

STAR ODYSSEY

Chapter 1: Lu Yin

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Noxious fumes billowed out from the countless cracks that marred the beaten earth, forming a black veil that obscured the red sunset. Tens of thousands of fearful faces trudged forward on a muddy path, their constant sobs accented by the echoing screams of those who fell into the cracks. This river of despair was nominally guarded by a group of cultivators, once-normal people who had now become unimaginably powerful beings half a year after the Apocalypse struck Earth. They were positioned along the path, each a set distance from the previous, and each responsible for their own section.

Near the back of this large group, Lu Yin suddenly looked up towards a large, burning tree in the distance. A hair-raising sound of flesh being ground apart filled the air before being quickly followed by a loud howl. Then, just moments later, a two-meter-long hound with scarlet pupils charged at the group. Many panicked and screamed at the grisly sight of its large jaws dripping with fresh blood, but Lu Yin's will remained unflustered as he grabbed an odd weapon hanging from his waist. It seemed to be just a metal rod, but were it sharpened enough, it could eventually become a blade. He jumped forward and smashed the beast's head wide open with a single heavy swing, dyeing the nearby grass red with blood. Only after the group witnessed the wild hound's death did they regain a modicum of calm and quell their fears enough to resume walking.

"Seems like it won't be long now," Lu Yin muttered under his breath as he gazed at the cracks that covered his weapon.

The last traces of daylight soon slipped underneath the horizon, prompting the cultivators to halt the procession. Each one then lit a bonfire for those under their care, a meager measure taken in the hopes of frightening away any mutant beasts. Walking in the darkness was certain death.

“Third team from the rear, head out and start looking for food sources. Limit the search radius to one kilometer,” Lu Yin said through his communicator; his personal identification number was 103. After glancing thoughtfully at the fresh carcass of the hound that he had just killed, he hoisted it up and unceremoniously tossed it to his group.

“Eat.”

Several men moved forward from the group when they received his command. They soon set to work, exquisitely carving the beast apart so as to roast it, not even wincing once at the strips of human flesh that they had to work around. There was only enough meat for twenty-odd people, however, so Lu Yin grabbed his weapon and headed out to find more.

The squelches of his boot trudging through the mud didn't stop even once, but glowing green eyes lit up in the darkness to stare at him. These were mutant mice; although they were unbearable to look at, they were at least edible. Lu Yin killed about a dozen of them before he obtained enough to feed his group, at which point he returned. Another piercing scream informed him that a fellow cultivator had died, but he had no desire to try to save them; nobody knew what dangers lurked in the darkness, and venomous snakes, infectious mosquitos, and even enormous rats that could chew through metal were common in this areas.

Lu Yin returned to a mute group that was huddled behind the bonfire, as though the pitiful flames would protect them from the countless dangers around them. His gaze shifted towards the dazzling stars in the clear night sky

that were no longer polluted by the light and smog of human industry. Of course, that clarity had come with the cost of the mutant beasts' arrival.

And mutant humans, too.

Nobody knew just what had triggered it, nor how it had happened to the entire world in just one night. All sorts of creatures had mutated into deadly beasts, and many humans had similarly lost their minds and become walking zombies without a hint of rationality. Those that survived saw a marginal boost to their own strength; while that alone wasn't significant, they had also gained the ability to grow stronger by eating the energy cores of the newly emerged mutant creatures. These survivors had renamed themselves "cultivators." The world then seemed to regress into ancient times, where the law of the jungle ruled supreme. Lu Yin had personally witnessed the explosions that had destroyed all of the modern weapons and munitions in his city; it was almost as though this new world order would not allow the existence of such advanced technology.

A soft gust of wind then drew Lu Yin's attention to a blood-soaked newspaper fluttering under a stone, which he picked up to read:

'February 3rd, 2200. This day shall be recorded in the annals of history as the day that Chinese Air Force 5 landed on Neptune. The first member of the crew to set foot on the gas giant was Bai Qian...'

