

Star Gate 181

Chapter 181: Peak Sunderer (III)

There was an audience behind the sparring duo. Liu Yan and Yun Yao watched silently, their hearts clenched with anxiety as it didn't seem to be a practice session at all. It was a struggle to the death between hated rivals! Every move targeted the vitals!

This was often the case, but the situation seemed more dangerous today.

The two on the sidelines watched the fight without saying a word or discussing anything. Offering comments on the site of two battling powerhouses was disrespect to the two combatants. If the audience wished to make conclusions, they should wait until after the battle concluded.

Both Liu Yan and Yun Yao reaped great benefits from their observation. They were both martial masters—Yun Yao had been an experienced Slayer before she ascended to Darkmoon. Naturally, both of them understood the perils and horrors encompassed by this fight. They could not afford to undergo this type of practice.

If they were in Li Hao's shoes, they would've been crippled long ago and could not recover. Liu Yan's mouth opened as she watched and she wanted to gasp, but she forced the urge down.

Liu Long suddenly relinquished the hatchet and threw it at Li Hao, breaking through the young man's sword intent. A fist quickly followed it, breaking Li Hao's rib cage with a thunderous crunch. The young man was also sent flying by the blow.

Advancing relentlessly, Liu Long didn't give time for Li Hao to struggle back to his feet. He swiftly advanced and punched once more!

A boom so loud sounded that it was as if Liu Long had punched a human drum. The young man vomited blood; the look in his eyes grew unfocused...

He hadn't felt that a big gap between him and Liu Long a few days ago, but after these punches today and a fully deployed aura, Li Hao was suppressed to the point where he could barely muster any resistance. Any ambush he launched was instantly evaded.

With Liu Long in close quarters and no longer pausing between blows, Li Hao felt that he would die from the next punch. He really would die!

Blood sprayed across the basement and the young man hit the ground heavily. Liu Long still did not show mercy and ruthlessly stomped down! He'd hoped to draw out Li Hao's potential, but perhaps he'd been too unrelenting. The young man did not have a chance to strike back—if this continued, their practice was over for the day.

It was at this moment that Li Hao suddenly opened his eyes wide. Sword intent brimmed in them! He'd been thinking back to the stroke he saw that day; the slash that severed heaven and earth was constantly on his mind. But now that he mused over it, he suddenly thought that perhaps... the focus of that stroke was on severing immortality and the self!

The swordsman had cut down his own unending life so he could create that move!

It was initiation without return, one stroke to crown oneself victorious. Either the enemy was vanquished or the swordsman perished. Each stroke was the final stand of his life!

Li Hao seemed to partially comprehend in the last possible second and reached a faint resonance with that stroke. The swordsman he'd seen had not considered the possibility of survival when he initiated his move. There'd been only one thought on his mind—slay the enemy!

As Liu Long's foot loomed in his line of vision, the young man finally realized that he'd been focused on the wrong area. To sever heaven and earth was just a battle cry to that person. The true core of his intent lay in severing the self, destroying the path of retreat, and going down with the enemy!

The sword must see blood when it was deployed, whether his own or the enemy's!

“Hup!” rang out a massive yell, a tiger’s roar. The aura of the earth trembled! A protective film appeared in front of Li Hao—such was the aura of earth. It immediately stopped Liu Long and halted his foot.

Li Hao waved his hand around—his palm like sword! This sword carried with it the conviction of mutual destruction with his enemy. There would be no retreat or surrender!

Killing intent flooded the basement, a chilling sensation felt by even Liu Yan and Yun Yao hiding in the back. The arctic tinge made their scalps crawl with numbness.

The young man’s palm split open, unable to endure his killing intent, but he didn’t care! Either his enemy died or he would stand no longer!

“Kill!”

Bam!

A huge collision rang out when the stroke slammed into Liu Long’s foot, fracturing his bones. Visible shock in his eyes, the man swiftly backed away. The stroke carried such heavy killing intent it was like the swordsman wanted to go down with his enemy!

Liu Long grit his teeth against the pain and punched outward. Li Hao remained firmly in place and neither evaded nor dodged the blow. There was no retreat for his sword! It either ended the enemy or was his downfall!

He slapped his left hand against the floor to prop himself up, flinging his right hand forward as a sword again.

Bam!

