

Necropolis 41

Chapter 41: Dragon

“Proof of allegiance? Sure.” Lu Yun smiled slightly.

Qing Han tensed. Was the Dusk governor going to kill him?

Qing Hongchen started. He hadn’t expected Lu Yun to be so agreeable.

“However—” Lu Yun’s tone changed, “You die first! Kill!”

Qing Hongchen’s thought process had momentarily been derailed by the unexpectedly easy capitulation. He suddenly sensed a terrifying killing intent looming behind him.

“A true immortal!” Qing Hongchen’s stomach lurched. He ignored the killing intent and spun around, sprinting away from the vicinity of the pond.

Hum.

An invisible barrier emerged and crushed the true immortal’s attack in its infancy. A tall wave once again reared from the pond. Hair resembling wilted seaweed shot at the true immortal, entangling and dragging him into the waters. It then swept around the bank, seemingly searching for other prey.

Qing Hongchen sat on the ground, panting. “Haha, hahaha! You have a true immortal, too!” He sneered, but there was a trace of desperation beneath his curved lips. He had a transportation portal on him as well, but every immortal he’d summoned had died here.

“What the—!” Lu Yun was slack jawed with shock. That had been one of his Infernum. He wanted the nether soldier to sneak a fatal blow against Qing Hongchen, then retreat back into the Gates of the Abyss.

Unfortunately, the soldier’s attack was blocked by the formation the moment he showed up. Once dragged into the water, he’d instantly lost his life.

“No immortal can use their power here,” Qing Han explained calmly, prone on Lu Yun’s back. “Anything of their power level triggers the formation and makes the things in the pond attack.”

So that’s what’s going on here.

In control of Li Youcai’s body, Yueshen had previously deployed the full power of an empyrean immortal. That had lured the corpsefish out of the pond and negated Li Youcai’s attack.

Lu Yun’s Infernum had attracted another monster. From the glimpse he’d caught, it was an undead hag. However, the pond remained undisturbed when the Skyriver city lord died. Only immortal-level strength would trigger the local restrictions.

He’d now lost two Infernum in short succession.

“Not bad, Lu Yun. It seems that you really want me dead,” Qing Hongchen snorted derisively. He manifested a cyan sword with an indistinct haze and advanced imposingly on Lu Yun and Qing Han. “You’ve used up your tricks, though, so let’s just see who’s the one going to die here.”

“You can certainly try.” Lu Yun’s face clouded over and Violetgrave shone brightly in his hand. “I admit I can’t defeat you, but I’ll make you pay before I die. Just try me!” He bared starkly teeth. “Within this burial mound, being injured is as good as being dead.”

Eyes narrowed, Qing Hongchen stopped in his tracks. “Bastard, how can a condensed qi weakling like you activate a ninth-rank treasure?! And Qing Han, why would you give him your sword? Didn’t you want him dead?!”

Lu Yun shrugged innocently. Even he didn’t know why he could use Qing Han’s sword. The incapacitated envoy’s eyes shone brightly and he glanced at Lu Yun, face flushed.

“Hey, do you have any pills to replenish energy?” Lu Yun suddenly asked.

“I ate them all,” Qing Hongchen scoffed, throwing a glance at Qing Han. “Even if I still had some, I wouldn’t give them to you.”

Lu Yun rolled his eyes in lieu of a response.

“What a fool you are!” Miao came out of nowhere and levied an accusatory finger at Lu Yun, no care for maintaining his elegant demeanor. “Didn’t you see the defensive formation here? How dare you let your immortal ghost loose? Are you trying to get me killed?!”

“Alright, alright, I know now,” Lu Yun grumbled. “Just tell me how I’m supposed to get past the pond.”

Yueshen was already in the pond, her current condition unknown. Fatty Li Youcai was sound asleep as his spirit recovered. Miao’s reappearance had allowed Lu Yun to relax slightly.

“Who are you talking to?!” Qing Hongchen’s eyes widened at the Dusk governor’s words.

Even immortal ghosts left traces of yin energy in the air. Not everyone could detect it, but a genius like Qing Hongchen could. This time, however, he sensed nothing. The only thing where Lu Yun was looking at was an empty void.

“I don’t like him,” pouted Miao. “Even ugly eyesore Qing Han is more likeable.”

Lu Yun repeated his words to the brothers.

“But I don’t like him,” Qing Han yawned lazily with narrowed eyes.

Lu Yun hadn’t let the envoy off his back. Qing Hongchen would absolutely attack his brother as soon as he was physically on his own.

Miao sniffed seductively, eliciting instantaneous goosebumps all over Lu Yun’s body. “My beauty would absolutely conquer that ugly eyesore if he could see me! My looks are unrivaled!”

The spirit caressed his own face, pleased, then his tone turned serious. “You have two options. First, you can wait until Yueshen returns. This is her territory, so she can take you to the other side. Second, you can use the Portrait of Emptiness, which you’ve given to ugly eyesore Qing Han.”

“The former won’t work. Who knows when Yueshen will return? There’s obviously something else here, too, and any delay will only put us in more danger. As for the latter...” A malicious smile tugged at Lu Yun’s lips. He pointed at Qing Hongchen and whispered, “Can you lure him into the water, Miao?”

“No!” Miao screamed. “You can’t kill another! One’s dead already, no more life shall be lost here. Otherwise, the dragon will come back to life and I’ll be the first one doomed!”

“What do you mean ‘the dragon will come back to life?’” Lu Yun widened his eyes. “There’s a dragon here?!”

“No—nothing!” Realizing that he’d let the cat out of the bag, Miao changed the subject. “I can create an illusion realm and trap him. You may use the painting without concerns.”

He disappeared after that, and Qing Hongchen’s eyes became lost in space. No one knew what he was seeing.

“Miao just said that if another person dies, a dragon will be resurrected!” Lu Yun murmured. This was too much for him to process.

“A dragon? Resurrected?” Qing Han was stunned as well. “There’s a dragon here?”

Splash!

A head popped out of the water and a dejected Yueshen floated into the air with a pout.

“I lost it, my lord.” She’d lost her earlier viciousness and now looked like a little girl immensely saddened because she’d dropped a piece of candy.

Lu Yun sighed in relief when he saw Yueshen resurface. Whatever the deal was with the dragon, it could wait. “Are you alright?” He considered her closely.

“I’m fine,” Yueshen responded unhappily. “I lost the big guy.”

“That’s alright, there are plenty of others here. Miao said this is your turf. What’s under the water?”

“My turf?” Yueshen looked lost. It was obvious that she didn’t think of the place as her territory.

“There’s corpsefish, undead hags, and ghostface maggots beneath the water.” She thought for a moment longer and declared with great certainty, “And that’s not regular water in the pond, but corpse water! Any living beings will die if they fall in!”

Chapter 42: Truewater City Lord

“Corpsewater!” Lu Yun shivered reflexively. Thank goodness he hadn’t tried to cross the pond on impulse. He was under the impression that corpsewater tended to be yellowish, muddy, and generally rancid smelling. The pool before him, on the other hand, was perfectly clear, like ordinary water.

Without Yueshen’s warning, he wouldn’t have been able to tell.

When a normal person ran afoul of corpsewater, the best they could hope for was zombification.

“How are we supposed to get across it?” Lu Yun’s expression was rather dark. This water probably originated from the humongous corpse they were in.

“My nine coffins... they’ll float on corpsewater,” Yueshen replied hesitantly, after some deliberation.

“Corpsewater has no density, so not even a feather will float upon it. But my coffins are rather special... I think they should probably work.”

“Well, it’s worth a try.” Lu Yun wasn’t exactly filled with confidence.

Corpsewater was a special substance that zombies and rotting corpses exuded. It was incredibly toxic, and once pooled, nothing could touch it without being consumed. Only a few specific monstrous species could survive in it, like corpsefish, undead hags, and corpse flies and the like.

“If they sink, you’ll need to go down and salvage them,” he added.

Yueshen’s nine coffins had originally formed a Ninefilia Specter Fostering layout, the basis of her existence. Now that they’d entered, and the art assimilated by the Gates of the Abyss, she would exist even if they were scattered, as long as the coffins remained intact.

“Alright,” Yueshen agreed readily.

Lu Yun conjured a pitch-black coffin with a wave of his hand. It landed on the surface of the corpsewater pool, spinning around once before achieving solid buoyancy.

“It works!” His eyes lit up.

“I knew it. I told you Yueshen would be able to do it,” Miao exclaimed proudly upon his return from bespelling Qing Hongchen.

“Why did you tell me to use the Portrait of Emptiness then? You should’ve told me about the coffins in the first place,” Lu Yun huffed.

The invisible spirit could only smile sheepishly.

“Stay still on my back and don’t move,” the young man instructed Qing Han, who nodded slightly. The latter couldn’t move even if he wanted to.

Possessing Li Youcai’s body once more, Yueshen leapt onto the coffin and sprawled atop it. Lu Yun jumped next, landing squarely on the fatty’s back.

The coffin’s lid was closed, and there wasn’t much room upon its surface. Li Youcai’s large body occupied most of the space, which forced Lu Yun to stand on his back.

Ditching her rotund host, Yueshen reemerged and began pulling the coffin along. They drifted slowly through the pond like a small boat.

A number of bloody or pallid eyes stared at the coffin from beneath the surface, but the immortal ghost’s presence daunted the corpsefish, preventing them from appearing. A number of undead hags also tailed them. They weren’t scared of Yueshen, like the fish, but they were oddly wary of her coffin.

“There’s someone on the other side. Who is it? Could it be Formation Thirteenth?” Qing Han whispered suddenly from Lu Yun’s back.

“That’s not a person. Close your eyes and don’t look at it.” Lu Yun put his fingers over the envoy’s eyes.

“Not a person? Then what is it?” Taken aback, Qing Han obediently shuttered his eyelids.

“An immortal ghost... a vengeful one.” Lu Yun’s eyes were fixated upon the white shadow on the other shore.

It wore robes white enough to instill ghastly despair. Long, sable strands of hair trailed to its feet. It stood silently at the water's edge, its back apparently turned to Lu Yun and company. Nevertheless, the young man felt two palpable daggers of venom drilling into his body.

"Such intense resentment! This ghost is different from Yueshen, who fears me because she's hung onto her sentience and rationality. This ghost is filled with nothing but malice. It's not afraid of me, and the current me can't drive it off!"

He knew what he was capable of. He was a Yama King in the flesh, but a very weak one. Only immortal ghosts who still possessed awareness feared him, not those blinded by hatred. The aura of destructive authority he emanated wasn't enough to daunt them.

It made sense, in a way. Madmen wouldn't kneel to an emperor the way that ordinary men would. At a high enough cultivation level, Lu Yun would be able to erase the ghost's resentful thoughts with a single gesture, but he was still very far away from that point.

The instant the coffin touched the shore, he leapt onto dry land with Qing Han in tow, putting as much space as possible between the ghost and himself. Yueshen, now back in Li Youcai's body, followed closely behind.

"Atone... for... my... people!" A hoarse growl screeched from the ghost's maw.