Lu Yin tossed the newspaper away when a little girl tottered up and carefully handed him a barbecued meat drumstick. He smiled at her as he said, "Thank you."

Lu Yin contentedly swallowed the hot meat down as the little girl smiled and ran back to the group. The meat was difficult to push down even with the overpowering seasoning, but it was a good source of energy. He suddenly pounded his rod down onto the ground as the bonfire flickered, killing a toxic

mantis that had tried to leap through the flames and attack the group. These insects could devastate a group if they succeeded; their blades that shone among the flames were no weaker than his own weapon. Lu Yin only got two hours of rest over the course of the entire night, as he had to kill a dozen mutants that tried to rush through the flames and attack the group. However, the other groups didn't have someone like him protecting them. Another group consisting of a dozen cultivators and even more survivors were all massacred by a single mutant boar. The creature's tough hide was covered in bristling spikes that could be shot out at will, and every volley reaped multiple lives. Several stronger nearby cultivators had to join forces to subdue it lest it cause even more casualties.

Still, the sun eventually rose and the group continued its southward march towards the city of Jinlin. This city was the largest rallying point in the surrounding region, and many soldiers and cultivators called it their home. Amongst them was Zhou Shan the Executioner, one of the Seven Sages. In the six months after the Apocalypse, the human race had used what limited information it had to construct a rough ranking system for cultivators. Someone who had just swallowed their first energy cores were unclassified, and those who had gained the power to crush them were in the Realm of Man. Above that was the Realm of Earth. Cultivators at this level could destroy entire cities with ease, but there was still one realm above them. Those in the Realm of Sky could take to the skies at will; perhaps it was due to their terrifying power in battle or maybe it was due to their role as guardians, but they were known as Sages. The Seven Sages were the seven individuals in China who had reached this realm.

The overall group was now only a hundred or so miles away from Jinlin, a distance that would have been covered in mere hours only a few years ago. Now, however, that same distance would take several days to cross, and the once-safe roads were also now plagued with wandering zombies that were

attracted to the aura of life. The guards lining both sides of the procession remained endlessly vigilant, but the fear in their eyes was obvious. While the zombies weren't fast, and even though their monstrous strength could be countered, their blood contained a vile toxin that could seep through skin and infect the brains of any cultivator exposed to it. This toxin would eventually sap its victim of their free will and sentience, turning them into zombies as well.

Lu Yin's gaze sharpened and he gripped his weapon tightly. It wasn't too difficult to fend zombies off since they always attacked in the same pattern. Unlike cultivators, they could not evolve and grow; otherwise, there would be no survivors in this world. The largest threat to the procession still came from mutant beasts.

Just as Lu Yin was about to engage the zombies, however, they suddenly went still before turning around and leaving. An ominous premonition bubbled up as his heartbeat accelerated. Just moments later, his omen was fulfilled as the very earth trembled. A thick, dark green vine tore through the ground and lashed out at the head of the procession. Its broad leaves captured the various survivors and then crushed them like ripe fruit. Cries of despair rang out once again, and the blood of the victims dripped down, fertilizing the soil below. Let alone the commoners, even some of the cultivators turned tail and fled.

Lu Yin's heart skipped a beat. This mutant vine had definitely reached the Realm of Earth; even though their group had multiple cultivators at the Realm of Man, it would be difficult to take down this mutant vine. Even those who had stuck around did not have any intentions of trying to kill it. Instead, they skirted around the edges of the battle, waiting for the vine to eat its fill. By the time it retreated, wails of desperation and sorrow echoed through the battlefield once more. Even many cultivators would break down at such a gruesome sight.

“Hold your ground. The Executioner will be coming to our aid soon,” said a husky voice through Lu Yin’s communicator. The hopeful news lifted the spirits of those who had survived. To them, a cultivator in the Realm of Sky was like a god; so long as they appeared, all problems would be solved.

