

Star Gate 141

Chapter 141: A Spare Tire (III)

In the basement.

Liu Yan and the others filed in. Yun Yao and the rest of the team still lived here—the offices upstairs were empty most of the time. Compared to the rest of the building, they were still more accustomed to this environment.

They didn't mind it when Li Hao and Liu Long came through the door together. Liu Yan knew some of the details, but didn't say anything. Upon seeing that their supernatural colleagues were yet to arrive, Liu Long swept a glance at Wu Chao and Chen Jian.

“You two only started absorbing mysterious power over the past two days, didn't you?” He frowned.

The two nodded.

“Finish absorbing all of your cubes in the next two days. I don't care if it results in internal injuries, induct them all!”

The two men blinked. Why were they suddenly in such a hurry? Based on previous circumstances, twenty cubes was more than enough to last half a year. They might not receive any more in the future, so doling them out sparingly was the best way to maximum gains. What was the rush for?

But Liu Long's authority remained and they highly trusted the director. They quickly nodded without any questions.

“Yun Yao!”

“Here.” Yun Yao looked at the director.

“You are a water supernatural now, how much of your healing abilities do you have left?” asked Liu Long.

“About the same as before.” Yun Yao pushed her glasses up her nose. She’d never worn any before, but was fond of wearing a pair now. Li Hao knew a thing or two—they seemed to be able to catch glimpses of scarlet shadows. The team doctor utilized them to steer clear of pursuit.

“Then you’re still our healer for now.” Liu Long nodded. “You’re in charge of treating the team before we have a true light or healing supernatural join us.”

“Understood!”

A knock sounded on the door before Wang Ming entered with a smile. He looked at everyone and nodded at Liu Long, wanting to find a place to sit. However, he found that the team was sitting willy-nilly. Chen Jian was even sitting on the floor!

Speechless, Wang Ming decided to stand on the side with Li Hao. Li Meng and Hu Hao opted to stand near Chen Jian.

Liu Long glanced at the group and dispensed with the niceties. “Folks, you’re none too familiar with us since you’ve just joined us. While we fought together before, that was a very short experience. I have one question for you—are you here to gild yourselves with pretty accolades, or are you here to experience life and death?”

“Of course we’re here to temper and hone ourselves!” Wang Ming replied with dissatisfaction. “Gild ourselves? Is there any point to gilding if we are lacking as supernaturals? Does Director Liu think too little of us?”

“Director,” Li Meng added. “We came to Silver City because we heard you need reinforcement. We’re not here to play around.”

“That’s good!” Liu Long declared coolly. “There will be a battle in the city soon. You don’t need to know who the enemy is! You just need to follow orders, keep your head, follow the plan, and don’t interfere with your teammates!”

A battle?

Wang Ming started. What battle?

“Director, how strong is the enemy?”

“Sunflare!”

“That’s not undoable.” Wang Ming furrowed his brows. “But the danger will be significant. Can I ask if they come from one of the three great organizations or some other one?”

“They can be viewed as part of the three great organizations!”

“But White Moon wishes that we don’t provoke a fight with them...”

“This is Silver City!” Liu Long barked out. “My decision is law here! You call the shots only when I step aside and you take my place! Otherwise, what I say goes!”

Wang Ming thinned his lips. Whatever you say then. He wasn’t afraid of just one Sunflare. Silver City was adequately staffed at the moment. While they lacked Sunflare, there were four Darkmoons in the department and two Sunderers. They could stand their ground.

As for danger... Just like he’d said, encountering danger was their ideal Silver City life.

“Director, do we have a time and a place for the operation?” asked a Hu Hao who’d been silent up to this point.

“I’ll let you know when it’s a go!”

Alright then, he didn’t trust them. That was normal. Although Wang Ming wasn’t too satisfied, he accepted the state of affairs.

“Do we have a plan of attack?” he asked instead. “How will we coordinate? I’m a metal supernatural, Li Meng is a special type, Hu Hao is a flight type. At White Moon, we typically run several drills beforehand to ensure that we’re synchronized and that our abilities don’t interfere with each other...”

“There’s no need, you just need to ensure that the three of you are in harmony!” Liu Long looked at him. “You need to be prepared for an attack by a Sunflare. Focus on how to withstand or even obstruct them so they cannot flee. If you cannot do it, let us know now!”

Wang Ming’s heart quailed! We three need to be prepared to fight a Sunflare? That’s... so... exciting!

He was worked up, apprehensive, and also embarrassed.

“Ah... Director...” he managed to spit out. “We... we lack sufficient battle experience. To be honest, our coordination isn’t all that and we probably won’t be able to keep a Sunflare in place if we ran into one.”

Liu Long chuckled; he liked the guy’s honesty. There was no use in running their mouths. They’d be beaten to death in a second if they were truly on the battlefield. It would be a detriment to themselves and to their teammates.

“The enemy is also new!”

“Huh?” Wang Ming and his brethren blinked. Also a rookie? “There’s rookies among Sunflare?”

It was hard to believe—how could one still be a rookie as a Sunflare? This level of supernatural had crossed over at least ten years ago. Whether the supernatural was of the Night Watchers or other organizations, it was impossible to not have experienced a certain amount of battle after ten years—particularly as a Sunflare. Only when one was a Heaven Favored and naturally developed their way to Sunflare was that a possibility.

“They’re most likely rookies... I’m not entirely sure, but ninety percent certain! Even if they’ve battled before, their fights were most likely against lower levels. They don’t look to have fought peers!”

“If that’s the case, then we have nothing to worry about.” Wang Ming breathed out more easily. “Hu Hao can fly, Li Meng can lock onto their location and distance, and I can attack. So long as the three of us exercise caution, we’ll be able to run even if we can’t defeat them. Ahem, I mean we’ll be able to curb them within reasonable limits.”

They were more experienced after the wounds they’d suffered last time.

“It’s fine if the three of you withdraw from the operation. But if you wish to participate, we are so decided!” Liu Long concluded. “Everything is to be kept confidential. Nothing is to be divulged to even White Moon City without my approval. Do all of you hear me?”

“Yes!”

“Then the meeting is concluded. Be ready to fight at any time!”

“Understood!” the team chorused.

The Demon Hunters were very composed. So what if they faced Sunflares? They'd taken down Darkmoons before and the entire team was stronger now. It wasn't incomprehensible that they had Sunflares in their sights.

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Liu Long's meeting was very brief. When the group filed out of the basement, Wang Ming grabbed Li Hao.

"Are we going up against Galaxy?" he muttered.

"Guess!" Li Hao grinned.

"....."

Guess my ass!

That was the only possibility he could consider since that corporation possessed Darkmoons. But did that mean they had Sunflares among their ranks?

He didn't know.

"Forget it, we'll go against whoever we go against so long as it isn't the Night Watchers!" He didn't have many demands in this area. He would hit whoever the target was as long as it wasn't one of their own. "Will your teacher be in the field?"

"Maybe."

That set Wang Ming at ease. Their safety was assured if there was a Dominator waiting on the sidelines. It was just one Sunflare! Yuan Shuo would slap them to death in a matter of seconds if they proved to be more than what the supernatural trio could handle. Wang Ming still recalled how Yuan Shuo had hacked Ying Hongyue's son to death with one stroke. The professor was formidable!

Thus, Wang Ming noticeably relaxed.

"Stay on your guard, things won't be that simple!" Li Hao whispered when he saw his colleague at ease. "Treat every battle as your last—my teacher taught me that and I'll tell you the same! Unexpected drops of the ball happen all the time."

"Understood!" Wang Ming nodded with renewed focus.

The two went along their ways.

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The work day was soon over. Li Hao promptly clocked out as usual; there was no aberration from his usual behavior. Anyone watching him would only draw the conclusion that the young man was extremely boring.

He came to work on time and left work on time. He didn't go anywhere else apart from an occasional visit to his teacher's. Li Hao's life was so regular that he was more predictable than a retired senior citizen.

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As Li Hao returned home.

The Yuan residence.

A panting Hao Lianchuan landed on the ground and irritably pushed through the front door. “Is there a need for this, Professor Yuan?? Threatening others with the life of the inspector general is not a good idea!”

He was quite dissatisfied! It was one thing to joke around, but Mu Sen had been gravely serious that Yuan Shuo would execute him if Hao Lianchuan didn’t come today! Once the matter involved the inspector general of a city... Hao Lianchuan had to rush here with due haste no matter how busy he was.

Yuan Shuo’s threat was over the line and out of bounds!

“Where is it?” Yuan Shuo ignored him. “Did you bring it? Don’t talk so much. You took my things and didn’t send so much of a word in many days, and you also took the sword of the Lis. Would you just forget about it if I didn’t ask you for it? Are the Night Watchers engaging in daylight robbery now?”

“.....” Hao Lianchuan heaved a resigned sigh. “I’m collecting the mysterious power for you...”

“The Night Watchers can close up shop if they can’t even take out one thousand cubes!”

Fine. Hao Lianchuan had nothing to say to that because they could indeed bring out that many. He had indeed wanted to delay the handover until after the expedition, but he couldn’t withhold it forever since this one had insisted.

“I brought them with me, two hundred cubes of each of the five elements...”

“I gave you thirteen hundred!” Yuan Shuo looked at him with a frosty expression.

“We’re really not misappropriating your goods, that’s not something we’d do! You wanted equal parts of all elements—this is all we have on hand. I brought unattributed power for the other three hundred cubes. Will they do? They’re more useful for martial masters.”

Yuan Shuo reluctantly inclined his head. That would do.

“Then it’s settled. Liu Long came to me this morning and said that if you come, you can be an anchor for him. He wants to hold a ribbon-cutting ceremony...”

Chapter 142: In A Rush To Die (I)

“I’m up to here with work, how do I have the time to participate in an opening ceremony??” Hao Lianchuan was so angry that he almost laughed. I have so much on my plate already and I’m supposed to hold down the fort for him??

What a joke!

“There are too many rats scurrying through Silver City. Do you think one Sunderer is sufficient to keep them under control?” Yuan Shuo responded faintly. “Do whatever you want. It’s the day after tomorrow. Are you going to rush back to White Moon right now?”

“.....” Hao Lianchuan was at a loss for words. “Fine! Nothing major should be happening lately as I’ve exchanged a few words with the various supernatural organizations. So don’t worry! As chaotic as the central region is, it hasn’t affected us for now. Everything is on hold until the expedition concludes.”

“Mmhhh.” Yuan Shuo waved a hand to send his visitor away. That’s enough, you can go now.

Hao Lianchuan didn’t think it was possible for him to become more speechless. I’m a Solar, alright? This guy’s getting more and more arrogant! He seems more like the Old Demon Yuan of old.

Neither could the director be bothered with further conversation. He turned on his heel and left. While he had some speculation as to why Yuan Shuo wanted mysterious power of the five elements,

it was too much effort to ask. He'd absorbed a little bit of other elements like the professor had told him to—the effects were decent. Despite a lack of noticeable gain to strength, his chest pains were alleviated. This was a very important matter.

Hao Lianchuan was prepared to experiment for a period longer before making an announcement to the Night Watchers at large. If no problems cropped up for him, he wanted them to study whether a balanced system of the five elements was needed for optimal development of supernatural abilities.

It was due to Yuan Shuo furnishing this information to him that he was so responsive. He came as soon as the professor called for him.

Hao Lianchuan's footsteps faltered when he reached the yard in front of the house. He stepped on a piece of broken tile and raised his eyebrow when he looked down at it. Being a Solar, his eye was keen.

The employment of the aura? It didn't seem like Yuan Shuo's—could it be that Liu Long had left it here this morning?

So this meant that Liu Long was familiarizing himself with the aura. That was good! It looked like the man stood a good chance of advancing to Dominator!

