

Necropolis 81

Chapter 81: Her

An even more dreadful creature emerged from the darkness. The formation should've had two hours left, but the giant fist had caused tremendous damage. Still filled with power, the Formation Orb was busily repairing the fissure, but Feinie herself was nearly spent.

"There might be a sliver of hope if I go. We're all dead otherwise!" Setting his jaw, Qing Han looked at Lu Yun. "Don't you dare follow me!"

Lu Yun searched Qing Han's eyes and found staunch determination. He nodded in acquiescence.

A smile formed on Qing Han's lips as he looked back at the Dusk governor. "Remember my present appearance."

The imperial envoy wasn't good looking, by any means. Grimy-looking skin and a centipede-like scar marring what was a passably clean-cut face, there was actually a sinister air to him.

"There's definitely something fishy going on between them," Mo Yi muttered under her breath.

As for Lu Yun, his expression was a little unnatural. Qing Han was a friend unto death, a companion he could entrust his life to. But what about his friend himself? Does he actually like guys?

At the same time, Qing Han seemed allergic to other men. Back when everyone still thought Miao was a man, he'd been reluctant to have much contact with the breathtakingly gorgeous fox. What did it all mean?

What's going through his mind?

Qing Han had already turned and left the formation, his frail figure quickly swallowed by the shadows. Yuying's demise and subsequent return to the Tome of Life and Death had taken the Emerald Mistfire with her. Meanwhile, the formation was suffering so much from the new assailant's violent pounding that it dimmed and was only dully clinging on.

Pitch-black despair reigned outside and there was no sign of Qing Han anywhere to be seen.

Lu Yun started shaking. Had he made the right choice? It somehow felt like something very important was departing from him.

"Redeploy the formation!" he suddenly shouted at Feinie. "It's our only hope of survival, we can't let it break! Mo Yi, help her." Then he steeled himself against the darkness and charged out of the formation.

"Alright!" Mo Yi tracked Lu Yun's departing figure with her eyes before turning toward Qin Xianhuo and the others. "You three lowlifes will help, or I'll execute you all. I never promised any of you anything. Anyone who wants to self-detonate can get to it. It's all the same to me whether you die now, or die later!" She glowered viciously at Qi Shenghui. A shudder ran through the eunuch and he followed her orders like a meek lamb.

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The endless darkness seemed to swallow everything, light and consciousness alike. Qing Han had no idea what gave him the courage to leave the safe confines of the formation and face the terrifying depths where even gods were buried. Was it merely the Scroll of Shepherding Immortals?

Or was it something else?

...or... someone?

The disguised girl herself was perplexed. If I actually like him, why can't I summon the courage to reveal my true appearance? Doesn't he also yearn to meet the pretty girl who saved him from the undead hag in the burial mound?

Was it simple reluctance? Or was it... fear?

I don't have long to live. I won't be anything but a fleeting interlude in the story of his life. So why not quietly stay by his side and keep him company as a friend? That wouldn't be so bad either.

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The giant monster roared and shrieked as it pummeled the formation again and again. But when it spotted a living being leaving the formation, it threw its head back, loosed an excited howl, and swiped at Qing Han's tiny figure in an attempt to grab the human.

"A Gandharva." Qing Han furtively unfurled the Scroll of Shepherding Immortals. The second the giant hand neared his figure, it instantly recoiled and the creature's lumbering frame beat a hasty retreat.

However, already spread out, the long scroll churned into the dark in close pursuit. The Gandharva howled with terror, but had no way of resisting the painting's power.

Whoooooosh!

A formless flame set its figure ablaze and instantly reduced it into ashes. The effort drained all color from Qing Han's face, given that the full power of the scroll was currently beyond his reach.

"This scroll... really shouldn't be called the Scroll of Shepherding Immortals." Qing Han sucked in a deep breath of air.

To shepherd was to guide and to oversee. To shepherd immortals meant to control immortals far and wide, to be the master of them. To bestow the painting such a name was proof of the divine race's ambitions.

But in fact, the three paintings that constituted the scroll themselves symbolized the core origins of the divine race: to wield the will of life in grasping the heaven's authority, and be born of the plentitude of nature.

Hence, the scroll wasn't merely a most cherished treasure, but also the antithesis of the divine race, one that could reduce them to their beginnings. Unless a divine could withstand its power, it would be disintegrated and returned to nature as a most primitive form of energy.

In fact, Qing Han now wondered who the ones that sealed the scroll had been. Were they immortals, or were they the divines themselves?

In any case, compared to the formidable painting, he was nothing but a weak nascent spirit cultivator. Killing a single creature had been enough to send him reeling, and the sound of his panting was painfully conspicuous.

All of the monsters here have a divine origin, including the ones Lu Yun calls ghouls. Someone buried their entire race here, then used a peculiar power to erase their sentience and transform them into creatures of the dark. Qing Han had derived some clues from the power of the Gandharva he'd slain. Though it was still a divine, it'd become something else as well.

Swish!

With a gentle shake, the scroll followed the direction of his finger and turned another creature to ash.

I have enough strength for three uses at most, no more. Mouth set firmly, Qing Han closed his eyes, prompting silver radiance to scatter from the starstone on his chest. Soon after, his figure shifted, transforming from a he to a she.

Good thing he can't see me. Her original appearance restored, she instinctively checked behind her. There wasn't a single speck of light to be found within the boundless dark. The glow of the formation had long dimmed to nothing.

She sent her starstone into the scroll to merge with it. Abruptly enlivened, the scroll glided in the air like a noble dragon and eradicated monster upon monster in a wanton killing spree.

But there were too many of them and they had a well defined goal: destroy the formation and devour the living inside. Though they feared the scroll, it didn't overpower their desire for living flesh.

In fact, the faint hints of carnage born from the scroll's slaughter sent the monsters into even more of a berserk frenzy. And despite the assistance of the starstone, manipulating the scroll was still a burden on Qing Han.

The starstone wasn't merely meant to conceal her appearance. More importantly, it also protected her life. Without the stone on her, her life began slipping away anew; not even the scroll could prevent this passage.

"Qing Han, are you alright?" Lu Yun's voice suddenly sounded by her ears, jolting her strenuous concentration. She bit her lip hard enough to draw blood and forcefully swallowed the words on the tip of her tongue.

Lu Yun followed that familiar feeling and reached her side. He couldn't help but be worried by her silence, but he didn't dare draw too close to her. Black fire raged around him, the full power of hellfire working to conceal his vitality as a living thing.

"Why aren't you saying anything? Are you hurt?" He dismissed the fire from his right hand and tried to grab her, but she shifted slightly and evaded his touch.

Chapter 82: Xuanxi

"Um... what's wrong?" Lu Yun smiled wryly. Why did Qing Han seem completely different in the darkness? He said not a word and refused to let Lu Yun touch him. At least the noteworthy power he sensed from Qing Han had allowed him to relax somewhat.

His friend wasn't hurt.

Clad in darkness, Qing Han quietly put a protective barrier around Lu Yun with the Scroll of Shepherding Immortals.

The governor was able to walk in this darkness because of the hellfire around him, obscuring his vitality and preventing the creatures of the dark from sensing him. Out of urgent concern for Qing Han earlier, he'd dismissed some of the fire and allowed some vitality to seep out. That had alerted the creatures of his presence and prompted a frenzied attack.

Qing Han destroyed them with the Scroll of Shepherding Immortals, her forehead breaking out into a sweat.

"Take me to the underwater palace!" Lu Yun suddenly said to Qing Han. Though they couldn't see anything right now, the strong memory skills of a cultivator pointed out the general direction of the palace to them. A moving cloud of sweet fragrance was the precursor to Qing Han slowly moving to the desired destination.

"Smells so good," the governor said without thinking. "It's sweet, like your breath. Did you eat something?"

When Qing Han once again refrained from responding, Lu Yun had no choice but to drop the conversation.

There was such a large swarm of dark creatures here that Qing Han struggled to force his way out, despite having the Scroll of Shepherding Immortals to tear through them.

Feinie's formation for directing the incense had been broken a long time ago. The scent of the Divine Lure had wafted about and attracted dark creatures from all directions, which was why the two of them had to deal with so many now.

And despite being stomped flat, the current river god was still alive. She was tightly clutching the incense in the formation and refusing to move, shrieking and wailing as the monster behind her unfeelingly dragged her back.

Something in the vicinity of the underwater palace seemed to be keeping the creatures at bay. They roared and wreaked havoc, and even tore into each other, but none of them approached the palace. This was the territory of something so much worse.

"Stay here and don't move," Lu Yun said, then made his way to the palace.