A sinister breeze carried it aloft and it lunged aggressively at Lu Yun, its black hair parted to reveal an ashen face and crimson eyes. There was only raw enmity behind them, nothing else.

"Such incredible resentment! Just how did this ghost die?!" Lu Yun was incredulous. The rancor he felt was hair-raising in its severity. A normal ghost that had loose ends to resolve wouldn't feel so much emotion!

The emotions ran so high, they shot up to the heavens! That was the only way Lu Yun could describe it.

Abandoning Li Youcai's body, Yueshen floated protectively at her master's side. "Leave us!" she demanded, her own aura becoming ominous once more as she spoke. The forbidding atmosphere descended into the uncanny as the shore became a spectral haunt. The two ghosts fought and tore at each other crazily.

"What kind of ghost is that, really!" Lu Yun was rather frightened.

Yueshen was a ghost born of the Ninefilia Spectral Fostering. One of the most sinister and powerful ghosts in the world, she was capable of overwhelming the vast majority of her lesser brethren.

Yet that vengeful ghost was dueling her to a standstill.

"She..." Miao's voice sounded softly. "She's Truewater's city lord. An entire city of immortals was sacrificed, including herself, her friends, her family, her people... why shouldn't she be filled with spite?"

"She's... the late Truewater city lord?" Lu Yun's eyes opened wide. "No wonder she said 'atone for my people' earlier. But why is her ghost here? Is she the main burial good? Does that... annex room... belong to her?" He became rather uncertain.

There was a closed stone door only a short distance away, an annex room doubtlessly behind it. He couldn't reach it right now, though. Yueshen and the vengeful ghost's battle prevented him from going anywhere.

"Rumor has it that the Truewater city lord was an exceptionally beautiful fairy, five thousand years ago. She once set up a formation that slew thirty-six monster kings of the North Sea, which spread her fame far and wide. Alas, she wasn't able to escape the descent of Mount Myriad Summit either." Lu Yun's wonderings prompted a melancholic explanation from Qing Han. "So she's the Truewater city lord. Her grudge too strong to allow her to simply pass on after death, she lingers yet, demanding justice for her people."

"She set up a formation? Could she have been a formation master? If the Formation Orb is truly here... could that have been her treasure?" Lu Yun blinked.

"Perhaps." Qing Han shook his head. "A connate treasure like the Formation Orb is desirable to even dao immortals. Who would announce their ownership of it to the world?"

He glanced down at the Portrait of Emptiness. This, too, was one of the legendary treasures owned by the lord of Truewater. It was why he'd come here in the first place.

"Take me to your corpse," Lu Yun suddenly commanded Miao.

"Eh?" Miao blinked, looking at the youth with some confusion.

"I said, take me to your corpse," repeated Lu Yun.

"No, it's too dangerous there. You'll die for sure!" The spirit shook his head.

"Then I'll commit suicide right here." Lu Yun placed Violetgrave upon his own neck. "I'd like to see whether that dragon will awaken and eat you after I die."

Miao was gobsmacked, entirely unsure of how to respond to the young man's threat.

"Alright, fine. You can come with me, but you have to leave the ugly eyesore here." He yielded in the end.

"He has to come with us. I'm not leaving him here to die." Lu Yun shook his head again.

Chapter 43: A Living Layout

"Alright, follow me." Miao didn't have much of a choice. He was truly worried that Lu Yun would slit his own throat on an impulse, or even kill Qing Han. Well, the latter was more likely than the former.

"What you've seen so far are mostly illusions," explained the spirit with a grave expression. "If you treat what you see later as illusions, however, you'll die."

"I understand." Lu Yun nodded seriously, then repeated Miao's words to Qing Han.

The imperial envoy nodded dejectedly. He was too weak to move even a muscle. Whether the threats they encountered were real or not didn't make a whole lot of difference to him; he could only rely on Lu Yun now. If the Dusk governor abandoned him, he was as good as dead.

“You must hold on, Yueshen,” Lu Yun shouted at the ghost before leaving. “Don’t let that vicious ghost kill you!”

The unresolved grievances powering the ghost of Truewater’s city lord were simply too great and Yueshen was starting to lose ground. “Don’t worry, my lord. My spirit will coalesce in the coffin formation even if she kills me.”

That greatly reassured Lu Yun. He’d already sent her coffins into the Gates of the Abyss and re-established the Ninefilia Specter Fostering layout.

Find Miao’s body and make him my second Envoy of Samsara! That was Lu Yun’s new goal.

Miao was clearly somebody. Truewater City was destroyed five thousand years ago by Myriad Formation Summit, but the spirit recognized the city lord, which meant he’d been buried here for more than five millennia.

His soul still remained strong after all this time, and he could even spin illusions. He must’ve been inordinately powerful when he was alive. More importantly, his experience and memories would be invaluable, allowing Lu Yun to avoid the dangers in the burial mound and go wherever he wished. He’d be able to deal with the city lord’s ghost then, too.

Under Miao’s guidance, Lu Yun ascended a steep cliff with Qing Han on his back and entered another passageway. This one was wide and damp, submerging Lu Yun’s ankles in water that chilled to the bone. The further in he ventured, the deeper the water became.

“This, this isn’t corpsewater, is it?” Lu Yun asked nervously.

“There was once an enormous lake near Truewater City called the Truewater Lake,” Qing Han answered quietly. “This water should be from that lake.”

Lu Yun sighed with relief. “That makes sense. If this were corpsewater, I’d be a zombie already.”

Given the number of hidden rivers and ponds here, Truewater Lake must’ve fractured from the impact of the mountain and become part of the giant zombie within the burial mound.

“Enough chatter,” Miao interrupted them in a grave tone. Before he could say anything else, a piercing tiger’s roar broke through the air, followed by the boisterous racket of percussion.

“Make way for the Tiger Prince!” Shadowy figures floated across the space in front of Lu Yun and Qing Han.

Qing Han widened his eyes in disbelief. The Tiger Prince?

There was a silhouette of an enormous tiger among the shadows, sprawling on a litter that was being pulled by three dragons and escorted by a myriad of other beasts.

Lu Yun was likewise seized by shock. The shadows seemed unassuming, but they were sentient and they could talk! So that made them real beings, as opposed to illusions. Now he understood Miao’s warning.

“Don’t talk. Don’t even make a sound. If any of the shadows notice you, you’re dead,” Miao said quietly. “Once they consume you, they’ll turn into living souls and escape the burial mound. You’ll be trapped here in their stead.”

Sensing that Qing Han was about to say something, Lu Yun grabbed his butt and gave it a firm twist, repeating his actions from the layout of certain death. The envoy shut his mouth with a tremble and glared angrily at his ride, who stared pensively as the carriage passed and only relaxed after it was out of sight.

“Stop glaring at me. Do you think I like grabbing a man’s ass?” Lu Yun huffed unhappily. Qing Han was on his back, so it was the only way to alert him without talking.

Qing Han’s face turned red, but he knew the governor was right. This was neither the time nor place to dwell on it, anyway.

“What were those?” he asked with a trembling voice instead. “Immortal ghosts?”

“No.” Lu Yun shook his head.

“I don’t know what they are either.” Miao shook his head as well. “They aren’t living beings, since they’re only shadows. But they aren’t ghosts, either, since they don’t have a soul. I can’t put my finger on it.”

“I know what they are,” Lu Yun said, cold sweat beading his forehead. “But I need to confirm my speculations.”

The Tome of Life and Death shifted slightly in his dantian, sending out the shadows of the Enneaworm Coffinbearers. The nine shadow dragons hovered in the air, bearing a large coffin.

“What the—” Qing Han widened his eyes. “Isn’t this the same as the shadows just now?” To him, Lu Yun’s dragons felt almost identical to the Tiger Prince and the other shadows.

“You’re right. They’re layouts, just like the Enneaworm Coffinbearers!” A chill spread through Lu Yun’s body. The physical manifestation of the Enneaworm Coffinbearers was already a big enough shock. In this burial mound, however, feng shui layouts had not only gained physical forms, but also intelligence.

“So this is the Duality of Dragon and Tiger!” An idea struck him like lightning.

“What?” Qing Han asked nervously.

“The Duality of Dragon and Tiger is a layout of conflicts. It prompts two opposing forces to clash endlessly, so that whoever is buried here will never have peace! The dragon bears claws and scales, while the tiger gives rise to hundreds of beasts. The various other major and minor feng shui layouts scattered around here came to life because of their energy and joined the fray.” Lu Yun turned to Miao. “There must be some mysterious power at play to make that a reality. No wonder you’ve been keeping me away from this place.”

Miao nodded, half understanding. “They weren’t in the burial mound until five thousand years ago when the mountain dropped down from the sky.”

Lu Yun frowned deeply and searched for an explanation, but came up with nothing.

“Forget it!” he breathed out. “The answers will come to us once we reach the center of the burial mound and see the truth of the Duality of Dragon and Tiger! Let’s keep going!” His eyes shone with excitement. There was nothing more exhilarating than uncovering the unknown.

The further they went, the more living feng shui layouts they found. As long as Lu Yun and Qing Han remained silent, though, the layouts couldn’t sense them.

“Whoa!” Lu Yun dodged a living layout, only to be greeted by a piercing scream. An undead hag lunged viciously at the Dusk governor from the waist-deep water.

“Shit!” Caught off guard, he hurriedly dodged the attack and cut down the undead hag with Violetgrave.

Its head thudded to the ground. However, its headless body still charged at him as ferociously as before.

Lu Yun decisively cut the hag into pieces with shadowy sword copies. Violetgrave was a ninth-rank treasure, sharp enough to cut through the undead hag like butter. However, every piece of the creature’s flesh and bones were still alive, and they continued to lunge at Lu Yun.

Buzz.

Violetgrave shone brightly, knocking the pieces away as Lu Yun made a sudden dash forward.

“Who dares intrude upon the territory of King Tiger!!” A voice suddenly boomed as a giant shadow dropped from above, targeting Lu Yun. The human felt as though the air around him had thickened, greatly slowing his movements.

“Living souls!” The giant shadow cheered. “Eating one of you will allow me to join the living and escape this place!”

“Out of my way!” Lu Yun shouted and thrust outward with his hand, deploying the nine dragons at the shadow.

“Dragons!” it screamed in panic. The Enneaworm Coffinbearers tore the shadow to pieces and devoured it.

“Huh, that works too?” Lu Yun stared at his feasting dragon shadows, dumbfounded. He’d thought that the Enneaworm Coffinbearers had become his combat art after entering his body, but a combat art coming to life and... devouring another feng shui layout?

“Let’s go,” Qing Han cautioned weakly. “Undead hags are coming!”

Lu Yun turned and saw a dozen undead hags shooting toward them underwater. Startled, he hurriedly retracted the shadowy dragons and ran ahead. However, the ruckus had attracted the attention of other shadows and they swarmed into the tunnel, darkening the already dim environment.

Roar!

A tiger roar exploded in the air, heralding the arrival of the Tiger Prince and driving away all of the other shadows.

“Two living souls!” Its deep, raspy voice was thick with excitement. “I’ll eat your souls and take your bodies. Then my royal father and I can escape this place and stop fighting that old dragon!”

