

Beyond the Nightmare's Reach

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by [azurrys](#)

Summary

The darkness presses in on him, burning his skin and stoking the pain in his chest, but nobody will see the blood behind his mask.

Nobody, except the god he is mourning.

Away from prying eyes, Xiao finally lets himself fall to his knees. He loses grip of his polearm when he's forced to brace himself on his arms; it hits the ground with a violent clatter, echoing in the silence of the narrow valley. The only light is the faint, cold shine of the stars above Qingyun Peak, but unlike mortals, he can't blame the darkness for his murky vision. The deep-seated ache in his chest is familiar as ever, and it hurts no less for being his perpetual state, gnawing away at the last remnants of his stamina.

The battle atop the Jade Chamber hadn't been the hardest he'd fought, nor the longest, but there's a raw edge to this pain. The upheaval in the wake of Rex Lapis's death has left him little time to dwell on it, caught up as he's been in the machinations between the Qixing and the adepti. This pain should be nothing — he's used to much worse, and even if the combat takes a toll on him, he's always been skilled at powering through it to the next battle.

But those words that he already knew, spoken into existence, seem to sap away the last of his will.

The time of contracts between gods and Liyue has long since passed.

His god is gone. The time of contracts has passed, and his god has passed with it. Rex Lapis, who drew him into the light and gave him a name, has left the world like so many others before him, with nary a final farewell.

The thought drives in the sharp, sudden stab of pain in his chest, and his throat seizes up in a spate of harsh coughs. He tastes blood in his mouth, feels it dripping down his chin, but he can't wipe it away. His arms are already trembling with the effort of keeping himself... not upright, but at least not on the ground. When he swallows, the unpleasant, coppery taste only seems to become stronger.

Around him, the shadows seem to press in, surrounding him in their chill. He's never had trouble seeing in the dark, not when he's walked in it for all his life. But it feels different, now — the darkness is no longer the comfort of being in Rex Lapis's shadow, of serving him from unseen places, but the more familiar murk that has always clung to him. Darkness held at bay only by his contract and vow.

And with the passing of his god, that last boundary has disappeared.

"Rex Lapis..."

He rasps the name out in a hitched, broken voice that sounds all the harsher in the valley's silence. He's heard it spoken so many times over the past few days, by voices both familiar and foreign, that it's almost starting to lose its meaning.

Xiao has known of Rex Lapis's death for days, yet only now is the realisation starting to sink in through the numb, insensate haze that has pervaded his mind since the Traveller delivered the message of his passing. It's been all too easy to ignore, his focus diverted by Osial's awakening and everything that has demanded his attention with it — protecting the ballistas,

aiding the Traveller, destroying the Jade Chamber... all of those threads that have finally wound to their end, tied off into a neat resolution that leaves him feeling nothing but *empty*.

Rex Lapis is gone.

Another fit of coughs overwhelms him, bringing up more blood. He's usually better about handling the backlash from his power, but tonight it's tinged with an exhausting helplessness that sinks bone-deep into him, draining away his will to push through it the way he always does.

Liyue has moved on.

More pain; the next spate of coughs seizes him so strongly that his arms give out, and he crashes onto the bloodied ground. There's a brief flare of pain on his cheek as his skin grazes the rough stone, but he can't spare a thought for it above the growing pressure in his chest that soon sharpens into another painful fit.

What, then, is left to protect?

His fingers twitch with the urge to summon his mask — *to bury his pain in more pain, it's always worked before*. He sucks in short, shallow gasps of air, all that he can manage to draw through the tightening ache in his chest. Slowly, he raises himself back off the ground with one quivering arm, on the verge of buckling as it strains under his weight. His hand trembles as he brings it up to his forehead, and his mask starts to take form beneath his fingers.

Shadows curl around him as the familiar power surges through his whole being in a rush of agony. He doesn't hear so much as *feel* himself scream, pain and power burning through his veins in an onslaught of sensation.

The darkness presses in on him, burning his skin and stoking the pain in his chest, but nobody will see the blood behind his mask.

