet rays of sword luminance emerged from his hands and cut off the gruesome appendages.

“Young master, hurry and leave... This fish is at least in the august immortal realm!” Color had drained from the red-clad immortal’s face. Though he’d successfully repelled the corpsefish’s attack, he’d suffered heavy injuries in the process. Hence, he set foot on his sword, ready to fly away, but crashed heavily to the ground a mere few feet later.

“I—I can’t fly!” he shouted, horrified.

“The corpsefish’s sphere of activity is limited to the water. We’d better move away from the lake,” Lu Yun declared gravely.

The corpsefish earlier weren’t tiny by any stretch of the imagination, but they’d rivaled a normal human’s size at most. The one they faced now was a leviathan that stuffed the waters full with its head alone.

“Is there a space-restriction formation in here?”

Sure enough, the enormous corpsefish sank beneath the surface when they left the shore, no longer visible.

Probing their current surroundings with his senses, Qing Han’s expression turned grim. Both cultivators and immortals alike took flying for granted, and to be deprived of flight was like a mortal denied the use of his legs.

"A space-restriction formation? Good! Great!" Lu Yun clapped and laughed aloud, his eyes gleaming with glee.

"We can no longer fly. You call that great?" Qing Han scowled in annoyance.

"Of course it is." Lu Yun grinned. "Both tombs and graves are made to protect something. The presence of this formation implies that we're nearing our goal. Onward ho!"

Increasingly buoyant, he hummed a little ditty and strode deeper into the dark tunnel with lively hops.

The others looked at each other. Why was he in such high spirits all of a sudden? Was it purely because of the treasure?

"Haven't any of you noticed? These intersecting tunnels feel somewhat familiar," Qing Han ventured hesitantly as he suddenly stopped and looked all around him. Rather than a single tunnel, many passageways criss-crossed each other inside this great tomb, like an underground maze.

"Hm?" Lu Yun froze when he heard the musing. "You also find them familiar?"

"Correct." Qing Han nodded. "Very familiar, in fact, but I can't tell you why. I've never come here before."

Lu Yun nodded. He also shared the same feeling. "I've been observing the tunnels along the way—"

Yuying interjected, "They're laid out in a pattern similar to meridians of the human body."

"Meridians of the human body?" Qing Han blinked, then realization abruptly dawned. "I see! It's just as you say, no wonder!"

"Meridians... human body..." Lu Yun felt a shiver course through his spine. The gears of his brain turning sluggishly, he stared fixedly at the corpse flies on the wall.

Corpse flies... things that only grew on millennia-old zombies.

"The one who built this place had truly exquisite skills to create such an intricate pattern." Qing Han exclaimed, clucking his tongue.

"I'm afraid that's not what happened here..." Lu Yun gulped violently. Even so, his throat still felt dry.

"These tunnels probably aren't man-made... rather, we're inside a giant corpse. To be more precise, inside a zombie." Even he found his words incredulous.

"Y-you need to stop with this nonsense," Qing Han shuddered as he hastened to protest. "How can there be someone this big?"

Chapter 33: Bloodcorpse

"Yeah. How can there be anyone so huge?" Lu Yun murmured in assent. He approached a wall of the passage, tensing his jaw as he removed a corpse fly that glowed faintly with a reddish hue. "It really is a larva!" The immature form of the corpse fly clouded his expression.

"No, not necessarily," Lu Yun tried to reassure himself. "These corpse flies have only recently hatched, but their larvae are ghostface maggots. The lack of maggots here means that we aren't inside a zombie."

“What are ghostface maggots?” Qing Han asked in a trembling voice.

“Well, these are corpse flies, right? Maggots mature into flies, and ghostface maggots grow into corpse flies,” Lu Yun explained, taking a deep breath.

Whether this was the interior of a giant corpse or zombie, their proximity to either possibility didn’t bode well. Still, his intensifying curiosity nagged him forward.

“Let’s keep going. I’d like to see what else is here!” As a tomb raider, a natural desire to excavate secrets tickled at him.

“Stop making up these outrageous lies!” the immortal in red cried out. “I’ll kill you right here and now!”

“Li Xing!” Qing Han called out suddenly.

The red-clad immortal violently shivered. “Please forgive me, sir!” His expression was respectful, but there was well-hidden venom in the back of his eyes.

“Keep going!” Qing Han demanded coldly.

An indeterminate amount of time later, the entourage stopped once more.

“What’s that?!” The envoy’s pupils contracted slightly and he glanced at Lu Yun for guidance.

“A layout of the nine sectors.” Lu Yun sounded tense. “I see the eight trigrams hidden within.”

The pathway that had been nine meters wide became narrow up ahead. Nine jet-black coffins barred their way forward, each about a person tall.

The others found no significance in the chaotic arrangement of the coffins. Sure, it was sinister and uneerie, but nothing was particularly noteworthy to them.

However, Lu Yun was of a drastically different opinion. The coffins formed a terrifying layout based on the nine sectors. The eight trigrams layout underneath melded with the one on top to form a very peculiar killing formation. Any carelessness would doom the group beyond redemption.

Lu Yun knelt and drew in the earth with his fingers, making rough calculations to figure out the changes of the formation.

“What’re you playing at now?” snickered Li Xing when he saw the young governor’s odd behavior.

“Shut up, if you don’t want to die,” Lu Yun retorted without raising his head.

“Grand Steward Li, you shouldn’t get upset with an ant like him. He’s just trying to show off before the seventh young master by making up all of these tall tales. First a giant corpse or a zombie, now this rot about sectors and trigrams. I don’t think these coffins mean anything at all.” One of the two remaining attendant immortals sneered.

“If that’s what you think...” Standing up, Lu Yun dusted himself off, “are you brave enough to walk past?”

“Why not!” The immortal colored a little, then snickered in derision.

There was an enormous monster in the lake that had eaten the blue-robed immortal, but there wasn't anything here that could hide anything remotely so dangerous. Even if those strange zombies were lurking in the coffins, what could a few zombies do to him? A little fire would burn them to a crisp.

In fact, it was very likely that the coffins housed more of those creepy zombies from earlier, nothing more. Conjuring a fistful of flames, the intrepid immortal stepped into the formation of coffins.

"What's this?! Ah, aaaah!" A frightful shriek sounded out, then was prematurely cut off. Absolute silence reigned afterward.

Those who remained outside had no idea what had happened.

"What was that all about?" Goosebumps popped up all over Li Xing's body. He possessed the strongest cultivation level here, as a peak true immortal who was very close to empyrean. Nevertheless, he hadn't picked up anything whatsoever about what had happened between the coffins.

"I can't very well stop someone from jumping off a cliff, can I?" It was Lu Yun's turn to snicker. "Don't you see the fearsome formation that these coffins represent?"

"Formation? What formation?" Li Xing scoffed. "I may not be a formation master myself, but I have the common sense to know that something this simple can't possibly be a formation! A few coffins scattered on the ground? What a joke."

In the world of immortals, formations were generally complicated affairs. What was before him was nowhere close to what he would expect a formation to be.

"The dao has its origins in the simplest of things," countered Lu Yun. "The first formations came from marvelous arrangements of natural stone that embodied the fundamental laws of the world."

He'd read about these things in his sect's texts. Of course, the words described feng shui layouts rather than formations, but the principle was the same.

"Dao... is simple." Qing Han felt an invisible wall before him shatter with a boom. "Dao is... simple!" His excitement grew as he pondered this.

"If you think this formation is so simple, why don't you have a go?" Lu Yun hadn't noticed Qing Han's reaction as he focused on Li Xing with a half-smile.

The immortal reddened, unable to respond.

Strange, I've done nothing to offend that man. Why does he cause trouble for me at every turn? Lu Yun frowned a little. He glanced back at Qing Han; the rush of elation upon the latter's face had already receded.

Qing Han wants to kill me so he can put his own men in the Dusk governorship. Why is he hesitating now, then? This Li Xing seems to be his representative, but not entirely with his permission. The young governor could make neither heads nor tails of the situation.

"If you aren't brave enough, then keep your mouth shut." He turned solemn, rolling his words slowly. "Follow me carefully. Don't deviate a single footstep." Saying this, he stepped between two coffins and into the formation.

Qing Han, Yuying, the fatty under Yueshen's control, and the two other immortals tiptoed behind him as careful as could be. The moment they entered the layout, the temperature around them suddenly dropped to a bone-chilling fridity. An instinctual shiver spread throughout the crowd.

Lu Yun wove between the coffins, following the path to safety he had calculated before entering.

"You were only a step from safety just now. Why did you turn back?!" Li Xing suddenly interrupted.

"You can go that way if you'd like." Lu Yun continued on his own path.

Li Xing angrily ground his teeth together, but he didn't dare disagree. After we get out, I'll slaughter you even if Qing Han insists on protecting you! His thoughts grew vicious. Deep down, he bore no respect whatsoever for his young master.

"Aha!" One of the other immortals shouted with unexpected glee.

"What is it?" Everyone else stopped to look at him.