Qing Han nodded silently. She knew he was headed to the palace to awaken the previous river god so that they could defeat the monsters here. That river god had easily driven the monster back into the earth with her brass spear, so she must be capable of driving away the rest of the dark creatures.

After a pause, Qing Han shifted the power of starstone she'd applied to the scroll back to herself, disguising her true form again.

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“This is it now. This will determine if we can make it out alive.” Lu Yun approached the previous river god and laid a hand on her desiccated body. With a single thought, he collected the corpsefish and the spear, then immediately entered the Gates of the Abyss.

“Milord!” Yueshen hurried to Lu Yun upon his entrance, her expression panicked. The nine bloodcorpses were huddled in a pile of quivering fear. There was something else here, a consciousness that nattered incessantly. It belonged to the giant undead hag, but was an incomplete. It had neither spirit nor soul, which caused it to wander around in an aimless fog.

Lu Yun couldn't be bothered with it.

“Where is this place, milord?” Yueshen asked with trepidation. “It's terrible. I feel like something can kill me at any second.”

“You feel that as well?” Lu Yun asked in surprise. According to Qing Han, the abyss was a burial pit for the divine race. Yueshen, on the other hand, was an immortal ghost...

Wait!

Yueshen?

Shen, as in the character for god?

Realization struck him. “You're a divine too?”

Yueshen was at a loss. She remembered nothing about her past but her own name.

“That must be it.” Her being a divine would explain everything. The burial pit was here for a reason, and the power beneath the abyss had likely also factored into why Yueshen had turned into a ghost, rather than return to life.

The thing beneath the abyss can kill divines. I wonder if the river god will be able to deal with it once she resurrects.

Lu Yun had all the time in the world to think, now that he'd entered the gates. Time was halted outside, comparatively speaking. Even if he stayed here for hundreds of millions of years, he'd return to the same point in time once he left. Thus, he wasn't worried that the palace monster would break free after he'd collected the body of the river god.

However, the monster intimidated even the dark creatures that the divines had been corrupted into; it was no ordinary monster.

“There's nothing for it, I have to try! If the river god can't help us, we'll die no matter what! Third Envoy of Samsara, seek your place!” Lu Yun exclaimed.

Hum.

A black light radiated from Lu Yun, and the faint shadow of a book rose from his body.

Crack crack crack.

The enormous corpsefish cracked open like a cocoon, allowing the mermaid to slowly step out. Her eyes gradually fluttered open, revealing the depths of an ocean in her gaze. Long, crystal-blue hair flowed around her, matching the color of her tail. She looked like a piece of fine art, sculpted from crystal.

“Xuanxi, third Envoy of Samsara, greets master.” She swept down in a graceful curtsey.

Lu Yun rubbed his nose. Just like Yuying, Xuanxi had resurrected without any clothes. What set her apart was the fish tail that made up her lower body. Noting her nakedness, the new envoy manifested a downy-blue silk robe with a light wave of her hand, covering her curves.

Is this corpsefish the one that rampaged through the Dusk River and ate the thirty-six golden immortals? Lu Yun stared at the corpsefish on the ground. The river god had come back to life, but that corpsefish remained.

It looked like Xuanxi had been eaten by the creature after her death, but her tremendous power had assimilated the corpsefish in return.

Chapter 83: Princess of the Dragons

Now that Xuanxi was an envoy, her true form split from the corpsefish.

“You’re... from the North Sea water spirits?” The flood of her memories and experiences astonished Lu Yun.

North Sea water spirits were very much different from the monster spirits that currently inhabited the sea. The former had long since vanished, their ancestral home taken over by the latter.

He turned to the bronze outer-coffin. Clearly, his new envoy knew who the burial vessel contained. Back in the day, she’d willingly walked into Wayfarer’s scheme in order to pass down instructions for the ritual to revive the one within.

“Yes, master. I am one of the shark spirits of the North Sea. I was the princess’ close subordinate, once upon a time.” The watery envoy quietly lowered her head. “She was the very first Dusk River God, but died in a fight with the terrible restriction that lies in the ancient tomb. I inherited the position from her.”

Gods were not only entities born of sacrifices through ritual, but also represented a position, a title created to fulfill a specific duty. The power of a god was a result of the laws of nature and the wishes of the masses.

Take the first Dusk River God, for example. Born from the sacrifices, prayers, and worship of the people living on the banks, the river god could manipulate the river so that it no longer flooded. Thus, she protected the lives of her worshipers on the banks, as was her born duty.

They wished for her to have that particular power over nature, and so it came to be.

This kind of position could be transferred to another, whether willingly or by force. Regardless, the Dusk River God would always have the ability to control Dusk River.

Xuanxi's death meant that she no longer held that post. Another river god wouldn't have been born otherwise. As for the princess she'd once served, occupant of the bronze outer-coffin, this was the one which the large burial mound and a thousand years of rituals wished to return to life.

"Was the disturbance a thousand years ago, the one that caused untold misery and suffering for all of Dusk Province, all to revive this princess of yours?" Lu Yun glanced at the outer-coffin, rather upset.

"No, no," the watery envoy replied hurriedly. "There must be another reason. The princess was the purest of nobility, but the last heir and had gone into hiding with few troops to her name. She even changed her name... wait!" Xuanxi shrieked with alarm. "What is this?! Why is there the light of blood on Her Highness?!"

Two beams of pale-blue illumination shot from her eyes, a gaze that could peer into the coffin.

"Offerings of grass and dogs fashioned from hay should borrow from the purest of energies in the world. Why does blood shimmer over her?" Xuanxi was deathly pale.

"The sacrificial goods were changed," Lu Yun intoned in a low voice. "They were substituted for ninety-nine pairs of children, plus more than a thousand cultivators' bodies and souls. It seems that someone wanted to revive the princess alright, but to create their very own killing machine in the process."

The ritual would've turned out fine if only effigies of straw were used. Once living sacrifices were substituted, it turned much too bloody and cruel, creating a critical mass of bad karma.

Under those circumstances, the princess could only rise again as a mindless, murderous fiend—even more horrifying than the zombie king.

Long ago, Xuanxi had offered up her own life to create a self-sustaining boundary with natural energy. The system didn't need outside help to perpetuate itself. She'd only passed down the sacrificial rites to revive her princess.

Alas, outside interference had altered her intentions beyond belief, turning the dragon princess into a monster.

The contingency she'd left in place to ensure that the ritual would proceed as normal had evidently been removed as well. As a result, the centenary rites led to a drastically different result.

Nothing she'd wanted to accomplish had been achieved.

"Master, for the sake of all life, please stop the princess' revival. Her Highness would never have wanted this either." Resolution flashed through Xuanxi's downy-blue eyes. She'd once given up her life to revive her mistress, but now pleaded with Lu Yun to prevent that goal from coming to fruition.

"We'll have to see. I can't touch this bronze outer-coffin yet." Lu Yun shook his head slightly. Though the burial vessel now resided in the Gates of the Abyss, it remained connected to the outside world through a mysterious power. The energies generated by the sacrifices still flowed readily into it. He didn't dare do anything to it yet.

"What's up with the brass spear though? Why is it here?" He changed the subject, pointing at the weapon embedded in the corpsefish.

Xuanxi blinked and shook her head. She naturally didn't know of anything that had happened after her death. While her convictions had recorded some memories during their possession of the corpsefish, they were too faded for Lu Yun to read.

The only thing she remembered was giving the Divinewater Talisman to Lu Yun and telling him how to leave the abyss. As for why a shard of her will had lived on to suppress the palace monster in the first place, she had no idea.

"This brass spear is called Seaward, and it's one of the most precious treasures of the North Sea water spirits. The princess lived in Dusk River Palace, once upon a time. If my guess is right, the monster beneath it is one of her dragonguards, twisted by the power here."

Xuanxi tried to sort through her thoughts. Previously, she'd been able to invoke Seaward's power because she was a strand of conviction representing her old self. Now that she was an Envoy of Samsara, she only had the strength of a true immortal. Seaward was a weapon wielded by dao immortals, so it wasn't something she could touch now.

The roving corpsefish that'd eaten her had also taken over the position of Dusk River God. At some point, someone had slain the disorderly corpsefish, and its corpse had sunk into the abyss to seal away Dusk River Palace.

But who had wielded the long-lost Seaward to accomplish the deed? It was another mystery to add to the pile.

"Do you have any ideas of how we can get out of here?" asked Lu Yun.

"Yes!" Xuanxi replied with certainty. "If we can capture that Dusk River God under the dragonguard's control, I'll be able to take back my position and control of the river. After that, I'll have the river's waters send us safely out."

"Although the entire divine race is sealed away in the abyss, I'm not a divine myself. I became the Dusk River God through inheritance, so the abyss doesn't affect me at all."