Its heavy body descended upon Lu Yun and Qing Han as it spoke.

“Put me down and run,” Qing Han urged. “Don’t mind me!” He tried to wriggle off Lu Yun’s back as he spoke, but was too weak to lift even a finger.

He knew the current him was only a burden. The only chance for Lu Yun to survive was to use him as bait and summon the nine dragons, buying himself time to escape. Otherwise, they’d both die here.

This Tiger Prince was a more than formidable foe; his presence alone was enough to overwhelm both young men.

“Shut it!” growled Lu Yun and slapped Qing Han hard on the butt. The envoy ground his teeth from the pain, his eyes brimming with tears.

“I told you that men shouldn’t cry.” Lu Yun’s chest heaved violently and he summoned the Enneawyrm Coffinbearers, but they were ripped apart like paper by the tiger’s presence as soon as they emerged. Black flames blazed in his eyes as his mind raced for options.

Boom.

A sudden rumble echoed through Lu Yun’s body. Under the tremendous pressure of the situation, he broke through in the face of an overwhelming threat and ascended to the qi transformation realm. Another death art came to him.

Spectral Eye. Identify living from dead, yin from yang. See through all life and death within five hundred kilometers!

Swoosh!

A painting slowly unfolded in the air, showing a panorama of a mountainous landscape surrounding bodies of water. The scene came alive with the sound of birdsong and the scent of flowers.

Lu Yun and Qing Han felt an instantaneous easing of the pressure. The giant tiger was instantly absorbed into the Panorama, and turned into a cub frolicking about the landscape.

Yuying slowly walked out from thin air.

“Yuying has arrived late. I await my punishment, sir.” She stood in the water and bowed slightly.

“You’ve come, and that’s all that matters,” Lu Yun sighed with relief. He’d made a breakthrough in the heat of the moment, allowing Yuying to be resurrected ahead of schedule.

More importantly, due to his improved cultivation level when activating the book, she had now recovered to peak true immortal!

Chapter 44: The Corpse as the Coffin

Yuying was already an immortal before her death. It was just that the thousand years since her passing had left her weakened, so she hadn’t recovered her full powers when she first became an Envoy of Samsara.

When she'd died again in the layout, she was returned to the Tome of Life and Death. Lu Yun's subsequent breakthrough had tapped into the power of the tome and allowed her to resurrect earlier, this time with her cultivation recovered to its peak.

Imbued with the power of immortals, Yuying was now able to manipulate the Panorama of Clarity much more easily, letting her use its core power to seal away the Tiger Prince. In addition, Lu Yun's breakthrough had bestowed upon him a powerful death art.

Spectral Eye!

This allowed him to witness all life and death within five hundred kilometers.

In other words, no dead folks within the area of effect could escape his eyes. He could even use the art to determine the dead's identity, which was the most heaven-defying thing about it.

"It's like a luopan—no, it's even more useful!" Lu Yun could barely contain his excitement once he understood his newly obtained death art; it would allow him to easily discover hidden tombs.

"How—how did she get here?" Qing Han blurted out. He'd been prepared to die with Lu Yun, but Yuying had arrived out of nowhere at the eleventh hour and sealed the tiger away.

"So this is where my house servant ran off to," Lu Yun lied. "She exited in another direction at the layout of certain death. I didn't expect her to end up in the same place as us."

Qing Han wasn't convinced. He'd seen Yuying disappear after cutting the arm off an undead hag and had pointed it out to the Dusk governor at the time. "But I saw—"

"The same happened with Yueshen. She was following us in Li Youcai's body," Lu Yun cut him off. "But when we left the layout, she was already waiting on the other side."

"Oh, I see." Now that he seemed to remember, Qing Han released his suspicions.

Lu Yun sighed in relief, but then a shudder ran down his spine. Wait a hot second, why do I care about his feelings? Am I—!!!

Lips trembling, color drained from his face. He recalled the glimpses of the stunning beauty back in the layout of certain death. Is that why? The layout is certainly powerful. It's affecting me even now!

"What wouldn't I give for that beautiful chick on my back to be real," he muttered.

"What beautiful chick?" Qing Han lay against Lu Yun's shoulders, his face heating up at the remark. Only he—no, she—knew that the starstone concealing her true appearance had been temporarily rendered ineffective in the layout of certain death, revealing her true self.

Did he see me? Her thoughts wandered, heart pounding.

"Hmph, the layout of certain death created the illusion of a beautiful girl. She's fake, but she was truly the finest beauty." Unsatiated, Lu Yun clucked his tongue. "It'd be wonderful if she were real. I'd make her mine. No, wait, that girl is actually the bony kid on my back." Goosebumps broke out all over his body as the realization hit home.

"Put me down!" Qing Han raged when he heard Lu Yun's whispering.

“Knock it off. If I drop you, the undead hags in the water will snatch you up.” Lu Yun unconsciously pinched Qing Han’s butt again. The envoy was so frustrated she could cry.

Hum—

Yuying blockaded the coming undead hags with the Panorama of Clarity, absorbing them into the painting and burning them to ashes upon entrance. Her Emerald Mistfire was at its most powerful when deployed within the painting.

The premises were now eerily silent as the Tiger Prince’s disappearance had sent the other shadows fleeing. It would seem that the panorama was a natural bane for the living layouts.

“Feng shui and formations.... The interplay of natural landscapes gave rise to the very first layout and formation. The Panorama of Clarity encompasses natural geographical terrain like mountains and rivers, so no wonder it can contain the layouts here.” Realization dawned on Lu Yun. The painting wouldn’t be effective, if the layouts hadn’t become sentient shadows. It could seal living layouts, but not dead ones.

“Humans really are strange,” Miao commented curiously as he heard Lu Yun and Qing Han bicker. “You have feelings for the ugly eyesore on your back, so why do you deny it?”

“Shut your stinking, putrid, useless mouth!” Lu Yun flew into a rage. He had feelings for Qing Han? A fecking man? Lu Yun was damn certain that he was as straight as the straightest fecking arrow!

Feeling awkward, Miao fell silent.

“What did he say?” Qing Han asked curiously, sensing Lu Yun’s anger.

“You shut up, too!” Lu Yun twisted Qing Han’s buttocks again, making the young man grimace in pain.

“I think that for my kind, touching each other’s tail is a gesture of affection,” Miao pointed out. “The ugly eyesore doesn’t have a tail, but doesn’t it mean you like him if you keep pinching his butt?”

Lu Yun balled his hands into fists and hoisted Qing Han higher. I really can’t touch his ass again! Why does a man’s ass feel better than a woman’s, anyway? He was getting confused himself and had absolutely no idea why he was acting like this.

It has to be a lingering effect of the layout of certain death. My subconscious must still think I’m carrying a beautiful girl! He took a deep breath to drive away the intrusive thoughts. Stop thinking about ass.

Qing Han’s eyes were misty with tears and his dark face reddened, his thoughts straying to unknown places.

“Here.” Miao stopped and pointed ahead. “There’s my body.”

Lu Yun took a good look. There was an elevated road before them, wide and gently sloping upwards. At the end of it hovered a floating summit, the top of which sparkled with an unknown object.

“Have you noticed?” Qing Han asked quietly just as his ride was about to set foot on the path. “The road looks like a tongue.”

Lu Yun’s expression tightened at the observation. He quickly turned back and looked up. “So that’s how the dragon coils around the tiger!”

An enormous human face came into view above them. It spanned more than six miles long, its eyes widened by emotion. A large crater punctured the center of its two eyebrows, which seemed to be the cause of death.

Flanking the human face were the heads of a dragon and tiger! Both were sculpted from mountainous rock and were the same size as the giant's skull. Most of the two beasts' bodies were piled atop the giant, forming a bizarre arrangement.

The Duality of Dragon and Tiger!

So this was its true form. Lu Yun could also see the tiger's eyes fixed on Yuying, a hint of murderous resentment in its eyes.

"The layout is too enormous. It won't be easy for the tiger king to manifest and escape." He understood the viciousness in the tiger's eyes.

"Corpse coffin," Qing Han remarked faintly.

"What?" Lu Yun tilted his head and looked at the envoy with his consciousness.

After a purposeful pause, Qing Han relayed an old tale. "I once read descriptions of a strange race from an ancient text retrieved from an immortal's tomb. They existed a hundred thousand years ago, before the war of immortals. Whenever their kin died, they hunted down members of other races and used those bodies as coffins for the dead."

Lu Yun gaped.

"You said the mountain is a large burial mound, but also that the giant body didn't fit the proper size ratio of the dead to their final resting place," Qing Han continued in a soft, measured tone. "If my guesses are right, the body itself is a coffin. There should've been a tomb housing the corpse coffin, but it was destroyed. The burial mound and the Duality of Dragon and Tiger were set up afterwards."

"That explains everything." Lu Yun sucked in a breath. "The burial mound and the Duality of Dragon and Tiger were probably set up by the body's friends or family in revenge. The body wasn't this big in the beginning, either. The grievances of the dead buried in the corpse coffin enlarged the surroundings after their tomb was replaced by a burial mound."

Qing Han nodded, but froze in the next second. "Look!" his voice trembled. "Doesn't that face look like Yueshen?!"

"That—" Lu Yun's eyes widened with shock, and he mouthed, "So the Ninefilia Specter Fostering layout was actually set up to protect and nourish her soul!"

Yueshen's final fate in life had been to serve as a corpse coffin. Someone had downgraded the palatial tomb around her into nothing more than a pile of dirt and established the Duality of Dragon and Tiger, which provoked the dead's grievances. That, in turn, ballooned Yueshen's body and the burial mound, turning it into the Myriad Formation Summit that everyone knew.

The person then entered the burial mound and collected the fragments of Yueshen's soul, setting up the Ninefilia Specter Fostering to resurrect Yueshen.

Indeed, resurrection!

They were in a place of extreme yin and death; the extremity of anything led to its counterpart, or in this case, life.

In Lu Yun's sect, there were records of a feng shui layout to resurrect the dead. It was said that such a layout could be found within the mausoleum of the first Qin emperor. However, the layout was dispersed in the end, so the emperor had remained dead.

"A new person must've entered and changed the layout again. They moved the poles of life and death away from the formation sustaining Yueshen. That's why she became a ghost instead of coming back to life. The nine sectors and eight trigrams were originally nourishing an immortal body for Yueshen to resurrect in. However, the new person's adjustments turned the body into a bloodcorpse, instead." Lu Yun turned back to look ahead.

The summit floated at the highest concentration point of death energy in the mound, which meant it was also the only point of life in the mountain. This was where Miao's body was.

1. Your friendly neighborhood etvo reminds y'all that a luopan is a compass used in feng shui, used for determining direction and locating items.
2. Remember, tombs are for elites and nobility, while burial mounds are for common nobodies. Tearing down a tomb and throwing a bunch of dirt onto the coffin instead would be a huge insult to the dead.

Chapter 45: A Dream

"What are you staring at me for?" Seeing Lu Yun look back in his direction, Miao couldn't resist caressing his face. "Have you finally been conquered by my unparalleled looks, perhaps?" he said, a little bashful.