"This coffin... it's made of jadesoul wood! An ingredient surpassing ninth-grade in quality!" Excitement was plain upon the immortal's face. He reached out a hand to caress the coffin in front of him.

"Don't touch that!" The sheer stupidity of the gesture instinctively elicited a loud rebuke from Lu Yun.

Creak.

Before he was done talking, the coffin's lid opened of its own volition. A bloody, skinless hand reached out from it and grasped the immortal's neck, then pulled him inside.

"What the hell is this thing! Young master, please save me!" The immortal shrieked a hair-raising yelp that was drowned out by a series of loud chomping noises.

"A bloodcorpse!" Lu Yun shrilled with alarm. "We need to get out of here, quick! Don't look at that coffin!" He turned and bolted after that screech.

The others shuddered and followed behind him as closely as they could.

"A ghost?! Mommy! Don't let it catch me!" No one knew what Yueshen showed the blinded Li Youcai, but the fat man was just as terrified as the rest.

A grisly head emerged from the coffin that had opened a moment prior. Its crimson, unlidged eyes were fixed upon the backs of the living.

"Hehehehehehe..." Laughter that made one's flesh creep echoed through the maze of coffins.

"Don't look at it!" Sensing potential stupidity, Lu Yun hastily shouted a warning.

In response, Li Xing fearfully jerked his half-turned head back around. They finally broke free of the formation a few moments later; Lu Yun immediately slumped onto the ground, panting with exhaustion.

A bloodcorpse, a real bloodcorpse! People actually raise these things? He looked back at the coffins with lingering fear. Bloodcorpses were a forbidden secret that went unrecorded in any texts. They existed only as a legend among tomb raiders.

Encountering one was like a brush with death. Even his masters' books held nothing about them. No one knew when the stories about them had first begun, but all tomb raiders were aware of their dangers.

"Leave!" The nearby Yueshen uttered an abrupt cry of admonishment, dispelling a faint, bloody shadow that hid in their field of view.

"What was that?" Still distressed, Lu Yun looked to his spectral friend.

"The bloodcorpse followed us because Li Xing turned around just now. Thankfully, it's a lot weaker when separated from those coffins, so I could deal with it." Yueshen breathed a sigh of relief.

"That's good." Lu Yun did the same. If someone got a good look at a bloodcorpse, no one in the world could save them—not even in this world, where immortals abounded.

"Who are you talking to?" Qing Han's face was as bloodless as the others'. The memory of the immortal who'd become corpse fodder was fresh on his mind, as was the heavy scent of blood. That Lu Yun was talking to thin air only scared him all the more.

"I'm talking to a ghost," Lu Yun exhaled. "You're a spirit realm expert, Sir Qing Han. You aren't scared of those, are you?"

Qing Han's lips were blue, but he shook his head.

"You..." Li Xing was just about to kill Lu Yun, but what he heard just now froze him in his tracks.

"I can overcome ghosts, intimidate them so they won't come near, or even subjugate them, but a bloodcorpse followed us just now..." Lu Yun's face flickered with uncertainty.

No one could fully explain what a bloodcorpse was. He had thought it was a kind of zombie, which was why its ability to take gaseous form had thoroughly surprised him. In fact, he found it rather mind boggling.

Thankfully, Yueshen had managed to drive the vastly weakened creature off. Once outside its abode, it commanded only a fraction of its true strength.

"Are we going further in or what?" Lu Yun asked Qing Han, whose eyes flashed with resolution.

"Yes, we're going in! There's something inside Myriad Formation Summit, and it will be mine!"

Chapter 34: A City As Grave Goods

"What is it?" Lu Yun asked without thinking.

"None of your business! Keep your nose where it belongs!" Li Xing snapped.

The Dusk governor shrugged nonchalantly.

With a sigh, Qing Han faintly explained, "It's of utmost importance to me. I have to find it."

"The Formation Orb?" Lu Yun asked with brows furrowed. That was what he was here for.

“No.” Qing Han shook his head. “The Formation Orb is tempting, but a connate-grade treasure like that isn’t for a cultivator like me. Only dao immortals who’ve plucked a dao fruit have the right to possess such a heavenly treasure.”

“Alright then.” Lu Yun nodded. “Things are only going to get more dangerous as we head further in, so all of you have to listen to me. Otherwise...”

He glanced at the formation of coffins behind them. Two immortals had already paid the price of ignoring him: their lives.

Li Xing shuddered, finally realizing how important Lu Yun was. That unassuming formation could claim even a golden immortal, since what the Dusk governor called a bloodcorpse was much more powerful. The time wasn’t right to kill Lu Yun. Not just yet, anyway.

As they left the formation behind them, the tunnel narrowed until only one person could pass at a time.

“Halt!” Lu Yun suddenly stopped in his tracks, cold sweat breaking out on his forehead. “Turn around!”

“What is it?” asked Qing Han.

“That thing is back! I relaxed my guard for just a second and almost fell into its trap,” he scoffed. “Turn back around!”

“Ai,” a faint sigh sounded in the air. The path beneath Lu Yun’s feet suddenly transformed, and another bottomless pit reared its ugly maw at them.

A dead end!

“An illusion?” Qing Han stared dully at the bottomless pit with a pale face.

“Remember the palace we saw when we entered? That’s an illusion created by something we can’t see.” Lu Yun narrowed his eyes. “Cut it out. Show yourself!”

“It’s gone, my lord,” Yueshen said faintly.

Scowling, Lu Yun turned around and retraced their footsteps, bringing the group to a three-way fork. There had only been one path when they came. Clearly, the other two paths had been hidden by whatever was creating the illusions.

“This way!” Lu Yun, pointing at the path on the right.

“Is that another illusion?” Li Xing asked hesitantly.

“You’re welcome to go the other way,” huffed Lu Yun.

The immortal swallowed his words with a scowl. He could crush Lu Yun as easily as he would an ant, but he needed the governor’s guidance here.

This tunnel didn’t narrow like the one before. Corpse flies covered both walls, casting the tunnel in a faint red glow. The number of flies further decreased as they went along, dimming the ambient light as well. However, a light came from ahead of them.

Everyone stopped. “This is...!” They gaped at the world before them, their breaths shallow and quick.

"It's Truewater City!" Li Xing exclaimed in shock. "The ancient city destroyed by Myriad Formation Summit five thousand years ago!"

Yuying's eyes glinted oddly. She'd once visited the mountain to search for Truewater's ruins, but had mistakenly ended up climbing the mountain after being disoriented by the formations. That trip proved a failure, but who would've thought that the ancient city would really be buried underground?

The tunnel ended in a cliff that overlooked the ancient city below. It was destroyed, merely a wreckage of broken walls and shattered roofs, the rubble of a decayed and desolate scene.

"Wow! Treasure! So much treasure! Mine, all mine!!" Li Youcai's shout was enough to startle the earth. Like a giant meatball, he bounced off the cliff and landed in the ancient city.

That was Yueshen's doing. She knew what Lu Yun wanted without him needing to say anything. The fatty would be their scout, probing to see if there were dangers awaiting them in the city.

"Five thousand years ago, the ancient Truewater City was a city of immortals! The city lord herself was a golden immortal." Li Xing watched as Li Youcai flew down and mumbled, "Not even the city lord escaped when the mountain fell. Perhaps there will be golden-immortal-grade treasure here."

Golden immortals and above were considered the elite nobility among immortals.

Qing Han hailed from an esteemed birth, and the Qing Clan had no shortage of golden immortals. However, he was just a cultivator, so he had no right to order immortals around.

Even for Li Xing, golden immortals were untouchable figures that he could only admire from a distance.

"It should be safe. Let's go down too." Lu Yun sighed with relief when he saw Li Youcai blissfully cackling over large stones in his arms.

Yueshen is too good at playing tricks. The Dusk governor snorted with exasperation upon seeing Li Youcai dump his valuables out of storage and replace them with skulls and stones. Judging from Yueshen's entertaining reactions, she was having a ball of a time.

Lu Yun wasn't about to intervene. He and Li Youcai were no allies.

"The moment the mountain landed was the moment the residents of the city all died."

Lu Yun and the others made their way down to the city. They noted human-shaped imprints on the ground. Qing Han squatted and considered the marks carefully, his expression dark.

"Don't you guys think there's something wrong here? What's emitting the light?" Lu Yun looked up into an expanse of darkness. There was no source of light or even corpse flies. Even so, they were able to see everything in the city very clearly. "This isn't an illusion," he added. "It's real!"

"Sir." Yuying turned to Lu Yun with a slight shift in her expression. "Have you noticed? The location and layout of the city seems like a...."

Puzzled, Lu Yun frowned slightly. Qing Han and Li Xing shifted their attention to Yuying.

“A peripheral burial pit!” Lu Yun slowly turned over the words in his mouth. “The person buried in the mound must be someone important enough for an entire city of people to be used as their burial goods!”

Peripheral burial pits were often seen in an emperor’s tomb. In the olden times, the death of an emperor signaled a corresponding retainer sacrifice in designated chambers or burial pits. His consorts and slaves would be buried alive, as companions for the afterlife.