Xiao gives himself over to instinct. His polearm feels weightless in his hands when he picks it up again, and he doesn't think about where he's going as he darts forward, streaking through the air. He scarcely remembers what he fights. He chases down the shadows that he left behind, the remnants of his karma that have infected the world — eradicates them, shreds them to pieces, and leaves behind a trail of corpses in his wake. Tonight, he is the Conqueror of Demons. The Vigilant Yaksha.

Tonight, he is not *Xiao*.

He doesn't take off the mask, not even when the whispers begin to rise and surround his mind with fog. The darkness licks at him with searing flames, but he can no longer find the will in himself to reject it. Rex Lapis is gone, and he is protecting Liyue from himself. Would it not be better, he wonders, if nobody else has to fight the taint he leaves behind?

He can feel the weight on his shoulders growing heavier with every strike, every slash, every life he snuffs out on his spear. It closes in on him, until finally he's brought to his knees within the pool of blood, kept upright only by bracing his polearm on the ground.

He doesn't know how much of that blood is his own and how much is proof of his sins, but perhaps it's all the same.

The darkness is welcoming as it rushes up to meet him, and he falls into its embrace without a moment of hesitation.

Xiao has seen this dream more times than he can count. The darkness winds around him, binding his wrists and ankles; caressing him like a lover but leaving behind searing pain wherever it touches. It keeps him suspended in the void, trapping him in a vortex that fills his vision with red and tastes like copper on his tongue.

His chest burns, heavy and aching with the weight of the karma that connects him to the shadows. He has always known that one day, he will be swallowed up by it in payment for all the death that has been wrought at his hands. It matters little that it was doled out in the pale name of protection; he has taken more lives than he has saved. That karma binds him, eats at his soul, and draws him towards the end he deserves.

Time and time again, he's broken himself out of the nightmare. Something has always been left unfinished. Another mission to fulfil, another person to save. Another of Rex Lapis's smiles to earn.

But now... there is nothing left for him in the waking world, and the darkness that beckons to him looks more tempting than it ever has before.

Xiao draws faint, shuddering breaths, each one tinged with a note of helpless surrender. He should fight it, yet he's no longer sure he wants to. If he is to sink into that vortex, succumb to the eternity of pain for his sins, at least he'll be able to forget Rex Lapis's death. Those halcyon days by his side feel like a taunt in the wake of his departure, and his parting has left Xiao without a purpose.

Perhaps it is time to pay his penance.

Perhaps, like Rex Lapis, it is time for him to depart.

He's sure he feels the bonds cut deeper into his skin with the erosion of his will, eating away at his flesh. The shadows surround him, wrap around him, and the burning in his chest gives way to another harsh fit of coughs, filling his mouth with blood.

His eyes start to close.

"Xiao."

That voice.

It should be gone, no longer a part of this world, and yet he hears it once again. The words seem to pierce the darkness; they don't have the power to banish the shadows, but they infuse him with renewed will, the name on his lips falling forth unbidden.

"Rex Lapis...!"

The bonds of his karma are tighter than ever around him, but with a rush of restored resolve, he surges forward. Heedless of the pain, of the bonds slicing into his skin, he throws himself forward with a snarl, thrashing and struggling —

They snap, and the whispers recede in an abrupt wave.

Devoid of his bindings, Xiao feels himself falling through the air. When he inhales his next breath, warmth surrounds him, drawing him out of the dark.

The light that fills his vision is radiant. Xiao recognises the surrounding scenery: golden leaves rustle and fall in the light of an eternal sunrise, the morning fog still thick around him. It is a vision of the domain he and his fellow adepti created centuries ago, and he recognises this space as an abode, constructed in dreams. Here, he is safe, separated from the creeping tendrils of his karma and the weight of his sins.

After the incessant whispers of his nightmare, the silence around him is a blessing. The pain has dissolved, although bone-deep exhaustion sweeps through him in its place, leaving him dizzy and weak. His skin is unmarred, but he knows he has just won a hard-fought battle.

Unable to summon the strength to remain on his feet, he sways, knees buckling — but instead of hitting the ground as he expects, he's caught by solid warmth. A firm hand lands on his shoulder, an arm sliding around his waist to keep him upright, and Xiao breathes out a shaky sigh of relief. His eyes have fallen shut, his energy so drained he can't even keep them open.