There were two kinds of gods: some were born through sacrifice, while others obtained the title and duty from another.

Yin and yang were by nature separated from each other, and their convergence gave rise to all life. Gods born of sacrifice and worship likewise possessed these characteristics, and their offspring formed the divine race.

A divine was endowed with extraordinary talents. The powers their parents received from their positions were passed down through their bloodlines, from generation to generation.

"Can you subdue that corrupted dragonguard then?" Lu Yun furrowed his brow. If he left now, the unleashed dragonguard would re-emerge and kill him and everyone else.

"Absolutely!" Xuanxi nodded. "I can hold it still for about ten breaths."

"That's enough time!" Lu Yun set his jaw in preparation.

The new Dusk River God was both a divine and a god born from the belief and sacrifice of worshippers. That nature meant that Qing Han's Scroll of Shepherding Immortals would work on it. Ten breaths was more than enough for the scroll to do its work.

Having come to a decision, he promptly stepped out of the gates with his new envoy.

Rumble—

The earth immediately began to tremble, opening up fissure upon fissure across its surface.

"Rauuuugh—" A bestial roar tore through the abyss in terror.

The gathered creatures of darkness were forced to the ground in fear, unable to move an inch. Dusk River Palace crumbled as a giant dragon head appeared in the gloom.

"Halt!" A crisp command cut through the silence, followed by the manifestation of a brilliant azure talisman that lit up the void. It plastered itself to the dragon head as soon as it'd fully materialized.

"Hurry, Qing Han!" Lu Yun bawled "Capture the river god!" Time was ticking down.

1. Lu Yun knew beforehand there's a dragon inside the coffin.

Chapter 84: An Old Crone Thousands of Years Old

The luminous talisman was as blue as the ocean waves, throwing off a radiance that instantly brightened the surroundings. Lu Yun and Qing Han found a monstrous dragon's head peering at them through vicious, blood-red eyes.

The Dusk River God hung upon its chin like a meat pie, her link to the black dragon the only thing keeping it alive.

"Got it!" Qing Han swiftly leapt into action. Crossing both arms over his chest, he cast a barrage of pristine light through the Scroll of Shepherding Immortals.

"Roaaaaaaar!!" The inky dragon head frothed with rage; that human was trying to take away its Dusk River God! Held fast by Xuanxi's talisman, it could only watch in frustration as the mythical scroll absorbed its prize.

Kchrrrk!

A burst of strength from the black dragon cracked the talisman on its head.

"Didn't you say ten breaths?! It's only been three!" yelled Lu Yun, positively frightened that the dragon was already breaking free.

"You fool! That's not Her Highness!" Xuanxi realized what was happening when she noted the madness in the dragonguard's eyes. Because of its title, the Dusk River God carried a very similar aura to the dragon princess of yesteryear and the dragonguard had mistaken it for its former mistress!

After all, this black dragon had been the North Sea princess' guard before. Qing Han and Mo Yi had both guessed incorrectly in this regard: the dragon hadn't linked itself together with the Dusk River God in order to use her as bait, but rather to forcibly sustain her existence.

The river god's tail had been eaten by the other denizens in the darkness, not the dragon. If the dragonguard hadn't saved her, she would've died long ago.

Boom!

Tremendous wrath increased the dragon's strength by a third. The talisman that should've been good for ten breaths lasted only three before being shattered. Its humongous form slowly crawled out from the floor of the abyss.

"Back! Back, I say!" Amid Xuanxi's frenzied cries, the envoy bit her tongue and spat out a small mouthful of blue lifeblood.

An even larger talisman materialized in the void, affixing itself to the black dragon's head once more. Its emerging body suddenly retracted, pressured by the power of the talisman.

"Hurt... princess... traitor!" Its words were laboriously slow and hoarse, its crimson eyes glaring venom at Xuanxi.

"That's not the princess!" Xuanxi gritted her teeth before firing back.

Boom, crack, rumble.

The ground trembled and shook. The dragonguard fell into an even deeper frenzy, breaking free of Xuanxi's second talisman in the next instant.

Every pore of the watery envoy's body exuded rivulets of blood. She frantically waved both hands in the air, casting talisman after talisman on the black dragon in a futile attempt to beat it back. She had no time or energy to do anything else. And alas, her efforts were getting weaker by the moment.

Lu Yun was astounded. He hadn't imagined there could be such ferocity from the dragon! He hurtled backward, retreating to Qing Han's side. His friend protectively opened the scroll around both of them.

"Master! Capture that dragon!" An urgent voice from the scroll sounded in Qing Han's mind.

"Who is this?" gasped the young man.

"It is I, the Dragon Prince!" the voice answered hurriedly before continuing. "That black dragon isn't pure-blooded. It's a scaled wyrm! If you send it into this scroll, the Tiger Prince and I can subdue it for you!"

The Tiger and Dragon Princes had come to live inside the Panorama of Clarity back inside the great burial mound: the former had been captured, but the latter had entered of his own volition.

After the three paintings had combined into the Scroll of Shepherding Immortals, the dynamic duo had only grown stronger inside their new home. They'd been forced to fight each other only because of the Duality of Dragon and Tiger, but were now freed from that.

"Fine... but if you two say anything unnecessary, I'll destroy you both!" Qing Han messaged back through clenched teeth.

He hadn't paid attention to the two beasts within the scroll, before. If they could see what was going on outside, they must know about his true identity and form.

“No, no, master! We won’t tell a soul anything about you!” the Tiger Prince anxiously replied.

“Lu Yun! Hold the black dragon still for three more breaths!” Qing Han yelled loudly.

“Xuanxi, you heard him!” Lu Yun scrunched up his face. Two black flames shot out of his eyes as the power of the Tome of Life and Death roared to life within his dantian, reinforcing Xuanxi with its potency.

“Understood!” The watery envoy could feel newfound vitality surging through her. The black flames that Lu Yun had manifested appeared in her own eyes as well. Though she hadn’t gotten any stronger, her stamina and spirit were fully restored.

She opened her arms, singing aloud a melodic verse. The song siphoned every bit of energy it could from the surroundings—heaven, earth, and even the darkness beneath the abyss—in order to form a giant talisman that was a full three hundred meters wide.

Boooooom!

As soon as it had come into being, the giant talisman slammed itself on the black dragon’s body. Under its influence, the dragon became as still as a statue. In fact, its very vitality was sealed away.

Xuanxi’s body crumpled to the ground like a leaf. That last act had drained every ounce of strength she’d had.

“Hah!” Qing Han forcefully expelled the air in his lungs. Floating in midair, he radiated a piercingly brilliant starlight that dimmed even the talisman’s glow.

“That isn’t the power of the scroll!” The starlight was oddly familiar to Lu Yun. He turned away instinctively from the blinding light, as it was too bright to look at directly. The zombie girl and Mo Yi shared his sentiment, closing their eyes in turn to avoid the dazzling glare.

In the silver light, Qing Han once more transformed into the girl of Lu Yun’s dreams. However, her sable locks had turned the same shade of silver as the stars. The pale yellow dress she had previously worn now shone with unearthly brilliance, concealing her form more delicately than ever. Silver tresses were whipped up by the power of the scroll, which was unfurled and on the offense toward the scaled wyrm.

“How dare you resist!” the girl trilled. “Come!”

Hum.

The silver radiance of the starstone shone even brighter, reinforcing the scroll with its lustrous beams, and the scaled dragon was instantly sucked up into the painting.

A moment later, the scroll began trembling. A wisp of black smoke escaped, heralding the attempts of a draconic shadow to break free. The roaring of a dragon and a tiger quickly shut it up, bringing peace and quiet back to both the scroll and the depths.

In the dusky void, the hovering girl enveloped in silvery starlight became the center of attention.

“It’s her! How can she possibly be here?!” Lu Yun looked at the girl suspended in midair, awed and mystified by what he had just seen. The starry girl slowly descended, landing softly in front of him.

“W-what just happened?” The young man could scarcely believe his eyes. She was here again, but what about Qing Han? Where had his friend gone?

“Who are you, really?” he hastily blurted out.

“My name is Qing Yu.” The girl opened up in a sunlit smile. “Remember that.”

She waved a hand, opening the scroll once more and ejecting the unconscious Qing Han and Dusk River God; after which her body dissipated into a million motes of light.

Lu Yun reached out a hand, but there was nothing for him to grasp.

“You saved me again, Qing Yu...” he muttered, still transfixed by the place she’d disappeared. It took awhile for him to recover his wits and dash to his friend’s side. “You alright, Qing Han?”

He extended both arms to help Qing Han up, whose pallid face was just beginning to stir. Although he had a million questions, he knew now wasn’t the time.

A pill supplied from his storage ring brought a bit of color back to Qing Han’s cheeks.