A smile traced Hao Lianchuan's lips. This was an unexpected surprise! No one had told him about it and Liu Long hadn't mentioned it. Was he planning on giving the Night Watchers a surprise after he broke through?

“Heh, it'll be a good thing if he can advance. It'll be worth it to put in a showing this time then!” A chuckling Hao Lianchuan made his way to the Inspectorate; he was in particularly high spirits. No one in Silver City was able to stir up any trouble.

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July 30.

The last day of the month. There were no longer or shorter months in the Star era. [1] Every month was a standard thirty days. Today was a rest day. Whether it was the Inspectorate or Night Watchers, they all had their days off. There were six days of rest in a month. Being a public servant was a cushy job, comparatively speaking. Of course, there was no rest to be found if they were embroiled in work.

Li Hao woke up later on this day—not because he was lackadaisical on a day off work. After his teacher collapsed part of the mine, the professor visited Li Hao's room and scared the living daylights out of the young man. After that, he didn't let the young man sleep.

Yuan Shuo force fed mysterious power to Li Hao! It was truly a forced action as Li Hao had to absorb energy whether or not he could. However much he could take in was however much Yuan Shuo shoved at him.

There were one thousand cubes of mysterious power! Li Hao almost vomited blood at the abundance and managed less than one hundred cubes. That in itself was sufficient to shock anyone who heard.

Who could absorb one hundred cubes of mysterious power in one night?! Not even a Dominator like Liu Long could take in that much—he wouldn't be able to digest it. Li Hao, however, possessed sword energy.

Mysterious power was neutralized to a gentle energy after the sword worked on it. Whatever he couldn't digest was stored in his body. Unfortunately, both disciple and teacher sensed that the sword's energy was dwindling. Yuan Shuo didn't yet know how to reverse the situation. Origin weapons were top secrets of the supernatural domain and ancient books didn't mention this term. It must be something formulated by modern supernaturals.

One hundred cubes were sufficient to help a Sunderer make the crossover. One such as Liu Yan would ascend, if being supernatural was in the cards for her. When Yuan Shuo reached peak Sunderer, he'd assessed that he needed several hundred or a thousand cubes if he wished to cross over. But Li Hao only strengthened his organs after absorbing so much; he continued to enhance his physique.

It required his own effort to project internal force from his torso. That would require some time as, strictly judging the conditions of his body, even Yuan Shuo said that the lad's organs rivaled his own at peak Sunderer. The professor had utilized his internal force to nurture his organs whereas Li Hao relied on special energy to fortify them.

This was why Li Hao rose late on this today and felt stuffed to the brim, like he'd had too much to eat!

The ribbon-cutting ceremony was the next night—August 1st. It was a long time from now and it didn't matter if Li Hao did no work today, so he didn't care about waking late.

"It's great having a big house, if a bit inconvenient!" he reflected as he digested his gains. The environment was great, but there was no place to have breakfast. No one else in this affluent neighborhood visited a breakfast stall everyday like Li Hao was accustomed to. They all had their own chefs and staff.

On the other hand, it was still a wonderful experience to wake up early, take a walk, grab some breakfast, do some stretching, and run through the Five Styles.

Li Hao grumbled as he took stock of his current condition. It felt like his organs were on fire—they were furnaces!

Blood churned through his veins, each flowing movement creating tendrils of internal force that strengthened blood vessels, skin, bones, and others.

"Thunder enhances the body, wind increases speed..." Li Hao turned glum whenever he thought of thunder. Ying Hongyue's son was a thunder supernatural and Yuan Shuo had obtained some upon killing his opponent. Huang Yun took half of the harvest and the professor traded the rest away.

He hadn't planned to at first, but he felt that the five elements were more important. yet with only one thousand cubes of the five elements and three useless cubes of unattributed power, Li Hao felt they'd done poorly for themselves.

What did Huang Yun want with thunder energy?? Wasn't he a wind supernatural? Although unattributed mysterious power strengthened martial masters, they were less valuable to Li Hao than attributed power.

As much as he grumbled, Li Hao ran through a lazy boxing technique. It was the form of the Five Styles when the method wasn't employed for battle. Hailed as the best drill for preserving one's health, it wasn't a fierce routine.

Li Hao focused on the increase of internal force, the reinforcement of flesh and blood, and the innate feeling of strength arising from them. He didn't dare utilize too much force in his training as too big of a disturbance might draw his neighbor's attention.

I wonder if Qiao Peng's in the mood to chat me up today. Li Hao's lips curved upward. The Qiao mines had collapsed last night and he'd sensed the Plenilune following Qiao Peng around leave. The light source was very noticeable in the dead of night.

He returned in the morning; it looked like he'd pretty much resolved the collapse.

Speak of the devil.

Li Hao couldn't sense Qiao Peng's presence, nor that of the Plenilune. But the supernatural was a giant walking light bulb. Li Hao was able to see him so long as he could still see. His best guess as to why he could see was his bloodline. There was no possible explanation apart from that. The Night Watchers seemed to have recruited some people like me. Are they also the bloodline of the eight families?

But that didn't make sense. If those people are from the eight families, that meant that the Night Watchers were aware of the folk song and legend. Why then, didn't they know about Silver City?

Some things were not easily broached. Wang Ming might know, but he wasn't a fool. Asking too many questions might tip him off.

The matter could not be rushed. Li Hao had time to slowly pump Wang Ming for information after they fought together in the upcoming mission and formed deep ties of friendship. There would be no fear of asking too many questions then.

What'd happened to those who could see the scarlet shadow? Was the shadow a secret to the Night Watcher senior council?

Perhaps not!

Why else would they know that the shadow handlers were special as soon as they saw the scarlet shadows? There had to be powerhouses with special abilities among the agency, as well as Solars who could directly see the shadows. But it was just a guess as Li Hao didn't have any Solar friends.

Thoughts zigzagging through his mind, Li Hao didn't notice his neighbor's arrival until someone knocked on the front gate.

"Who is it?" he called out.

"It's me, Commissioner Inspector Li. Are you busy?" Qiao Peng waited outside with his Plenilune driver.

The door quickly swung open and Li Hao regarded him frostily with a frown. "I told you already, Qiao Peng, leave me alone and I'll forget you exist! What do you mean by disturbing me so early in the morning?"

“Don’t misunderstand!” Qiao Peng chuckled. “I truly don’t mean anything else by it. The commissioner inspector misunderstands me. I’m here on business.”

“What kind of business?” Li Hao stood at the front gate, not intending to let his visitor in.

“As things go.” Qiao Peng wasn’t angered by the treatment. “Qiao Mining Industries owns a mountain in Silver City. Commissioner Inspector Li visited two days ago, do you remember?”

“Of course!”

“We had a collapse in the mines yesterday...”

“Did people die?” Li Hao brightened. “And you want me to smooth it over? Tell me how many are dead first. If it’s more than three, handle it yourself at the Inspectorate. If it’s less than three... I don’t care about money and it holds no value for me. I want mysterious power!”

Qiao Peng’s jaw dropped. Who the hell said this kid was a good person? Heavens above! He’s only been an official for a few days, but he’s already learned how to demand bribes! Did he just not have room to flex his muscles before?

This was the last thing that Qiao Peng expected, and he really wasn’t here to ask Li Hao to make the problem go away.

“That’s not it... Qiao Mining treats our employees well and does not work at night. Only the mine shaft collapsed last night, no one was injured. The mines are closed until a new shaft is constructed.” Only now did Qiao Peng address the purpose of his visit. “Professor Yuan is the city’s most renowned geologist...”

Chapter 143: In A Rush To Die (II)

“You want my teacher to open a new mine for you?” Li Hao understood.

“That’s not it!” Qiao Peng chuckled. “Professor Yuan is Silver City’s foremost powerhouse. We wouldn’t dare trouble him with such a trifling matter! We all know that Commissioner Inspector Li is the professor’s disciple and used to concentrate your learning in this area. I’ve come today to request the commissioner inspector’s help in identifying a new mine opening for us.”

Li Hao furrowed his brows while his mind operated at high speed. He hadn’t thought that the Qiaos would come to him for help in the end. What was the meaning of this? The Qiaos were professional miners, did they lack experts?

No!

This wasn’t a difficult task and they were the experts, so what were they doing knocking on Li Hao’s door? It was... the height of strangeness.

The young man had some thoughts after a while. They want me, but what good does having me do? Absolutely nothing! Not only am I of no help, but they’d have to worry that I might discover something. However, Qiao Peng is here all the same...

The ruins!

Li Hao roughly grasped the Qiaos’ intentions. Maybe the mine collapse meant nothing to them, but if they could utilize this chance to invite Li Hao in and possibly activate something through his bloodline... then it was a matter of paramount importance!

Perhaps they might even try to kill him?

Li Hao took an inward breath. It wasn’t outside the realm of possibility!

Silver City had drawn a lot of attention these days, as had he. It wasn’t a sure bet to have him visit the mines with a regular reason. He’d gone a few days ago, but with a Night Watcher. His visit had also been common knowledge and many were keeping an eye on him.

An excuse of privately helping with identifying a new mine opening might draw less attention from his watchers. Yuan Shuo was an expert in this field and Li Hao was his prized disciple. It was reasonable that a large corporation like Qiao Mining Industries would request the young man's help.

Li Hao's only concern was that... there might be no return from this! Qiao Feilong might seek to kill him, grab what he could from the ruins, then make a run for it. Exposure wouldn't be a concern for them anymore.

Danger! Li Hao sniffed the scent of danger. The Qiaos might really use this opportunity to kill him. No wonder they still invited him despite knowing there were ancient ruins and their own secrets present. There were certainly ulterior motives at play.

Despite understanding the connotations, Li Hao showed a conflicted expression.

"I won't have the commissioner inspector make this trip in vain." Qiao Peng lowered his voice with understanding. "Whether it's star coins or mysterious power, everything is negotiable..."

"I don't have my teacher's skills!" Li Hao frowned. "And it's just identifying a new mine opening. Does your company lack talent like this?"

"We don't," Qiao Peng replied with resignation. "And to be honest, we'd much rather have our own people handle things if possible. But the collapse site is in an awkward location and our experts are elderly. They're not light on their feet, so we want someone nimble who can swiftly reconnoiter the surroundings and immediately restart operations at the mines. Commissioner Inspector Li and Professor Yuan Shuo are the most suited in Silver City, but we really can't afford to invite the professor!"

Qiao Peng chuckled with resignation. "He is a Dominator, a walking god—how much would it cost to be graced with his presence? Our mountain is worth only so much. We can't bear to part with more than it's worth and the professor won't be satisfied if we offer too little. After some consideration, we guess that the commissioner inspector's learned roughly eighty percent of the professor's knowledge. That's enough!"

It was a perfect reason. Why didn't they go to Yuan Shuo? Because he was too expensive. Why did they come to Li Hao? Because he was a fighter jet among experts—agile, efficient, convenient, and decisive.

“And how much can you pay?” Li Hao raised a brow.

“One cube of mysterious power or one million star coins!” Qiao Peng responded seriously. “This is absolutely a fair price!”

“Forget it, my monthly salary is one cube.” Li Hao was disappointed. “I thought the Qiaos ran a big empire, but this is all you can offer?”

Qiao Peng cursed inwardly! I'm willing to put up ten or one hundred cubes, but I bet you wouldn't dare accept it! And I'm paying you this much only to have you prospect the area. How are you not satisfied? This guy is much greedier than the stories make him out to be.

“It's a lot, commissioner inspector. It's not that we can't afford a higher price, but to be honest, it wouldn't be worth it if we did. If the price is too high, then... we'd rather wait a few days than restore operations tomorrow,” Qiao Peng paused. “It's just a day's work for one cube. Commissioner Inspector Li, please feel free to ask around to see if we're offering a fair price.”