There shouldn’t be such a pit in a burial mound, yet here it was. The location and layout of their surroundings made it clear what role it played. The mountain had destroyed Truewater City, offering it as tribute to the dead.

All of its residents were grave goods.

“It’s not as simple as that.” Qing Han shot to his feet and looked around hesitantly. “Five thousand years ago, the residents of the city were all immortals!

“Immortals are protected by their qi. Even after being crushed by the mountain, there should be skeletons or something left. But look, why are there only imprints and no corpses? There aren’t even shards of their weapons.” With his keen eye for detail, the imperial envoy made these observations as he landed.

“A ritual sacrifice!” Qing Han answered before anyone could say anything. “Someone sacrificed a city’s worth of immortals and their treasures!”

“This...” Lu Yun had no idea what to say. It was immoral enough to bury living people as companions, but to slaughter Truewater’s residents like sacrificial animals, too?

Suddenly, Qing Han’s expression changed. An indistinct purple sword manifested in his hand and he slashed it at Lu Yun’s neck.

Chapter 35: Undead Hag

Qing Han’s sword was too fast! Neither Yuying nor Yueshen were able to react in time.

He wants to kill me!! was the only thing Lu Yun could think of as purple light enveloped him.

In the face of danger, his strategy was to retreat into the Gates of the Abyss. But when faced with Qing Han’s intimidating sword light, his thoughts moved sluggishly, and he couldn’t react at all.

Thud!

There was a dull impact near Lu Yun’s ear, followed by a strange, wet sound. Sticky, cold liquid splashed his face as a tortured cry assaulted his eardrums. Startled, he whirled around to find a woman lying on the ground, whimpering with pain.

Well, something that resembled a woman, at least. Its skin and flesh were jelly-like and they clung to the exposed bones, as though they’d been submerged in water for quite some time. Its disheveled hair stuck together like aged seaweed and its pale, pupil-less eyes stared straight at Qing Han. The envoy’s attack had exposed its blackened brains.

“What the hell is that?!” Qing Han almost threw up when he got a good look at the thing. This is too damn revolting! It looked like a body that had been submerged for years, but it was alive!

Lu Yun stumbled a few hasty steps back.

“An undead hag,” he muttered. “Why is there an undead hag here?!”

An undead hag was a water spirit, or rather an underwater zombie. However, they were much more terrifying than regular zombies. Even a thousand-year-old zombie had its weaknesses, but so far, no one knew how to deal with undead hags. Not even a black donkey’s hoof worked.

Case in point, this particular undead hag still lived even after Qing Han had cut off half its head. Its body twisted and contorted as it struggled to get up.

Undead hags mostly resided in water, but Lu Yun hadn’t found any signs of a river or a lake here.

“Run!” He snapped and bolted when he saw Qing Han preparing another attack. Rushing their way from afar were hundreds of undead hags that’d crawled out from who-knew-where. His skin crawling, Qing Han rushed after Lu Yun.

“Yueshen!” roared Lu Yun.

“Alright, which one of you clay-brained shitgibbons wants to steal my treasures?!” Li Youcai dropped the stone he was holding and shot to his feet, breaking out of his reverie. A large square seal was in his hand.

Buzz.

An explosion of golden light saw the seal grow several times larger at great speed, then it viciously slammed into the hags like a small mountain.

Rumble.

The earth shook slightly from the force of the seal crushing the undead hags.

“The Seal of Mountains and Rivers, an eighth-grade treasure!” Greed flashed through Li Xing’s eyes when he turned and stared at their deliverance. But this was neither the time nor place for treasure-snatching. He kept running.

Despite being crushed by the seal, the bodies of the undead hags continued to twitch and convulse, slowly recovering. To Lu Yun’s knowledge, no one had ever found their weakness. Running away was the only way to survive an encounter.

“Gya!”

“Ga!”

“Gaaa!” The monsters emitted strange sounds that startled Yueshen’s specter on Li Youcai’s back and dispersed it.

“Holy!!” With his senses recovered, Li Youcai finally saw what was actually happening in front of him. His first impulse was to put away the seal and flee.

More undead hags flooded in, filling the air with a strange fragrance.

“Hold your breath and don’t breathe in the scent!” yelled Lu Yun. “It’s poisonous!”

Black flame burned within him, destroying the toxins that entered his body. Qing Han and Li Xing cleansed themselves of the poison with their own techniques, as well.

The poisonous fragrance coming from undead hags was very unearthly. Prolonged exposure would turn someone into another of their kind.

The fifth grandmaster of Lu Yun’s sect had once encountered undead hags in an underwater tomb. Not long after his close escape, he himself had turned into one of the monsters as well. In the end, a group of elites banded together and sealed him away.

The battle had greatly weakened the sect, and it took countless years for them to recover. Although Lu Yun was now a cultivator, he still didn’t know how to deal with these monsters.

“There!” shouted Yuying, pointing at the tall building at the center of the city. “They seem to be avoiding that place!”

Lu Yun perked up. “Let’s go then!”

The undead hags were very fast. They caught up to the humans in an instant, but gradually lost speed the closer the group drew to the tall building. Something about it intimidated them.

Once they’d reached the building, Li Youcai dropped to the ground, his chest heaving like bellows from heavy panting.

“What is this place? What are all of you here? Where are my treasures?” He looked around, befuddled. His eyes lit up in the next instant. “Oh! Here’s my precious!” A satisfied smile tugged at his lips.

Yueshen’s startled specter was back to distort Li Youcai’s perception.

“It really is a mythical immortal ghost!” Qing Han shuddered violently as he observed Li Youcai’s behavior. Records spoke of immortal ghosts that were almost impossible to shake off once a person was haunted by one.

“Thanks.” Lu Yun glanced at Qing Han. If not for the young man, Lu Yun would’ve been a delicious meal for the undead hag. Sure, he had the Tome of Life and Death, but it didn’t make him invincible. A bite from the monster definitely would’ve killed him. If he died, Yuying, Ge Long, and the three remaining Infernum within the Gates of the Abyss would cease to exist as well.

Qing Han huffed in response to Lu Yun’s show of gratitude. Lu Yun rubbed his nose awkwardly.

“What is this place?” Li Xing asked curiously as he considered the tall building. “How is it able to drive off these terrible, undying monsters?”

The hags continued moving even when missing half of their heads, or after being mashed into meat paste. That made them undying creatures in his eyes.

“It’s an altar.” Lu Yun looked up.

The building was about a dozen yards tall and completely black. There were strange symbols and patterns all over the architecture. The undead hags kept a distance of about thirty yards from the altar, a deeply terrified look in their ghastly pale eyes.

“The living souls residing within Truewater were buried alive, then sacrificed. This must be the sacrificial altar for those living souls.” Lu Yun took a deep breath and murmured, “I didn’t see this altar when we were on top of the cliff.”

“What are you suggesting?!” Qing Han demanded darkly.

“The altar must have sensed us coming—or rather, sensed living souls approaching,” Lu Yun responded in a strained voice. “That was why it reappeared. It wants to sacrifice us as well.”

“Do you mean the altar is alive?” Qing Han asked in startlement.

“I don’t think so. There must be something else here. For example, whatever has been creating the illusions! We’ll know once we get up there!”

Chapter 36: The Portrait of Emptiness

Grand steps led up to a magnificent square altar, which was framed by a collection of lofty terraces. As soon as the group set foot on the steps, they felt they’d departed from this world and entered a different one.

“That’s...!” A flush colored Qing Han’s face the moment he reached the peak, the relic at the center prompting his trembling. A painting scroll radiated a faint blue aura as it floated silently above the ground. This was the objective of his trip!

“The Portrait of Emptiness!” Yuying was also affected by the sight. The ultimate goal of her exploration more than a thousand years ago was to find this artifact, but her attempt had proved fruitless.

How curious for it to appear now upon this strange altar—almost like it was suppressing the altar beneath it. Much like her own Panorama of Clarity, the Portrait of Emptiness was an immortal treasure that surpassed ninth rank.

Shoom!

A crimson shadow blurred past. In the next moment, the painting had a new owner.

“Li Xing!” Qing Han colored when he saw who it was.

“Hehehe. Did you really take me for your servant, you piece of trash?” The respect on Li Xing’s face had completely evaporated, replaced by a vicious depravity. “I am the grand steward of the Qing Clan’s inner circle, every bit equal to one of the outer circle elders. You’re just one of the clan’s discarded pawns, how dare you order me to and fro!”

Now that he’d obtained the Portrait, he had no reason to maintain a front.

“You...” Qing Han wavered and almost fell over. “You’re a servant! Do you intend to rebel against your masters?”

“Rebel?” Li Xing roared with laughter. “As long as all of you die here, who’s going to know what I’ve done?”

A blue haze emanated from his body. He’d poured his energy into the portrait, and the tiniest bit of the treasure’s channeled power could crush any immortal, to say nothing of cultivators. Moreover, a mysterious force seemed to be guiding him in refining the painting.

“Stop him!” Qing Han shrieked.

“Yueshen!” Lu Yun knew that if Li Xing succeeded, he’d be the first one to die.