Lu Yun was well prepared this time. Upon leaving the burial mound, he’d asked Yuying to refine some pills. By now, he had plenty of the kind that restored stamina and healed injuries.

The depths enjoyed a rare moment of peace and tranquility, the creatures in the darkness having been scared off by the Scroll of Shepherding Immortals. Xuanxi forced herself to stand and approached the Dusk River God’s body, then forcefully took the god’s position.

“I think the girl just now was someone’s spirit given form,” the envoy helpfully supplied, noticing Lu Yun’s perplexity.

“Someone’s spirit?” Lu Yun blinked.

A cultivator could form a nascent spirit upon reaching the spirit realm. After sending it out from the body, one’s spirit could take on a thousand forms and deploy a smattering of different arts.

Leaning on Lu Yun’s arm, the recovering Qing Han immediately tensed.

“It seemed like it, but that spirit was also unreasonably strong,” Xuanxi said, hesitant.

Lu Yun glanced at his friend, who closed his eyes straight away.

“Qing Han, is there a girl in your clan called Qing Yu?” Expectation shone on the young governor’s face.

“No!” Qing Han was beginning to regret his actions. Although he’d used his spirit to hide his identity, telling Lu Yun his real name had been completely unnecessary. Surely, saving the governor was enough. The number of people in the world who knew that secret could be counted on one hand!

“Sir!” Xuanxi interrupted his train of thought. “The position of the river god is mine once more. I should be able to bring down the Dusk River and have it transport us out.”

“Take a break to recover a bit more,” Lu Yun disagreed. “It’s fairly safe here, for now. We’re not in a hurry.”

Xuanxi had used her very essence to create the absurdly powerful talisman that had immobilized the dragonguard, and her lifeforce was on the brink of exhaustion. If she pushed herself any more, she would very likely die.

Although the Tome of Life and Death could revive her, Lu Yun needed her more immediate assistance with his planned rescue of Wanfeng. He couldn't afford to wait a week for her to be reborn.

Xuanxi silently inclined her head. She curled up her fishy tail closer to herself, focusing on healing her own injuries. Straightening himself up, Qing Han began doing the same.

"Hey~ Qing Han," Lu Yun singsonged and sidled up to the youth, a simpering smile plastered across his face.

"What?" his friend coolly shot back.

"See, you know a lot of my secrets..." Lu Yun's expression was a bit awkward.

The Scroll of Shepherding Immortals was one of the divine race's crowning treasures, far more precious than the Formation Orbs. However, Lu Yun had handed it over to save his friend's life without batting an eye. And now, he'd shown the revival of the previous Dusk River God too.

Qing Han had liked being shown these things because it was a sign of Lu Yun's trust in him, and trust to these depths was a luxurious feeling.

"I won't tell anyone about all this," he replied seriously.

"That's not what I meant!" Lu Yun corrected hurriedly. "Is there really no one named Qing Yu in your family?"

"What, you want to ask for her hand in marriage??" Qing Han tilted his head with an amused half-smile.

"Eh, that's not... well, I... Look, she saved me twice. I should at least thank her face to face, r-right?"

If Qing Yu hadn't appeared just now and tamed the black dragon, everyone here would've died. Lu Yun was only a core realm cultivator; a stiff breeze from the dragon's general direction would've been enough to send him through the cycle of reincarnation again.

The girl's repeated appearances during times of great danger meant that Qing Han had to be related to her somehow. In fact, he must know her very well!

"Sure," Qing Han nodded. "She's a couple thousand years old, though. And a scary crone."

Chapter 85: Divine Obsession

Lu Yun rubbed his nose in embarrassment at Qing Han's words. Those were the very words he'd said himself in the beginning. Come what may, he was now even more positive about a certain conjecture of his.

The girl called "Qing Yu" must have left a strand of her nascent spirit on Qing Han in order to emerge at critical times to confront powerful threats.

"Do you want her to come out again?" Qing Han grinned and winked at him.

Lu Yun shook his head. "The last time she appeared, it almost cost you your life. And it wasn't much better this time around."

Qing Han blinked, a strange sentiment gleaming in his eyes. Outwardly, he seemed to have recovered somewhat, but he'd truly exhausted too much of his energy. If he hadn't refined the Scroll of Shepherding Immortals, the starstone would've already drained his life.

This time, he'd released the power of his nascent spirit to boot, and used it to activate the starstone in order to subdue the black dragon.

"If I ever have the opportunity to visit House Qing, I must meet and thank her in person. Since she told me her name, she must be a little interested in me." Lu Yun's expression turned sunny once again, the earlier display of his anxious stammering nowhere to be seen.

"Yes." Qing Han felt the burn on his cheeks. Thankfully, his skin was dark enough to cover the blush. "Who the heck knows why she did that," he mumbled almost inaudibly.

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Mo Yi and the others caught up to them. The protective formation had shattered when the black dragon burrowed out from the ground, but thankfully, the scroll had already sent the dark creatures packing, giving the group a reprieve.

Fragments of talismans littered the ground, illuminating the area with their cool blue light.

Seeing Qing Han and Xuanxi in a boneless heap on the ground, Mo Yi immediately asked, "What was that just now?"

She smartly avoided asking about Xuanxi's identity. Given that her appearance was strikingly similar to Dusk River's river god from earlier, much of it was easy to guess.

"Everything's settled. We'll be able to leave in a moment." Lu Yun sighed with relief when he saw Diexi and Mo Yi appear.

Both Qing Han and Xuanxi were incapacitated, and Lu Yun was only a golden core cultivator. Hellfire was now his only way of self-defense. But Mo Yi and Diexi were both powerful immortals, and even if they couldn't face the legion of creatures by themselves, they'd easily be able to dispose of one or two stragglers.

"Leave?" The two women beamed. Finally! Freedom from this forsaken place was finally at hand!

"Hmm? Human torso, fish tail, blue hair, and blue eyes... that's a mermaid!" Qi Shenghui's eyes gleamed at the sight of Xuanxi. "What a fine mermaid slave, and she's already a true immortal. She can be sold for a small city at least!"

Xuanxi's face hardened at his remarks.

Mermaids were beautiful by nature, and their songs moved the soul. In the immortal world, they were outstanding playtoys in certain circles. But they were extremely few in number and protected by the water spirits in the four seas, so mermaid slaves were extraordinarily precious commodities.

“The Formation Orb might be out of reach, but capturing a mermaid slave for the crown prince will make up for our failure!” Near-visible beams of light from his eyes highlighted Qi Shenghui’s desire.

“Qi Shenghui, what kind of nonsense is this?” Qin Xianhuo scowled when he saw Qi Shenghui head for Xuanxi. How could the eunuch think of stirring up trouble at a time like this! He was the reason why everyone had almost lost their lives earlier!

“Mister Qin, this slave that appeared out of nowhere is obviously a creature of the abyss. When I capture her, she’ll belong to me. What, are you people going to stop me?” Qi Shenghui fixed a malevolent look upon the old man.

Qin Xianhuo was about to retort when Situ Yun pulled him aside. Everyone had quietly distanced themselves from the eunuch during the exchange.

“What’s wrong?” The old formation master had finally noticed something amiss.

“A castrated man like him already brims with yin energy. Giving free reign to his wicked desires in such a sinister place...” Lu Yun pressed his lips together. “He’s been possessed.”

And not by an immortal ghost! Lu Yun would’ve been the first to notice that. Moreover, an immortal ghost would be afraid of approaching him. A place permeated with such strong yin energy was certainly populated with many unknown, sinister creatures that’d initially stayed away, intimidated by his hellfire.

A eunuch to begin with, Qi Shenghui was teeming with the most yin energy out of all of them. Moreover, his mind was filled with one evil scheme after another. The strange yin creatures had followed the trail of his wicked desires and taken possession of him. They now controlled his thoughts, magnified his most hidden desires a thousandfold, and exposed them for all to see. He wouldn’t be so uninhibited otherwise, even if he’d these dark stirrings.

“You can’t kill him!” Seeing Mo Yi about to attack the man, Diexi urgently stopped her. “The stench of blood will attract the dark creatures again.”

“You’re mine! His Highness the Crown Prince will surely reward me handsomely when I bring him such a prize!” Qi Shenghui howled with laughter, his shrill tones reverberating through the abyss with bone-chilling echoes. Seeing that no one dared stop him, his expression turned increasingly self-satisfied.

He made a hand seal and flashed with an abnormal golden luster again. The eunuch was plainly using the threat of detonating his body and spirit to get his way. He stalked toward Xuanxi, the light of madness in his eyes growing ever more feverish.

Roar!