Another massive collision rocked the area as the stroke cut through Liu Long's wave. Li Hao's hand slammed down like a sword, cutting into Liu Long's fist with a wet thwack and spraying blood everywhere. The young man, however, did not deviate from his original intention and switched direction, sending his hand at Liu Long's head!

The man roared and propelled another giant wave through the premises. He shouted consecutively, layering waves and internal force upon each other. His life was under threat! Liu Long could bear it no longer and ceased holding back on the Nine Forged Force.

Boom!

The tremendous method crashed into Li Hao and deformed his palm, twisting it until it snapped. Liu Long raised a foot and connected solidly with the young man, sending the latter flying. The director didn't follow up his attack, choosing to touch his throat instead. His hand came back with blood! His throat had suffered a flesh wound!

It was Li Hao's sword intent!

Liu Long looked at himself with a complicated gaze, sorrow welling up from his heart. This was another day of injuries. His throat was bleeding, his hand and foot were almost broken... Not even a Dominator could be tormented like this!

This time, Li Hao remained prone on the floor for a very long time. It was his turn to die after the sword stroke with his entire strength failed to kill the enemy. Thankfully, Liu Long didn't intend to actually kill him.

However, it still took almost eight minutes before the young man could slowly struggle back up with a pale face. He'd suffered grave wounds even with the aid of sword energy.

"Chief..." Li Hao suddenly smiled at Liu Long. "I... seem to be able to deploy the sword at will now!"

Liu Long inclined his head. “You have completed your consolidation of internal force. I’m more curious about how you suddenly erupted in that moment. Did you think of something?”

“I need to sever the self!” Li Hao nodded.

Sever the self?

Liu Long turned over the response in his mouth and abruptly frowned. “This sword technique and method are too brutal! I’d thought it was exquisite before and just accompanied with too much killing intent. But your comprehension plainly indicates that this is a move that must be fed blood when it is utilized!”

This blood could stem from either the enemy or the wielder. Liu Long abruptly understood that Yuan Shuo had not invented this!

“The inventor must be a fanatic swordsman! He kills with every move he makes or ends himself instead! He kills for the sake of killing...”

“Teacher says that the moment martial dao and the supernatural domain appeared, it was for killing!” Li Hao smiled. “So I rather think that this stroke demonstrates that admirably.”

“You...” Liu Long wanted to say something, but sighed wordlessly without saying anything else. Indeed, whether it was martial dao or the supernatural, they both focused on killing. However, there was also defense, withdrawal, and fleeing as possibilities as well...

Li Hao’s stroke truly only focused on killing. There was nothing else to be found within it.

“Your move is very strong!” the director complimented it highly. “My throat might’ve really been slit if I didn’t bring out the Nine Forged Force just now!”

He utilized his entire aura, but had still almost died.

Slightly embarrassed, Li Hao smiled bashfully. Liu Long nearly scowled. Don't smile like that! Bah, that's disgusting!

"You're heavily injured, chief. I don't need to spar anymore now that I've consolidated my internal force with sword intent. Come with me to my teacher's so he can look after you. We don't want any aftereffects to result from your wounds!"

Liu Long rolled his eyes. Your teacher? Forget about that! I'm not an idiot after all of these days! He'd known a long time ago that any special healing method was likely from Li Hao—including the energy he'd used to break through. The young man's fast recovery from all of his injuries possibly had to do with the sword that he kept on him. How would Liu Long still be oblivious at this stage?

Of course, knowing was one thing. Liu Long did not intend to expose the young man. It was enough to know, there was no need to bring it out in the open and portray himself as smarter than others.

"Shaping your internal force into a sword and consolidating your sword intent... You're really something, Li Hao!" Liu Long complimented again. "If this was twenty years ago, you'd be able to earn a title of Sword King or something similar in the martial world of Silver Moon! My father was one of the Three Spears, your teacher was king of the Five Styles. Your current accomplishments rival them..."

It was incredible. The young man, however, shook his head.

"I'm far from it! Chief, a reputation is earned from fights and battles. It's not awarded just because I reach that cultivation level."

He himself knew that there was quite a gap between him and the greats of yore. What did he lack?

True slaughter!

His teacher and those peers had forged their accomplishments step by step. Li Hao just benefited from a higher starting point. The excavation to come was when he would truly grow and develop.