“Son of a... stealing my treasure from under my nose! I don’t think so!” Under Yueshen’s control, Li Youcai once again pulled out his Seal of Mountains and Rivers, slamming it toward Li Xing.

“Well met!” A reddish flame burned in Li Xing’s eyes and he suddenly produced a copper coin between his fingers. “The Seal is mine! I order you to fall!”

Clang!

The palm-sized coin drifted across the air, light trailing behind it like two gossamer wings. It began emanating a golden glow.

Bang!

The power dissipated from Li Youcai’s seal. It crashed to the ground, refusing to budge any more no matter how much its owner tried to manipulate it.

“After my Seal too, are you?! Come at me, you pathetic excuse of a man!” Seeing his seal struck down by the strange coin had completely riled up Li Youcai. His waddling form charged Li Xing.

“The Treasurefall Coin! That’s Qing Hongchen’s! Why do you have it!” Qing Han demanded loudly in surprise. The coin was an item that could strike down any treasure, but the frenzied Li Xing was deaf to this question. He only had eyes for Li Youcai.

“Piss off!” he exclaimed. A stifling blue light flared out of the painting and shunted the fatty aside.

Blood trickled out of Li Youcai’s mouth. He made another pass at Li Xing with a resentful look. Alas, the true immortal that he should’ve easily beaten was bolstered beyond belief by the Portrait of Emptiness.

“He... he’s controlled by that scroll! I can’t touch him!” Yueshen wanted to help, but the portrait’s light repelled her. In fact, she was nearly forced into visibility. Her eight specters went up in smoke upon exposure to the eerie radiance.

Yuying stood at Lu Yun’s side, firmly shielding him with her body.

“All powerful paintings have their own souls,” she remarked quietly. “When I first won the Panorama of Clarity, I, too, nearly fell under its influence. Li Xing’s mind is no more. His soul and consciousness have been crushed, and the soul of the painting is now in charge of his body.”

“Hahahahaha!” roared Li Xing. He rushed at Lu Yun in a blue blur. “Die!” The cry echoed the decisive sentiment in his eyes; he was hellbent on killing the Dusk governor.

Why does he want to kill me so badly?! Lu Yun was chilled to the bone. He wasn't scared of dying, per se, but the sheer hatred he perceived from this Qing servant was visceral. Since Li Xing was no more, this murderous impulse could only be a lingering obsession. The painting's spirit would naturally gravitate toward accomplishing such things for its host.

"Go!" Yuying raised a hand, summoning her seven swords. They hurtled toward Li Xing in an unbroken chain.

"Out of my way!" howled the man who was little more than instinct. He slammed his sleeves into the swords, scattering them to the ground. Yuying's attack had only served to push him a few steps back.

Blood welled up in Yuying's mouth. Nevertheless, the ashen-faced envoy stood resolutely in front of her master.

"Die, die, die!" Cracks appeared all over Li Xing's body. His robes were soaked through with fresh blood, but the cerulean flames in his eyes spurred him on. Power welled up within him, propelling him from a peak true immortal to the empyrean immortal realm.

A long trill from Yuying heralded her scroll's unfurling in midair. She was finally unleashing her strongest trump card: the Panorama of Clarity. Her blazing Emerald Mistfire dyed the entire altar a verdant green.

"The Pano... rama!" Li Xing growled like a savage animal. "D...d...die!" He conjured a mystical blue flame that warded off its green counterpart.

"Lucent Voidfire!" Qing Han was utterly fixated upon the fire between Li Xing's fingers. He called out its name through tightly clenched teeth.

There were three legendary fires in the world of immortals: Emerald Mistfire, Lucent Voidfire, and Daevic Skyfire. Each was sealed within a painting scroll that surpassed the ninth rank.

The Emerald Mistfire had been sealed within the Panorama of Clarity, and the Lucent Voidfire's vessel was the Portrait of Emptiness before them.

The three fires were largely equal, but the one who wielded the Voidfire was the painting's soul. Its conduit, Li Xing, had just reached empyrean immortal realm. Post-rebirth, Yuying was only in the spirit realm, and thus was at a considerable disadvantage.

The Voidfire's explosive fury dispelled the Mistfire, sending Yuying and her Panorama flying.

"DIE!" Li Xing cackled with great pleasure. Killing Lu Yun would resolve the Qing servant's obsession, allowing the painting soul to truly become a living creature.

Lu Yun ground his teeth together. Nine faint, draconic shadows manifested around him. Alas, the art was as flimsy as paper under an empyrean immortal's assault and the coffinbearers were destroyed the instant they were summoned.

Death's shadow loomed over him.

"Ho!" A tinkling cry intervened. The altar was enveloped in a misty violet light.

Hum!

A powerful blade light burst forth from Qing Han's form, slashing bitingly toward Li Xing.

"Violetgrave!" The blue flames in Li Xing's eyes faded, replaced with overwhelming terror. Violetgrave, a ninth-rank sword!

The weapon's unleashed energies instantly quelled the awakening portrait. A white figure seemed to hover within the violet light, pressing a hand down to dampen the energies unleashed by the painting scroll.

Boom.

A violent quake rocked the altar. Li Xing's body was cleanly hewn in half, then shattered by the sword's lingering trail.

Thump!

Qing Han collapsed onto the ground and fainted from overexertion. A curious shortsword glimmered a brilliant amethyst next to his body—a new addition.

Lu Yun dumbly froze where he was, dripping with cold sweat. If Qing Han hadn't helped him just now, he really would've died once again. His trump cards were as fragile as glass before the threat of absolute strength. He dropped down to the ground, panting with exhaustion.

"It looked like there was someone in the sword's light just now." Lu Yun rubbed his eyes and looked in the sword's direction again, but nothing was there. "A hallucination, maybe?" He turned his eyes toward the others on the altar.

Li Youcai was grievously injured and completely unconscious. Yueshen's eight copies had been destroyed, and she was quite hurt herself. Yuying had been knocked off the altar, her status unknown.

"Why did he hate me so much?" Lu Yun flicked a glance at the pieces of Li Xing on the ground. "How many awful things did this Lu Yun guy do before I came along?" he muttered with some lingering fear.

Earth's Lu Yun hadn't made any enemies since arriving in the world of immortals. Therefore, the only possible explanation was that these grudges were debts unpaid by the previous owner of this body.

After resting for a few moments, Lu Yun breathed a sigh of relief when he saw Yuying climbing back up the stairs to the altar. Not that he was worried that she'd actually die, since as long as he lived, she could be revived through the Tome of Life and Death.

"The altar is about to activate very soon, sir. We need to leave as quickly as possible, or we really will become sacrifices." The Panorama of Clarity had shielded Yuying from almost all damage. "The Portrait of Emptiness was placed here as a seal."

Lu Yun nodded in affirmation. "Are you alright, Yueshen?"

"I'm fine, my lord. I've only lost my specters." Yueshen drifted aloft once more. The flight restriction formation had no effect on her.

"Can you control the fatty?" Lu Yun pointed at Li Youcai.

“He’s an empyrean immortal. If he was awake, I’d only be able to hoodwink his senses, but I can completely possess him now that he’s out cold,” answered Yueshen.

“Good!” Lu Yun breathed another sigh of relief. He wouldn’t have known what to do if it weren’t for her help.

Yueshen’s assistance in Li Youcai’s body would make the road ahead considerably easier. There were many more dangers within the burial mound, and a meat shield like the fat immortal was invaluable.

The Dusk governor picked up the Seal of Mountains and Rivers and tossed it back to the fatty, then pocketed the golden coin. “This bad boy is mine now,” he chuckled.

“What should we do with him, sir?” Yuying glanced doubtfully at Qing Han. The young man was still crumpled on the ground in a listless heap.

“He saved me just now, didn’t he?” sighed Lu Yun. “I really didn’t expect that from someone who tried to kill me earlier.”

Qing Han could’ve cut down Lu Yun along with Li Xing, but had only killed the latter in the end. Furthermore, he’d protected Lu Yun by using the violet sword to shield the Dusk governor from harm.

“This Portrait of Emptiness is what he came here to find, right...” Lu Yun plucked the scroll off the ground as well. Without energy to fuel it, the painting rested quietly in his hand, pulsing with an eerie blue light.

He hesitated a moment, then helped the unconscious Qing Han up. Shoving the Portrait of Emptiness into the noble scion’s embrace, he gathered up Violetgrave for safekeeping. Finally, he put the other youth on his back.

“Let’s go.” Lu Yun wasn’t going to take the painting that Qing Han had come for.

There was an unspoken rule among tomb raiders that if someone found what they were searching for, they had the right of first claim. This rule applied universally, whether the other raiders were friend or foe.

This kid is skinny and heavily tanned, but he’s surprisingly soft. A fleeting thought flickered through Lu Yun’s mind.

The altar was completely empty now. Freed from the grip of the Portrait of Emptiness, the altar was slowly stirring to wakefulness. Runes on its foundation were lighting up, readying for actuation. If the group dawdled any longer, they really would be sacrificed.