Li Hao seemed tempted and considered the offer for a bit. “Very well, then give me a moment. Are we going now?”

“Yes, as soon as possible!” Qiao Peng bobbed his head, wanting nothing more than for Li Hao to follow him right now. He couldn't forcefully abduct the lad—there might be people from the city keeping an eye on him. They were also too close to Yuan Shuo. If Li Hao was taken against his will, it would send the city into an uproar.

They had to ensure that the young man followed them willingly! Once they were inside the mines, no one would brazenly follow them in because they understood that the trip was just for a new mine opening.

Qiao father and son had made quite the airtight plan, and they did have some other motivations in play. If special circumstances were triggered when Li Hao approached the ruins... they could either kill him on the spot or find a way to collect some of his blood.

In either case, the Qiaos needed to confirm the usability of the young man. If there was no response from the ruins and his blood proved useless, they would needlessly offend a large host of people if they killed him. It would also expose them after numerous years of concealment—an immense loss rather than a gain.

They would inevitably extract some sort of gain by inviting Li Hao this time. They would ensure he left a bit of blood behind at the very least. The mines were also one of the least inconspicuous ways to ensure this. It'd just caved him and rubble abounded. Any random fragment of rock could inflict a bloody scrape—that would be a very ordinary occurrence.

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Li Hao didn't delay. He returned to the house for a change of clothes and quickly walked out of the front gate. His communicator rang just when he climbed into the Qiao family car. Qiao Peng pricked his ears in the front seat when the young man picked up, eavesdropping on his conversation.

“Li Hao!”

“What is it, chief?”

Qiao Peng raised an eyebrow. Liu Long?

“Director Hao's come from White Moon and says he'll be the master of ceremonies for the ribbon-cutting ceremony tomorrow. Hurry up and present yourself to him!”

“Now?”

“Yes, the faster the better.”

“Um...” Li Hao hesitated. “Chief, can it wait? Or do you want to come to Qiao Mining and wait for me at the front of their mountain? I’m going to locate a new mine opening for them right now and will be done soon.”

“What are you blathering on about?!” Liu Long’s furious roar split the receiver. “You’re going to pick up some extra income when Director Hao’s waiting for you?”

“No, that’s not what I mean...” Li Hao explained. “The Inspectorate has a duty to handle certain cases and one like the collapse of a mine involves general safety. I’m primarily going to investigate to see if they’ve concealed any casualties. Chief, I’m busy with proper business!”

“Bullshit! Get back here!”

Li Hao set his jaw with reluctance. “It’s just one hour, chief. I’ll be there as soon as I’m done. I said I’d do it and we’re almost there, it won’t do if I don’t go! And chief... I... I need mysterious power.”

“Fuck that!” Liu Long cursed. “I’d smack you to death if you weren’t Yuan Shuo’s damned student! I’m driving there right now and you finish as fast as you can! Li Hao, all your learning’s gone straight up your ass! Don’t give yourself airs just because you’re Yuan Shuo’s student. How dare you act like this with Director Hao in residence?! I really couldn’t tell before!”

“It’s just a coincidence!” Li Hao hastened to explain, but Liu Long had already hung up. The young man swore with frustration and looked irritably at Qiao Peng. “Look at this, I was yelled at for you guys! I don’t care what the situation is, Qiao Peng, you get one hour at most. It’d be best if we can decide on a new location, but you have to pay up even if we can’t!”

Meanwhile, Qiao Peng was also inwardly cursing up a storm! Screw this blasted development! Liu Long was coming too?? And Hao Lianchuan was in town?! If Liu Long came and Li Hao was also here, that'd draw all eyeballs to them!

And if Hao Lianchuan also turned his attention to them... they needed to exercise utmost caution. Taking Li Hao and Liu Long to that place might result in exposure.

"Let's not, Commissioner Inspector Li," Qiao Peng quickly raised. "Let's forget about today. I don't want to have Director Liu make a trip in vain. We can reschedule for another time."

The plan was ruined with the addition of Liu Long's presence. They could take a break and go about their business.

"None of that bullshit." Li Hao frowned. "I've already been yelled at and will be yelled at again if I tell chief not to go. It's fine, Director Liu is very good to me and I do lack mysterious power. Taking one hour to earn one cube... he won't mind. He won't do anything apart from yelling at me."

He glanced at Qiao Peng out of the corners of his eyes and suppressed a laugh. You've now got troubles you can't speak of, huh!

Liu Long's call had come in such a timely manner naturally due to Li Hao's actions when he went inside to change. Since the Qiaos were so earnest in their invitation, the young man might as well go. Refusing could raise suspicion.

Liu Long wanted to tag along to see if he could sense something. Perhaps he could probe the attributes of the three supernaturals, their abilities, and their strength. Martial masters could easily hide themselves, but supernaturals would give something away if they were close to a Dominator—especially if they were Sunflare.

And here they were, fretting about a lack of opportunity to understand their opponent! A chance had come knocking at their door. Otherwise, the director of a Night Watcher branch really didn't have a reason to visit a mine.

While Yuan Shuo had gone last night, what he sensed might not be the same as Liu Long. Perhaps the professor felt that he could take on their opponents, but it was still up to Liu Long to draw his own conclusions.

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At the same time.

A mystified Liu Long drove toward the mountain. What... nice fellows to offer themselves up on a silver platter. Was the Qiao family in such a rush to die?

He wanted to sneak into the mountain as well, but worried that his abilities of concealment would fall short compared to Yuan Shuo's. They would be in grave trouble if he was discovered. Thus, this was perfect. He had a legitimate reason to walk right in.

Chapter 144: In A Rush To Die (III)

Liu Long drove like his personality—fast and furious. He arrived before Li Hao did.

There were very few people on site due to the collapse. Liu Long stood at the entrance and waited for the others, lighting a cigarette when he alighted from his car. When someone approached him, he declared coldly, "I am Liu Long!"

The person's eyes widened.

"Where's Li Hao? Tell him to get out here!"

Only senior executives were left on the scene. The man quickly responded, "Liu... Captain Liu, Commissioner Inspector Li doesn't seem to be here. Are you looking for him?"

“Yes!” Liu Long frowned. “He’s not here? Is he playing me?” His frown deepened and his voice snapped with arctic frost. “I hear there’s been a collapse. Has anyone died?”

“No, no one’s died at all...” stammered the fearful executive. Everyone was apprehensive of the boss of the law enforcement team. Although Liu Long no longer occupied this position, regular people weren’t aware of that.

A car pulled in as they conversed.

“Chief, how are you here faster than me?” Li Hao called out with delight.

Qiao Peng kept up an internal litany of curses as he got off. You’re here damned quick!

“Cut the bullshit!” Liu Long ignored Qiao Peng and turned his glare onto the driver. He looked uncertainly at the man, then at Li Hao. “Hurry up, Director Hao’s waiting! ...are you a supernatural?” He suddenly pointed at the driver. “Have you registered?”

“No,” the middle-aged driver responded softly. “I’m planning to go tomorrow.”

“This is the bodyguard that my father hired for me,” Qiao Peng explained. “We don’t mean to keep it from the Night Watchers and were planning to register him...”

“Shut up, there’s no place for you to talk here!” Liu Long speared him with a cutting glance. “Register as soon as possible!” That was all he said since everyone knew that there were bound to be supernaturals hidden at different places.

Qiao Peng still brought his driver despite knowing Liu Long was coming, partially because it was inconvenient to send the supernatural away when Li Hao was already in the car and partially because they wished to test to see how much the Night Watchers knew about the Qiaos.

Based on Liu Long's reaction... there seemed to be nothing amiss. Otherwise, the man would've played dumb.

While Qiao Peng appeared to be a dandy, schemes and calculations abounded in his heart. Every step he made was carefully considered. Far from being an accident, the exposure of his driver was deliberate.

After all, it would be unbecoming their status if the vast Qiao family didn't have a single Darkmoon or Sunderer to their name.

"I don't care what you agreed to," Liu Long barked with annoyance. "Hurry up, Li Hao. I'll go in with you so you can handle this as fast as possible." He glanced at the driver again. "Leave this guy here. No one will do anything to a Qiao young master while I'm here!" A jeering tone crept into his voice. "And keep your head down! Don't think you can do anything you want just because you've got money. We couldn't be bothered with you before and lacked the authority to do anything, but times are different now!"

"Understood!" Qiao Peng bobbed his head. "Why don't Director Liu take a seat here? I'll only trouble the commissioner inspector and he'll be out soon..."

"No need, we go together!" Liu Long responded with aloof arrogance. "I'm sure you understand with your family's position just how much danger Li Hao is still in. We cannot afford a single mishap! If there's someone hidden in the mountain who means him harm, your family cannot afford the consequences!"

Damn it, how unlucky can we get?! Qiao Peng cursed again. We thought ourselves real clever and made sure to invite Li Hao with an airtight excuse. Great, now we've brought Liu Long to us as well. What a hassle this has turned out to be!

As for the possibility of killing Liu Long along with the young man... Forget it, not with Hao Lianchuan and Yuan Shuo both in residence. Open hostilities at this point in time would easily lead to other problems.

They had to give up the plan and send away this scourge as quickly as possible. Qiao Peng dared to say nothing else and quickly led them into the affected zone.

Liu Long crossed his arms and wordlessly stalked behind Li Hao. He walked into the mountain without reservation, sensing something as soon as he entered. There were three extremely faint presences that he wouldn't have sensed without being a Dominator. And it was also because he knew of their existence beforehand that he could sense anything. He might have ignored the information otherwise.

Based on that alone, they could determine that the Qiaos were skilled at concealment. Were these three the same as Qiao Feilong and possessed treasures that could hide their presences? Even if that was the case, he was only picking up very faint signs. That indicated they either contained all of their power inside their body, or they were in a unique environment with quarantine properties. Perhaps... they were surrounded by ice crystals!

Liu Long's eyes suddenly lit up. Was that the case?

Ice crystals could indeed obscure their presences to the greatest degree possible. But if that was the case, it meant they would have trouble using their full strength if suddenly forced into battle.

This wasn't an issue under normal circumstances since ice crystals were fragile and easily broken. But this was a valuable opportunity if the team made full use of it.

Are there ice crystals around? Or is this the effect of the ruins that Li Hao and Yuan Shuo spoke of? Liu Long rapidly ran through possibilities and felt that it was more likely to be ice crystals! The Qiaos likely hadn't penetrated deep into the ruins. If those weren't fully open, then it was most likely to be the isolating effect of ice crystals.

The heavens smile upon me! Liu Long was immensely excited. If this was the case, he might be able to dispose of the three Sunflares ahead of time if he snuck in and caught them unawares before they smashed the ice crystals! This trip was highly worthwhile!

His perception of the three presences swiftly vanished as the zone of collapse was quite far away. What he sensed slowly dwindled until he could no longer sense them anymore. This was further confirmation that it was likely to be ice crystals.

In the meantime, Li Hao busily took in his surroundings. He was actually observing the three balls of light and determining how strong they were. It was most straightforward to compare them to Huang Yun; he might be able to identify their exact strength this way. And if he saw any colors in their light... he might be able to see their power attributes if they were of the commonly seen ones.

The trio soon arrived at the caved-in area. Li Hao did have some skill to his name. He looked around in great detail and swiftly inspected the surroundings. The young man ducked into the hole and quickly bounded back up.

“This is easy, you don’t need to build a new mine shaft. You just need to clean this area up and you’ll be able to resume work in roughly ten days. Building a new shaft might take longer. You better wait to send someone to clean this place up after three days so there’s no secondary collapse!