Accomplishing the consolidation of his internal force meant that he'd completed all of the training available at the Sunderer level. From now on, he could focus on preparing to advance to Dominator. It was only now that he truly sensed the strength of being a Sunderer—he was finally a peak Sunderer!

While he technically counted as one when they were in the mines, that condition was a far cry from what he commanded today. The most apparent difference was that he could easily direct his internal force wherever he'd like. All of his force traveled wherever he pointed.

This was most likely one of the greatest trademarks of peak Sunderer.

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Li Hao no longer practiced with Liu Long after reaching perfection. He brought Liu Long to his teacher so that the injuries accumulated over these days could be addressed. Liu Long observed propriety and thanked Yuan Shuo, but he kept his eyes trained on Li Hao.

You sure can act, huh, kid!

Li Hao didn't mind. One day's acting was one day gained. He would give up the act only when there came a day in which he couldn't keep it up anymore.

So long as I don't feel awkward, the awkward ones are you guys. None of you are rude enough to expose me.

Chapter 182: Ghost Shadow Sword (I)

Time paused for no one; it marched inexorably onward. It was mid August in the blink of an eye.

The entire Silver City Night Watcher branch improved by the day. Everyone steadily digested the gains from killing multiple powerhouses in their last battle. The harvest from one operation eclipsed gains that the Demon Hunters accumulated over the years. All members advanced at a rapid clip.

Liu Yan finally set foot into mid Sunderer. Although Wu Chao and Chen Jian didn't take another step forward, they were close to mid Sunderer as well.

The supernaturals of the branch showed even faster progress. All that Darkmoons required was sufficient mysterious power to swiftly improve. If one had already found the third supernatural lock, they only needed sufficient mysterious power to open it and set foot into Sunflare. Thus, Li Meng and the others made great strides forward.

The fastest rate of improvement came not from Li Meng or Hu Hao. They possessed unique abilities and could only absorb unattributed mysterious power in the absence of energy that matched them. Hu Hao was better off in that he could take in some wind energy to strengthen himself. These days, Li Meng was interested in martial dao and devoted her efforts there. This resulted in her making the modest move from initial Crescent to peak Crescent. She didn't even reach Halfmoon.

Yun Yao showed the fastest rate of improvement. A water supernatural now, she was previously a peak Slayer. Crossing over as a martial master meant that her physique was stronger than homegrown supernaturals and she had a pool of internal force to convert. Thus, she set foot into Halfmoon before Li Meng did.

Hu Hao was previously peak Crescent and also reached Halfmoon.

This left Wang Ming and his high rate of energy conversion. Although he hadn't been a Fullmoon for long, he ascended to Plenilune on August 15 after furiously absorbing mysterious power. Now it was time for him to prepare to be a Sunflare—this was a development that he didn't anticipate before arriving in Silver City.

He'd thought it would be good enough to take a step forward after half a year in his new post. Who would've thought he'd make the leap less than a month after arriving? He'd advanced during each

of the two times he visited Silver City! By now, Wang Ming felt that this city was more like his land of fortune and prosperity.

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For more or less, every member of the branch found progress. Eliminating the Qiaos handsomely benefited all of the Silver City Night Watchers. After Li Hao broke through to peak Sunderer, he spent the rest of his days studying the little sword. Not only that, but he also asked his teacher for sword methods.

The stroke he knew of cut down the enemy and the self. It was best not to use it until the last possible second. In that case, the young man wished to learn some sword techniques and basic sword methods.

The New Book of Five Styles centered on the fist, claw, and foot. It did not involve weapons. While Yuan Shuo wasn't versed in sword methods, he knew of them. His knowledge and experience was so vast that there was almost nothing he didn't know.

The front yard of the Yuan residence.

Yuan Shuo thought for a bit upon hearing his student's request. "There were once the Seven Swordsmen of Silver Moon. Known throughout the province, I don't know how many are left as most of them are dead.

"One of them was known as the Shadow Swordsman! He was renowned throughout the Silver Moon martial world for his technique of the Ghost Shadow Sword! Soundless and formless, it was as dogged as a shadow. Covert, sinister, and vicious were its core tenets—and speed!"

The professor thought for a moment longer. "He was a peak Sunderer and had comprehended the aura of the shadow. It was like night fell when he deployed his sword. The gloom concealed everything about his move, enabling him to frequently occupy the upper hand when it came to battle."

The Ghost Shadow Sword! Li Hao was very interested in this technique.