"Xiao, can you hear me?"

This close, the voice makes him feel both comforted and uneasy. This is not the way he should be interacting with his god; without distance between them, everything laid bare. Drawing on the last vestiges of his strength, he pulls away, and when he falls to his knees for lack of strength to keep himself upright, it doesn't matter. He'd always intended to kneel.

"Yes, Rex Lapis." He keeps his head bowed, and even behind his closed eyelids the world is a dizzy swirl. All that answers his words is a soft sigh. In the next moment, Xiao feels those solid arms surrounding his shoulders again, the warmth closing in until he can't feel anything else.

It's improper; ludicrous, even, for him to wish for such closeness. He is no fool — he's aware of his desires, but he has never before felt the slightest conflict in concealing them. He would

never risk his contract for a moment's stolen pleasure. Rex Lapis has never laid out such terms for him, and Xiao cannot imagine his god feeling any desire for the stained, bloodied yaksha in the shadows, even in all his magnanimity.

But then again, his god is dead, and he is still dreaming. He knows that for a fact, and the thought is freeing. He can cling to this dreamed comfort without fear of how he'll be perceived. He feels the arms around him still in surprise when he presses into the touch, as if in shock that he's responded at all; and when he speaks, he thinks he feel the grip around him tense.

"I miss you..."

The words come out softer than expected. Raw, exposed. *Vulnerable*. Xiao can't bring himself to care, to put on his mask again, literally or not. His god is not alive to witness his weakness, and for once, his honesty will hurt nobody.

"I never managed to see you... one last time... and now you're gone. There is so much... I never told you." Breath fading, Xiao is forced to take a moment to reorient himself before he can go on. His fingers curl into the solid chest he's leaning against as he whispers, "And now you're *gone*."

Fingers tense on his skin in answer, followed by a sharp intake of breath. "Xiao..." A shaky sigh. "I am alive. I am here." Xiao can't help it — he laughs derisively, amused by his imagination's cruelty. But the reply he receives is a determined order of, "Look at me."

When he doesn't respond, he feels a hand take hold of his chin, tilting his head up gently but firmly. Xiao's eyes flutter open to meet an unmistakable shade of amber, and his breath stills in his throat.

Those eyes.

"I am alive. I never died, Xiao. I felt your despair, and I pulled you into my dream."

It's true. He's wearing a different form, but Xiao recognises him now. He's seen it before, even. Only ever from afar, too far for him to see that amber light in his eyes or feel the thrum of his power, but the man is familiar. Zhongli, the Wangsheng Funeral Parlour's consultant. Rex Lapis. It all overlaps in his head, and with the knowledge comes a fresh wave of tears, blurring his vision anew.

The consultant is still alive. Xiao has glimpsed him in the days following Rex Lapis's death — *alleged* death. And he... he is Rex Lapis.

Rex Lapis is alive.

"You're alive." His voice shakes on the words. Even after restating them in his mind so many times, they still sound unreal.

"Yes. I apologise for not reaching out sooner. I wanted to gather all the adepts together to inform them of the truth, and so I first set out to construct this space — but then I sensed your

pain. I could not ignore it." Zhongli's arm around his waist tightens. He just barely reaches Zhongli's shoulder — the same difference in height he'd shared with Rex Lapis. "I..." Zhongli exhales, eyes falling shut briefly before he opens them again. "It is no excuse, but I did not realise my perceived death would affect you so deeply. My apologies, Xiao."

"Why?" The question slips out before Xiao can restrain himself. "Why did you do it? Why did you lead us all to believe that you..." He cuts himself off with a hiss. He can't say it, even knowing now that it's untrue.

"It was a test for Liyue. I wanted to see if the humans could survive without me, what they would do in my absence. And — "

"You wanted to die."

Zhongli's breath hitches, eyes going wide with surprise. Xiao almost regrets pushing that boundary, but the mix of dizziness and exhaustion and joy and *anger* curling in his gut has his head spinning, loosening his tongue in ways he otherwise wouldn't allow. "You wanted to leave us behind. You were tired of protecting Liyue. You were tired of *us*."