"I'd rather feast my eyes on the pretty girl from the certain death layout," snorted Lu Yun.

Qing Han made a moue and blushed once more.

"You have to be careful, a dragon lies in wait over there," Miao warned when he saw Lu Yun make his way along the tongue toward the floating summit. "If it comes back to life, it'll certainly swallow me whole. Well... it's already tried and failed, I suppose," he mumbled as he followed behind.

The peak gradually enlarged in Lu Yun's field of vision.

"A resurrection layout, sure enough.... A feng shui grand influence over the world as described by the sect records!" His eyes burned with feverish zeal as he recognized the structure on the peak.

The classics divided feng shui layouts into four realms: formations, layouts, influences, and grand influences over the world!

The one in front of him belonged to the highest tier. It commandeered nature's blessings to invert yin and yang in order to bring back the dead! For a tomb raider and feng shui master, such a grand influence exuded an attraction that was impossible to resist.

Of course, the four-tiered classification was based on knowledge from Earth, and his perspective was much broader now that he'd arrived in the immortal world. Grand influences were certainly not the be-all and end-all of feng shui.

There absolutely was greater power to be found.

"This is..." He abruptly froze. "A bronze outer-coffin!" He squeezed out the words through clenched teeth.

"Isn't that the one we saw when we first came in?" asked an equally baffled Qing Han. "Is it real, or illusion?"

"It's real." Lu Yun took a deep breath. Yuying quietly stood by, wielding the Panorama of Clarity and alert against lurking dangers. Her treasure kept the living layouts at bay, ensuring that they were too intimidated to approach.

.....

The bronze outer-coffin lay peacefully at the center of the resurrection layout, the sole recipient of its restorative effects.

"Does that belong to you?" Lu Yun asked, his eyes riveted on the coffin. This metal container was identical to the one Miao had conjured at the entrance. Even the runes on the surface were the same.

"No." Miao shook his head, rather aggrieved. "My body is over there." He pointed at a tiny corner on the summit, outside the layout. Over there rested a small, fluffy thing the size of a human palm. Its figure gently rose and fell in rhythmic fashion.

"A fox?" Lu Yun gawked and looked at Miao. "Is that what you are, a fox?"

"A fox? I suppose you could say that." Miao stared vacantly, then nodded, seemingly unaware of his own species.

"Also, you're not dead." Lu Yun's Spectral Eye could discern the status of life from the creature.

"Really?" Miao blinked. "If so, why am I standing here?"

"You're asleep." Lu Yun scrutinized the small fox. Indeed, it was simply resting, its body undulating up and down with its breathing.

"And you're dreaming!" The Dusk governor found the notion a little absurd. "This is nothing but a dream!"

"Nothing but a dream?" Miao repeated, dumbstruck.

"Correct. Right now, you're merely a dream, while the rest of us are inside your dream. That's why no one but me can sense your existence, because... you're not real," whispered Lu Yun.

The fox—or rather, Miao's soul—hadn't popped out of his body, and neither was he astral traveling. He was just dreaming, pure and simple.

The ancient Chinese legends spoke of Wei Zheng slaying a dragon inside his dream.

As a mere mortal, Wei Zhen possessed no nascent spirit and couldn't have sent his soul outside his body, yet he'd slain a honest to goodness dragon king merely by dreaming of it.

Miao's case was strikingly similar.

Lu Yun could sense his existence, thanks to the Tome of Life and Death, but the spirit was indiscernible for everyone else, Yuying included. Or rather, he didn't exist at all for them.

He could conjure mirages and create illusions to mislead his victims because the entire burial mound had become his dream world.

"No wonder! That explains why the dragon never managed to eat me. How can it swallow something without substance?" Miao applauded merrily. Soon enough, his figure began fading, then ultimately vanished from sight.

"The little fox is about to wake up!" Yuying whispered. "Is it the invisible Miao you spoke to?"

The possibility stirred Qing Han's interest as well.

"Ah.... Too bad," Lu Yun lamented. "I thought he was dead, but the rascal was just napping"

Since Miao was alive, Lu Yun couldn't take him as an envoy. He couldn't very well kill the little fox, could he? I'd probably get my ass handed to me in a fight anyway.

"Yaaawn—" The white fox gradually roused from its slumber, its big, sapphire-like eyes looking around in confusion. "Yip yip yip? Yip! Yip yip!" It opened its mouth and barked cutely a few times.

"I think I was dreaming. In my dream, I met a strange man who told me I was dreaming," a baby voice echoed out from the little ball of fur.

"Miao?" Lu Yun called out tentatively.

The fox froze on the spot and its ears perked up as it hastily turned around.

"Lu Yun? So you're not a figment of my imagination, but real? Wait, that means everything in the dream was real?" The fox blurred into a white flash as it pounced on Lu Yun. "So everything was real after all."

Curled on Lu Yun's shoulders, the fox softly rubbed its cheeks with its front paws.

"I should've let you sleep a little longer." Lu Yun rubbed his forehead. "You're of no help now."

"Says who!" the disgruntled fox protested. It leapt down from Lu Yun's shoulders and released a dream-like radiance.

Soon enough, Miao's peerless beauty made another grand entrance. Only now, there was a fluffy tail swishing behind him. A small mirror in his hand, he admired his features, the very picture of self-conceit. "My nap didn't mar my beauty at all, thankfully."

"I-Is that Miao?" A dumbfounded Qing Han stared at the paragon of beauty.

"What do you think? Ugly eyesore, are you blinded by my stunning looks?" Miao made a full turn, as narcissistic as ever.

“You’re nothing but a fox spirit,” Qing Han snickered, unfazed by the spirit’s nickname for him.

“What about you? Are you so enthralled by my beauty that you can’t look away?” Miao ran over to Yuying and struck what he believed to be a dashing pose.

“I only have eyes for milord,” she responded quietly after giving him a cursory glance.

It was no small blow for the crestfallen Miao. “What an insensitive bunch of weirdos. Did the standards of beauty change this much while I was asleep?”

“Alright, enough of that,” Lu Yun interrupted. “What’s the deal with the bronze outer-coffin? Why is there a coffin here in the first place?”

Bronze outer-coffins were portents of extreme danger to begin with. Not to mention, this one even housed a dragon, according to the fox spirit.

“Someone put it here five thousand years ago, the day this burial mound fell from the skies. Ever since then, the dragon has absorbed the vitality of every creature that’s died inside this place, and it won’t be long before it comes back to life.”

There was a trace of dread in Miao’s voice. “Stranger still, starting every century from a thousand years ago, a tremendously rich bundle of life essence descends from outside. The next instance is in seven days. The dragon wouldn’t resurrect so soon, if it weren’t for all that additional vitality!”

1. Wei Zheng served as a prime minister for Emperor Taizong of the Tang Dynasty. According to legend, the dragon in charge of rain tampered with a vital rainfall during a severe drought, all for the sake of a bet. The city flooded and people drowned, while the fields still cracked with dryness.

Furious, the Jade Emperor ordered his public execution. The terrified dragon fled to Emperor Taizong, who granted him a pardon, as the dragon was one of the founding members of the nation. The next day, Wei Zheng was invited to the palace for a game of chess. At the specified time for the execution, Wei Zheng fell asleep and beheaded the dragon while he was dreaming. A bloody dragon head rolling into the palace indicated that the actions had taken place in reality.

This story was popularized in fantasy form in the classic novel ‘Journey to the West’.

Chapter 46: The Original Owner

“The Dusk River Sacrament?!” Lu Yun and Qing Han exclaimed at the same time. Seven days later precisely marked the beginning of the ritual. According to Miao, all of the life energy from the ritual’s sacrifices would be diverted to the bronze outer-coffin.

“Everyone finds the Sacrament strange, but it’s hard to imagine it’s all for the sake of the creature inside the coffin,” Qing Han said, a solemn ring to his voice. “There’s definitely foul play at work here!”

“But in that case....” Lu Yun frowned. “The ritual was first established because of the upheaval from that ancient tomb. In that case, is the coffin related to that ancient Dusk tomb?”

“That’s....” That illuminated new paths of potential for Qing Han.

During the outbreak of the ancient Dusk tomb, specters and ghouls had poured out en masse into the Dusk River and shattered the oceanic stronghold on the northern border. As a result, a legion of North Sea monsters invaded the province and caused untold misery.

The river god had then made a personal appearance and used its formidable powers to seal off the ancient tomb. Before departing the world, it had also left behind instructions for the Dusk River Sacrament. From then on, the Sacrament had become an integral part of the province, its inhabitants unflinching carrying out the ritual every hundred years.

However, it was now plain to see that matters weren't as they seemed. From the very start, the life essence collected through the ritual was meant as an offering for whatever was inside the bronze outer-coffin.

"What on earth is going on?" Qing Han murmured. He could feel the onset of a pounding headache. If the Sacrament was a dark scheme, then what about the tomb's uprising, or the river god? Were they all part of a plot hatched by the tomb's undead residents?

But if so, why had creatures from ancient Dusk tomb come to this burial mound?

"There truly are too many unfathomable mysteries in the immortal world," sighed Lu Yun. "We have to stop the ritual, in any case. As for this bronze outer-coffin... it belongs to me now!" A smile floated onto his lips. "Whether you're a dragon, or something else, you're mine as long as you're dead!"

"You people stay put." He slowly squatted down and lowered Qing Han to the ground.

Miao stepped forward, ready to help the envoy.

"Don't touch me!" the latter cried urgently the moment he saw Miao's hand draw near.

Miao froze, then awkwardly retracted his hand and mumbled, "Can that be aversion I see on the ugly eyesore's face? Am I still lacking in beauty?"

"Come and help me up," Qing Han spoke to Yuying. He sighed with relief when Miao stepped back.

"I already warned you, don't even think of coveting our Yuying!" Lu Yun snarled.

"I-I just don't want that guy to touch me!" the boneless Qing Han explained.

"Fine." Lu Yun shrugged. He's probably not into animal spirits.

With a nod, Yuying approached Qing Han's side and gently helped the imperial envoy up.

"If you really want to marry her... hmmm, you need to prepare a hefty bridal gift." The urge to say this suddenly struck Lu Yun for some reason.

His skin immediately prickled from the heat of four pairs of murderous eyes.

"I mean, you can also skip that, if you want." He ran away with his tail between his legs.

Qing Han sighed softly with relief.

"I will never be wed to you!" Yuying retorted with complete seriousness.

“...” Qing Han rolled his eyes, but offered no response. What was he supposed to say to that?

Standing at the root of the tongue, Lu Yun studied the floating summit in earnest. The peak itself is a resurrection layout, a complete grand influence. Its structure is in stark contrast to the rest of the tomb. It was most likely added afterwards.

There had originally been another resurrection layout in the tomb, one designed to revive Yueshen. But it was later altered, resulting in a transformation into an immortal ghost.

Unless he was mistaken, Miao was the one who'd stolen her opportunity for rebirth. This floating peak had come into existence because of the fox spirit, and its resurrection layout had brought the fox back to life.