“Teacher, I call my move the Sever Self Stroke! Its key lies in being fast, vicious, and keen, but it’s mostly used in direct frontal combat. If I also know the Ghost Shadow Sword, people will think that I’m skilled with unpredictable sword methods that are easy to maneuver. If I then deploy the Sever Self Stroke in a moment of surprise, I think most won’t be able to react in time.”

Simply put, he wanted to learn the Ghost Shadow Sword.

“I can teach you if you want to learn!” Yuan Shuo smiled. “I happen to know the technique and its breathing method.”

Why did he know that? Li Hao glanced at his teacher. “...teacher. How many of the Seven Swordsmen did you kill?”

“.....” Yuan Shuo glared at him. You make me out to be a demon! “What how many? I didn’t even kill half of them, just three! It has nothing to do with me if the rest are dead!”

I knew it! Li Hao couldn’t hold back his curiosity any longer. “Teacher, has no one teamed up to take vengeance on you given that you’ve killed so many people?”

It must’ve been so hard for his teacher to survive till present day!

“You stick your nose in a lot of areas!” Yuan Shuo glared at him. So the little guy was poking around in his affairs now, huh? And does it look like I’ll tell you just because you’re curious? Some of his past was indeed nothing upstanding to talk about. Thus, the professor evaded the topic.

“If you learn the Ghost Shadow Sword, you’ll know three secret arts. When it comes to martial masters, it’s best to walk the path of one method from beginning to end!”

Why was that?

Because of the breathing methods associated with each art.

One of the major drawbacks of martial dao was that each art possessed a proprietary breathing method. Switching to another method necessitated adjusting one's breathing. The slightest hiccup could result in missteps that the enemy could take advantage of.

Therefore, even someone as strong as Yuan Shuo wasn't omnipotent. He didn't know how to utilize weapons. When he wielded the stone blade, he did it as an extension of his claw or fist. He didn't really use it as a blade.

The secret arts of martial masters would not be rendered obsolete with the times. The stronger one was, the stronger the secret art. Thus, one art was often sufficient. Experts that focused on one art were famed in Silver Moon's martial world back in the day. They were uniquely skilled in either the sword, staff, fist, or spear.

While Yuan Shuo naturally wished for his student to be strong, he still cautioned, "Everyone wishes to be a martial master adept in all disciplines. But a jack of all trades is a master of none. This can become a grave problem!"

"Powerhouses often die when they need to switch between breathing methods. This is their most probable likelihood of fatality!"

A martial master proficient in identifying battle timing easily captured split second pauses.

"I understand." Li Hao nodded. "Teacher, the Five Styles were separate when you first started practicing them. You later incorporated them into one and unified them with one breathing method, right?"

This was one of Yuan Shuo's greatest accomplishments in his life. However, the professor frowned and didn't speak for a while.

"Firstly, there are similarities between the five animals! Secondly, I didn't create the Five Styles wholly from my imagination. It was recorded in ancient records, so I did not build a towering building from laying the foundations. I stood on top of its rubble and built up from what was already there."

He looked at his student. "While I do not think I am lesser than anyone, I do not have the confidence to say that I can create the Five Styles from scratch."

He wanted to warn Li Hao to not aim too high! Even he, a savant of ancient knowledge and sage of modern wisdom, dared not say he could consolidate the Nine Forged Force, Ghost Shadow Sword, and Five Styles into one through a new breathing method.

The young man didn't say anything else. Let's just take things one step at a time. In any case, he still needed to learn a sword method.

Yuan Shuo was just offering a reminder, he knew Li Hao wouldn't give up. Not to mention, the young man should be picking up the sword.

"Think on it and I will teach you the Ghost Shadow Sword today!" Yuan Shuo rose and lifted his hand, summoning a longsword from the rack of weaponry in the yard. As a grandmaster, he wielded the sword with more poise than Li Hao, despite not being practiced at the weapon.

The longsword swept through the air while Li Hao watched raptly. He knew that his teacher was putting on a demonstration for his benefit, so he drank everything in.

The longsword flitted through the air like a shadow. Despite it being broad daylight, only a hint of light and shadow could be seen. There was no sound.

Fast, discrete. Such were the characteristics of the Ghost Shadow Sword. The resulting noise of the weapon breaking through the air seemed to be concealed by its breathing method. As Yuan Shuo breathed in and out, he created a void around the sword and placed it in a vacuum. That made it possible for the sword to dance even more gracefully and for it to be utterly silent.