“Do not take human life lightly!” Li Hao intoned. “The Qiaos are rich, but we all call Silver City home. There is indeed a risk of a secondary collapse here, so you should wait a few days for things to stabilize before cleaning it up. Do you understand? I’m keeping an eye on you, so don’t set a toe out of line. You don’t want Sis Liu to recall anything unpleasant, do you? If that happens, you can’t blame us for not showing you face!”

“Of course not!” Qiao Peng quickly agreed. “Commissioner Inspector Li, are you sure we don’t need a new mine shaft?”

“One hundred percent!” Li Hao pronounced loftily. “I may not be on the same level as my teacher, but I can solve a small problem like this with a single glance! I have to say, it’s a waste of money to invite me here. Other people can come to the same conclusion. But you Qiaos run a large business, so what do you care about money?”

“Not at all, I’m much reassured with the commissioner inspector here...”

“That’s enough,” Liu Long interrupted impatiently. “Come with me if you’re done. What are you dragging your heels for?”

Li Hao chuckled and looked at Qiao Peng again.

“I’ll send someone over with it when the commissioner inspector returns tonight,” Qiao Peng quickly said in understanding. “It’s not convenient to carry it around with you.”

“I’m betting you wouldn’t dare misappropriate my money!” Li Hao snorted and left with Liu Long.

Qiao Peng escorted them out of the mountain and breathed more easily only when the two got in their car. He couldn’t resist cursing when their car was far away.

“We almost succeeded!” he swore. What did Liu Long have to get involved for?? Another thought quickly occurred to him and he swiftly turned to his driver. “Go ask if anything unusual happened at that area.”

It was a pity that they hadn’t collected Li Hao’s blood. But perhaps something had happened to that place with the young man’s visit?

The driver vanished without a word.

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At the same time, in the car.

Liu Long broached the topic only after they were a long distance away. “Their presence was very faint and hard to sense, but they should be Sunflare. I seemed to sense some flames, so they might be fire supernaturals!”

Li Hao nodded, he'd also seen some red. "There seems to be two fire supernaturals, the other might be an earth or wood supernatural. We're not sure on that—teacher told me about this after he visited last night. They should all be a bit weaker than Huang Yun—the wind supernatural from the Night Watchers last time."

"Your teacher... is really strong!" Liu Long sighed with appreciation. He'd only sensed a tiny bit, to think that Yuan Shuo would see so much and even be able to estimate their strength! The professor was truly magnificent!

"Huang Yun is a mid Sunflare, which possibly makes these three initial Sunflare or approach mid level. Regardless, it's good that they're not stronger than Huang Yun!" Liu Long continued, "Did your teacher mention if they're being concealed because of the ruins or because of ice crystals?"

Erm... his teacher hadn't mentioned any of that! Not only had he not talked about this, but he didn't even investigate anything last night for fear of discovery. Granted, Li Hao didn't mind the question. He thought back over what he'd observed.

"It might be due to ice crystals because the ruins are very durable. Being more fragile, some of the ice crystals might've cracked with the collapse last night. That permits some supernatural power to leak out—you might not have sensed anything otherwise, chief."

Chapter 145: In A Rush To Die (IV)

Li Hao based his judgment on the fact that he saw mysterious power seep out around the balls of light and not surround the balls. This was likely due to minor cracks in the ice crystals.

Liu Long was fully confident now. He didn't suspect anything as there was no need to suspect Yuan Shuo's words.

"So we've determined their strength and attributes. What a coincidence that the Qiaos would invite you to prospect the mines. They threw their brains away!" Liu Long snorted.

Threw their brains away? Li Hao pursed his lips. Not at all. Beautiful thoughts filled them. If you weren't here, they'd very likely find a way to kill me.

"Then now..."

"We go see Director Hao. What, did you think I was joking?" Liu Long looked at the young man with surprise. You're a branch deputy director. How can you not greet your direct superior? What are you thinking, boy?

Li Hao thought for a bit and nodded. "What level Solar is Director Hao?"

"That's hard to say."

"Do you not know, chief?"

"How would I possibly know?" Liu Long shook his head.

Should I ask? With Hao Lianchuan as a baseline, I should be able to tell what level Qiao Feilong is. Is he peak Sunfare, initial Solar, or even stronger? In Li Hao's eyes, the ball of light around Qiao Feilong was slightly weaker than Hao Lianchuan's, but not by much. He was a bit weaker than Brokensky, but also not by much.

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The car quickly stopped at the Law Enforcement building. Li Hao once more saw Hao Lianchuan, the powerhouse that his teacher had summoned to be their spare tire in the trunk.

Hao Lianchuan seemed quite congenial and smiled kindly. He showered Li Hao with praise as soon as he saw the young man, expressing how much the Night Watchers cared about Li Hao and their difficulties. They'd taken the sword of the Lis and would deliver their part of the bargain in return, but they needed some time.

In other words, typical bureaucratic jargon!

Li Hao didn't mind and spoke plainly when Hao Lianchuan had gone on for a while, "Director Hao, my teacher says that you're very strong and that he may not be able to beat you even though he killed Brokensky. My teacher says that Brokensky doesn't count as a strong Solar, that Director Hao is stronger than him. Is Director Hao a mid Solar?"

Directly asking someone about their strength, particularly a subordinate to their superior, was a very rude gesture. It was a flagrant violation of custom!

But since the speaker was Li Hao, a student of Yuan Shuo's that was yet to graduate... And the crux of the question being that Yuan Shuo had praised Hao Lianchuan and claimed to be inferior... Everyone loved praise!

Hao Lianchuan was no exception. A smile crossed his face without a hint of dissatisfaction regarding Li Hao's words.

It was Liu Long who furrowed his brows. "Manners, Li Hao! Don't ask what you shouldn't! Director Hao was a Sunflare before and can only be an initial Solar now. It's impossible for him to be a mid Solar so quickly!"

Hao Lianchuan frowned in response, now these words grated on the ear despite being the truth! While he was put out, what could he say to a straight shooter like Liu Long?

"It's fine!" He smiled instead. "Children will be curious. It's as your Director Liu says, Li Hao. I am only initial Solar based on your divisions of initial, mid, and late. There's nothing to hide about it, but there's not much meaning in discussing this since Solar is so far removed from you."

Li Hao nodded with a trace of yearning. "Being a Solar is amazing! Even teacher says Director Liu is formidable. Someone who teacher speaks about like this must be incredible! I hope I can dominate the lands like Director Hao one day!"

“You will, you’re still young.” Hao Lianchuan beamed radiantly. These words were right up his alley! Oh Yuan Shuo, you may be arrogant, but your student’s exposed everything about you. So you also think I’m very strong, hmm? What a simple child! You’ll be in for a beating if your teacher heard you.

You’re the heir to a martial master, yet admire a supernatural. That would be the greatest failure in Yuan Shuo’s eyes. The professor had killed a Solar, but his disciple thought less of him compared to Hao Lianchuan. Damned sweet!

Li Hao also smiled bashfully. “Then I won’t disturb Director Hao any longer. The director has a million things to attend to everyday, I am very honored with being able to meet you! Please go back to your day, director. I take my leave!”

“Mmhmm, work hard and try to join the supernatural as soon as possible. There’s a better environment at White Moon than here, so I hope to see you at White Moon soon!”

Li Hao nodded with a smile and left by himself. So Qiao Feilong is only initial Solar and a little weaker than Hao Lianchuan. Teacher ought to be able to handle him, right?

.....

Inside the office.

“The educated are different, alright!” Hao Lianchuan complimented Li Hao a few more times. “They are highly cultured and steeped in propriety. This is something that Yuan Shuo will never measure up to. That guy is an absolute hypocrite and far from being a good soul. Thank goodness his student is different.”

Seriously? Is that all you can see? Liu Long wondered with resignation. He had to acknowledge, however, that Li Hao easily lulled one in. When he first witnessed the young man’s bashful smile,

he'd thought that the lad was too pure. Someone as innocent as the boy shouldn't be dragged into such dangerous affairs.

Of course, Liu Long no longer held those views. Li Hao was a massive trap on the same level as Yuan Shuo.

Liu Long fobbed Hao Lianchuan off with generic responses before quickly saying, "Director Hao, the others and I will be late to the ceremony tomorrow."

"Eh?" Hao Lianchuan blinked. How could one conduct their business in this manner? There was nothing right about the hosts being late to their own event.

"You know about the Demon Hunters and our activities before the branch establishment, Director Hao," Liu Long explained. "Liu Yan and the others have expressed a desire to pay a visit to our fallen comrades before the ceremony. It's not that appropriate for the director to come with, so..."

"I..." Hao Lianchuan sighed. "Of course! These were all valiant people who fought the good fight. It's just that the Night Watchers had our difficulties in the past, as I'm sure you're aware."

"Yes, and we hold no grudges!" Liu Long responded calmly. "Li Hao says that we're Night Watchers now and to curse the Night Watchers is to curse ourselves. Therefore, there's no need to cast blame. It was all our own decisions!"

Hao Lianchuan once again thought highly of Li Hao being a good lad! Of course, these words could only come from the cultured. Liu Long didn't have it in him at all.

"Then you guys go pay your respects, I'll host the ceremony. We'll formalize the establishment when you guys arrive!"

"My thanks to Director Hao!" Liu Long said perfunctorily.

“There’s no need for thanks,” Hao Lianchuan chuckled. “This is what I’m supposed to do!”

The two exchanged a few more pleasantries before Liu Long left. He’d confirmed Hao Lianchuan running the show tomorrow and the team’s absence wouldn’t elicit the director’s confusion or dissatisfaction. That was perfect.

They might even have time to join the reception after they were done killing people.

.....

Hao Lianchuan thought things over after Liu Long left, finding something amiss, but unable to put his finger on it. Forget it, nothing major would occur when he was here. Although, did they need to bring Wang Ming and the others with them?

“But it’s just as well, that means Liu Long and the rest have accepted them. This is good!” Hao Lianchuan smiled with gratification when he thought of this point. Being able to meld together was naturally the best possible outcome.

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A day swiftly passed by.

August 1st.

Silver City.

Qiao Mining Industries.

The office on the top floor.

Qiao Feilong stood in front of a window and overlooked the entire city. The moderately sized metropolis filled his field of vision. It was a clear day, but it somehow gave him a stifling feeling.

“The winds are about to blow!” murmured the white-haired Qiao Feilong.

This wind didn’t pick up only today. It brewed in Silver City when Red Moon lost a Solar to Yuan Shuo during their operation to capture the last heir of the eight families. There was no other place in Silver Moon at the moment that was more tumultuous than Silver City. Red Moon, Celestial, Yama, a few mid-sized organizations, and the Night Watchers were all watching the city. How much longer could the Qiaos hide themselves?

Once they were exposed, Yama would be the first to bring arms against him. He was the organization’s pawn in Silver City. Yama had only known bits and pieces about the eight families, but once they understood that Red Moon had made preparations in the city, they sent Qiao Feilong back since he was a Silver City native.

Qiao Feilong had only been a peak Slayer then. That had been a passable level of strength in that period, but completely negligible to Yama. They undertook these actions to put a thorn into Red Moon’s side.

No one expected that Qiao Feilong would actually find something in Silver City and glean many benefits from it. Unbeknownst to the untold number of those fighting grimly outside, Qiao Feilong quietly set foot into the ranks of Solars with none the wiser.

Yama would certainly send someone to kill him once word got out. Their leader might even come for a personal look. Silver City’s ruins were plainly much more incredible than previously thought if they could facilitate a Slayer without much battle experience into crossing over.

“Time to go!” Qiao Feilong murmured once more. Silver City was not a place to stay for long. It’d drawn too much attention after a Red Moon Solar died here. However, he was loath to leave like this because he hadn’t fully excavated the ruins.

He even felt that he’d skimmed only a bit off the surface—just that was sufficient to help him into the Solar level. If he could inherit it all, he would certainly advance beyond Solar and even create a supreme supernatural organization on par with the three great organizations!