However, rather than waking up to a second chance at life, he'd fallen into a deep slumber and encompassed the entire burial mound in his dream world. This was a form of self-preservation. The dream protected his physical body and prevented intruders from approaching the summit, so that his body had ample time to recover.

But one day, everything changed. Five thousand years ago, the arrival of a bronze outer-coffin had pushed him out of the resurrection layout, extending his sleep for another five thousand years.

It seems that whatever's buried inside the coffin is responsible for the destruction of Truewater City. It sacrificed every living soul as blood offerings. Many conjectures whirled in his mind. The Truewater city lord placed the Portrait of Emptiness on the altar to suppress it and prevent it from activating.

The altar had stirred to life the second he'd taken the painting away, consuming all of the undead hags in the ruins. But these hags were half-dead monsters with no life essence whatsoever, so they were worthless offerings.

In that case, how did the city lord die? Since she'd sealed the altar with the Portrait of Emptiness, that's proof she was still alive then. But she's dead now and has become part of the burial goods... is there something even more frightening in here?

A memory struck him all of a sudden. Inside the layout of certain death, something had fooled both him and Yueshen.

For a split second, he'd been confident that he'd unraveled the truth about the tomb, but now he faced another enigma. There was definitely far more here than met the eye.

No matter, first things first! Secure that bronze outer-coffin and the resurrection layout!

With a single thought, a silent rumble echoed across the void as the Gates of the Abyss swung open behind him. A colossal devouring force erupted from within and swallowed the floating peak.

Hum—

Before momentum took over, an indistinct azure halo pulsed from the coffin's surface and resisted the force, as if it sensed danger.

"I wouldn't be able to do anything to you, had you been alive. The merest inkling resistance would've stopped me cold." Two black, ghostly fires ignited in Lu Yun's irises. "Sadly for you, you're dead, and the dead are mine to command!"

Boom—

A loud explosion seemed to rock the tomb's very foundations. The next moment, the floating peak—and the coffin resting upon it—had vanished without a trace.

A muffled groan sounded out of Lu Yun and there was a trace of blood on the corner of his lips. The coffin itself had presented no great challenge, but taking the resurrection layout with it had been more of an ordeal. The enormous backlash hadn't left him entirely unharmed.

"What a formidable storage item!" murmured the immobilized Qing Han as he looked upon the scene, leaning against a boulder. It was obvious that Lu Yun had called upon an incredibly strong immortal storage item; there was no other possible explanation.

"Awoooo!" A ringing howl from below suddenly pierced the air. Something seemed to be slowly clawing its way up from the abyss.

"What is that?!" Lu Yun flinched and looked down instinctively. An enormous hand, pale as death, abruptly lurched out of the gloom. "It's a ginormous undead hag!" He blanched. "We're leaving right now!"

He reached Qing Han in a single bound, flung the young man onto his shoulder, then turned and ran for dear life.

An undead hag! A titanic undead hag had crawled up from the abyss!

Ghastly, pale eyes full of rancor, its enormous frame brimmed with a terrifying aura of resentment and hatred. Corpse water overflowed from its body, and it reached surface level in no time at all. It slinked up the path through the mouth of the corpse coffin, accessed the body proper, and gave chase to Lu Yun's group.

This hag wasn't all that much smaller than the corpse coffin, but strangely enough, it had made its way inside with no issues whatsoever!

The moment it had appeared inside the corpse coffin, its fiendish aura began shredding monsters and living layouts alike. Cracks even started crawling over the surface of the Duality of Dragon and Tiger coiled around the corpse coffin.

"How can there be such an enormous undead hag?!" Qing Han groaned weakly on Lu Yun's shoulder, struggling to lift his head to observe the creature. He'd previously seen a giant corpsefish, but that was simply dwarfed by this undead hag's stature.

"An aura of malicious hatred covers it from head to toe. A foul taint born from accumulated grudge and fury... if my guess is right, this was the one originally buried inside Yueshen, the burial mound's original owner," Lu Yun explained as he ran.

Having broken through not long ago, his entire being was overflowing with strength. He hurtled forward furiously, wind beneath his feet. The hag would eat him alive if he were too slow.

He hadn't thought that someone would throw the burial mound's original owner into that bottomless abyss, turning them into an undead hag!

"I wonder what's at the bottom; why's there so much corpse water down there?" he mumbled under his breath. It was plain to see that the corpse water on the hag wasn't its own, but had come from an outside source.

Where? Logic would dictate that it came from the bottom of the abyss.

"Watch where you're going so you don't make a wrong turn!" Miao floated beside him, his tail wrapped around Lu Yun's arm as he let the governor drag him away. As for Yuying, she brought up their rear.

"Don't worry, I won't get lost." Two spectral rays of light burned in his eyes as he picked up speed and charged back to the location of Truewater's mistress. With Yuying's return, he was confident he could handle the malicious ghost that had risen from the city lord this time around.

"We're clearly inside one of the corpse coffin's meridians. How can such a gigantic hag fit inside?" wondered Qing Han.

The current tunnel should've been too narrow to accommodate the creature, but it moved unobstructed, as if it were perfectly at home.

"We're inside its coffin in the first place, of course it can come and go as it pleases. Look out, lower your head." Lu Yun patted Qing Han's thigh in warning. The next moment, he hunched down on himself and squeezed into an even narrower space.

"Impertinent miscreants, how dare you trespass in the Dragon Prince's chambers!" exploded a booming roar.

Chapter 47: Dragonseal Stone

"The Dragon Prince's chambers?" Lu Yun was perplexed. "Wasn't this the Tiger Prince's territory? Where did this 'Dragon Prince' come from?"

Before he could fully understand what was going on, a mass of shadows pounced on him. An enormous, draconic shadow was poised a short distance behind the group.

"Back off!" An imperious command from the dragon shadow immediately dispersed the charging mass. "Where did the Tiger Prince go?" it demanded. The pressure it exerted on Lu Yun was identical to the Tiger Prince's—both were so heavy as to be suffocating.

However, Yuying was an immortal as well, now. She could suppress these living layouts with her Panorama of Clarity, Dragon Prince included.

"The Tiger Prince? He's dead." Lu Yun calmed down. He lifted Qing Han off his shoulders and returned the envoy to his back, to which the other youth let out a sigh of relief.

"No, the Tiger Prince isn't dead!" There was a hint of expectation in the Dragon Prince's voice. "Where did you send him? Send me there too."

"What?!" Lu Yun traded a stunned look with Yuying.

“The Tiger Prince and I share the same life. If he were dead, I would disappear as well.” The Dragon Prince was only a shadow, but his yearning was nearly tangible. “He’s not dead. Instead, he’s undergoing metamorphosis. I can feel that he’s evolving to a higher level.”

The dragon shadow’s voice was low, indistinct, and altogether strange. “I know what’s going on. He met you earlier, didn’t he? The place he’s gone to must be the reason for his transformation.”

“Yuying.” Lu Yun glanced at the brilliant envoy.

Yuying? A thought popped into Qing Han’s head. The Panorama of Clarity! No wonder. So Yuying didn’t die a thousand years ago.

He didn’t dwell on it, however. Within this burial mound, Lu Yun had displayed a wide range of incredible talents. He wasn’t strong himself, but his collection of tricks had resolved every problem so far with ease.

He must have many secrets about him.

The eighth governor of Dusk Province was rumored to have died during her heavenly tribulation, but whether she had actually died or not, who knew? That was twelve hundred years ago, regardless.

Yuying understood her master’s intentions. She extended her fingers, slowly unfurling the Panorama of Clarity. The painting depicted mountains and rivers in washed ink, but there was a new addition: a small tiger, napping in the midst of the landscape.

“There!” The Dragon Prince’s voice was filled with longing. “Send me in!”

“I can do that,” Lu Yun allowed. “But first, you need to tell me how we got here so suddenly. I’m sure we were in the Tiger Prince’s territory.”

“I brought all of you here.” The Dragon Prince calmed down once more. “If I hadn’t, you would’ve died at that undead hag’s hands.”

Lu Yun frowned, but said nothing.

“The Tiger Prince and I are spirits born of this space. He and I are bound to each other by our existences. He represents the body, and I, the spirit. The rules here force us to fight tooth and nail, but they also prevent us from ever coming face to face. We can only fight our war by proxy, as in sending other creatures at each other. Our proxies were also born of this place.”

Lu Yun finally understood the situation. The Duality of Dragon and Tiger couldn’t allow the two kingly creatures to actually come face to face. If they did, they would fight to the death. If one of them was gone, the layout would also be broken.

No wonder they were separated by the duality of body and spirit.

He recalled the tiger head outside the corpse coffin, and the venom in its eyes. That head was the tiger part of the layout, spawning the Tiger Prince from its essence. Now that the Tiger Prince was gone, the tigrine portion would disappear shortly thereafter, leaving only the draconic.

If the Dragon Prince went into the Panorama of Clarity as well, the entire layout would dissipate.

"This is the mindspace of the coffin, where I've taken up residence. The undead hag can't come in here, so you're safe for the time being," continued the Dragon Prince.

"Aha, so that's it." Lu Yun nodded. If the Dragon Prince embodied spirit and thought, then his residence was a purely mental space.

"Wait a second. What mindspace? That coffin can think for itself!?" Qing Han instinctively shrank back.

"No, it's not the coffin's mind, it's the undead hag's," corrected the Dragon Prince. "She was the one that was originally buried in the tomb. Because of what she turned into, her soul hasn't been able to enter the wheel of reincarnation. In fact, it's eroded to nothingness. On top of that, her mind was extracted and fused into the corpse coffin, so she would suffer for eternity. Her corpse gradually transformed into an undead hag, sealed away in the abyss by the floating summit."

"If it were me, I would do the same." Lu Yun nodded. "This is the only fitting retribution."

Qing Han flattened his mouth in disgust.

"Don't curl your lips like that," the Dusk governor chuckled. "What would you do if your family members were refined into corpse coffins?" He meant it as a rhetorical question. "I'd wipe out the perverted race responsible, then refine the one buried in my family into a corpse coffin themselves. Give them a taste of their own medicine, so to speak."

The suffering visited upon the coffin itself would be transferred to the mind of the buried individual.

Qing Han fell silent for a time. "My family isn't all that kind to me," he remarked quietly.

A strange feeling entered Lu Yun's heart. "That's enough of that," he coughed softly. "What's down in the abyss?"

He'd tried to examine it using his Spectral Eye, but the energies of life and death there were too chaotic. He could see nothing but the teeming dead.

"I don't know," responded the Dragon Prince. "But maybe the fox does." He nodded at the nearby Miao, who shook his head slightly.

"I don't know either. The abyss is outside the boundaries of the burial mound. I tried to go down there a few times in my dreams, but ended up back here every time I jumped in."

"The burial mound might have landed here because of that abyss," speculated Lu Yun.

"Can you let me into that painting now?" Anticipatory joy colored the Dragon Prince's voice.

Lu Yun inclined his head. "Will we be forced to leave if you go into the painting?" he asked.