It was a very unique sword method!

Li Hao carefully sensed everything. If he could utilize this method in his other arts, it would be quite a feat to make both his fists and swords soundless.

A vacuum...

A vacuum wasn't the true absence of sound; it just eliminated sound to the greatest degree possible. This was an exceptional technique for assassins and killers! How had his teacher killed the Shadow Swordsman??

Yuan Shuo deployed twelve strokes in quick succession. Li Hao could tell from their trajectory that this was a brutal sword technique. Each stroke stabbed straight at a vital point.

Moments later, Yuan Shuo retracted the sword and heaved an exhale. It was as if a clap of thunder and a beam of white light shone out of nothing, piercing through the air.

"The final stroke of the Ghost Shadow Sword lies not with the sword, but in this breath!" Yuan Shuo said solemnly. "Under most circumstances, opponents will only care about your weapon. When you put it away, they'll think you're switching to another method or are about to surrender. No one knows that this final stroke is the most treacherous!"

"The Ghost Shadow Sword breathing method continuously devours the air around it and accumulates qi as force. All of it is exhaled in the last moment, creating a mouthful of sword qi that exceeds the strokes from before. That is the true core of the Ghost Shadow Sword!"

Li Hao nodded.

“This last stroke was the one that almost killed me...” Yuan Shuo continued, not afraid to reveal his weakness. “I, too, thought that he lacked the strength to battle on when he returned his sword to a defensive position. I wanted to destroy him with my next move, but he suddenly breathed outward and almost shattered my heart with that final stroke!”

He sometimes thought back to his fight with the Shadow Swordsman. He’d almost lost his life that day, despite occupying the upper hand throughout the entire battle. It was apparent from this that battle was not a simple matter of who was stronger. He could’ve died in a moment of carelessness. Thank goodness the stroke had been a little off center and missed the fatal point of his heart!

Chapter 183: Ghost Shadow Sword (II)

“This technique must be very strong if even teacher was taken in by it.” Li Hao flashed a smile. “But... the veterans of Silver Moon’s martial world all know about it, right?”

“No.” Yuan Shuo shook his head. “The Ghost Shadow Sword would not be a secret art if people knew about its final move! Those who fought the Shadow Swordsman either died to the last stroke or killed him instead.

“Anyone witnessing his last stroke was in danger of losing their life, so they would kill him even if they didn’t want to before. Therefore, he dies unless he kills his opponent!”

And so, the Shadow Swordsman had died.

To Yuan Shuo’s hands.

“That’s perfect!” Li Hao said delightedly. He liked this secret art—it was a marvelous technique for ambushing others, much like the Hand That Brings Back Life. Added to that the stroke recorded in his mind... the young man suddenly felt that he had many fatal aces up his sleeves.

Such was the benefit of being under the wing of a formidable teacher who knew anything and could bring out any secret art! Other martial masters could only gaze upon Li Hao with longing and envy.

Next, Yuan Shuo taught his student the breathing method of the Ghost Shadow Sword. This was the fundamental of the art. Breathing came first, then the technique. The technique was the external manifestation of the art and did not remain unchanging. It could be adapted to different battle conditions, circumstances, and opponents. Techniques should not be stagnant.

Take the Five Styles, for instance. A ferocious tiger altered its hunting style based on the number, type, and strength of prey. It didn't always leap up to attack with one swipe.

Li Hao bent his mind to the task. His memory was very good and he could remember at least seventy percent of everything his teacher said. He couldn't memorize everything on the first pass, that required a second pass.

After he committed the knowledge to memory, he started experimenting himself. The crux laid with the adjustment of the breathing method. Each breathing method was tailored to its techniques. Using another would only lead to harming himself.

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Li Hao started his next round of arduous training.

At the same time.

White Moon City.

Hao Lianchuan was preparing to set out. The excavation was set for August 28, leaving roughly ten days until the expedition began. He needed to arrive ahead of time and conduct some preparatory work. The deputy director also needed to visit Silver City, primarily to escort Yuan Shuo to Rift Canyon. It was also a convenient time to give Wang Ming the final Sunflare level blood pearl in the Night Watcher vaults.