Zhongli's shocked silence is telling. As Xiao stares into his eyes, he's sure he's hit upon the truth — and it stings. Knowing that he wanted to leave it behind; knowing that he had tired of Liyue.

That he had tired of Xiao.

(And if Xiao feels the same stirrings of guilt, remembering how close he had come to giving up — to allowing his karma to consume him — well, he's always known he was broken, unlike Rex Lapis in all his perfection.)

"Xiao..." Zhongli whispers his name with a sort of broken gentleness that Xiao has never heard from his guarded, closed-off god; a tone of voice that leaves him at a loss for words, even as Zhongli draws him closer. "I'm sorry. I never thought... no. That is no excuse." He curls his fingers around Xiao's cheek, brushing gently over the red-lined corners of his eyes. "I was tired — very tired. I cannot deny that. But not of Liyue. Not of *you*."

Xiao's breath catches. Surrounded by that warm, golden glow, although he's taken a mortal form, Zhongli looks as ethereal and enchanting as Rex Lapis always did. "I was tired of time and duty and the too-heavy burden I had taken on my shoulders," Zhongli says. "But I could never tire of you."

The words are spoken with deep, heartfelt conviction. They settle in Xiao's heart as reassuring warmth, soothing away some of the doubt that still clings to him. He longs to speak, to ask Zhongli to give him more than words, but as he stares mutely back into those golden eyes, he's reminded once again of all the lines he's crossed. The disrespect he's shown to the god he swore to serve. He tries to duck his head, sudden shame rising above the exhaustion weighing down his bones, but Zhongli stops him with a firm, gentle grip.

"Allow me prove it to you."

Xiao freezes when Zhongli leans in closer, until Xiao's whole world is the amber light he can't look away from. Zhongli stills for a moment, as if waiting for Xiao's answer; his grip has loosened again, enough that Xiao could easily free himself if he wanted to.

But he doesn't. Instead, he waits, and Zhongli takes the unspoken invitation for what it is. Tilting Xiao's head up, one arm still cradled protectively around his waist, Zhongli leans down.

They share the space of a breath before their lips connect in a desperate meeting, long years of desire poured into that point of contact. They're closer than they've ever been, pressed together skin-to-skin without any space in between. The endless, insurmountable distance of the past — of Xiao standing in Rex Lapis's shadow, longing and wanting but stopping short because it wasn't his place — dissolves all at once, and it takes Xiao's breath away.

Xiao can't tell where the first kiss ends and the second starts, though he knows he pulled away for the briefest second to draw breath. In contrast to the heat and need of that first kiss, the second is slower, though no less passionate. Zhongli takes the time to taste him, wearing down the last of his reservations with patience and tenderness until Xiao is boneless in his arms. Even after they part to catch their breath, Zhongli doesn't let him go; he holds Xiao close, drawing him into his lap, and leans down to press their foreheads together.

"You've been tired as well, haven't you?" Zhongli asks softly. "In some ways, the weight you bear is heavier than that which I carry." Stroking a gentle hand through his hair, Zhongli whispers, "Xiao, there is no shame in needing to rest. Your duties have weighed upon you for so many years now. I have always wished for you to stop, but it was never because I was tired of you. All I want is for you to be free of your suffering."

Xiao closes his eyes. The tenderness in Zhongli's expression is difficult to look upon. Zhongli has always treated him with kindness, but this intimate comfort is new and unexpected; the sort of closeness he never imagined he could share with his god. When he finally opens his eyes again, he doesn't dare to raise his head for fear he'll lose the last tatters of his control in the face of that warmth, keeping his gaze trained on his lap instead. "There is no rest for the wicked."

Unhesitatingly, Zhongli answers, "Then it is good that we are neither of us wicked, and can have our rest."

For a moment, Xiao is struck speechless. He raises his head to meet Zhongli's eyes again without thinking, and the hint of amusement in his gaze gives him away. "You know that isn't what it means," he says, though he's already starting to get a sense that this is an argument he's losing.