"The undead hag has already left," the Dragon Prince answered in perfect understanding of what he meant. "Still, you need to be careful. Since you let it out by removing that floating summit, there's not much else here that can restrain it."

Lu Yun's mouth quirked slightly upwards, but he said nothing. Not much else here? Not necessarily.

The Panorama slowly unfurled, then absorbed the Dragon Prince, adding the image of a juvenile dragon to the painting. In the next moment, Lu Yun felt his body grow heavy, as if he were falling, then landing somewhere. However, nothing in his field of view had changed in the slightest.

“Come! We need to go find Yueshen!”

“Mommy! A ghost!! Save me!” Li Youcai’s earthshaking wails traveled in from the far off distance. His voice climbing several octaves, he’d tightly plastered his body on a large boulder. His flabby cheeks trembled and oscillated like ocean waves.

Yueshen and the vengeful ghost were still fighting relentlessly in front of him.

“The Portrait of Emptiness!” A shrill shriek burst out of the ghost’s mouth. Having noticed Lu Yun’s arrival, she pounced recklessly toward Qing Han on his back. She’d glimpsed a corner of the scroll that was so intimately familiar to her.

The Portrait of Emptiness was an ultimate treasure that Truewater’s city lord had used to seal away the altar. Now that the portrait was in Qing Han’s hands, the ghost’s thoughts were consumed by obsession, violence, and hatred.

Protecting her people by keeping the altar sealed had been her fixation in life, and she was furious to see the tool she’d used to do so in different hands. As such, she rebuffed Yueshen with a single blow, then flashed in front of Lu Yun.

“Grab her!” the young man shouted with his eyes wide.

Yueshen pounced onto the ghost’s back without hesitation, clutching the other’s form as tightly as she could. Though ghosts were incorporeal, they could interact with each other.

“Yuying!” urged Lu Yun.

The envoy knew what to do. She unfurled the Panorama of Clarity, sucking both Yueshen and the vengeful ghost inside. But her face paled in the next instant.

“The Panorama can’t hold her!” The scroll in her hands began violently shaking, the vengeful ghost about to break free at any second. The potent treasure wasn’t able to suppress ghosts and the like.

“Give me the scroll,” Lu Yun exhaled, then took the painting from his servant. Opening the Gates of the Abyss, he sent it right in, ghost and all.

If I could form a golden core and enter the core realm, I would’ve been able to simply use the gates on it. The ghost was too strong for his current death arts to be effective. He couldn’t just let it inside the gates without a filter of some sort, as he’d probably die from the overflow of energy.

The gates were manifested through the realms of yin and yang, which meant they were ephemeral, rather than physical structures. Still, his success with the ghost considerably raised his spirits. Ignoring the trembling Li Youcai curled up on the ground, he looked at the annex room.

“That’s where the Formation Orb is!” Lu Yun’s pulse quickened. Once I get my hands on that, I’ll be better able to integrate my feng shui skills with the formations of this world.

He peered at the door expectantly, but then his expression suddenly stilled. "Wait, is that... dragonseal stone?"

Tomb raiders absolutely hated encountering the stuff. Doing so generally meant going home empty-handed. In fact, it was jokingly nicknamed 'Death's threshold', since it'd take becoming a ghost to get past.

He hadn't noticed it earlier, because all of his attention had been on the vengeful ghost, but the discovery of what the door was made of had really put a dampener on his mood.

"What's dragonseal stone?" Qing Han asked, noting the ugly expression on Lu Yun's face.

"An uncommonly heavy, durable kind of stone. If that's what's keeping the annex room shut, I'm probably not getting the Formation Orb." Lu Yun was noticeably disappointed. It was the third time he'd encountered dragonseal stone, and his previous two run-ins had proved frustratingly fruitless.

"Violetgrave is a ninth-rank sword that's incredibly sharp. It should be keen enough to cut through dragonseal stone," Qing Han said softly.

"Violetgrave? A ninth-rank sword? Really?!" Lu Yun's eyes lit up. He moved to the stone.

"Put me down first," Qing Han added hurriedly.

"Oh yeah, you're still on my back," the young man laughed, with some embarrassment. He let his friend down and propped the young man up against a wall. "Take care of him, Yuying."

"Yes, sir." The envoy nodded, standing at attentive guard.

Qing Han bit his lip, watching Lu Yun's figure with an unblinking gaze.

Violetgrave in hand, the young governor stepped up to the slab of dragonseal stone. The monolithic door, deep bluish-green in hue, emanated a chilling cold. It seemed almost like a heaven-sent obstacle.

Lu Yun raised up Violetgrave and brought it down on the stone.

"Heavens! What in the blazes is that?!" Li Youcai began to cry from terror again. A corpse hag had crawled out from the corpsewater pond behind them and lurched toward him.

"Yueshen, shut him up." Lu Yun's cut had left a faint mark upon the stone.

"Okay!" Now that the vengeful ghost was safely inside the Gates of the Abyss, Yueshen could come back out with the Panorama. She immediately took possession of Li Youcai, deluding his senses once more. Her presence calmed the fat official's fearful heart down.

"Oho, ohohoho. You're a monster who dares to steal my treasures!" Li Youcai rolled up his sleeves and walked toward the corpse hag with a ferocious expression.

"This can work!" Lu Yun returned to the stone with renewed excitement. He took a deep breath, then put everything into the next cut.

Thrum!

Violet light burst forth, leaving a much deeper impression upon the stone.

Hiss.

There seemed to be a blue gas escaping from the rock as well.

“You can stop now!” Qing Han interjected. “Now that the dragonseal stone is damaged, its essence has dispersed. You can use Emerald Mistfire to do the rest.”

He raised his volume a little too much in giving the pointer, which sent another wave of weakness through his frame. How come I’m so exhausted after using Violetgrave just once, while he’s perfectly fine after all this time? The unfairness of it all was rather upsetting to the beleaguered Qing Han.

Chapter 48: Feinie

Lu Yun was a qi realm cultivator. Though he hadn’t tapped into Violetgrave’s full power, he’d used it to cut down countless undead hags and monsters in their exploration, and he’d even used it to kill the Skyriver city lord, a peak origin core cultivator.

It would be too taxing for even Qing Han to use a ninth-rank treasure in such a way. However, the Dusk governor didn’t even seem strained.

Does he have a shared fate with the sword? Qing Han’s thoughts wandered into a flight of fancy.

“That’s right. With the dragonseal stone damaged and its essence released, the layout will be broken as well!” Lu Yun nodded.

The dragonseal stone was heavy and impenetrable because there was a layout hidden within, suppressing everything it sealed away. Now that the stone’s essence had dissipated and the layout was broken, it was just a regular hunk of rock.

Suddenly, Lu Yun’s hair stood on end. “Run, Yuying!!”

From the corpsewater pond behind her rose a giant head. It was the undead hag! The titanic undead hag was crawling ashore!

Startled, Yuying grabbed Qing Han and ran toward Lu Yun, casting a ball of emerald fire at the cut surface of the stone.

Whoosh!

The stone burst into flame.

“Don’t burn all of it,” Lu Yun hurried out as he stared at the giant undead hag, which had almost fully crawled onto the bank. “Just put a hole into the door!”

“You mewling shitgibbons! How dare you try to steal my treasure! You have a death wish, huh!” Li Youcai exclaimed.

What on earth is this fatty made of? Lu Yun wondered. The fatty had fainted after being severely injured, but was as energetic as ever when he came to.

Yueshen had once again twisted his perception of the world. Whatever he saw had prompted him to enlarge the Seal of Mountains and Rivers, turning it into a minor mountain that brutally slammed into the undead hag's cheek.

Thud!

The impact sent it teetering back and forced a piercing shriek out of its mouth. Meanwhile, Yuying had managed to burn a hole into the dragonseal stone with Emerald Mistfire. Even without the layout, the stone itself was extremely hardy and it had taken her a good while for the fire to punch a large enough hole in it.

"You and Qing Han go first!" Lu Yun rushed out. His envoy helped Qing Han into the chamber, and he followed closely behind them. Miao was already inside, as he'd moved as soon as the hole was made.

"What the hell is that?!" Li Youcai had finally seen the undead hag for what it was. With a wail, he scrambled into the annex room, barely able to squeeze his rotund body through the hole.

The annex room only spanned about thirty-six meters; there weren't any items of note except for the figure in the center of the room.

"The Truewater city lord!" Qing Han exclaimed subconsciously.

Lu Yun took a good look and echoed his sentiment, "The city lord!"

A lady in black sat cross-legged on a mat, her eyes closed. Her skin was fair and her features delicate, the black silk robe she was wearing fully accentuating her curves. She looked about sixteen, and her stunning beauty could match that of Mo Yi and Yuying. The only thing tarnishing her perfection were faint traces of resentment and hatred in her expression.

She looked just like the violent ghost from earlier.

"Is that the Formation Orb?" Lu Yun noticed the glowing white orb the woman was holding. Its luminescence illuminated the room, penetrating the walls and reaching far beyond. "So this is the source of light in the burial mound."

"This is what the legends call the light of formations," Qing Han murmured. "The illumination traveled outside and morphed into layers of formations circling the burial mound, transforming it into Myriad Formation Summit."

The two were lost in thought as they stared at the treasure. "I won't tell anyone," the imperial envoy suddenly added.

Lu Yun nodded. "Alright." He approached the city lord's body one step at a time.

"Holy, that's an eye! A ginormous eye!!" Li Youcai's distinctive wail rang through the room.

Everyone turned to find a horrifyingly pale eyeball peeking through the hole in the stone door, the whites of its eye showing a reflection of everyone in the room.

"Seal it," ordered Lu Yun. The undead hag couldn't hurt them for now, but being stared at by a large eyeball was still quite unsettling.

Swoosh!

Emerald fire leapt from Yuying's hand and formed a ball that stoppered the hole, shielding them from the undead hag's chilling gaze.

Yueshen wanted to make Li Youcai use his seal, but she wasn't sure what she had to make him see for him to do so. The seal was, after all, his most precious treasure. She'd managed to induce the fatty into throwing away all of his valuables, but he just wouldn't let go of the seal.

Lu Yun walked toward the city lord's body.

"Wait," Qing Han said in a trembling voice. "I can tell that her body has long decomposed into corpse powder, and the Formation Orb is the only thing maintaining her form. As soon as you take it, her body will dissipate. Even a little powder from the body of a golden immortal will kill you."

Lu Yun froze, profuse sweat drenching his collar. "You've saved me once again," he said, backing away with a pale face.

Qing Han bit into his lip without a word, worry filling his eyes.

"If that's the case..." An idea came to the tomb raider's mind. He muttered, "The realms of yin and yang!"

The Gates of the Abyss emerged with a rumble, welcoming both the city lord's body and the Formation Orb into its maw. Lu Yun flashed into his domain, a scene of utter chaos greeting him upon arrival.

Chased by the ghost of the city lord, Infernum Lu Xuan and Lu Huang ran around frantically like headless chickens. The ghost harbored a tremendous amount of resentment, to the point where even the two nether soldiers were afraid of her.

The giant floating summit and the bronze outer-coffin were here as well, but Lu Yun ignored them for the time being.