The undead hags were scared off by the disturbance, fleeing in every direction. Lu Yun and the others took this opportunity to flee unhindered through the ancient city. It only took a few moments before they scaled the opposite cliffs.

As soon as they reached the top, a black sphere of energy enveloped the city behind them. Everything disappeared in a burst of lightlessness, including countless hags that shrieked with anguish. Only imprints remained on the ground afterward.

Lu Yun traded a terrified look with Yuying. If they'd stayed any longer, they would've been consumed as well.

"Ah..." A soft sigh sounded at Lu Yun's ear. "All of you need to stop walking forward. It doesn't matter if you die, but you'll get me in trouble too."

Chapter 37: Ghostface Maggots

"So you finally show yourself." Lu Yun wasn't at all surprised to hear the voice.

It didn't appear often, but every time it did, an illusion led Lu Yun and the others astray at a critical juncture. Thankfully, he'd seen through the illusions every time.

When the owner of the voice finally showed itself, the visage that appeared took his breath away. His heart skipped a beat upon seeing a face worthy of launching a thousand ships.

Silver hair ran down to a shapely waist and hip, framing perfect features that stirred the soul. A long, loose robe of silver silk covered a lanky, limber body. The arresting sight fulfilled all standards of beauty in the world. There were no words worthy of describing this being. Even Yuying and Mo Yi paled in comparison. Flawless, second to none, unequaled...

But damn, it's a man, sighed Lu Yun.

Indeed. This mesmerizing, sublime creature who could seduce all living souls was a man.

"Has it shown itself, sir?" asked Yuying. She knew there was something in the burial mound that could create illusions, but it had stayed hidden until now.

"You can't see it?" Lu Yun asked after collecting himself.

Yuying shook her head slightly, her delicate eyebrows knitted together.

"No one other than you can see me, not even the immortal ghost. But why are you an exception?" His voice was a soft murmur straight out of one's dreams.

"You're not a ghost, so what are you?" Lu Yun asked without much thought.

"Me?" The man paused and shook his head with a lost expression. "I don't know what I am. And why am I here?" He frowned, struggling to find an answer.

"What's your name?" Lu Yun reached out to touch the man, but his hand went straight through the other body. The man seemed more like a shadow than a living soul.

"My name? It seems to be Miao." He continued with uncertainty, "It's been too long since anyone called me by name, but I think it's Miao."

"Do either of you know someone called Miao?" Lu Yun asked Yuying and Yueshen. The woman and ghost shook their heads.

"Go back," Miao said abruptly. "You've obtained what you want. Go back the way you came." The air around him rippled, painting a faint path leading to heaven in front of Lu Yun.

"Stop it with the illusions!" hectorated the Dusk governor.

Miao trembled, and the illusion disappeared.

Lu Yun's expression lightened. "That's the only thing you can do, isn't it?"

Miao smiled wryly. His illusions were almost flawless. Many had entered the burial mound throughout the course of history, but all of them had ended up disoriented by his tricks. They either turned back and left, or were trapped in here forever.

This freak called Lu Yun, however, wasn't affected at all.

"Go back," Miao cautioned seriously as he watched Lu Yun. "If you go in any further, you'll die, and you'll drag me down with you."

"I want the Formation Orb," responded Lu Yun. "I'll leave after I get it."

The response elicited a pause, then a smile. "That's fine enough. The thing called the Formation Orb isn't stored in that most dangerous place. I'll lead the way," volunteered Miao.

Lu Yun cast a suspicious look at the newcomer.

Miao knew he was being overeager. He awkwardly explained, "Your current path leads to the center of the burial mound. Only death awaits if you go there. Things won't end well for me then, either."

Lu Yun nodded. "Lead the way. If you pull any tricks, I know a hundred ways to take you out."

A paper talisman appeared in his hand. It didn't belong to the world of immortals; it was an exorcism talisman from his world. He'd drawn it with the black flame in his dantian, and it could suppress any evil spirits or beings of yin.

Miao shuddered at the talisman. He didn't know why he was afraid of it, but he was.

Tunnels clustered along the cliff, bringing to mind the notion of an ants' nest covered in holes. Miao picked one out and entered it.

"Do you know who's buried here?" asked Lu Yun. He trailed after the man with Yuying on high alert. Yueshen controlled Li Youcai's body and brought up the rear.

Miao shook his head. "This place is a hodgepodge of creatures and monsters. Fights break out every single day. Whenever one batch dies, another enters and takes its place. Who knows who was the one first buried here?"

"How did you get in here?" Lu Yun was surprised. There were fights all the time? That was likely due to the Duality of Dragon and Tiger.

Lost, Miao shook his head. "I don't know. What a strange person you are." Self-infatuation flooded his voice as he stroked his face. "You're not enthralled by my looks."

"No matter how beautiful you are, you're still a man," Lu Yun huffed.

"Who—who are you talking to?" A weak voice came from Lu Yun's back; Qing Han had regained consciousness.

"You're awake." Lu Yun turned to smile at him.

Face flushed, Qing Han said in a panicked tone, "Put me down!"

"Oh? You can walk on your own now?" Lu Yun stopped to drop the envoy from his back.

As soon as Qing Han's feet touched the ground, however, his knees gave out. Only Lu Yun's quick reflexes saved him from planting his face onto the ground.

"Don't touch me!" yelled Qing Han.

An irritated Lu Yun pulled away and called out for Yueshen, "Fatty, you carry him!"

Under Yueshen's control, Li Youcai waddled toward Qing Han.

"You stay away from me as well!!" Qing Han just about lost his mind. He turned to Yuying, "Help me up."

"So you're after my house servant!" Furious, Lu Yun grabbed Qing Han and wrestled the envoy on his back. "It's me or the fatty. Pick one."

Take advantage of Yuying? Dream on!

Qing Han lay bonelessly on Lu Yun's back, so desperate that he wanted to cry. Of course he would pick Lu Yun when given the two options.

Lu Yun had wanted to leave the imperial envoy with the possessed Li Youcai, but the prefect's mission was to fall back and deal with any unexpected developments. That left only Lu Yun, and he wasn't going to just leave Qing Han behind when the young man had saved his life.

Plop!

The Portrait of Emptiness fell from Qing Han's arms due to his earlier dramatics. Lu Yun picked it up and returned it without hesitation.

"You—you're giving it to me?" The envoy stared at the back of Lu Yun's head in disbelief.

"You wanted it," Lu Yun said matter-of-factly, "so it's yours."

"This is an immortal treasure beyond the ninth-rank!" Qing Han couldn't believe his ears. Even arcane and peerless immortals would bitterly fight over such a treasure.

"Cut the crap and take it," Lu Yun grumbled. "Do you want me to have it so badly?"

Qing Han shut his mouth and tried to put away the painting, but he was too weak to even properly lift his arms.

"I don't think you can use this sword right now. Let me borrow it for the moment." Lu Yun drew Violetgrave from his waist and waved it at its owner. The latter nodded.

"Did you eat something sweet?" Lu Yun asked suddenly.

The envoy paused. "What?"

"Good thing your breath doesn't stink," Lu Yun grumbled.

Qing Han's face was almost flush with Lu Yun's ear; each of his exhalations hit Lu Yun's ear and cheek. There was a faint sweetness to his breath, and though Lu Yun had never wanted a man to breathe on him, at least it wasn't foul.

"Ai." Miao looked at the two of them and rubbed his forehead.

"What's that sigh for?" Lu Yun glanced at Miao.

Already reddened by Lu Yun's words, the sudden question befuddled Qing Han. "I didn't."

"I wasn't talking to you," Lu Yun responded casually. "There's another guy you can't see."

Qing Han shuddered.

"By the way, you should really work out more, Sir Qing Han," Lu Yun commented suddenly.

"Work out?" Qing Han didn't understand what the Dusk governor was trying to say.

"Men should have a body of iron muscles and strong bones. Look at you. You're all soft skin and tender flesh. It's all flab, where's the muscle? Your chest, especially—ow! Why are you biting me?!" Lu Yun abruptly yelped as Qing Han bit his ear. "Let go, let go! Stop it!" He shook his head violently.

Qing Han didn't let go until much later, then spat a few times for good measure.

"You talk like you have any muscle yourself!" he growled.

Lu Yun blushed. He hadn't had the chance to properly work out since inheriting this body. Though he was more toned than Qing Han, he still wasn't all that muscular. If it weren't for reaching the condensed qi realm, he wouldn't even be able to carry Qing Han. The young man wasn't heavy, but even a forty kilogram burden was too much for the past Lu Yun to bear.

"I know a weight training regimen. Once we get out of here, let's train together and see who succeeds in getting pecs first," Lu Yun snickered.

Qing Han tightened his jaw and scoffed, "Train together? You agreed to serve Qing Hongchen, my archenemy. Aren't you afraid he'll kill you?"

"Qing Hongchen?" Lu Yun snorted. "He even looks like a rat. His tongue is barbed silver and he changes his mind at the drop of a hat. Why would I serve him? I was just putting up a front."

Qing Han fell silent.

"Why are you carrying that ugly thing?" Miao asked faintly once they'd stopped talking. "He's nothing but a burden."