It grated to give up like this! Greed existed in everyone. Not to mention, he’d already obtained certain gains. How could he bear to relinquish his fortune like this?

“Li Hao...”

Chapter 146: Setting Out (I)

Knock knock knock!

Someone knocked on the office door.

“Come in!”

Qiao Peng pushed through the door. “Father.”

Qiao Feilong turned around with a calm expression. “What is it?”

“Father, the Night Watcher branch is being formally established tonight and Director Hao Lianchuan is overseeing the proceedings. Although we have not been invited, Uncle Chen and the others have been issued invitations...”

“Mmhmm.”

Uncle Chen was the driver that had been protecting Qiao Peng recently. He was the powerhouse that the corporation halfheartedly concealed and pushed to the forefront as the strongest among them. As a Plenilune, he matched Liu Long. It was a sign of Qiao Mining Industries' status and strength.

He was exposed now only because Qiao Feilong wished to avoid certain oblivious people targeting Qiao Mining in their schemes. It was so inconvenient when they did so. Now with such a heavyweight among their ranks, their enemies had to consider if they could take action or not. Would Liu Long have dared to sneak into Qiao Feilong's room in the middle of the night if the Plenilune had been public knowledge beforehand?

It was due to this and out of a desire to prevent further irritations from happening that this powerhouse was out in the open. Or rather, what they revealed to those higher up was that this powerhouse was here at Qiao Feilong's request and came with a hefty price tag.

Qiao Mining offered him one hundred cubes of mysterious power a year, the equivalent of one hundred million star coins. A branch director such as Liu Long received only three cubes a month—thirty-six a year. Such was the package offered by the government's only major supernatural organization.

Patently, it was much better to work for the Qiaos.

"Father," Qiao Peng interrupted when he saw his father sink into deep thought. "Can I go to the ceremony tonight?"

"You?" Qiao Feilong frowned. "What for?"

His son wasn't a supernatural and hadn't been invited. Wasn't he just creating trouble for himself by turning up?

“I want to take advantage of this opportunity to talk to Liu Yan and resolve our old scores. Also... I want to converse with Li Hao more!” Qiao Peng said grumpily. “I might already have Li Hao’s heart blood if it wasn’t for Liu Long throwing a wrench into the works yesterday.”

Qiao Peng still hadn’t recovered from yesterday’s failure. They’d been so close!

Qiao Feilong furrowed his brows before quickly shaking his head. “There’s no need! I have made arrangements for Li Hao.”

He didn’t want to drag things out. Although the Qiao ruins were yet to be fully excavated, once the Night Watchers finished with theirs, so was peace in Silver City at an end. He didn’t have much time to waste.

Qiao Feilong needed to handle Li Hao before this and attempt to access the ruins. What a pity that the sword of the Lis had been turned over to the Night Watchers! He didn’t know if it was the weapon they needed or the bloodline. It was because of that that they waffled on the proper course of action.

“Father, the arrangements you speak of are to...?”

“Fake an assault!” Qiao Feilong said coldly. “Pretend to be Red Moon and ambush him. We can’t hope to kill him, but we can take a portion of his blood, and preferably heart blood!”

That was all they could do.

Qiao Peng nodded, he held no dissenting opinion. Of course, it didn’t matter if he did. “Do we wait until Hao Lianchuan leaves?”

“Yes.” Qiao Feilong nodded. If he had any other option, he’d wait until Yuan Shuo left. But Yuan Shuo would very likely bring Li Hao with him to the other ruins. The Night Watchers wouldn’t

permit the young man to stay alone within Silver City because they knew that Red Moon had their eye on him.

The only advantage the Qiaos held was being under cover. No one knew about their strength or situation. Even if an investigation was launched after the attack, it would only be traced to Red Moon. That might buy him more time to fully excavate the ruins.

He was still loath to leave like this!

After father and son conversed for a bit, Qiao Peng looked around with uncertainty.

“Speak!” Qiao Feilong frowned again.

“Father, we may be withdrawing from Silver City soon. When... when can I enter that area and make the cross over?” He couldn’t help himself in the end. He wanted to grow stronger, particularly after yesterday! Liu Long had outright ignored and looked down on him. He spoke to only Uncle Chen—that scorn and disregard was too much to bear.

It was the same from Li Hao! This was all due to Qiao Peng being a mundane. Hence, even Li Hao treated him with contempt because the former was a Slayer.

Qiao Peng couldn’t bear it anymore! He wanted to be supernatural. They were leaving soon anyway, according to his father!

“Father, if I leave still as a mundane, I will delay the withdrawal. I can at least ensure that I won’t hold us back if I’m a supernatural then.”

Qiao Feilong’s brows knitted together. This wasn’t the best timing. Of course, he wasn’t planning on keeping Qiao Peng down forever since he only had one son. He’d prevented his son from crossing over due to the need for concealment and for other reasons. But from the anxiety and

resentment shining from the depths of Qiao Peng's eyes, he understood that his son was angry after being suppressed for so long.

"Peng'er, it's easy to become supernatural!" Qiao Feilong sighed. "I would've let you cross over if this was ten years ago! But as time went on and my own strength grew stronger, I discovered more that I didn't know before."

He looked strangely at Qiao Peng. "They all say that opening the supernatural locks is the permit toward the mysterious! But my findings these years tell me that opening them ahead of time exhausts the potential and consumes vitality."

"Martial masters reach their limit at Dominator of Thousands. There is no way forward, so the martial master path is not the correct one. However, the supernatural isn't necessarily safe or holds more promise than martial masters either."

Qiao Feilong lowered his voice. "I think some of the more powerful supernaturals might have realized the issues themselves through exploring ruins and perusing ancient texts. Just wait a little longer until we excavate the ruins more. I promise that you'll be a powerhouse in this new world order!"

Qiao Peng's thoughts took an aggrieved cast at his father's ambiguity. He was none too happy. What had his father discovered? Not safe? The supernatural dominated the world and the more powerful ones could fly through sky and earth. They were like gods! Could anything be more unsafe than being a mundane?

"Father, no matter what path I walk, I've made no progress in either martial dao or the supernatural over these years. I can't just keep waiting to be a powerhouse, can I?"

So the supernatural wasn't safe, what about martial dao? But his father didn't even give him mysterious power to absorb, so he naturally didn't make much progress as a martial master. He wasn't even a Slayer, just a mundane who knew how to fight.

“Would I do anything to harm you?” Qiao Feilong said impatiently. “One cannot absorb too much mysterious power at this stage. Absorbing too much damages your own potential! Plus, I’ve discovered a more unique and stronger energy in the ruins!”

The Qiao patriarch’s eyes gleamed and he finally showed some excitement. “That energy is different from other mysterious power and internal force! It can nurture your physical body and strengthen your supernatural locks! While it appears that you haven’t gained much strength, it’s a match made in heaven when combined with mysterious power! If we obtain more of that kind of energy, you’ll quickly make it to Sunderer or even Dominator! Once you use a stronger body to break through your supernatural locks, you’ll vault to Sunflare or even Solar!”

Qiao Peng’s eyes widened. Crossing over as a Sunflare or Solar? How was that possible?? It’d taken his father more than ten years to reach his state, even with all these years of excavations. His father was spinning a farfetched tale!

“Ah... father, do you mean this?”

“Of course!” Qiao Feilong frowned. “It’s not just you, but also me. I will be able to rectify some of the old injuries that I suffered in my early years. This energy will also supplement the potential that was consumed. I’ve found that it’s hard to keep improving after becoming a Solar due to the potential that I exhausted earlier. It may be gone, but that thing will help us get it back.”

He flushed with agitation. If he could lay hands on the energy, he would very likely fix everything and take another step forward. He might be able to proceed beyond Solar and become a true powerhouse, one that could stand on equal footing with the leaders of the three great organizations.

Likewise moved, Qiao Peng no longer insisted that he wanted to immediately become supernatural. His father wouldn’t be lying to him at this stage, unless he wasn’t his father’s son.

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Qiao Feilong sent away a buoyant Qiao Peng after a while. The former's smile slowly dropped off his face with a sigh. "Tell me, do you think we've been exploring the real ruins over these years or just their outskirts?"

"What makes you say that?" came a low human voice in the spacious office.

"The more we explore the area we discovered... the more I think... I sense... that it's fringe territory and not the core! The core area is very likely to be behind that door. What else do you think is behind it?"

"The door?" came the wispy voice again. It spoke hesitantly this time. "Perhaps there's nothing beyond the door..."

"Impossible! The energy is seeping out from it!" Qiao Feilong frowned. "There's just very little. And remember the grooves that we saw in the door! Do you think the weapons of the eight families need to be embedded within to open it? And that's when we'll enter the true ruins of the eight families!"

The more he spoke, the more certain he was. It was just... he had no options. Seven of the eight families were dead, only Li Hao was alive. His sword was with the Night Watchers, so there was nothing Qiao Feilong could do despite knowing what he needed.

This was a key reason why he wavered and debated whether it was better to leave earlier rather than later.

"I'd like to seal off the ruins first and seek out Red Moon when I'm strong enough, seize the weapons they've taken, then get the sword from the Night Watchers..." Such were his most recent plans.

"You make the call!" came the voice in the shadows.

“You’re still like this after all these years,” Qiao Feilong laughed. “Alright then, I’ll make the decision! What a pity that we couldn’t obtain enough power... I think it might be able to reform your body.”

“It doesn’t matter anymore,” chuckled the voice. “Boss, I am who I am today because I do not have the restraints of external concerns. Every sip and every bite is preordained. Who says it’s a bad thing to not have a body?”

Chapter 147: Setting Out (II)

“But you are barred from reaching grand perfection!” Qiao Feilong murmured. “Based on the information we’ve gathered these years, the physical body is still very important. The notion of ascending beyond matter by abandoning the body is not proven! Red Moon is undertaking a similar plan—you’ve seen for yourself what you discovered before and realized that they were just puppets. They aren’t true spirits!”

“The spirit...” The person in the dark quieted down. They thought of the scarlet shadows that existed like puppets, completely lacking their own consciousness. Although they moved without a trace and were invisible to outsiders, they had not ascended any plane of existence.

Red Moon might have already discovered something and started experimenting, but everything pointed to the conclusion that this was not a viable path.

“Did someone from Red Moon come to collect those things?” Qiao Feilong asked.

“I’m not sure. I didn’t dare investigate with Yuan Shuo in the city and Hao Lianchuan also present at the time. They were gone when I could perform reconnaissance. Red Moon might have retrieved them, or they might have collapsed on their own.”

“What a pity!” Qiao Feilong sighed. He might’ve been inclined to capture some for study otherwise. They might be very useful.

.....

Li Hao was naturally completely oblivious of the conversation that took place at Qiao Mining. He and Liu Long were hiding in the basement with the others. There was an additional fixture there today—a car undergoing modification.

Yun Yao gently embedded ice crystals into the vehicle, turning it into a moving ice crystal cover. A merry Liu Yan regarded her efforts with crossed arms.

“Modifying this is no problem, but we can’t let Li Hao drive it. If he does... he’ll crash this thing to smithereens no matter how tightly you enclose it!”

“Sis! My driving’s been pretty decent the past couple of days,” Li Hao protested awkwardly.

“Enough of that!” Liu Yan snorted. Pretty crap, more like!

Wang Ming and the supernaturals were also present. The former looked the car over with a frown. “What’s the point of modifying the car? The engine’s noise will draw the enemy’s attention. You’re just obscuring the supernatural ripples.”

What was the point of this? There wasn’t a need for it, ice crystals were expensive and easily broken.

“It’s enough to simply conceal mysterious power!” Liu Long explained calmly. “You supernaturals will ride in the car to prevent your power from leaking out and being exposed.”