A dragon roar resounded as an enormous dragon head emerged from the Scroll of Shepherding Immortals and lunged at Qi Shenghui, its mouth wide open.

“What is this!” the eunuch shrieked, his self-detonation art immediately dispelled. He shot backward at an inconceivable speed, narrowly escaping the bite. By now, the timbre of his voice was rough and a strange red glint shone in his eyes.

“Something recognized that Xuanxi is the key to leaving this place. That’s why it’s taken control of Qi Shenghui to seize her,” Qing Han explained as the light of understanding dawned. The scroll flashed black as the dragon head withdrew inside.

“Agreed.” Lu Yun had also discovered this development, but he didn’t dare rush blindly into action when the identity of what’d possessed the eunuch remained unknown.

“It’s a divine obsession!” Mo Yi identified solemnly. “When a god dies, convictions that don’t disperse turn into obsessions if they merge with foul yin energy. It’s an incredibly dangerous thing with no form or substance. It’s merely fragments of a thought, so there’s nothing to be done about it.”

“Divine obsession!” Lu Yun suddenly recalled that there was something similar inside the Gates of the Abyss.

A thought fragment belonging to the original master of the burial mound had merged with the corpse coffin, allowing it to control the undead hag. Lu Yun hadn’t fully understood its nature until Mo Yi’s explanation. The thought fragment that’d scuttled inside the gates was a divine obsession.

“No matter what, let’s get rid of that half-man first!” He clenched his teeth. “Feinie!”

“At your service.” At Lu Yun’s command, she waved her hand and released a black light from the Yin Formation Orb. One formation after another emerged above it and moved to quell Qi Shenghui.

“Kekeke—” Strange cackles burst forth from Qi Shenghui. With a sudden shift in his figure, he instantly flashed to Lu Yun. “Die, pathetic bug!”

He aimed a punch at the governor’s chest, deploying the power of an august immortal. The blow would shatter Lu Yun to pieces if it were to land, leaving nothing of him behind.

Boom!

At that moment, an enormous black dragon head interposed itself between Lu Yun’s chest and the incoming punch. It snagged Qi Shenghui and swallowed him whole with one bite.

“I’ve been waiting for you.” Qing Han stood beside Lu Yun, ashen-faced as he gasped for air.

The killing intent that Qi Shenghui was already harboring toward Lu Yun would’ve been magnified by the divine obsession, so Qing Han had long been prepared for the eunuch to attack Lu Yun. At the exact moment of action, he released the dragon inside the scroll to devour Qi Shenghui.

Swish.

When the eunuch disappeared into the dragon’s mouth, a black shadow with a streak of red glow fled from the dragon’s mouth and melted into the darkness.

“Kekeke... for destroying my host, all of you will die!” Laughter that raised one’s hackles rang out as a faint, red shadow condensed in front of them. Soon after, the strong stench of blood filled the air.

When the divine obsession detached itself from Qi Shenghui, it’d brought all of the human’s blood with him. The dark creatures that were fleeing in all directions rushed back in at once when they caught wind

of that smell. Their minds were foggy and confused. Their fear was instinctual, but a thirst for blood was also part of their very natures.

The divine obsession shrieked and cried out gutturally, its penetrating voice seeming to summon something.

"I've finally found you. A divine obsession is nothing but a fragment of thought, and shouldn't be so self-aware and independent. So what can you be?" a soft whisper sounded.

"Who is that?" Lu Yun's group froze when they heard the voice and reflexively glanced into the depths of the darkness.

Chapter 86: No Escape

They saw what looked to be a young man of about twenty-three years old. World-weariness written in his face, he slowly padded out of the darkness dressed in a clean but worn-out robe and holding an azure bamboo stick. Judging from his empty gaze and unfocused eyes, he seemed to be blind.

"Who are you?" Lu Yun demanded, having concluded with his Spectral Eye that the abruptly-appearing young man was alive.

Qin Xianhuo didn't say anything when he saw the newcomer, but the excitement flashing through his face spoke volumes; he knew the stranger.

The young man didn't respond. Instead, he took out a palm-sized gourd and opened its lid, tapping it thrice to swallow the divine obsession before it had time to react.

"I've finally caught you," muttered the blind young man. "Now I can figure out what you are."

"Who are you?!" Lu Yun demanded again.

"It seems that someone alive has entered." The blind man paused and sighed. "I don't know who I am..."

"Wayfarer!" Qing Han shouted in shock. "The masterful Art Saint! I've seen your portrait in history books!"

"What?!" Lu Yun's eyes widened with shock and he quickly rummaged through the portion of his mind reserved for Yuying's memories. Hidden deep in her recollections was the faint figure of a man. It overlapped with the blind young fellow before him.

Wayfarer!

Twelve hundred years ago, Yuying and Wayfarer had walked the world of immortals hand in hand. They were the perfect match, in many people's eyes. Sadly, they'd eventually parted ways in the end.

When Yuying had died in her heavenly tribulations, thanks to the Exalted Immortal Sect's scheming, Wayfarer collected her body and buried her and the Panorama of Clarity in the tomb outside Dusk City.

He'd become the governor of Dusk Governor a thousand years ago and altered the tributes used in the ritual that Xuanxi had left behind, almost turning the dragon princess in the burial mound into a vicious killing machine.

Now here he was, in the abyss that was the burial grounds of the divine race.

“He’s Wayfarer?” Mo Yi frowned and looked at Wayfarer in disbelief. “The masterful Art Saint is blind?” An artist without his vision was as good as dead.

“Wayfarer?” The young man paused. “Maybe. Is that really my name?”

“Yip yip yip!” Miao popped out of Mo Yi’s arms and waved her little paws at Wayfarer in complaint.

“What’s she saying?” Lu Yun looked at Mo Yi.

“She said that in her dreams, she saw this man kick her away and place the bronze outer-coffin in her place instead.” Mo Yi paused, bemused pause. “In her dreams?”

Given her lack of knowledge of what had happened in the burial mound, she couldn’t quite comprehend what she’d heard.

Lu Yun and Qing Han exchanged a glance. The fox’s dreams were all real! Five thousand years ago, the burial mound had fallen from the sky and destroyed Truewater City, burying Feinie with it. Was Wayfarer responsible for all of that?

“What’s going on?” Mo Yi grew further confused.

Meanwhile, Situ Yun and Qin Xianhuo remained timidly silent, holding their breath. The two august immortals had lived more than a couple thousand years, so they’d naturally seen Wayfarer before.

A thousand years ago, he’d been the most handsome gentleman in the world of immortals. Countless fairies had thrown themselves at his feet. However, he rejected everyone. His eyes harbored a profound sadness that never dissipated.

Because of Yuying.

Wayfarer’s appearance hadn’t changed, but he was blind and worn down by the world, a far cry from the genteel and urbane man he had once been.

“Yip yip yip!” The fox had a lot of things to say, but she could only loudly mewl at the moment.

Previously, she’d been able to imitate human language through illusion. After Mo Yi broke her illusions, though, she was neither able to project human form nor speak the human language. Nevertheless, Mo Yi had done that to protect her. Creating illusions would greatly hurt the little fox in her current state.

“Now I understand.” After listening with a cocked ear, Mo Yi could deduce a few things about recent history.

“I have seen you before,” Diexi suddenly said, scanning Wayfarer closely. “You have been here for a very long time.”

She might not have had a soul when she was a zombie, but her body passively remembered everything. During her years in the tomb for the living, she’d seen Wayfarer more than once.

“I don’t know that, either,” Wayfarer murmured.

Diexi declared with great certainty, "You were here a thousand years ago. You were also here five thousand years ago."

"What?" This took everyone aback, Situ Yun and Qin Xianhuo in particular. They were certain the man in front of them was Wayfarer. They'd both met the Art Saint in person before, and would never mistake his presence for someone else.

"You were here before my tomb appeared," Diexi said without any trace of doubt. "You have been here for tens of thousands of years!"

"Maybe... I've been here so long that I don't even remember who I am." Wayfarer intended to quirk his lips into a rueful smile, but his face was so stiff from disuse that he only managed to slightly lift the corners of his lips.

"That doesn't make any sense! If you've been here forever, who is the Wayfarer we knew? He gave me the same feeling as you." Qin Xianhuo approached Wayfarer. "I once sought your guidance, and you gifted me with a painting that helped me become a formation master..."

"I don't know how to draw." Wayfarer shook his head. "I can't see."

With a twist of his wrist, Qin Xianhuo manifested a scroll that was a traditional ink splash painting of natural landscapes. The signature at the bottom read "From Wayfarer to Junior Brother Xianhuo."

"What an exquisitely crafted painting. It embodies the principles of formations and the heavenly dao." Mo Yi's eyes lit up when they settled on the painting. "It is indeed the work of Wayfarer, the man before us."