After a moment of silence, Lu Yun responded, "He saved me. I'm not going to just forget that and leave him behind."

"I don't understand you people," Miao complained, befuddled. "He saved you once, but he may get you killed now with him dragging you down."

"That's why we're human," Lu Yun said easily, "while you don't even know what you are,"

Miao's expression turned awkward.

Emotions flashed through Qing Han's eyes as he listened to Lu Yun's response. "You're talking to that invisible thing again?"

"My name is Miao," the man corrected.

"He said his name is Miao," Lu Yun relayed. "And he called you an ugly thing."

The further they went, the more water there was. Toward the end, Lu Yun's ankles were submerged.

"You should think about how you're going to deal with those strange creatures up ahead." Turning solemn, Miao abruptly stopped in his tracks and re-emphasized, "You mustn't die here, or I'm doomed!"

"Undead hags?" Lu Yun narrowed his eyes. "Wait, they're dead. Those are ghostface maggots!!"

Panic overtook his face. He'd finally encountered what he least wanted to see.

Chapter 38: Layout of Certain Death

Ghostface maggots were the larvae of corpse flies. While the flies could fly about freely, the maggots couldn't survive outside their host. They needed the corpse qi as a nutrient. Once they were separated from their host zombie, they would slowly wither to death.

The maggots proved Lu Yun's speculation right. They were inside the body of a giant zombie!

A dozen undead hags lay scattered in the water ahead, their bodies tattered. Two white maggots ate away at the jelly-like flesh. They were palm-sized, and although their bodies were harmlessly chubby, their heads sported horrifying, twisted expressions.

Squeak squeak squeak!

One of the maggots noticed Lu Yun and the others, and the face on its head glowed a faint red as it squeaked like a mouse. The other maggot reared up and shrieked at them.

Whoosh!

Emerald flames surged and swept over the maggots. They squeaked in pain as they burned to ashes.

"All things have their natural bane," Lu Yun muttered. "Ghostface maggots can kill undead hags, but they themselves are vulnerable to Emerald Mistfire."

Undead hags were strange creatures that were immune to all elements. Not even Emerald Mistfire could injure them. The maggots, however, while not being particularly powerful, were a natural counter. Just two of them had killed a dozen undead hags!

"They really are dead," he said in a heavy tone, using Violetgrave to pick at the tattered bodies.

"Don't—don't use my sword to touch those disgusting things," Qing Han complained from Lu Yun's back.

"Ah, okay." Lu Yun awkwardly put the sword away. When cultivators fought, they mostly used the light of their swords to attack their enemies. Rarely did anyone use their swords as a physical tool.

“How much farther do we have to go?” Lu Yun felt compelled to ask as they carefully navigated around the bodies of the undead hags.

“Not much further,” Miao announced after some deliberation. “But you’ll have to dig after a few more kilometers to get to your destination.”

Lu Yun widened his eyes. “We’re inside a zombie, and we’re digging a hole?”

“So what if we’re inside a zombie’s body?” Qing Han interjected. “Haven’t you realized that it was petrified a long time ago?”

“That’s right.” Miao nodded in agreement. “I always felt that this seemed to be the inside of a large zombie, but I also believe it’s dead and turned to stone.”

“Petrified? Can it be....” Inspiration struck Lu Yun. “Can it be that the giant zombie was the one who was first buried in the mound?” He stopped in his tracks and closed his eyes, making mental calculations.

“No, that’s not right.” He opened his eyes, his brows knitted tight. “We’re walking along the zombie’s meridians. Judging from their size, the zombie should be a few hundred meters tall. The burial mound is a bit small for a body this large.”

Meridians were much thinner than blood vessels and intersected within the human body to create a large, interconnected web.

Keeping in mind his suspicion that they were inside a giant body, Lu Yun had been mapping their progress to human meridians all along. The appearance of ghostface maggots had confirmed his speculation, which enabled him to make further deductions about their surroundings. There was a fixed ratio between the size of burial mounds and those they were meant for.

All of Lu Yun’s deductions led to one conclusion: Myriad Formation Summit wasn’t big enough for this body.

“A zombie that large?!” Qing Han shuddered against Lu Yun’s back.

The Dusk governor was at a loss as well. There were just too many things in this world that defied common sense. “Screw it. We’ll take it one step at a time, and get the hell out of here once we get the Formation Orb.”

If it didn’t make sense, there was no use dwelling on it. There were many mysteries in ancient tombs, especially those in the world of immortals. If Lu Yun insisted on getting to the bottom of everything, his head would’ve exploded a long time ago.

The conclusion resolved the knot in his mind and his steps became lighter in response.

“Careful, there’s a formation ahead.” Lu Yun paused at the development and readjusted Qing Han by the hip, bringing the envoy closer. “Strange, what’s a man’s ass so soft for?” he muttered without thinking, as his eyes—and thoughts—were fixed on the misty formation ahead. Shadows stumbled and paced within the formation, marking the presence of many entities.

Qing Han glared viciously at Lu Yun’s ear with a tightened jaw. He’d love to bite this bastard again.

“Yuying, Yueshen, follow me closely,” Lu Yun ordered with a slight tremor in his voice. Yuying nodded and moved up to closely shadow her master.

“This strange formation has claimed many lives. You must be careful; your deaths will also be my doom,” Miao sighed faintly. He was merely a shadow that could create illusions. There wasn’t much he could do.

“A feng shui layout’s not gonna stop me. If I fall into the same trap twice, I might as well kill myself right here.” Veins throbbed noticeably in Lu Yun’s forehead due to his stress. He clutched tightly at Qing Han’s thigh, his fingers digging into the flesh. The envoy could sense Lu Yun’s anxiety, so he just bit his lip and swallowed his complaints.

Lu Yun didn’t recognize the formation, but he recognized the feng shui layout it corresponded to.

Certain death.

That was how he’d died back on Earth—he was killed by a layout of certain death when exploring a Han Dynasty tomb. It’d been concealed within a layout of life. He’d fallen into the trap in a moment of carelessness. Now, in this enormous burial mound, the same layout, sans any concealment or facade, was once again before him.

Here we go again.

Yuying and Yueshen could sense his change of mood. They held their breaths and watched Lu Yun without a word. The very air congealed, the stillness broken only by a pained groan from the envoy on Lu Yun’s back.

“What is it?” Lu Yun asked with a tremble. The interruption had made him realize that he was too nervous. If he entered the layout of certain death in that state, he would be dead without a doubt.

“My leg hurts,” Qing Han admitted with exasperation, his face bright red.

“Um, I didn’t mean to!” Lu Yun hurriedly let go of Qing Han’s leg. Why does it feel so good to touch his leg? He shuddered and almost threw Qing Han off his back.

“I like women,” he muttered. “I like women.”

Qing Han’s eyes blazed with rage. “What did you say?!”

“Shut up!” snapped Lu Yun. He slapped Qing Han on the ass, making the young man shriek. The latter wanted to fight back, but couldn’t muster any strength. Without further ado, the governor stepped into the formation and white fog replaced the scene.

“Follow me closely,” Lu Yun commanded his two unearthly followers without turning around. “Don’t believe anything you see! And you stay put as well!” he snarled at Qing Han.

He knew that if he hesitated any longer, he would grow nervous again, which would cloud his judgement. That was why he’d stepped right into the layout the moment he relaxed. There were all kinds of terrors and traps within.

From behind him came a soft scoff. It was Yuying. She'd cut something's arm off with her sword, but it continued wiggling even after falling to the ground.

An undead hag. There was an undead hag within the formation!

The water had now reached his waist, and the biting cold kept assaulting Lu Yun's nerves. There was no movement behind him; Yuying had also disappeared.

"Your—your servant is gone," stammered Qing Han.

"Shut it!" Lu Yun growled like a wild animal. He grabbed Qing Han's buttock with the hand that'd been holding the envoy's leg, twisting with all of his strength. The pain almost made Qing Han cry. It was the only thing Lu Yun knew to do in response.

Yuying was dead.

She'd died the moment she cut down the undead hag.

However, she wouldn't stay dead. The Tome of Life and Death would resurrect her, just not immediately.

"Follow me, Yueshen. Don't lose the fat guy!" Lu Yun's chest heaved as he moved forward, one inch at a time. He could feel something entwining his legs beneath the water.

"Fake! It's all fake! If I believe anything, I'll die! That's what makes this a layout of certain death! It's a realm of illusions that can kill!" he roared gutturally as terrible monsters pounced at him one after another.

He saw Xue Lang and Old Willow coming for him, blood streaming out of their eyes. He saw himself back on Earth being executed by firing squad for his crimes. A large truck hit him, smashing him and running over the pieces.

These were all illusions that the layout created based on his memories and fears.

"Don't turn back, don't fight back, and don't flinch or dodge! Not even when something is about to eat me! If I fight back, I'll die!"

Back on Earth, Lu Yun had died when attacking a monster that was about to eat him. The illusions here were simply too real. Terrors continued assaulting his senses, trying to force him to believe what he saw.