Martial masters weren’t afraid of that possibility, but supernaturals were easily exposed.

“Chief, can we still not know who the target is?” Chen Jian shifted weapons off to the side.

“What are you in a rush for?!” Liu Long answered curtly and turned back to Wang Ming. “I told you your mission already, so keep another point in mind. Try not to get out of the car if you can

help it, not unless the enemy is running toward you! Apart from being a zone of concealment, the ice crystal cover is also to facilitate your ambushes. You need to make good use of the opportunity!”

He then addressed Chen Jian and the other martial masters. “You, Wu Chao, and Liu Yan will be responsible for employing the hot weapons. The target will seek to kill you at first opportunity, but they may also show you mercy. Sunflares will most likely want revenge after being blasted by hot weapons!”

The martial masters nodded. Plainly, they were bait in this operation. It wouldn’t be the first time. They were in a more precarious position compared to the supernaturals.

“What about me?” Li Hao asked. There was no job for him.

Liu Long looked at him. “What do you think you can do?”

I...

Li Hao didn’t know what to say, but also what Liu Long meant. The chief was protecting him as he knew the young man was a Sunderer. He was actually stronger than Chen Jian and Wu Chao.

“Your mission is simple, get rid of that flea!” Liu Long assigned a task in the end because he was worried about Li Hao wandering off. The flea he spoke of was Qiao Peng. The Qiaos needed to be exterminated as soon as possible.

“Then let Sis Liu go...”

“Just listen to orders!” Liu Long growled. “Not to mention, you’re a more suitable candidate if that person’s also at the office. I’d be afraid that your teacher doesn’t care about Liu Yan’s survival, do you understand?”

Li Hao did. If Qiao Peng was present when they went to take out Qiao Feilong, that made for a sticky situation. Or perhaps his teacher would eliminate him as an afterthought.

“Chief, is that guy really not going to go home?” Li Hao thought for a bit. “Why would he be at the office in the middle of the night?”

“He will. He’s lived there for many years.”

It was very odd that Qiao Feilong never returned home. Perhaps it was out of a desire to keep his strength hidden, or perhaps there was another reason. Regardless, there was a bedroom in his office.

Liu Long had personally visited to spy upon him there, which was why he knew that Qiao Feilong did not leave at night.

“Everyone needs to be careful as we will be conducting separate missions. We will commence action at the appropriate time. Synchronize watches now!”

The team looked down at their watches; the supernaturals did not wear any as mysterious power easily interfered with mechanical workings. That wasn’t a problem, however, as they would be with Liu Yan and the others.

Liu Long took a deep breath after completing preparations and waited. Only the sounds of everyone busy completing their tasks filled the basement. He rose to his feet when the car was complete after an indeterminate period of time.

“Li Hao, let’s make a round and let everyone know that we’re still here. Liu Yan will take the car and drive the others to the target spot!”

“Understood!” Excitement and agitation filled the woman’s eyes. She knew who the target was tonight!

The Qiaos!

She only had one mission—drive the car to a high vantage point near the mines and go into hiding. Then, when the time arrives, blast the shit out of those fuckers!

Wang Ming and the rest of the team quickly climbed into the car, leaving only Liu Long and Li Hao. Liu Long took a moment to sense the surroundings when the door closed and nodded with satisfaction when he couldn't sense any mysterious power. Rookies such as Wang Ming and his comrades easily seeped energy. The three Sunflares would sense them as soon as they walked out of the ruins.

Another door opened elsewhere in the basement, one that led straight to the underground garage. No one would notice if they drove out of there.

.....

Nerves set in once everyone left—Liu Long whispered as they walked, “This is the strongest enemy I’ve ever faced in my professional career, and it’s not just one enemy. Nothing can go wrong with your teacher’s side or we’ll be in grave trouble!”

As Qiao Mining’s headquarters were in the city center, blunders could easily happen. Of course, based on their analysis, neither Yuan Shuo nor Qiao Feilong would want others in the city to know of their situation. Hao Lianchuan was also present, so Qiao Feilong was bound to leave at the first possible opportunity once battle was joined.

But that was just their judgment. As for whether or not he would do so, that was uncertain.

“Chief, we’ve done everything we should do, so there’s no use in thinking too much about the results. The more perfect a plan is, the more likely it is that something will go wrong. All we can do now is just forge ahead!”

Liu Long inclined his head. “You only have one mission—protect yourself!”

“Don’t worry, chief. I’m a Sunderer!”

Liu Long didn’t say anything to that. “Perhaps you can bring Panther with you to prevent falling to bizarre danger. Supernaturals have many tricks up their sleeves. People can’t see certain things, but the dog can.”

He showed extra care and concern for the young man as his breakthrough to Dominator had much to do with Li Hao.

“I will!” The two reached the ground floor as they spoke, running into Hao Lianchuan descending from upstairs.

“Have Wang Ming and the others left?” he asked curiously when he saw the two. He didn’t sense other supernaturals within the building. Were they gone?

“They’ve gone to procure certain things for our fallen comrades.” Liu Long nodded. “Where are you headed to, Director Hao?”

“To Yuan Shuo,” Hao Lianchuan chuckled. “He’s the foremost of Silver City, after all, and needs to be invited to something like this. But he might not show you face if you go, so I’ll go in person!”

The professor would show him face, right?”

“I’ll go, director!” Li Hao hastily said. “How can we trouble the director? I’ll bring my teacher back here.”

“You go?” Hao Lianchuan acquiesced after some thought.

A merry Mu Sen walked in from outside. “Director Hao, Ole Liu, shall we instate a curfew tonight since there will be a gathering of supernaturals? Some of these guys won’t follow the rules and could cause trouble.”

“That’d be for the best!” Liu Long glanced at his watch. “Let’s make it a bit earlier tonight at 8pm! We can prevent anyone from acting the fool on the way here. The reception will start at 9pm sharp!”

9pm was slightly late, but day and night were all the same to supernaturals. Liu Long would’ve gone to Mu Sen had the inspector general not come. It’d be best if no one was on the streets tonight.

Mu Sen nodded; Li Hao made his farewells to leave for his teacher’s.

.....

The Yuan residence.

A weapon that looked like a brass knuckle had appeared in Yuan Shuo’s hands; the sharper point in the middle was the truly lethal weapon.

The blade of the Zhangs!

He pointed at a map on the table. “Your reception starts at 9pm. As the main focal point of the evening, I will leave at 8:30pm. You drive. We’ll pass by Qiao Mining Industries at roughly 8:45pm.”

Silver City was a small place. There would be almost no one on the streets at that time, and even fewer tonight since curfew would be in effect.

Qiao Mining headquarters was located in the commercial district. No one was there at night since they left for home after work.

“Teacher, Qiao Feilong is on the top floor. We don’t know how to fly, so we can only take the elevator or stairs. Doesn’t that give him too much time to react?”

Yuan Shuo smiled. “That’s of no matter, the Birdshot technique isn’t that impotent. Two leaps will definitely be sufficient, if not one! He won’t have much time to react. Qiao Feilong’s used to hiding in the dark, so he won’t respond as quickly this first time!”

Li Hao nodded. He could only trust his teacher’s words.

Student and teacher fell silent. Time trickled while they waited. It was soon 7pm, yet the sky wasn’t fully dark. Night descended slower on a summer’s night.

Chapter 148: Battle (I)

At the same time.

The Law Enforcement building.

Activity bustled at the Inspectorate tonight due to the Night Watcher ribbon-cutting ceremony. Instead of being hosted at a hotel, the ceremony took place on Inspectorate grounds.

Guests started arriving at 7pm. They were greeted at the door by law enforcement team members and the head usher was Mu Sen. Many were startled by the flattery of being welcomed by the inspector general. Some, however, were confused. Where were Liu Long and the others?

A dojo master couldn’t help but ask, “Inspector General Mu, is Director Liu not around?”

“He is, he is,” chuckled Mu Sen. “But he’s busy at the moment and it’s Director Hao overseeing the proceedings tonight. With Director Hao present, it doesn’t matter if that fellow is around or not!”

Laughter broke out in the crowd, but some didn’t dare laugh in case they landed themselves in trouble. As for Director Hao... these people were more or less familiar with him.

Second-in-command of the Silver Moon Night Watchers, Hao Lianchuan was a premier powerhouse. It was their honor to see him in Silver City. The mere Slayers, Sunderers, Starlight, and Darkmoon gathered didn’t dare give offense to this legendary Solar.

Inside.

The Inspectorate’s largest hall had been set up for the establishment ceremony. A frowning Hao Lianchuan stood within it. There were quite a number of guests filling this magnificent hall of the vast Inspectorate, but he... seemed to be ignored.

It was frustrating!

He could understand Liu Long and the others being absent—they’d gone to visit their fallen comrades. But old fart Yuan Shuo? He wasn’t here either. Was he waiting for the last possible second?

Hao Lianchuan’s position was too far removed for ordinary people to attempt striking up a conversation, so he seemed at a loss for what to do in the hall. Well, it was his fault for coming so early. He had no place to go other than the Inspectorate in Silver City, yet this was where the ceremony was being held. He’d thought that he could chat with Yuan Shuo when the professor came...

People jostled each other through the crowd, but there wasn’t a single Night Watcher in attendance. Hao Lianchuan shook his head. This is the most unique establishment ceremony I’ve ever been to. Not a single focus of attention is here! Shouldn’t a deputy director be mingling with the attendees, at the very least?

Thankfully, Mu Sen ran in before long. He sought out Hao Lianchuan to express his impatience. “Director Hao, why don’t we rush along Liu Long and the others? They’re still not back, but it’s almost time for the ceremony. It’s inappropriate that they’re absent.”

“No, it would be inappropriate to rush them.” Hao Lianchuan shook his head. “They’ve gone to honor their fallen comrades. It’s fine if they’re late. We can use it as an intimidation tactic on these guys. But Yuan Shuo—you should hurry him along!”

Awkwardness crept over Mu Sen’s face. He could urge Liu Long to faster speed, but Yuan Shuo... he was afraid of being yelled at.

“Are you being silly or what? You can contact Li Hao if you don’t dare rush Yuan Shuo!” Hao Lianchuan explained with resignation. What an inflexible stickler for the rules!

Didn’t Li Hao set out to get his teacher already? They must be together and probably didn’t go with the group visit. Unfortunately, Mu Sen had to follow orders. He dialed Li Hao’s number, hanging up with no better answers after a while. “Li Hao says that his teacher said he’ll head out at 8:30pm sharp and arrive at 9:00pm on the dot!”

“.....” Hao Lianchuan cursed to himself. This was too much!

He impatiently waved Mu Sen off and set off in search of a place to rest that wasn’t the great hall. All of these guys were more reliable in the reports of White Moon than in person.

.....

Some more time passed as various faction representations filtered in. Meanwhile, a silver car drove out of Yuan Shuo’s residence. It was his car, though he never drove it. He simply owned one—a feat that poor kid Li Hao couldn’t measure up to. Not only did the professor own a car, but it was a very trendy design. Those of Yuan Shuo’s age typically liked black, but not him. He purchased an eye-catching little silver car.

Li Hao drove with his hands clenched tight around the steering wheel. He had a hunch that his teacher's car would be scrap metal after this mission. Of course, he didn't say anything because he wasn't going to pay for that if it was the last thing he did!

The car slowly drove into the distance. Based on their route, the Qiao residence would be on the way before they reached the Inspectorate.

.....

A silver car slowly crept along the city streets, passing by the Qiao residence without stopping. There were two humans and one dog aboard. Li Hao shifted restlessly in the driver's seat after a while.

"Teacher, what should I do if Qiao Peng and his driver happen to be there and I can't beat them?"