"Freeze!" He pointed a finger at the ghost, immediately stilling its motion. "You two useless pieces of crap!" He cursed at the two panting soldiers.

No wonder Infernum weren't listed in the Tome of Life and Death. They didn't have the right to be! They were disposable tools—two had died in the burial mound, and the remaining two were intimidated by a mere ghost.

"Seek your place, second Envoy of Samsara," exclaimed Lu Yun.

Whoosh!

Black flames rose from him and enveloped the city lord's body, burning away her grudges and replacing her terrifying scowl with calm. The ghost faded away as her body recovered. A pair of bright eyes, underwritten with melancholy, slowly opened.

"Second Envoy of Samsara, Feinie, greets the master. This servant awaits punishment for my previous offenses." She swept a graceful curtsy to the ground.

Another name was added to the book in Lu Yun's dantian; her background, experience, and memories also came to him.

Feinie, city lord of Truewater City, Dusk Province, Nephrite Major.

Her formations were unique and unrivalled in the world of immortals, earning her the title "Formation King". Thanks to them, she once killed thirty-six peerless immortal kings in the North Sea, despite being a golden immortal herself.

Formation King of the immortal world! What a cocky title! It's even more over-the-top than Yuying's. He shifted his gaze to Feinie and was suddenly struck by *deja vu*. "Lin Daiyu?"

Feinie was unusually beautiful and her features attracted pity, but her face was pale and her figure sickly pliable. Her limpid eyes shone with a faint sorrow.

"You may rise. Your ignorance exempts you from your sin." Lu Yun helped her up and added when he saw her expression, "Don't worry. I'll get to the bottom of what happened to Truewater City."

"The Truewater city lord is dead, master," Feinie responded with fear. "Feinie is your second Envoy of Samsara, nothing more."

Lu Yun shook his head in lieu of an answer.

"This is a connate-grade treasure, master." She presented Lu Yun with the Formation Orb.

"Keep it. It's more useful in your hands than mine." Lu Yun shook his head. "By the way, I've gifted your Portrait of Emptiness to my friend."

Indeed, Qing Han was now a friend in Lu Yun's eyes. They'd saved each other's life in the burial mound and weathered the dangers of death side by side.

"Whatever belonged to this servant in life belongs to master now," responded Feinie. "Master can dispose of them as he wishes."

"What's your cultivation level?" Lu Yun asked with a nod.

"This servant has yet to recover to my peak, master. I'm currently only a true immortal."

She'd been a golden immortal at her peak; Lu Yun frowned at the unwelcome revelation. "It seems I'll need to find ghostface maggots to kill that undead hag."

A true immortal was no match for the giant undead hag, so that left the maggots as their only option.

Feinie's wealth of knowledge on formations slowly filtered into Lu Yun's memories, combining with his mastery of feng shui and improving it further. A veil seemed to lift from his eyes as the layouts in this great burial mound that he'd originally been unable to grasp grew clear to him.

"There's something else in the bronze outer-coffin, master," Yuying piped up, pointing at the coffin. "It's of the same root as the Panorama of Clarity and the Portrait of Emptiness."

“Oh?” Lu Yun paused. “The outer-coffin is extremely dangerous. If I open it outside of the gates, it might cause a disturbance. But here, everything is under my control and I can easily deal with whatever happens.”

The thought prompted him to approach the bronze outer-coffin and crack it open by a hair. Blinding crimson light shot out of it.

1. Lin Daiyu is one of the principal characters of Cao Xueqin's classic Chinese novel *Dream of the Red Chamber*. She's portrayed as a well-educated, intelligent, witty, and beautiful, yet physically frail, young woman who is somewhat prone to occasional melancholy. She's a very classic literature character.

Chapter 49: Escape

When the crimson light burst forth, the entire realm within the Gates of the Abyss was dyed the same bloody hue.

“It really is a dragon inside, not a monster!” Lu Yun was appalled by the violent bloodthirst and anger that the light contained; they were so sharp they cut like a blade. He grit his teeth, then dug around in the bronze container.

“Is this it?” He pulled his hand out as soon as he touched something that felt like a scroll, half of his arm stained red by what was inside. The ancient scroll in his hand pulsed faintly with a bright yellow energy.

“That’s it, the Profile of Harmony!” Feinie announced eagerly.

The Panorama of Clarity, Portrait of Emptiness, and Profile of Harmony! They contained the Emerald Mistfire, Lucent Voidfire, and Daevic Skyfire, respectively. These three artworks shared the same origin, each one serving as the sealing vessel for a type of immortal fire.

“Another treasure above ninth rank.” Lu Yun was noticeably enlivened by the discovery. “So, what does this one do?”

He recalled the other two scrolls he had found; specifically, the Panorama of Clarity was so named because it refined and clarified pills and medicines, and could store things and people. The Profile of Harmony, on the other hand... he had no clue as to its functions.

He didn’t dare to simply refine the new painting himself, either. Li Xing’s recklessness and possession by the painting soul were fresh on his mind.

As soon as he had retrieved the painting, he shut the bronze outer-coffin. Its closure made the bloody radiance disappear. Lu Xuan and Lu Huang crumpled to the floor, foaming at the mouth.

“Absolutely useless. What’s the point of runners like these?” Lu Yun put an exasperated hand to his forehead. These ghost servants were worse than the bean soldiers he could summon. Those could at least sense danger and react to it, while these guys were flimsier than paper.

“Ah, yeah. Where did Skyriver’s city lord go?” He had finally remembered a pretty important detail from earlier.

He'd killed the city lord during a previous run-in within the burial mound. As such, the man's ghost should've entered the gates and become one of his soldiers as well. But he hadn't seen hide nor hair of the man since setting foot in his domain.

"My, milord... I'm right here..." A faint voice traveled out from beneath the bronze outer-coffin.

Lu Yun blinked, honing in on the crushed person beneath. The man was sprawled across the ground, immobilized by the weight above him; only his hands and feet were visible.

"Oh, uh, you can stay there for now." The lord of the Gates of the Abyss finally had a better picture of what these Infernum were useful for.

They were cannon fodder, plain and simple.

.....

Though Lu Yun had disappeared and reappeared, he seemed to have remained still in the eyes of the others.

The realm within the Gates of the Abyss was extraordinary indeed. Its flow of time—and everything else, for that matter—seemed to be cut off from the outside world. No matter how long Lu Yun spent in there, nothing would be changed when he came back out.

He didn't have Feinie exit with him, however. It'd be too difficult to explain where she'd come from, and her golden immortal cultivation meant there was a risk that the ancient Dusk restriction against golden immortals would be triggered, even though her power was currently repressed.

"Did you put away her corpse?" asked Qing Han. In his eyes, Lu Yun was just turning around after waving his hand.

"Yes," nodded Lu Yun. "Do you recognize this?" He raised up the Profile of Harmony, drawing his friend's attention.

"That's the Profile of Harmony." Qing Han was a little surprised. "It contains an immortal fire within it as well: the Daevic Skyfire. That's on the same level as Emerald Mistfire and Lucent Voidfire."

"Do you need this thing?" Lu Yun had already been rewarded handsomely on this trip with the Formation Orb and his new envoy.

Qing Han bit his lip, then shook his head. "The Portrait of Emptiness is enough for me."

He was embarrassed, Lu Yun realized, at having obtained the portrait. After all, he hadn't helped with much of anything in the burial mound. On the contrary—without the Dusk governor to take care of him, he would've perished long ago.

He'd taken the Portrait of Emptiness because of how important it was to him, but the Profile of Harmony was no more than a generic, powerful treasure in his eyes.

If these scrolls come from the same source, they might be hiding a truth that can only be revealed after joining them together. Despite thinking that, Lu Yun didn't force the point. He tucked the painting away into his embrace. The beyond ninth-rank treasure was simply too valuable to ignore.

“How do we get out of here?” Qing Han tensed again.

The annex room was a closed off space. Aside from the slab of dragonseal stone, there didn't look to be any other exits. Unfortunately, the way they'd come in was barred on the other side by a gargantuan undead hag that made their blood run cold.

Now that they'd both gotten what they were looking for, escape was their most important objective.

“Do you know where I can find some ghostface maggots?” Lu Yun glanced at Miao. Currently, that was the only way to deal with the giant hag.

“I do,” nodded the fox. “There are some in the bloodcorpse's coffin formation.”

Lu Yun's face darkened. “I... actually saw two outside, earlier.” He was beginning to feel a little queasy. Even if there were maggots inside the bloodcorpse's coffin, he was far from brave enough to approach that can of worms.

From what he'd figured out earlier, the bloodcorpse had probably been intended to be an immortal body for the newly risen Yueshen, once upon a time.

Said body had only become a bloodcorpse under very unusual circumstances. In fact, he had a pretty good hunch that the corpse coffin had been zombified due to the bloodcorpse's influence... and probably another's.

It was a stroke of tremendous fortune that someone had collected the fragments of Yueshen's soul beforehand. Otherwise, even that would've awakened the zombified corpse coffin and an absolutely enormous zombie would've devastated the rest of the world long ago.

“I think the two I saw that weren't hatched yet are the only ones in the mound that are accessible.” Miao shrugged helplessly. “The ghostface maggots and corpse flies all come from the bloodcorpse's coffin.”

Lu Yun furrowed his brow, trying to figure out a solution.

“The hag just left!” Yuying's voice cut across his thoughts. She'd noted the departure of the giant eye on the other side of the mistfire veil. Its corpulent body had lumbered away in a different direction.

“There's someone there!” Through the hole, Lu Yun's envoy could see what was on the other side of the corpsewater pond. Qing Hongchen was present, along with someone else.

Formation Thirteenth! He'd finally shown up once more. Right now, he was busy dashing toward a passage in the cliffs above the pond, a firm grasp on the Qing scion. His movement had attracted the giant undead hag's attention, and the creature was now giving chase.

“Formation Thirteenth? Wait a sec. That's not him, that's not even alive!” Lu Yun's brows furrowed even further in thought.

There was a strange formation on the other side of the pond that prevented immortal-level strength from being used. It also served the dual purpose of summoning the monsters within the pond to feed on whatever source it suppressed.

However, Formation Thirteenth's immortal-level strength didn't trigger it at all.

The only explanation was that he was one of the dead within the mound, disguised as the formation master. Only the mound's native inhabitants could be so uninhibited by the formations here.

"We need to hurry while the hag is distracted!" Galvanized, Lu Yun put Qing Han onto his back again, then crawled out through the hole in the door.

Qing Han seemed to have finally gotten used to his ride and obediently remained very still.

"Just what is going on here?? Why can I still see so much treasure?! I just want to live! Aieeee!" Li Youcai was crying again, to which Yueshen could only shake her head. The fatty had had quite enough excitement for one day, to the point where his mental state was starting to crack from all the strain. Yueshen could delude his senses, but her control over his mind was slipping.

"Shut up and follow me!" bellowed Lu Yun.

Li Youcai trembled violently, but stuck to the young man like glue. Yueshen hung out right behind him, as usual.

"We can circle around the corpsewater pond this way," said Miao.