The presence lingering about the painting matched that of the young man. Now everyone fell silent. Nothing made a lick of sense, and there was no fathomable explanation for the situation.

"To be honest, there's no use dwelling on the matter." Wayfarer shook his head, disrupting their discussion. "You'll forget everything if you stay here. Who I am doesn't matter at all."

"Do you want to get out of here?" Lu Yun suddenly asked.

"Get out of here?" Wayfarer shook his head after a pause. "There's no way out. I've tried many different ways, but to no avail..."

Lu Yun shook his head slightly. "Just because you can't doesn't mean we can't."

"I know you want to leave through the river above us, but there's something keeping the abyss sealed. As soon as you attempt to leave, it will drain your life essence and turn you into shriveled corpses, just like those things on the cliff. There's no escape," he muttered. "No escape...."

Chapter 87: The Altar, Again

Lu Yun's heart thumped. "Something that absorbs life essence?"

"Correct." Wayfarer nodded. "Any living things that attempt to leave are drained of life."

"Living things?" Qing Han interjected, "What about dead things?"

Wayfarer paused. "Dead things?"

"Such as ghosts or zombies." The imperial envoy paused in thought. "Or things that have disguised their vitals."

Previously, a titanic undead hag had crawled out of the abyss. It was neither alive nor dead, but something akin to a zombie.

Diexi was from here as well. Unfortunately for her, the nine bloodcorpses had delayed her right after her transformation to zombie king, and the island's descent back into the abyss had occurred before she could escape.

Wayfarer shook his head. "There's a special power in the abyss preventing ghosts and zombies from being born."

His meaning was crystal clear: Diexi wasn't born of the abyss. Someone had placed her here and established the tomb for the living, making use of whatever power was here. As for the undead hag, it'd simply been sealed in this place.

"The immortal ghost is scared." Lu Yun knew what Qing Han's next question would be. "Yueshen was a divine before her death. She doesn't dare come out."

"No." Qing Han shook his head. "I wasn't talking about Yueshen, but you."

Lu Yun paused. "Me?"

"When you were next to me earlier, I didn't feel your vitals," Qing Han transmitted to Lu Yun. "Even the Scroll of Shepherding Immortals and my... treasure couldn't sense you."

Lu Yun's hellfire had concealed his lifeforce, preventing the creatures of the dark from noticing him. At the same time, neither the Scroll of Shepherding Immortals nor the starstone could sense him either. If even two great treasures had been fooled, what about the thing Wayfarer was talking about?

His eyes lit up with possibility. That's right, I can use my fire to disguise myself, locate that life-absorbing thing, and temporarily seal it away. Lu Yun started running through plans in his head.

"I'll give you the Scroll of Shepherding Immortals. Go up with it, you'll find a way out." Qing Han shoved the painting into Lu Yun's hands, but the governor pushed it back.

"Keep it." Lu Yun shook his head. "I have my ways." He glanced at Feinie, who retreated back into the dark and vanished into the Gates of the Abyss without missing a beat.

"I'll go up and see what's causing all this." Lu Yun bowed to Wayfarer. "Please protect them well, senior."

"You're going up?" Wayfarer started, given that he didn't know what Lu Yun and Qing Han had discussed, since their conversation had been held through consciousness. He nodded. "You must have a few tricks up your sleeve if you can survive here as a golden core cultivator. Go on. However, I'll only wait here for you for three days. If I don't hear anything from you in three days, I'll assume you're dead and take your companions someplace safe."

“Alright,” Lu Yun agreed without hesitation. Even if he couldn’t locate that life-absorbing thing in three days, he would return to the abyss. They were currently in a more dangerous part of the abyss where even Wayfarer didn’t dare stay for too long.

Qing Han handed over the Divinewater Talisman that Xuanxi had gifted them. Xuanxi tapped into her godhood to instantly call down the Dusk River from the sky. Lu Yun activated the talisman and dove into the water with a flash of azure light, soaring past the abyss through the river.

Although the river looked like it was right on top of them, the space here was fragmented and displaced. The true distance between him and the transcended river was unknown.

Of course, the river god could send Lu Yun directly into the river, but he had to find the thing that was absorbing life essence first, then deactivate it before sending everyone out.

“So you’re a divine born in the Dusk River.” Wayfarer might not be able to see, but his powerful consciousness allowed him to sense his surroundings without his eyes and ears.

Xuanxi didn’t respond, but kept tight control of the river with her eyes shut.

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Whoosh!

Within the waters of Dusk River, hellfire glazed intensely around Lu Yun. This time, he didn’t disguise his vitality with his fire, but merely locked his life essence in his body.

“Sir,” Feinie said from within the Gates of the Abyss. “Diexi gifted me the Yin Formation Orb.”

That gave Lu Yun pause. The Yin Formation Orb was a connate grade treasure that would be a powerful weapon even if Diexi didn’t know formations. But she’d given it to Feinie just like that.

“If the two orbs come together as one, sir, I’ll be able to recover my empyrean immortal strength with its power.” Feinie had been a golden immortal before her death, but her resurrection by the Tome of Life and Death had left her a true immortal. There was no telling how long it would take for her to become a golden immortal again.

However, the combined power of the yin and yang Formation Orbs would push her one step closer to empyrean immortal.

“Wonderful!” Lu Yun grinned and returned to the Gates of the Abyss. Time came to a halt in the outside world when he was in here. Feinie would have enough time to combine the two Formation Orbs and recover her strength.

It was just a pity that Lu Yun himself couldn’t cultivate within the netherworld.

The damaged world had been slowly recovering as Lu Yun’s cultivation progressed. Although the Envoys of Samsara could cultivate by absorbing the energy here, its chaotic nature made them wary of depending on it too much.

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Feinie sat cross-legged on the floor. Black and a white orbs were floating before her and slowly merging together. Their light combined to create a strange, formless glow. Within it were countless formations, each more powerful than the ones she'd deployed before.

The formations created by the two Formation Orbs were polar opposites—ones of extreme yang, and ones of extreme yin. At the same time, yin and yang couldn't exist for long without the other.

Someone had killed Feinie in the burial mound as tribute, despite her being in possession of the Yang Formation Orb, and she had no idea who her killer was. She hadn't even seen their face.

The two Formation Orbs complemented each other's flaws upon their merger, and the formations within became flawless and complete.

When the two orbs disappeared, a colorless Formation Orb resembling a brilliant pearl took their place. It hovered before Feinie and slowly sank into her forehead. She made several seals with her hands, her body continuing to absorb the energy in the Formation Orb like an enormous sponge.

Hum.

After a long period of time, a hum echoed from Feinie's body. She opened her eyes, revealing two balls of flame—the fires of hell. As Lu Yun's envoy, she was able to tap into the flame's power.

In fact, that fire was what her life core was composed of.

As she'd once said herself, the original Feinie was dead. All that had been reborn after her resurrection was Lu Yun's envoy.

"I've kept you waiting long enough, sir." Feinie rose to her feet. Like a butterfly emerging from its chrysalis, her presence had undergone a fundamental change. Though a hint of melancholy still remained between her brows, there was a new trace of dashing confidence in her face.

"Good!" Lu Yun commended, then lowered his voice and continued, "I'll be counting on you in a moment."

Even if he could locate the life-absorbing thing, he wouldn't be able to deal with it himself.

And to be frank, he'd never intended to destroy it in the first place. Otherwise, the endless swarm of dark creatures would crawl their way out of the abyss and destroy Dusk Province.

The right thing to do was for Feinie to temporarily isolate the life-absorbing power with a formation so they could depart.

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Lu Yun made his way out of the abyss through the Dusk River.

"Here it is!" Lu Yun focused his mind when he felt an incredible devouring power emerge from thin air and target his life essence, the loss of which was prevented by the hellfire sealing away his life essence.

"There!" His eyes gleamed. The river roared and flowed in the direction Lu Yun pointed it to. "That's the direction of the burial mound!!"

The life-absorbing thing was within the burial mound! Now he knew what it was.

It was the altar in the mound.

Chapter 88: Another Wayfarer

“Stop!” boomed Lu Yun.

Since Xuanxi was Lu Yun’s envoy, the two would remain in communication even if they were hundreds of millions kilometers apart.

Under her control, the Dusk River came to a sudden halt. The governor swam out of the water and dropped down to the ground on steady feet. He’d entered the fringes of the burial mound, upon which the life-absorbing power had faded, reaching no further than the abyss.

Nevertheless, he sensed something familiar here—an energy that belonged to the altar in the ruins of Truewater City. So it seemed he’d once again entered the burial mound. The destruction of the corpse coffin had transformed it completely, turning it into an enormous cavern.