Sage? Lu Yin scoffed at the rest of the group’s reaction as he surreptitiously flexed his left arm. Even now, the entire left side of his body still pulsed with bone-piercing pain, an ever constant reminder of that fateful night. The entire city had been abandoned, and all of the weaponry and firepower that had yet to be destroyed had been focused within the city itself. The screams from that night still rang vividly in his ear; that was the night he had caught sight of that lofty being with golden eyes.

Liu Shaoge, the Sage of Light. Lu Yin would never forget the man who had caused him unbearable pain — pain that he had vowed to return ten times over.

As always, the bonfires were lit just before dusk. Lu Yin was about to rest when he was alerted by a scream behind him, and upon further examination, there was some crying as well. His brows furrowed as he turned around to see a dozen-odd cultivators surrounding several girls with ripped clothes. The girls were barely able to maintain the last shreds of their dignity as the men salaciously toyed with them.

Unfortunately, this was not an uncommon sight. Humans, too, had reverted to a barbaric philosophy after the calamity. One had to pay a price for protection in this world of beasts. Lu Yin shut his eyes, his consciousness fading away.

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Not far away, a girl screamed as she was pushed to the ground. A cultivator towered over her. “Goddamn it, I put my life on the line to protect y’all. So

what if I want to have some fun with you? You should consider yourself lucky. A rising starlet slept with me just two days ago, but now, I'd refuse her even if she begged me. Get up!"

The girl's cheeks were flushed red with anger as she stared at her oppressor, but the surrounding cultivators just laughed raunchily. These people fit right into this kind of world where one could do as they pleased as long as they had the power.

Whoosh! A quick gust of wind brought a new member to the crowd, his rod held against the man's neck as he indifferently stated, "Scram." The surroundings instantly fell quiet save for the soft sobbing of the girls.

The threatened cultivator's expression soured and he gritted his teeth. "This has nothing to do with you, Lu. They're under my command."

"You're too noisy," Lu Yin said emotionlessly as he slammed his weapon into the man's throat. Skin tore open as blood spilt forth, staining the metal rod a familiar color. "If you're going to be that vicious, then sure. They're all yours now. I won't touch them."

He then withdrew his weapon and calmly walked back to his previous spot, the silenced crowd watching with confusion. They had already grown used to such acts, and normally, nobody would have stepped forward to save these girls even if they were about to be killed. To them, Lu Yin was the strange one.

The rest of the cultivators all shared a glance as they seethed with rage. However, none of them dared to make a move; they all knew that Lu Yin was more powerful than them. The girls ran over to say something, but when he closed his eyes with no intention to talk, they could only give him a look of gratitude.

Not long after, a stunning young lady dressed in revealing clothing walked over with a smile. She stared at the girls until they lowered their heads in fear, and was only satisfied once they all backed off. She then sat down beside Lu Yin and gently blew into his ear.

However, the response was a calloused hand wrapping itself around her throat. "One more time and you're dead."

"Still so heartless," the woman spat out, forcing a smile onto her face even as her eyes dimmed.

"What do you want?" Lu Yin asked coldly as he released his grip.

"Ack. Don't you know you've already offended somebody?" she asked with a glare, rubbing her throat pitifully. When he didn't reply, she continued explaining. "Zhang Tong and his group are plotting against you. They have over ten cultivators while you're alone. You can't deal with them. Be careful."

"Thanks," Lu Yin blandly replied.

The woman groaned helplessly, "You know, I have some backing myself. I can help you out of this. All you need to do is ask."

"Don't need it."

"Sigh. Alright. Well, feel free to call me whenever you want. As for Zhang Tong, don't worry about it. I'll handle them for you. See you soon." She flashed him a smile before turning around, leaving a hint of fragrance in her wake. Lu Yin simply closed his eyes again, completely unaffected by the woman's arrival and departure.