The giant undead hag had just swum across the pond and wasn't entirely out of it yet, so that route was obviously blocked off. Thankfully, the fox spirit knew the ins and outs of the entire mound.

He'd dreamed in this place for thousands of years, after all.

"Lead the way," said Lu Yun.

Miao flitted ahead, diligently guiding the rest through a honeycomb of cliff and cave.

"This way." He dove into a particularly wide passage. Lu Yun and the others followed suit. The passage was very damp, and stagnant, bone-chilling water came up to their knees.

Large swathes of corpsefish wove to and fro in the water, their arm-like tentacles incessantly casting formation after formation toward the group. Yuying formed a sword seal, sending her seven swords to slaughter the fish as quickly as she could.

"Careful! Big guy up ahead!" Miao yelled hysterically.

In front of them was a corpsefish more than thirty-six yards long, its maroon eyes fixed unblinkingly on Lu Yun.

"We'll cut our way through!" shouted the Dusk governor.

Hum.

Yuying's expression was beautiful in its coolness. Her white robes fluttered out behind her, heralding the flight of her seven swords in rays of rainbow light. They arrayed themselves into a sword formation in midair, then tore the giant corpsefish to ribbons in the next instant.

Splash!

The fish's head fell into the water, stirring up a bloody ripple. Its white arms twirled and twisted, clutching at empty air.

"Ah..." Yueshen sighed with disappointment. She'd wanted to eat the fish, but Lu Yun's increased cultivation level gave him enough additional authority to inhibit some of her ghostly instincts. She could already hang onto her reason quite a bit better.

The passage seemed to stretch on forever. More and more water filled the way forward, until there was no air left at all. The corpse flies had all disappeared, replaced with nothing but endless darkness.

The light of the Formation Orb should've illuminated their path, but it was inside the Gates of the Abyss right now. Thankfully, Lu Yun's cultivation allowed him to hold his breath for much longer than a normal person. After who knew how long, a maroon light appeared once more.

"Oh, no..." Miao's terrified tone sounded. At a wide-open space near the passage's end, a pallid pair of eyes stared right at them.

It was the giant hag.

It'd been waiting here for them all along!

Chapter 50: Goddess

"Why is she here? How did she know which path we'd take?!" Miao cried out in shock. The titanic undead was obviously lying in wait.

Cornered, Qing Hongchen and Formation Thirteenth trembled together in a fearful bundle. Using the young man as a shield, the formation master seemed to be etching formation lines into the floor with a spirit stone.

"This is her corpse coffin!" Lu Yun explained gravely. "Her consciousness has been incorporated into the coffin, which makes her omnipresent in this space. We can't escape her senses, no matter where we go."

He hauled his feet out of the water and stared straight at the undead hag. Fleeing wasn't an option. The monster suddenly sprang into motion and an enormous palm the size of a small mountain grabbed ferociously at Lu Yun.

Hum.

Yuying swiftly unfolded the Panorama of Clarity, manifesting a landscape that blocked the giant hand.

Thud!

Face spontaneously paling, she threw up a mouthful of blood as a tremendous force knocked her back.

"You, you blasted thing! I'm the prefect of Duskwater Prefecture. I'm not going to lose to a woman!" Li Youcai made a move as well, not because of a command from Yueshen, but of his own accord. The enormous Seal of Mountains and Rivers scattered beams of golden light all around as it summoned vast amounts of mighty energy from the earth.

Bam!

The seal slammed ruthlessly into the undead hag's palm. A shrill scream rang out as she stumbled backward, jelly-like flesh splattering away from its hand.

Li Youcai flew into the pond behind him, his face likewise drained of color. It was difficult to tell if he was still alive.

The undead hag shrieked again and again in quick succession, thoroughly enraged by the fatty's attack. Mouth gaping open and emanating an undefinable odor, she charged at Lu Yun.

The monster's head was enormous, even bigger than the empty clearing they were standing in. Yet strangely enough, she was still able to occupy the space, thoroughly unconcerned by the limited space. Nevertheless, there was no time for Lu Yun to dwell on this.

Muscles tense with concentration, he made a series of peculiar steps, imitating the form of a leopard. The movement took him out of the immediate area, avoiding the undead hag's bite by a hair.

This was a technique of Feinie's that had surfaced in Lu Yun's mind. Although he had yet to master it, his initial attempt was still enough to evade a fatal attack.

"Qing Hongchen, Formation Thirteenth!" Lu Yun yelled at the two men hiding in the corner. "If you refuse to step in, you'll die after I do!"

Qing Hongchen blanched and shuddered, his mind too shot with fear to say anything. Formation Thirteenth, on the other hand, was unusually calm. "Alright, you draw the monster's attention and I'll set up a formation to kill it!" he called out as he continued drawing lines onto the floor.

"You're etching a fucking single-use transportation formation!!" Lu Yun roared furiously. He rushed toward the formation master with Qing Han on his back. The formation master's face clouded over as he saw Lu Yun grasp his plan and lead the undead hag his way.

"He's not Formation Thirteenth," Qing Han said weakly.

"I know," Lu Yun whispered as he ran. The man was obviously either possessed, or another soul had replaced the original.

"It's someone from the Exalted Immortal Sect." Qing Han had recovered some of his strength. He assessed the formation master with a critical eye and murmured, "It's weird, though. Why would someone from the Exalted Immortal Sect be here, and why would they take over Formation Thirteenth's body?"

"What?!" Lu Yun shuddered. "The Exalted Immortal Sect?" He remembered their people back in Yuying's tomb.

The sect had set Yuying up to die under her heavenly tribulation in order to acquire the Panorama of Clarity, but Wayfarer had collected the treasure and buried it with his love. Those from the sect refused to give up, though, and had plotted for another seven hundred years in Yuying's tomb.

And now, here they were again.

Formation Thirteenth's disappearance must have had something to do with the sect! His soul had most likely been replaced by another!

Yuying launched a series of attacks at the undead hag with her painting. She hadn't paid much attention to the formation master, and therefore hadn't recognized him as someone from the Exalted Immortal Sect. Her continuous attacks kept the hag down, preventing Lu Yun's demise.

Why does she keep following me? So when she chased after Qing Hongchen... that was on purpose! She couldn't get to me when I was behind the dragonseal stone. I was only accessible after I left the annex room. Comprehension dawned on Lu Yun. That's it! She's after the layout of resurrection!

The layout had kept the undead hag in the bottomless abyss. Naturally, she'd witnessed Lu Yun collect the floating summit, which was why she was doggedly chasing after the Dusk governor.

The layout of resurrection was composed of a pole of life and a pole of death. The latter sealed the undead hag, while the former had a chance of resurrecting it.

"So you've seen through my plan!" Formation Thirteenth tightened his jaw as Lu Yun led the undead hag his way. "Big deal, I've already completed the formation!" He grabbed Qing Hongchen and hurled the young man at Lu Yun.

"Formation Thirteenth!" Qing Hongchen yelled in panic, his expression crumbling. The undead hag was right behind Lu Yun. If he smashed into the Dusk governor, both of them—and Qing Han—would be devoured.

Whoosh!

A shadowy figure suddenly materialized next to Lu Yun and punted Qing Hongchen back. The young man landed squarely in the single-use transportation formation.

Buzz.

The formation activated, and Qing Hongchen vanished in the next instant.

"No!!" howled Formation Thirteenth. He'd been trapped here for a thousand years and was so close to getting out, but his chance had been stripped away by another right before his eyes!

Lu Xuan landed beside Lu Yun; his foot had been the tool that sent Qing Hongchen away. With the sheer force that Formation Thirteenth had used to throw the young man, the collision would've crushed Lu Yun.

"Stop the hag!" Lu Yun summoned Lu Huang as well. The two were terror-stricken by the undead hag, but they didn't dare disobey Lu Yun's orders and had no choice but to step up.

Infernum were an incompetent bunch that could only bully the weak. An undead hag was far too much for them to handle, and the two were decimated in only three breaths.

Are Infernum naturally weak, or were Lu Yuanhou's four followers that useless? Lu Yun's stomach dropped as the undead hag began chasing after him again.

"You're its target. I'll take my leave then." Formation Thirteenth noticed that the monster's white eyes had been fixed on Lu Yun this entire time. He shifted his body out of the way and fled in another direction.

“In your dreams! I’m taking you with me if it’s the last thing I do!” Lu Yun threw Qing Han out of the hag’s attack range and lunged at Formation Thirteenth.

“Get away from me!!” The formation master flew into a rage. His aura rose explosively and sent Lu Yun flying with terrifying force. He was an immortal to begin with, and his body now was occupied by an even more powerful immortal. Although the soul was still adjusting to its new body, the strength of an immortal was still something that Lu Yun couldn’t handle.

Lu Yun’s body set a trajectory straight at the undead hag. Formation Thirteenth disappeared in thin air, his cackles lingering in the air.

“Am I going to die again?” A wry smile tugged at Lu Yun’s lips. He’d only just gotten used to the world of immortals. Would he reincarnate into another world this time, or would his soul scatter for real?

What I wouldn’t give to see that beautiful girl before my death. He couldn’t help but think of the girl on his back in the layout of certain death. The fleeting glimpse he’d caught was enough for her beauty to imprint itself onto Lu Yun’s heart.

Though she’d been an illusion born of the layout, all illusions were based on reality. Since her image had appeared there, it meant there must be someone like her in the real world.

“Hey now, this isn’t the time to think about a woman, is it?” He laughed wryly at himself. A soft whisper floated into his ear while a white haze illuminated the space.

Whether it was Yuying, relentlessly attacking the undead hag; or Miao, hiding in the corner trying to come up with a strategy, all parties gaped. The undead hag seemed to have been paralyzed as well.

A beautiful figure strolled gracefully out of the light, injecting a breath of life into the bleak burial mound. She looked around seventeen years old. Dressed in a downy-yellow, chiffon dress, her hair flowed softly like the clouds and her skin was fairer than snow.

Lu Yun stared at her profile, dumbfounded. It was the beautiful girl from the layout of certain death!

Why is she here? Has God heard my dying wish? His mind seemed to have short-circuited.

“Goddess?” He fell heavily to the ground, his gaze fixed on the girl.

Her yellow dress perfectly outlined her alluring curves, offsetting a tranquil expression at peace with the world. Her bare feet were as fine as jade, while a gem on her chest scintillated brilliantly, like the most splendid of stars.

“I only have two years left in my life. Even with the Portrait of Emptiness, I can at most live three to five more years,” she murmured in a soft voice that only she could hear. “I might as well discard this useless life to save yours.” She turned her clear, bright eyes on Lu Yun. “Other than big brother and cousin, you’re the only one who’s ever shown true kindness to me.” She recalled Lu Yun sending her to safety before going after Formation Thirteenth.

The girl put her hands together and closed her eyes. The gem on her chest exploded into magnificent grandeur, slamming into the undead hag and knocking the monster out of their view.

Everything quieted down.

“What happened?” Silence stretched on until Miao’s murmur broke it.

“I saw a goddess. A real goddess.” Li Youcai struggled out of the pond, dumbfounded. “What a beautiful goddess...”