Within it, all sorts of zombies, undead hags, corpsefish, corpse flies, and others rampaged, tearing and biting at each other. Moreover, freed from the restraints of the Dragon and Tiger Princes, the living layouts roamed free as phantom-like figures and joined the fray with abandon.

This was no place for any living soul.

Lu Yun now had to completely conceal his lifeforce with hellfire, or he’d be torn to pieces by the ocean of monsters in the blink of an eye. He gulped. This place has become even more dangerous than the abyss!

Although there was no shortage of dark creatures under the abyss, they remained docile in the absence of provocation. The undead creatures here, by contrast, actively sought out their prey.

The corpse coffin has disappeared completely. Lu Yun frowned slightly, trying to reconcile the sight with his knowledge that the corpse coffin had been divvied up and sealed in different locations. He could still see marks left by the coffin, but the enormous body itself was nowhere to be seen within the cavern. Has it rotted away already? But it hasn’t been that long!

Blanketed by blazing hellfire, he quickly followed the route in his memories to Truewater City. The ancient city was buried under the Myriad Formation Summit, rather than within the abyss, but the cavern now spanned the entire underground of Duskwater Prefecture. Lu Yun encountered few obstacles as he made his way to the sunken mountain.

Pushing the ninth-rank Violetgrave to its limit, he vanished in a flash of violet sword energy.

There! He stopped after roughly an hour, the ruins of Truewater City having come into view. The altar sat at the center of the old city, throwing off a ghastly white light.

But at this moment, Lu Yun felt his hair stand on end. There was someone on the altar!

A figure in white stood quietly at the heart of the structure, his bright eyes fixed on the Dusk governor.

“Who are you?!” demanded Lu Yun.

“Do you know the grave trouble you’ve caused?” responded a soft, hoarse voice. He sounded very familiar.

“Wayfarer!” Lu Yun’s eyes shot wide. Although he couldn’t catch a good look at the figure, he could see the man’s bright eyes and recognized his voice.

Wayfarer! What, again?? He was identical to the young man they’d encountered beneath the abyss!

“Without the Portrait of Emptiness, the Water Altar will sacrifice all living souls in Dusk Province during the next Dusk River Sacrament,” Wayfarer muttered to himself, ignoring Lu Yun.

“Why are you here?” Lu Yun asked coldly.

“I’m here to suppress the altar, of course,” the man said without pause.

“Xuanxi!” Lu Yun contacted the river god. “Is Wayfarer still there?”

“He is!” she answered immediately.

Is this a clone? A spirit manifestation? Or something entirely different? Lu Yun frowned deeply, a torrent of thoughts swirling in his mind. “Who are you?” he asked again.

“I’m Wayfarer, of course.” He looked at Lu Yun with surprise. The mist obscuring his body dissipated, revealing his true self.

Dressed in white, he was a devoutly handsome man with long hair and eyes as radiant as the stars. And he wasn’t blind at all. He looked exactly like the art saint Yuying remembered, both in grace and temperament.

“Didn’t you recognize me?” The man chuckled.

“Are you really Wayfarer? The governor of Dusk from a thousand years ago?” Lu Yun scoffed. “Are you really so kindhearted as to stop the altar from claiming lives?”

Wayfarer blinked. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“A thousand years ago, you triggered the calamity that almost destroyed Dusk Province and altered the rituals left by the river god, creating countless unjust deaths. Now you want to suppress the altar to save lives? I don’t think so.” Lu Yun was slightly nervous when he made the accusations, since they were merely his conjectures.

Wayfarer fell silent, confirming his role in the matter.

“You were also the person who barged into this place five thousand years ago, weren’t you?” Lu Yun’s chest tightened. This man was truly responsible for all those atrocities.

“Aren’t you afraid that I’ll kill you for knowing my secrets?” Wayfarer smiled. “You’re a golden core cultivator, little one. I can kill you with a single breath.”

“You would’ve killed me already if you wanted me dead.” Black light shone in Lu Yun’s eyes. “The Portrait of Emptiness is on me, you need that to suppress the altar.”

“You’re very smart.” Wayfarer nodded. “And I sense a familiar presence on you. Did you enter the ancient tomb outside Dusk City?”

Killing intent flashed through his eyes. Yuying was his bottom line. Anyone who dared disturb her tomb was his enemy.

Lu Yun tensed. Yuying had died and returned to the Tome of Life and Death, so it’d be a few days until she could resurrect.

“That’s right,” he responded frankly. “But the tomb had long been broken into by members of the Exalted Immortal Sect.”

Wayfarer closed his eyes and fell silent. The Exalted Immortal Sect... he hadn’t gotten around to taking his revenge on them, yet.

“The altar will activate in less than a day.” He suddenly opened his eyes. “Hand me the Portrait of Emptiness if you don’t want to die.”

“How do you know I’m the one who took it?” Lu Yun’s heart sank. The Dusk River Sacrament was only a day away! He’d been in the abyss for five days and hadn’t noticed the passage of time. “Have you been in the burial mound all this time?” He instantly hit upon the answer.

He’d always felt there was someone else behind the altar. Feinie, and the members of the Exalted Immortal Sect who’d entered this place, had all met an unexplained death.

“Wait!” Disbelief flashed through Lu Yun’s expression and he took several steps back. “You aren’t human. What are you?!”

Chapter 89: Eyes

Lu Yun was truly frightened out of his mind. For a fleeting second, he seemed to have glimpsed a pair of giant eyes floating in the center of the altar. They were crimson in color, and radiated a powerful evil presence.

They weren’t human, living creatures, or even zombies. They weren’t anything Lu Yun had seen before. Although the moment had been brief, seemingly a trick of light, he firmly believed what he’d seen. Wayfarer had turned into a pair of eyes just then!

Though they were a couple back in the day, Yuying decided not to be dao partners with Wayfarer at the last second. She must’ve discovered something!

Lu Yun took several steps back, his expression shifting through grim changes. He could read Yuying’s memories, but not her inner thoughts. Memories of Wayfarer were buried deep, and she’d even gone so far as to destroy her recollections of their breakup.

After her resurrection, she’d immediately burned the painting that Wayfarer had made for her. That wasn’t only to cut ties with her past, but also a sign that she didn’t wish to recall anything about the man.

Have the eyes become sentient? This was such a baffling situation. The Wayfarer in the abyss was blind; were these his eyes?

But that didn't make any sense either. Though the Wayfarer in the abyss couldn't see, his eyes were intact in their sockets. Besides, it was simply too far-fetched for one's eyes to leave their owner and gain a mind of their own.

Wayfarer's appearance became increasingly twisted.

"Hand over the Portrait of Emptiness!" he shrieked at Lu Yun, a disorienting ray shooting from his eyes and into Lu Yun's to seize the governor's mind.

"Hell no!" Hellfire blazed in Lu Yun's eyes and blocked the look as he retreated. There was something seriously wrong with this Wayfarer.

Suddenly, all of the monsters, including the zombies and the undead hags, lunged at Lu Yun under the man's command. An undead hag stealthily crept up on the governor and almost killed him with a single bite.

Hum.

A bright crescent of sword energy careened out from behind Lu Yun and cut the monster down. Feinie emerged from the Gates of the Abyss with sword in hand, making seals with her free hand as she kept the monsters at bay with flashes of sword energy. The Formation Orb surged to envelop Lu Yun within the protection of a grand formation.

"You?! Impossible!" Wayfarer screamed with disbelief when he saw Feinie. "I killed you myself five thousand years ago! I saw your contamination by boundless resentment and transformation into an immortal ghost with my own eyes. How are you alive again?!"

"Nothing is impossible." With an impassive expression, Feinie snapped formations into existence with her fingers, pinning the monsters down. Recovering to the empyrean immortal realm had increased her strength by more than tenfold. She was able to tap into more of the combined Formation Orb's power as well.

"Remember not to kill the zombies." Lu Yun noted the presence of the eerie monsters he still wasn't able to deal with. Whoever killed the zombies would be turned into one of their kind by an unknown power.

"Understood." Feinie nodded and set up a dozen trapping formations around the zombies instead of slaughtering them.

She suddenly realized something. "It's not him that's keeping the altar suppressed, sir, but the other way around. Removing the Portrait of Emptiness released him from the altar!"

"I see." Lu Yun nodded. "He was trying to coax me into handing the portrait over. That's probably why he approached Yuying back in the day—her Panorama of Clarity. Strange, though, it'd be easy enough to take the panorama after Yuying's death, but he didn't. Why not?"

He couldn't come up with an explanation for this. It couldn't have been a coincidence that both the Portrait of Emptiness and the Profile of Harmony were placed in the same burial mound.