"Or is it?" Zhongli's hand settles on the back of his head, the touch solid and reassuring. "There will always be evil in the world, but it should not always fall upon our shoulders to fight it. Liyue is strong. Its people have proven itself as I have hoped, and we no longer need to carry it on our backs. That would only hurt both Liyue and us. We shall always support and protect it — but not at the expense of ourselves."

Zhongli says the words with such conviction that Xiao has no retort. He stares up at Zhongli, and his silence must be telling enough, for Zhongli answers him with a quiet smile. "Let us make a new contract, Xiao."

Despite the fact that Xiao is curled up in his arms, Zhongli says the words with all the formality and decorum of an official pact. Xiao shifts, the protest halfway to his lips, but Zhongli silences him with an unexpected kiss. When they part again, Xiao can no longer quite summon the same will to say the words, and Zhongli takes his silence as the invitation it is to speak.

"For centuries, we have both hidden our exhaustion. Neglected ourselves in the name of protecting a land that has moved on." There is no regret in his tone, but Xiao feels that undercurrent of weariness resonating in himself. "From now on..." Zhongli's voice drops, his next words lower and gentler, as if speaking to a lover. "I want you to live for yourself."

The statement leaves Xiao at a loss. *Live for yourself*. Such simple words, yet so broad. "I... I do not believe I would know how to," Xiao whispers. He hates that he can provide no other answer, but he can't imagine what it would entail, after all these years of duty. Zhongli, however, seems both unsurprised and undeterred by his reply.

"Truthfully, neither do I. But it is something I would like to learn — something that we can learn together." Xiao's breath lodges in his throat as Zhongli speaks again, voice firm and resolute. "I will not let you succumb to your karma. I will not lose another yaksha to it, least of all you." He slides his hand downwards to cup the back of Xiao's neck; the gesture feels so very intimate that Xiao can't help but shudder, pressing back into it. "Allow me to stay by your side. To share in its weight with you. I will not let you be lonely again."

Zhongli's eyes gleam with the bright amber of his power. He is not saying the words carelessly — he is making a promise. A contract, as befits him. Although Zhongli may no longer be Rex Lapis, his power still shines through, seeming to surround Xiao in solid reassurance.

"Will you make this contract with me, Xiao?"

The words bring an unexpected flood of warmth to his eyes. Xiao tries to blink away the sudden blurriness in his vision, but instead, the tears overflow. Before he can reach up to wipe them away, however, soft warmth presses to his cheek. Through the bleary mist, Xiao sees familiar amber, and he feels Zhongli's breath brush over his skin before another kiss catches his falling tears. His breath trembles in his throat, voice choking up as he whispers his answer.

"Yes."

He feels it in his soul when the contract is sealed, much like the first time he'd sworn his fealty thousands of years ago. The bonds of his karma are so often dark — he's forgotten how it feels to be tied to another in a way that gives him strength, rather than sapping it away. Over the years, the darker side of his karma has tangled together with his first contract, eroding what had once been his anchor; but now, as their renewed bond settles in his heart, it seems to fill in the holes in that old, worn comfort.

Once again, tears well up against his will, but this time Zhongli kisses them away from the corners of his eyes before they can fall. "Rest," Zhongli says softly. "I am here. I always will be, from now on."

Zhongli's will burns bright and strong through their renewed connection. It takes Xiao's breath away, to be surrounded in such radiant comfort. Zhongli leans down, capturing his lips in another kiss so gentle that Xiao can't help but tremble. He's so tired, and it's impossible to resist such tenderness; he's always balked at being treated as fragile, but Zhongli somehow manages gentleness without edging past the line into wary caution of breaking him. Xiao can't remember the last time he's felt so relaxed.

"Thank you." The word falls unbidden from his lips. Zhongli stills with surprise beneath him for a second, but in the next, gentle fingers sink into his hair, stroking through it.

"Rest," Zhongli says again, and Xiao doesn't protest. He rests his head against Zhongli's chest, the solid warmth beneath him slowly starting to seep into his cold skin. This time, as his consciousness begins to fade, it is not to cold, consuming emptiness or agonising pain. His god is closer than he has ever been. Surrounded by Zhongli's soothing embrace, peace steals over him for the first time in what feels like an eternity.

Within Zhongli's dream, he is safe, and his nightmares can no longer reach him.

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