He read Qiao Peng's driver as a Plenilune—that mapped to peak Sunderer! They'd received an invite to the ceremony at the Inspectorate, but what if they were late or simply decided not to go?

Li Hao hadn't asked Qiao Peng if he planned to go. If they were unlucky, they might run into him at the destination.

Eyes closed in repose, Yuan Shuo suddenly opened them. "You're a Sunderer too and practice the Five Styles and Nine Forged Force. You won't die in an instant even if you're no match for them. Take advantage of Qiao Peng's lack of intent and draw out battle if you really can't defeat him. Panther has some strength to its name. You won't die that quickly if the two of you coordinate well."

That was heartless enough. "You won't die that quickly." Plainly, Yuan Shuo had considered this possibility and still decided to bring his student along.

Li Hao quietly focused on the road.

“There comes a time when a fledgling must spread its wings to fly. I am not worried that you’ll suffer heavy injuries, not with sword energy at the ready. You’ll be able to recover from whatever you suffer. What I worry about is that you lack valor. That is intolerable for a martial master.

“I do not expect my final disciple to defy powerhouses beyond your level. However, you should at least be able to hold your own for a while. Both of you are Sunderers—the only difference lies with your physique. Your opponent does not possess an aura while you wield a burgeoning one. Why would you be afraid of him?”

He felt that there was no need for Li Hao to be afraid. No need at all!

“Remember, the aura is a martial master’s ultimate ace! A Dominator with an aura will never fear a Sunflare. Keep in mind that you are no ordinary initial Sunderer. Nothing is a problem so long as you keep your heart in order. I even hope that you’ll run into him!”

Only hope, no concern.

“Teacher, I’m a rookie...” Li Hao chuckled. “Aren’t you afraid of me dying?”

“Then that is your destiny if you die!” Yuan Shuo intoned. “I can take you under my wing for a while, but I cannot shelter you forever. Although your opponent is a Plenilune, he is not that much stronger in my eyes. I rather hope that you come across opponents like these.”

“I understand!”

A loud boom sounded right when Li Hao responded. Yuan Shuo shook and the corners of his lips spasmed.

“I’m just a little nervous. It’s fine, teacher.” The young man took a deep breath. “I think I hit a curb, that’s not a problem.”

He started up the engine again. There was nothing to cars after one drove them a few times. He was finding his teacher’s car a bit unfamiliar only because it was his first time driving it.

The car continued down the empty street. It was very quiet tonight as curfew was in effect starting at 8pm. Only those with special identities were permitted to move about. Silver City denizens were a law-abiding sort, not to mention there was a lack of entertainment in such a small place. Add to that major disturbance taking place only a few days ago—it made for no people to be seen on the streets.

A skyscraper grew in size up ahead. Qiao Mining Industries! Neon lights shone with light, illuminating the surroundings. Yuan Shuo clenched his fists and breathed out gently. Was he stressed?

A little.

A Dominator battling a Solar...

His first battle had been a complete ambush. He’d occupied the upper hand only because he presented a weak front. It was now public knowledge that he’d triumphed over a Solar, so while he may be able to ambush his opponent again, he would not be able to lull them with a show of weakness. No one would believe that Yuan Shuo was lacking.

When Qiao Feilong realized it was Yuan Shuo attacking him, he would be on full alert and wouldn’t prioritize keeping his strength hidden.

But am I afraid? No! I’ve never been afraid! Yuan Shuo was just a little wary and solemn, but he didn’t flinch from the battle to come. As a martial master of decades, he’d experienced hundreds of duels at the very least. What right did Qiao Feilong have to compare himself to such a veteran martial master?

His fists slowly relaxed. Beside him, Li Hao continued a litany of suggestions.

“When we get there, teacher, why don’t I drive the car straight into their building? Maybe Qiao Feilong will come downstairs. When he does, we can ambush him...”

Yuan Shuo ignored his student’s ideas. Did they make sense? A little. But too many coincidences would appear too contrived. He’d be willing to give it a go if their opponent was younger than thirty. However, Qiao Feilong was a similar age to him and a wily old fox who’d spent decades in the world of business.

Did it make sense that Li Hao’s car would just so happen to crash into his building tonight?

Did it make sense that Liu Long would follow the young man to the mines today?

For Qiao Feilong, one coincidence was fine, two coincidences were acceptable. But three? That was no longer a coincidence.

“What do you think, teacher?” Li Hao continued. He really felt his thoughts were good. Accidentally running into a building when the building owner was present... Qiao Feilong would have to come down if Li Hao and Yuan Shuo were in the car, right? He’d have to greet them, at least? They could swiftly stab him in the gut when he was smiling pleasantly at them. That’d give them an advantage then!

Li Hao built quite a nice picture in his mind.

“Focus on driving,” Yuan Shuo responded calmly. “Continued employment of trickery is not the right way! Additionally, don’t think too little of your teacher. I’ve had the stone blade for multiple days and resided at peak Sunderer for decades. Do you think I haven’t improved at all compared to a dozen days ago?”

Li Hao snapped to solemn attention and said no more. Panther sprawled in the passenger seat, seeming to sense the grave killing intent in the air.

Chapter 149: Battle (II)

The top floor of Qiao Mining Industries.

Qiao Feilong looked down from a window and could vaguely make out a silver car's slow approach. His stomach turned; his heart was slightly unsettled.

Had he forgotten something? Or was something about to happen? The car below... seemed familiar. Curfew was in effect tonight, so those who could so blatantly drive on the streets must be supernaturals attending the ceremony. At this hour, the reception was about to begin.

Who could it be?

...Yuan Shuo!

He remembered now, it should be Yuan Shuo.

"A martial master..." Qiao Feilong murmured. There were numerous drawbacks to martial masters at times and unique advantages at others. Currently, it was the latter as he could not sense the other's presence. He could only speculate and rely on his own judgment due to martial masters possessing only internal force, not mysterious power.

Internal force was held within the body and exceedingly hard to detect. Qiao Feilong hadn't paid much attention to the previous Yuan Shuo as the man was just peak Sunderer. He was strong, but that was all there was to him. But now that the man was a Dominator and had killed a Solar, Qiao Feilong committed the person to memory. Perhaps they would have more run-ins in the future and they might even exchange blows. He'd considered how he might react if Yuan Shuo was his enemy. There was also Li Hao to consider. If he wished to kill the young man, then Yuan Shuo might be an impossible hurdle to cross over.

Qiao Feilong suddenly glimpsed something as he ruminated through his thoughts. Something was amiss.

.....

At the same time, street level.

Li Hao looked at his watch. "It's 8:45 pm..."

Their side was to commence at this time; the operation outside the city would start one minute later because the disturbance here would be smaller. A clash wouldn't be known that quickly, even if it was between two premier powerhouses. The situation was different outside the city as Liu Long and the others packed large amounts of hot weapons. A large uproar was inevitable once they started fighting and would raise Qiao Feilong's attention.

A marvelously fast Yuan Shuo darted out of the car window like an ape as soon as Li Hao spoke. The window was tiny, but the professor burrowed through without a sound. The young man glanced backward while keeping his foot on the pedal. A shadow shot toward the sky, visible in the dark through the glow of neon lights.

Yuan Shuo set foot in the air like a massive bird, covering nearly one hundred meters with an upward leap. The building barely reached one hundred meters since it was thirty stories tall, putting it within easy reach of the Dominator.

Li Hao watched with immense shock. The last time his teacher bounded through the air, he'd traveled only a dozen meters. Perhaps he hadn't utilized his full strength then, but this time he rose one hundred meters! He was obviously much stronger than before.

Yuan Shuo swiftly ascended with unparalleled speed. He seemed to glimpse a pair of eyes as he soared through the sky. The owner of the eyes also saw him.

Behind the window, a stony-faced Qiao Feilong looked on with consternation and inexplicable relief.

He's here for me! Yuan Shuo's here!

Solemn and grave, a ball of fire rose around him. He didn't know how he'd been exposed, but knew that battle was inescapable the second that Yuan Shuo came striding through the air. It would only end with one of their deaths.

He didn't know how much Yuan Shuo knew or why the man was so certain that Qiao Feilong was hiding his strength, but years of tempering in commerce enabled him to keep his head. A long blade of fire materialized in front of him.

A man gripping a blade of fire slashed through the window, sending searing flames through the air. Another man punched forward from the other side. There was no need for words, any that were said would be a joke. They both had only one goal—kill the other.

There wasn't even the sound of shattering glass. Flames melted the window and the long blade of fire lit up the night sky. A faint glow from the stone blade erupted from Yuan Shuo's fist. His punch seemed more like a blade stroke than a punch.

Two blades collided without a sound! All of the glass in the top floor simultaneously shattered, as did the floorboards beneath Qiao Feilong's feet crack and go up in flames.

Fist and blade crashed into each other!

Only after Qiao Feilong took a slight step back and Yuan Shuo spun in the air did the sound of their impact travel outward.

Boom!

Boom!

Boom!

A series of explosions ripped through countless panes of glass. It was as if multiple bombs had gone off on the top floor, leaving it a pockmarked mess. All of the desks and chairs were obliterated.

Qiao Feilong took a step back without looking down at himself. He coughed lightly as dripping sounds traveled into his ear. Fresh blood drenched his hand!

Shock, confusion, and a trace of amazement filled his eyes. Could a Dominator truly break through a Solar's defenses? He could sense that he wasn't able to bring any defenses to bear as the other broke through his fire system with a punch. Internal force shook his insides to the point where the bones of his hand cracked.

Was this Dominator of Thousands?

No, it should just be Yuan Shuo. Dominators should not be this strong.

Thoughts flashed through his mind for a split second. Outside the window, Yuan Shuo returned like a bird. A tiger roar shook the heavens next.

"ROAR!!" This was a true tiger. Anyone who saw or heard him would see a spotted tiger prowling down from the mountain. This was the true tiger style!

A ferocious tiger shook the firmament with its roar, the sound wave collapsing the floor. Yuan Shuo punched again with a massive sound blast and pummeled Qiao Feilong into the ground. The man dropped from the top floor while Yuan Shuo set foot into the building. In this moment, he seemed the reincarnation of a demon god.

“Is this all there is to a Solar, Old Qiao?!” Yuan Shuo crushed the floor with a stomp and transformed shrapnel into lethal projectiles, shooting them outward in all directions. A fiery streak soundlessly answered from below!

Pfft!

The entire floor was cut into two; blazing flames melted through even concrete and iron.

Yuan Shuo adroitly vanished on the spot, reappearing as a hulking bear and crashing through the top floor. The fiery blade once more cut through the smoke and haze.

Qiao Feilong did not respond or ask anything. There was no need to! Everything would be over once Yuan Shuo was dead. He was more concerned with where Hao Lianchuan was. Was the director also part of this attack? Or was he outside the city?

As concerned as he was, Qiao Feilong knew he needed to eliminate Yuan Shuo. With a shift in thought, he transformed the flames from a blade into a fiery sea. A mountain of blades and a sea of flames! The building was lit up from within as flames licked at it.

Fire energy!

“Flowery moves that bear no fruit!” Yuan Shuo declared coolly. He was Old Demon Yuan!

I only have my pair of fists! It was these fists that beat endless martial masters to death and killed countless supernaturals before that domain came into its own. Only when his fists weren’t tough enough did he hole up and live out his days in Silver City.

But now, they were tough again!

“Kill!”

Like demon, like beast. The fiery sea shook when his punch barrelled forward. The consciousness erupted and aura swelled; he was a walking god that never lost a battle.

Yuan Shuo extinguished the fiery sea with that punch alone. A massive explosion sounded before Qiao Feilong was sent flying from the center of his creation. The man’s heart and mind quailed with incredulity!

Was this Yuan Shuo??