He could see through Miao's creations, but not the ones in this formation! If it weren't for his resolute will, or if he hadn't known what he was dealing with, he would've believed everything in front of him.

Lu Yun felt a sudden surge of envy for Qing Han. The young man was terrified out of his wits and shrieking mindlessly. Though he believed the illusions, he was too weak to react, so the layout couldn't hurt him.

Lu Yun clenched his jaw so tightly that his gums began to bleed. He widened his eyes and stared down an undead hag approaching them.

"Move!" Miao shouted anxiously at his ear. "That's a real one! You're out!"

Chapter 39: The Belle On His Back

“Shut your mouth and stop talking!” Sensing that Qing Han was about to speak up, Lu Yun viciously pinched the young man’s butt, turning whatever the envoy was about to say into a yelp.

The undead hag moved... through the two of them and vanished without a trace.

“We’re at the center of the certain death layout. Everything you see or hear is an illusion. The layout will extract your soul the moment you answer anything, so keep quiet if you want to live!

“Listen to me. Just close your eyes and shut your mouth. I don’t want to hear a word out of you, even if you hear your ancestors calling out to you! That includes me talking to you right now. Listen, but don’t you dare reply!” Lu Yun said, his tone brooking no disobedience.

Resting against the Dusk governor’s back, Qing Han nodded in silence and closed his eyes. What he’d experienced inside this burial mound was far beyond his comprehension.

“Damn it, why is your ass like a woman’s!” Lu Yun’s aggressive tone sounded again. Although highly aggrieved, Qing Han kept his lips sealed.

The Dusk governor heaved a long sigh of relief. I pinched his ass just now out of pure instinct... Holy feck! Am I turning gay? he lamented inwardly. No, wait... I didn’t do it because it feels good to the touch. There was no other choice, given the situation. It was the only way to make him shut up. Right.

A little spooked, he repeatedly reassured himself. On his back, Qing Han suddenly weighed like an uncomfortable burden. I definitely don’t swing that way. Nope! Not to mention, Qing Han might not be the most ugly guy out there, but no one would ever call him a looker...

Damn it, what do his looks have to do with me? I don’t swing that way!

Resisting the urge to ditch Qing Han there and then, Lu Yun made his way forward step by step, wading into ever deeper water. Inside this formation, the water was the only thing that didn’t lie.

Just please don’t let it be corpse water from that zombie. Lu Yun’s heart pounded; corpse water would very likely infect him and turn him into one of the undead.

Jabbering from Yueshen and Miao drifted by his ears as they chattered about who knew what, but then he suddenly caught an unfamiliar female voice.

“Wait, why is the starstone losing its effect?” A warm and soft voice echoed quite pleasingly in the air.

Lu Yun seemed to feel Qing Han undergo a change on his back. The stick-thin body gradually turned fleshy, slender, increasingly more pleasant to the touch. Two strange, soft lumps pressed lightly against his back, making his heart quake.

He reflexively tilted his head back. Instead of Qing Han’s overly tanned face, he was greeted by the sight of an extraordinarily beautiful face resting against his shoulder.

Said face even wore an expression of disbelief.

Trying to seduce me? Lu Yun snickered inwardly. It’s not like I don’t know I’m carrying an ugly kid on my back. How is such a cheap trick part of the near death layout?

He kept his eyes trained on the ground and ignored the woman on his back, plodding onward.

Sure enough, the dainty female figure returned to its lanky, male form after a while. It still felt soft, but was miles apart from the slim, yet curvy figure from earlier.

Lu Yun smacked his lips. That illusion just now was actually a nice one. He suddenly halted and lifted his right hand. With a flash of purple sword light, he slashed at a corpsefish that had appeared out of the blue.

Splash!

The monster flopped back down in two pieces, coloring the clear water a dark red.

Lu Yun sheathed Violetgrave and resumed his journey. Truth and falsehood...

Genuine mortal dangers lurked within the formation. Then again, would he be this nervous if the layout only killed with deception?

After disposing of the fish, he turned around and retraced his steps, circling many times in the water.

I didn't think I'd lose sight of Yueshen. Are the illusions blocking my senses, or did she die in here? No, she's an immortal ghost, she wouldn't die so easily... Fatty Li Youcai is the only one who might. But if he died, where did Yueshen run off to? Lu Yun frowned lightly. He really couldn't sense the slightest trace of her or Miao. Qing Han and him were now the only ones left inside.

"What happened just now?" Qing Han suddenly murmured to himself. "Why—" he cut his sentence short and clamped his mouth shut.

"Did you feel yourself becoming a woman?" asked Lu Yun.

The earlier warning still fresh on Qing Han's mind, he merely threw back a ferocious glare and didn't answer. Even so, his face was bright red.

"It's alright, we're almost out of the formation." One hand supporting Qing Han, Lu Yun held the sword in his other. Fresh blood was still dripping from the weapon's blade, as he'd killed too many monsters to count.

Truth and lies lay interwoven inside the layout, but either could claim his life. If not for his will having been tempered by a previous brush with death, or if he hadn't become a cultivator, he'd truly have lost his life in this formation.

Qing Han sighed softly in relief at their deliverance.

"I lied! I'm one of the formation's ghosts and I've come for your life!" Lu Yun's tone suddenly turned forceful. The eerie, ominous voice made Qing Han blanch. On the verge of tears, he trembled repeatedly.

"Alright alright, I'm just messing with you. A grown man shouldn't cry like a snotty brat," Lu Yun said, softening his words with a smile. "Eh? Why do I know you're crying?" He blinked. "Oh, it's my consciousness."

As a cultivator, he possessed a consciousness to match. He'd just never made deliberate use of it before now. But after experiencing many trials inside the burial mound, he'd slowly acclimated to using a cultivator's methods, mentally transitioning from a tomb-raiding mortal to a tomb-raiding cultivator.

"I was wondering how I spotted a pretty girl on my back with just a sideways glance. Turns out it was my consciousness doing it." Recalling the details of that peerless face, he couldn't help but smack his lips again, somewhat regretful.

His lips thinning into a line, Qing Han stayed quiet, but his expression turned increasingly indignant.

After walking for a little while longer, they reached a wide open space. The water at Lu Yun's feet was much shallower in this place. There, he spotted Miao and Yueshen, as well as Li Youcai's bulky frame.

"My lord!" In control of Li Youcai, Yueshen flew his way the moment he appeared, sighing in relief when she saw him unharmed.

"How did you two end up here?" Lu Yun asked, a little confused. Miao was invisible, but Yueshen could still sense the spirit's existence.

"The formation is aimed at the living. I... don't know what I am, but in any case, I'm not alive. And little Yueshen is an immortal ghost. So of course it has no effect on us. We came here first and waited for you," explained Miao.

Lu Yun felt his scalp go numb. He'd clearly seen Yueshen behind him in the formation and had been dead certain it was her! So in other words, he'd already fallen for the trap then.

"My lord, before entering the formation, I told you I'd exit first and wait for you on the other side..." Yueshen's words chilled Lu Yun to the core.

He'd heard nothing of the sort.

So something had enthralled him before he'd even entered the formation! He'd dispelled it only because of his steadfast refusal to believe the fake Miao's words. It was also around the same time that the Yueshen following him had vanished.

"In that case, did you see me reply to you?" he slowly inquired.

"You nodded, my lord." Yueshen also seemed to notice something out of place.

"It even fooled an immortal ghost. What can it be?" whispered Lu Yun.

"I told you this place was dangerous. You should've listened to me," Miao grumbled. A thought struck him and alarm was suddenly writ large on his face. "Where's the girl who was with you? She's not dead, is she?"

"No, she's bringing up the rear. She'll be here soon," Lu Yun lied casually.

Yuying really had been behind him, but her senses had also been fooled at some point, so she hadn't heard his warning. That led her to attacking an illusory undead hag, spelling her death inside the layout.

Thankfully, she was an Envoy of Samsara and could come back to life because of the Tome of Life and Death, so she'd appear again after a little while.

“Good. Good. As long as she’s not dead...” repeated Miao.

“You seem very afraid that we’ll die in this place. What’s going on?” Lu Yun frowned.

“I’m not telling you.” Miao threw him an eyeroll.

Blinking, Qing Han hesitantly ventured, “Are you talking to something right now?”

He’d already seen Yueshen. The ghost was controlling Li Youcai at the moment and wasn’t visible, but he could sense her presence all the same. Miao, however... didn’t seem to exist at all. The sight of Lu Yun talking to empty air made Qing Han’s skin crawl.

“Something? I’m no thing, you ugly eyesore, I’m Miao!” retorted the outraged man.

“He said, ‘I’m no thing, you ugly eyesore, I’m Miao,’” repeated Lu Yun.

“Oh, okay,” Qing Han softly acknowledged against his back.

“Aren’t you mad he called you ugly?” Lu Yun paused.

“What’s there to be mad about? I can’t see him, and didn’t he call himself a nothing?” Eyes closed, Qing Han rested against Lu Yun’s shoulder, not even aware that he no longer found the action repulsive.