This Wayfarer must have been the man Miao had seen, the one that had placed the bronze outer-coffin in the layout of resurrection with the Profile of Harmony hidden in it.

Wayfarer slowly calmed down and his eyes grew increasingly brighter as he chanted softly, casting a strange art.

Bam! Bam! Bam!

The cavern trembled and shook. Something big was coming.

“What is that?” Lu Yun almost threw up when he saw what came walking—no, crawling out of the darkness.

It was more than two hundred forty meters in size and resembled an undead hag, but there was an additional head next to it that belonged to a corpsefish. A long fish tail trailed between its two legs. It looked like a chimera of an enormous undead hag and a corpsefish and reeked of a thick, pungent smell.

It was plain to see that the fish head and tail had forcefully been grafted onto the undead hag’s flesh. Lu Yun could even see rotten skin and white bones from where their body parts intersected.

Flanking it were countless undead hags and corpsefish that’d crawled ashore, and the entourage rushed them with reckless abandon. The enormous monster instantly tore through the trapping formations Feinie had set up.

Hiss hiss hiss!

Making sounds like a snake, it broke another formation with its claws, releasing the zombies trapped within.

Feinie backed away. “It’s more powerful than the undead hag we encountered before. It can rival at least a peerless immortal!”

If she’d recovered to the golden or august immortal realm, she would’ve been able to kill the monster with her formations. But as an empyrean immortal, there were four cultivation levels between them; it was an enormous gap that even the complete Formation Orb couldn’t bridge.

“Kill them!” screamed Wayfarer.

The monster abruptly picked up speed and scuttled to Lu Yun’s side. The tentacles on top of the corpsefish’s head somehow circumvented the defensive formations and grabbed at the governor.

“Waughhhhhh!!!” An enormous roar interrupted the attack. Nine crimson shadows rushed out from behind Lu Yun and lunged at the monster. Yueshen had charged out of the Gates of the Abyss with the bloodcorpses.

“Hurry and seal the altar with your formations, Feinie!” the immortal ghost blurted out.

No matter how terrifying the bloodcorpses were, they were merely arcane immortals. The chimera, on the other hand, was one step higher as a peerless immortal. It easily scattered the nine bloodcorpses with a casual backhand.

Under Yueshen’s control, they regathered their forms and leaped at the monster, opening their mouths so that ghostface maggots could burrow into the monster’s body and slow it down.

“Don’t worry!” Yueshen used the opening to explain, “The altar is here to seal the abyss. It won’t sacrifice all of Dusk Province!”

“Alright!” The last of her concerns dispelled, Feinie sent the light of activation flaring throughout the Formation Orb. The sealing formation she’d been preparing clamped down on the altar, temporarily deactivating it.

“Not so fast!” Eyes bloodshot, Wayfarer lifted his arms and punched the formation, breaking it before it could bring its full power to bear. But at that moment, the altar stirred to full wakefulness, its black light surging and restraining Wayfarer.

“Not again!” he yelled. “Which bastard sealed me in this forsaken place when I was asleep?!”

Chapter 90: Setting Things Up

Wayfarer had only been able to destroy the seal before the Water Altar restrained his tremendous might. He lay prone on the altar, roaring with rage and frustration.

Scattered again, the dim crimson glow about the nine bloodcorpses was almost nonexistent. Fortunately, ghostface maggots continued burrowing into the undead hag’s body, devouring its rotten flesh and slowing it down. However, the chimera’s corpsefish head and tail remained strong, and its tentacles relentlessly tore through Feinie’s formations.

“Help Yueshen fight the monster, Feinie. Leave the altar to me.” Lu Yun dashed in the opposite direction with Violetgrave. Even the slightest ripple from a fight between immortals could end him. If Feinie hadn’t set up a myriad of defensive formations around him, he would’ve already been reduced to dust several hundred times over.

He reached the other side of the altar in no time at all, where its power could temporarily shield him from the terrifying energies unleashed by the fight between the bloodcorpses and the chimera.

“Be careful, sir!” Feinie deployed another 108 miniature defensive formations on Lu Yun before smashing into the monster with the Formation Orb, buying Yueshen a short window of repose.

Both of them had pulled their punches when Lu Yun was close by, worried that their master would be caught in the crossfire. But now it was a no-holds-barred match.

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Around the altar was an enormous boundary that isolated the space within so that even the greatest power fluctuations couldn’t reach the altar. Nevertheless, Lu Yun didn’t dare approach it just yet.

Wayfarer might be restrained, but he’d been able to break Feinie’s seal with a single punch earlier.

Gradually, the power keeping him sprawled on top of the altar abated. He rose to his feet, coldly staring at Lu Yun.

The Dusk governor silently etched formations into formation stones. To be precise, he was setting up a feng shui layout. Given that Wayfarer could destroy formations from an empyrean immortal with a single punch, Lu Yun’s formations definitely wouldn’t survive either.

So he'd turned to feng shui layouts instead.

Formations could be destroyed with raw power, but feng shui was different. Layouts were a mysterious power, born of the influence that formations exerted on nature. Brute force didn't work on them. As long as Lu Yun kept the formation stones intact, Wayfarer would never be able to destroy the layouts.

It was several times more difficult to set up a feng shui layout than a formation because not only did he have to rely on the innate power of formations, but he also had to consider the environment.

The same formation would give rise to different feng shui layouts in different environments. At the same time, two different formations might create the same layout in certain places. That was the fascinating thing about feng shui layouts.

When she'd first acquired the knowledge of feng shui from Lu Yun, Feinie's first thought had been that feng shui was a much more complicated art.

Lu Yun brought out seven of the formation stones that Feinie had fleeced from Qin Xianhuo and stored in the Gates of the Abyss. He etched seven different layouts on the formation stones in order to change the environment around them.

The strength of feng shui masters was that they could make the impossible possible. Since the local terrain and environment wasn't conducive to the formation of a seal, Lu Yun would just change the environment.

Hum.

The seven formation stones erupted with dazzling light and hovered in the air, injecting vibrant life into the desolate cavern.

Someone sealed the air above the abyss using the altar as a core, but the altar's properties created the life-absorbing power. I'll just establish a layout of life to counter it!

Some deliberation led him to the most appropriate conclusion. This life-absorbing power not only sealed away the abyss, but also drained the life essence of every living being that had died in the burial mound, transferring it to what had once been a layout of resurrection.

It was a much bigger threat than the power in Diexi's tomb for the living.

Lu Yun's layout was different from Feinie's formation, in that it targeted only the life-absorbing properties to temporarily block them, but kept the altar functional. Her formation would not only offset the life-absorbing power, but also suppress the altar, which might have unwanted consequences.

"If you hadn't broken Feinie's formation just now and allowed it to seal the altar, you would've broken free," Lu Yun remarked faintly as he set up the layout. "Seems like your brain's gone to mush after being trapped here for too long."

Wayfarer scowled with regret. He'd been too focused on stopping Lu Yun earlier, and neglected his own condition. "But you're also setting up a formation," he spoke his mind. "I'll be able to break free once it comes into effect."

“You can certainly try.” After completing the seven formation stones, Lu Yun ate a pill to recover some of his qi and stamina.

“How about this,” Wayfarer changed his tune, alerted by Lu Yun’s response. “If you let me go, I’ll order the monster to leave.”

“No need.” Lu Yun opened his eyes and began etching lines on an eighth formation stone. “Although the monster possesses the power of a peerless immortal, it has no intelligence. Feinie and Yueshen, on the other hand, do. If they can’t defeat it together, I’ll destroy them again myself.”

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As he’d expected, Feinie and Yueshen were gradually able to gain the upper hand by fighting together. The monster was indeed pure instinct and no brain.

Feinie had set up a dozen illusory formations to twist its perceptions, tricking it into attacking air instead of the bloodcorpses. The bloodcorpses took advantage of the distraction to lunge and tear at the monster. They’d picked clean a titanic undead hag before, so this monster would be nothing more than another feast for them.

“Go back, Feinie, Yueshen!” Lu Yun exclaimed after an indiscernible period of time.

“Understood!” responded Feinie. She deployed another dozen formations to trap the monster, then entered the Gates of the Abyss with Yueshen.

“Xuanxi!” ordered Lu Yun. “Leave the abyss in eighteen breaths!”

Under the abyss, Xuanxi burst into azure flames. “Activate the Divinewater Talisman. We’re leaving!” she quickly alerted everyone.

The endless Dusk River transcended the obstruction of space and swept them away. An enormous black wave wrapped around Lu Yun at the same time.

Hum.

Emerald light rose from around the altar. The power of life and vitality instantly locked it down.

“I’m stuck!” Wayfarer tried to break free, but the altar kept a tight grip on him. Desperate, he threw another punch at the green light.