He couldn’t withstand Yuan Shuo whether in terms of technique, killing intent, or consciousness! The only area that he held the advantage was his strong base of mysterious power. It prevented disastrous defeat from crushing him!

“Cough cough cough...” Flaming red blood seeped out the corners of his lips. A fiery dragon appeared beneath his feet and brought him into the air. Countless flames once more flew out with a clench of his jaw. They were stronger this time and burned through this floor with a rumble.

The two hovered in the air as they fought, battle intensifying for this round.

Qiao Feilong found the circumstances unbelievable—he was a Solar!

Hadn’t Yuan Shuo been able to kill Brokensky only because he’d hid his strength too deeply and Brokensky had been careless? But while Yuan Shuo had indeed launched an ambush tonight, Qiao Feilong was also ready beforehand. And yet, he still found himself on the losing side.

Why??

This didn’t make sense!

Was internal force this strong at a Dominator level that it could directly break through the defenses of a Solar?

Should I run?

The thought flashed through his mind. No!

Battle was only the beginning. If he chose to run now, he wouldn't have a chance to counterattack. Running was to give Yuan Shuo a chance.

Rumble!

Fists!

Uncountable fists!

Yuan Shuo employed no technique at all; he simply rained punches down on his opponent. And gradually, Qiao Feilong began to sense something different. He exhaled with a cold look at Yuan Shuo.

I've figured you out! Your right fist!

The professor's right fist was remarkably fierce due to a special energy that wasn't internal force. It seemed to be a treasure as the brass knuckle was too big to be just that. As cutting as the blows from Yuan Shuo's left fist were, they delivered minimal damage.

A treasure!

“Your brass knuckle... is a supernatural object?”

Cough cough cough.

Qiao Feilong evaded another series of blows while struggling with a coughing fit and rapidly backed away, burning through floors to endure Yuan Shuo's mighty offense. The two quickly descended through the building.

The brass knuckle was a supernatural object!

Yuan Shuo continued his attacks without a word. Qiao Feilong had a good eye for detail and he wasn't in the mood to respond. Just as he'd taught Li Hao, there was no need to converse with a standing enemy. The only time talking was appropriate as if he was heavily outmatched. Otherwise, keeping up the offense was the only answer!

Unceasing offense!

Another loud explosion rang out as Yuan Shuo flung a punch that fractured the floor. He swung through the air like an ape and kicked out a foot, circling Qiao Feilong upside down and delivering a dozen kicks.

Bam bam bam!

Qiao Feilong responded as well, blasting back with flames that turned into fiery dragons. They sought to wrap around Yuan Shuo and burn him to death.

Chapter 150: Battle (III)

Qiao Feilong split his attention between defending himself while coughing and maintaining a clear look in his eyes. Though he lacked battle experience, he wouldn't die so easily. Years of

participation in the world of commerce had equipped him with the calm required in these situations. Yuan Shuo being more difficult to handle than expected was one such occasion.

However, he still elected to speak again to catch the professor's attention.

"You're here for the ruins, aren't you?" Qiao Feilong's voice was haunting. "That is not something you or I can claim alone. don't force me into making it common knowledge. Perhaps you and I can partner to explore them together! You have the strength and experience, whereas I have decades of research. Working together is the way."

Yuan Shuo remained silent.

A silhouette slightly darker than the rest disengaged from the wall and slowly approached them. A shadow in the night, it was soundless, without smell, and lacking even mysterious power. It was more eerie than the scarlet shadow.

The shadow gained a target when Qiao Feilong pointed out that the threat came from Yuan Shuo's right brass knuckle. It didn't seek to kill the professor, that was too hard!

Dominators possessed aura and consciousness, of that everyone was well aware of. It was very easy for scarlet shadows or similar entities to move against Sunderers. But when it came to Dominators, it was very hard to invade their bodies. At the same time, it was incredibly difficult for the martial masters to discover these entities, especially in moments like this.

Powerhouses could not afford to lose their concentration in battle.

Qiao Feilong would have a chance to counterattack if they removed the brass knuckle. Once they interrupted Yuan Shuo's momentum, the man was sure to die.

.....

At the same time, below ground.

Li Hao drove the car straight into the building and looked up when he abandoned the tattered silver car. He saw a massive ball of light!

It went without saying that that was Qiao Feilong.

However, the young man quickly frowned. The ball of light illuminated a black shadow—what was that? He hadn't seen anything near Qiao Feilong when he visited last time, so what was that shadow?

He wasn't seeing a wall or other matter, it was an energy source. Just like Qiao Feilong's fire energy and Yuan Shuo's internal force could not be seen through, the visibility of the shadow meant that it was a special type of energy that he'd never seen before.

The black shadow dawdled around the ball of light. Li Hao was no fool, he guessed it was Qiao Feilong's trump card that he meant to ambush his teacher with. Should he yell? But who knew if his teacher could hear in the thick of battle. Even if he did, that might goad the black shadow into pouncing on his teacher.

"The black shadow looks like a Sunflare, not a Solar..."

What should he do? Should he yell?

Various possibilities floated up in his mind.

"The Night Watchers are here on a case! Stop resisting and turn yourself in, Qiao Feilong!" Li Hao roared. He didn't know if the two could hear him, so he utilized Tiger Roar Through Mountain and Woods, bawling like a cub. A string of strange words emitted from his mouth next. "The three spirits safeguard the flag, the southern mountain in my heart..."

The secret language!

Yuan Shuo shared a secret language with his students, employing it to discuss certain ancient texts and to pass on secret arts such as the Breathing Method of the Five Styles. He'd utilized it when teaching the method to Li Hao through the communicator.

Up in the air, Yuan Shuo kicked another floorboard to pieces. He plummeted downward with his opponent, but still managed to catch the juvenile roar of Li Hao's voice.

"Be careful teacher, there's a black shadow behind you..."

A black shadow?

The hairs rose on the back of Yuan Shuo's neck. He didn't sense anything and his perception was exceedingly keen as a Dominator. He also possessed the usage of a consciousness, so he could sense it if a scarlet shadow drew near him.

But now, he had no idea that anything was around him. Where was the black shadow? Behind him?

A strong mental fortitude led him to put the thought out of his mind. "Get away!" he roared without turning around. It was a reminder to Li Hao for him to leave as fast as possible, and an attempt to distract Qiao Feilong.

The appearance of the black shadow ruined some of their plans because he couldn't locate it! The unknown represented danger. As for why Li Hao could sense it, Yuan Shuo didn't know. It might have something to do with his eyes. Those eyes were already unusual in that they could see the scarlet shadow.

Yuan Shuo had secretly asked around as his student said the Night Watchers may have taken some people like him. He hadn't received word back yet.

Down below, Li Hao looked in a certain direction instead of responding. Some people were running down the stairs and fleeing for their lives. The battle had erupted so suddenly that there were still people inside the building. Joy erupted in his heart when he saw Qiao Peng. The man really was there!

"Cease your resistance, Qiao Feilong, or I'll kill your son!" Li Hao shouted and jumped upward, rushing toward the panicked Qiao Peng.

Qiao Feilong didn't even blink, but the black shadow approaching Yuan Shuo hesitated. Qiao Peng was Qiao Feilong's only blood descendant, his only heir! Although the black shadow was close to Yuan Shuo, the situation on the ground was critical.

Yuan Shuo had come so suddenly that Qiao Peng's bodyguard was still at the Inspectorate. The Qiaos weren't ready to erupt in open hostilities just yet, so they would naturally send their people to the ceremony. And it was because he lacked a protector tonight that Qiao Feilong summoned his son to the building. He didn't want anything to happen when his driver wasn't around.

Who would've thought that Yuan Shuo would pick tonight to visit?

The disadvantages of Qiao Peng not yet crossing over to the supernatural world were evident in this moment. He was no match for Li Hao; his piddling skills were sufficient only for mundanes.

The black shadow hesitated. Should it strike against Yuan Shuo first or go down to save Qiao Peng?

The black shadow wouldn't necessarily be able to invade Yuan Shuo's body, but it was confident of seizing his brass knuckle. But once it did, the professor would discover it. If he wasn't swiftly defeated, he might preoccupy the shadow.

All of these considerations were considered in half a heartbeat. Li Hao didn't care about any of it. He who struck first was stronger!

"Go on, kill him!" Qiao Peng roared from the stairs. Some people ran by his side—not ordinary employees. Those still at the office in the middle of the night weren't regular workers. Other than the security detail at reception who'd long run off, the ones remaining now were his usual bodyguards.

The supernaturals had gone off to the ceremony, these were the ordinary bodyguards. They were equipped with guns as the Qiaos had their own security company. All of them, Qiao Peng included, drew their guns to take aim at Li Hao. They wanted to shoot the young man dead in a firing blitz.

As for what would happen to the ruins if Li Hao died... that wasn't on Qiao Peng's mind at the moment.

The battle overhead continued. On the ground, Li Hao responded by landing explosively and stomping his foot, shooting out sharp shards of rock. They pierced through the heads of some gun-wielding bodyguards before they could react.

The young man was not the sort to show mercy when he acted. He was very concerned about his teacher's circumstances. Perhaps it would instill some caution in Qiao Feilong if he captured Qiao Peng.

Bang bang bang! fired the surviving bodyguards and Qiao Peng when Li Hao stomped his foot.

Qiao Peng ran for cover as he shot wildly. Guns may not be able to kill the young man—the guy was a Slayer, after all, though it was said that his strength was mediocre...

The thought had just entered his mind when light flashed in front of his eyes. Li Hao slashed across several bodyguards' throats with fingers like a keen blade. He instantly appeared in front of Qiao Peng, grabbed his throat, and swung his other arm down.

Crack!!

Qiao Peng's hand holding the gun flopped down listlessly—it was broken. A massive boom sounded at the same time as the floor above them caved in. Two figures appeared in front of the two. Qiao Feilong and Yuan Shuo had fought their way to ground level! They'd blasted through an entire building with the fastest speed possible; such was the strength of a Solar.

Li Hao swiftly followed up with a kick that broke Qiao Peng's leg, forcing the latter to kneel on the ground. He grabbed a handful of Qiao Peng's hair and kept his other hand around the man's throat. Qiao Peng flushed beet red as he struggled for breath.

"Heh..." Qiao Feilong panted, turning to Yuan Shuo. "Your disciple seems a bit dumb... Will I allow myself to be taken without a fight now?"

Was this an effective threat?

Not at all! Allowing capture now was to go to his death. How dare Li Hao use his son against him!

Li Hao naturally knew that it was ineffective to threaten Qiao Peng, but when he saw through the radiance of fire and light that the black shadow approached him instead, the gesture didn't seem as impotent as he thought.

The shadow changed targets to him because it wanted to save Qiao Peng! It relinquished the chance to attack his teacher because it wished to conduct a rescue. It was clear to see that this ordinary person held some importance for the shadow.

Li Hao wasn't as afraid of the black shadow—he'd terminated even the humongous scarlet shadow, to say nothing of this one. However, he wasn't certain if the two shadows were similar.

The young man was still cautious as Qiao Feilong wasn't too far from him. He was afraid of a powerhouse like the esteemed businessman, but not of unknown entities like the black shadow. He had all those meals of scarlet shadows to thank.

Yuan Shuo continued to fight, not considering the fact that his student was nearby and had taken Qiao Peng alive. His usual ferocity was on display; no caution marked his movements. He bore down in domineering fashion and utilized the Five Styles to their utmost, suppressing Qiao Feilong with repeated punches. He was so overbearing that the other's fire energy couldn't even spread out too far. Some ripples undulated from their fight, but there was nothing he could do about those for the moment.

Perhaps out of concern for his son on one side and his student on the other, both parties moved away with unspoken accord. They broke countless floor tiles and battled their way to the street. At the same time, Li Hao saw the black shadow pounce on him. Other people may not be able to see it, but he could.