“...” Miao’s mouth twitched. “We’re at the right spot. Time to dig. The Formation Orb is right below our feet.” He pointed at the damp ground. “Are you sure you want to continue?”

Lu Yun nodded resolutely. “Qing Han, do you have any other immortal swords, flying swords, or anything like that inside your storage ring?” he asked with a glance at Violetgrave in his hand.

“My storage ring?” Qing Han tried to lift his hand, only to give up bonelessly in favor of an annoyed retort, “If I could use it, do you think I’d still be on your back?”

Lu Yun’s gaze fell on Li Youcai. Yueshen unlocked the fatty’s ring and dumped out a pile of very useful, and valuable, bones and stones. Very useful. And valuable.

“Sigh.” Shutting his mouth, Lu Yun took out two soybeans and flung them aloft.

Hum—

Hum—

Resplendent golden light blossomed from the two beans, followed by two two-meter-tall armored figures lumbering out of thin air.

“For what reason did thee summon this divine general?” one of them boomed.

“Dig a tunnel over here.” Lu Yun pointed at his feet.

“Dig? Knowest thou not of this noble general’s august status? And thee would have us dig?!” the figure shouted, his eyes wide open.

“Are you two digging or not?” Lu Yun’s expression darkened.

“We will, we will!” The two figures fawned obsequiously as soon as they saw his face. Without further ado, they rolled up their sleeves and, huffing and puffing, dug at the soil.

“Wh-what kind of combat art is that?” Qing Han gawked in sheer disbelief at the two armored giants. Thankfully, the tunnels were wide and spacious, or the two hulking figures might not have fit in the available space.

“It’s a... hmm, summoning art. It only summons puppets. Didn’t you notice? These two fellows aren’t all that bright,” Lu Yun replied.

“Oh, I see.” Qing Han nodded, still somewhat confused.

“We did it, we did it!” One of the golden warriors hollered excitedly before... falling into the hole he’d just dug. Lu Yun wearily rubbed his eyes and dismissed the two soldiers.

“The Formation Orb is right underneath, is it?” His heart pounded furiously.

“It’s... well, there’s still a little way to go. But whether you can reach that place depends on you,” Miao responded after some reflection.

“We’re going in!” Lu Yun tightened his jaw, secured Qing Han on his back, and jumped in without hesitation.

Chapter 40: Proof of Allegiance

Was Lu Yun scared?

He was only human. Of course he was scared. As an experienced tomb raider—and the best of his field, at that—however, fear wasn’t going to deter him. Quite the contrary, unknown terrors only excited him further.

“There’s a gradual slope here.” He made his way down the tunnel the soldiers had dug, adjusting his posture to maintain balance. “The air is very humid. There should be a large body of water ahead of us.”

It would either be a wetland or an enormous pond.

“There’s a pond up ahead, and past it, an annex room,” Miao said. “You’ll find what you’re looking for in there.”

“An annex room? Why’s there an annex room in a burial mound?” After brief confusion, Lu Yun quickly accepted the anomaly. Whoever was buried here had warranted an entire city as their burial goods, so building an annex room—a feature only found in tombs—was nothing in comparison!

There were very few corpse flies here, providing limited light. For cultivators, however, it was enough. Lu Yun slowly made his way downhill without a word, Qing Han on his back.

The sloping tunnel wasn’t very long. An enormous pond came into view after only a few kilometers, its waters rippling and reflecting with light. Like the ancient Truewater City, there was no source of light here, but the entire place was well lit.

“I’ve been here before,” Lu Yun muttered at the sight.

“Of course you have,” a chilling voice suddenly sounded from beside him. “What a trick you’ve pulled, Lu Yun, Governor of Dusk!”

Qing Hongchen!

The man’s clothes were tattered and his face was covered in bleeding cuts. Venom stabbed out of his eyes as he glared at the Dusk governor.

Lu Yun’s breath hitched; he hadn’t expected the young man to be here. Enlightenment struck in the next instant. Miao had led him to a tall cliff earlier, but the young governor hadn’t been fooled. Instead, he moved the consciousness brand that Qing Hongchen had imprinted on him to a stone, then threw it off the cliff.

At that point in time, Lu Yun had vaguely glimpsed a large pond below. Within it was a terrible creature that had devoured one of his bean soldiers. What he hadn’t expected was that Qing Hongchen would follow the brand down to where the Formation Orb was.

There was another man by Qing Hongchen’s side. It wasn’t Formation Thirteenth, but the Skyriver city lord.

“Kill them!” Lu Yun yelled.

“Die!” Yueshen charged in and Li Youcai activated the Seal of Mountain and River, smashing it down on Qing Hongchen and the city lord.

“No!!!” Qing Hongchen screamed in panic and bolted for the shore.

Rumble!

As soon as the seal activated, something disturbed the surface of the peaceful pond. An enormous white arm shot out and made a grab for it.

A giant corpsefish!

It was larger than the ones they’d seen before.

“Get lost!!” Yueshen pulled out of Li Youcai’s body and shrieked, her expression grave. That put fear in the fish’s dimly crimson eyes and its giant head slowly sank back into the pond.

Plop!

The seal fell into the water as well.

“My lord, I, I want to eat it!” Strands of black smoke abruptly rose from Yueshen’s body and her face turned eerily terrifying. Her eyes glowed scarlet as she stared at the pond with want.

“What—what is that?!” The Skyriver city lord exclaimed with fear when Yueshen suddenly manifested in midair.

“Is that the immortal ghost?” Qing Han gasped. He knew of her existence, and they’d interacted when she was in Li Youcai’s body. However, this was his first time seeing her in person.

“Go ahead,” Lu Yun responded calmly. He knew Yueshen would lose control if he denied her request. Immortal ghosts were dangerous beings of great grievances, and even an empyrean immortal like Li Youcai was nothing but a toy to her.

If it weren't for the Dusk governor's ability to control Yueshen and keep her nature in check, she would've long rampaged on a killing spree. Immortal ghosts were no benevolent creatures; this was Yueshen's true nature.

Permission obtained, the ghost cheered and dove into the pond, searching for the giant corpsefish.

“An immortal ghost, Lu Yun? How unexpected.” Qing Hongchen let out a long breath, then noticed Qing Han on Lu Yun's back. “Qing Han, my dear seventh brother, what happened?”

He could tell the condition Qing Han was in. With a feral grin, he stalked toward Lu Yun and his younger brother.

The Skyriver city lord threw his head back in satisfied laughter. “Oh, how the tables have turned, Lu Yun!”

He knew Qing Hongchen well; Lu Yun was dead without a doubt. The Qing scion might've allowed Lu Yun to live in order to use him, but not after the governor gave the order to kill.

“You don't have to get your hands dirty, fifth master. Allow me.” The city lord advanced on Lu Yun with a vicious smile.

“Alright.” Qing Hongchen nodded with an aloof expression.

“Wait!” Lu Yun said coolly. “Aren't you worried that the immortal ghost will kill you once she returns and finds me dead?”

“Return?” Qing Hongchen scoffed. “You don't know what's under the water, do you? She's not coming back. Do it!” he scoffed. “And kill Qing Han, too!”

“So what if you're the governor. You court death by stealing my fiance from me! Die!” The Skyriver city lord took a step forward and slashed at Lu Yun, his sword flaring with brilliance.

Buzz.

Violetgrave suddenly exploded into purple light and cut the city lord down.

“What?!” The city lord's face crumbled. His sword crashed into an invisible wall that shattered his wondrously sharp blade. The purple light expanded to enshroud him and reduced him to ashes.

Lu Yun panted, his face pale. Fresh blood dripped down the tip of the sword in his hand.

“Impossible!” Qing Han and Qing Hongchen yelled in unison. Violetgrave was a ninth-rank weapon, how could a qi condensation cultivator use it?

Qing Han had depleted all of his energy and strength to use the sword, and still couldn't move even now. Lu Yun, on the other hand, was simply breathing a little faster.

“Nothing is impossible. I wouldn’t have come to explore this burial mound with you guys if I didn’t have a few tricks up my sleeve.” Lu Yun’s breathing was labored and his face flushed. “I have some strength left in me. Even if I can’t kill you, I can at least injure you severely. That means death in this cursed place.”

He wasn’t afraid of Qing Hongchen. There were three true immortals within his Gates of the Abyss. However, Lu Yun didn’t want to summon them just yet; Formation Thirteenth was still lurking somewhere.

He didn’t think the man was dead. Even someone as useless as the Skyriver city lord had survived, so an immortal like Formation Thirteenth must still be alive. The only explanation for his absence was that the man had betrayed Qing Hongchen and was now in hiding.

As the thirteenth best formation master of Nephrite Major, he would surely detect that there was an invaluable treasure hidden in the burial mound.

Lu Yun looked around and found that Miao was also missing.

“What do you want?” Qing Hongchen said with narrowed eyes, his tone murderous.

“We’ll work together to find the treasure,” Lu Yun said seriously. “It’s a fair competition after that!”

“Work together? Sure,” Qing Hongchen scoffed. “But I’m more powerful than you. If you want an alliance, kill Qing Han and give me his head as proof of your allegiance.”