The Night Watcher genius had requested it through someone else and paid two hundred cubes of mysterious power to obtain it. The cubes came from the Wangs. Wang Ming had promised his family that if he received the blood pearl, he would one hundred percent set foot into Plenilune and bear a thirty percent chance of becoming Sunflare...

The young man was shrewd for once as he worried the family wouldn't be willing to front such an enormous expenditure. He didn't make it known that he was already a Plenilune, mostly because the distance between the two cities was too great. Wang Ming could keep a secret for once because communication was inconvenient.

In this way, he wouldn't feel guilty if he didn't progress to Sunflare. He was already a Plenilune and had an explanation ready if he didn't ascend. A wealthy scion like him didn't lack for money, but mysterious power was so precious that it could not be wasted willy-nilly, particularly in sums of two hundred cubes.

Hao Lianchuan would not go alone this time. The Night Watcher headquarters was an entire building. He was bringing twenty people with him—all experts. Darkmoon was the bare minimum, there was a handful of Sunflare, and him at Solar. The agency was sending a full force for this exploration.

Apart from a few Sunflares that truly could not be redeployed from missions at hand, the Night Watchers were sending all of the Sunflares they had. When adding Huang Yun who was already on site, that made for seven Sunflares total from the Night Watchers.

There was also Yuan Shuo who could kill Solars, and if Liu Long had set foot into Dominator as well... Those two together would make up nearly half of the Night Watcher contingent in terms of strength.

Hao Lianchuan was waiting. The others waited as well.

A figure walked down the stairs after a while. Hou Xiaochen's expression was calm as he approached the gathering: he didn't carry himself with his usual majestic poise. The director

typically strode like a dragon or prowled like a tiger—he was just very relaxed today. It helped taut heartstrings relax.

“Director!” the group called out. Some of the younger Night Watchers were simply overcome by the sense of authority, whereas older Night Watchers were more fanatic.

It should be that the older one was, the more unruffled and composed. The situation was the opposite way around as it’d been a long time since Hou Xiaochen last fought. Veteran Night Watchers, however, had witnessed the director’s might on the battlefield for themselves.

Red Moon once attacked many years ago to force Yuan Shuo to show himself and make the province stand down. They just wanted to kill Yuan Shuo; if the Night Watchers dared intervene, they would exterminate the agency.

During that incident, Hou Xiaochen charged out with his spear and slayed a Solar in domineering fashion. It was a similar happening to Yuan Shuo killing a Solar, just many years earlier. Not only that, but the director killed numerous Sunflares as well. He trounced the supernatural organization so thoroughly that Ying Hongyue himself appeared in the end.

Hou Xiaochen did not back down a single step in front of Ying Hongyue. Fortunately, that was also when central region reinforcements arrived. The central Night Watchers sent multiple powerhouses in aid, which finally persuaded Ying Hongyue to retreat.

While Hou Xiaochen did not exchange blows with the leader of Red Moon, he was still a god in people’s eyes. The director had withstood pressure from one of the three great organizations and didn’t fear Ying Hongyue!

The greater Ying Hongyue’s subsequent battle achievements in the central region were, the more it testified to Hou Xiaochen’s greatness.

The director ignored the crowd’s reaction and spoke in an even tone that was calm and gentle. “I wish everyone a smooth and fruitful trip. It is best if we are successful, but survival is our bottom

line. Pay attention to Yuan Shuo's words when you are in the ruins, but do not grow too close to him.

"He's offended too many people," chuckled Hou Xiaochen. "So there might be powerhouses waiting to ambush him. He is a professional and should be respected accordingly, but it will be dangerous to stay too close to him!"

Although his words were full of caution and danger, laughter rippled through the assembly. Listen, but stay far away from the demon. Everyone understood that.

"Director Hao is a steady and dependable man. While he is a fire supernatural, he lacks the brash violence that is their trademark. In my view, someone who can hold themselves in check is someone who will find success!"

Hao Lianchuan smiled. It felt so good to be complimented!

"But your Director Hao sometimes thinks too much..." Hou Xiaochen smiled. "There are seven Sunflares among this contingent, with Yuan Shuo and Hao Lianchuan making for nine total. If there is a conflict with the three great organizations, your Director Hao may hesitate. At that time, if five people agree to fight, you can engage in battle without having to report it to headquarters! If less than nine are present and the majority agree to fight, you can commence battle immediately as well!"

Hao Lianchuan bit back what he wanted to say.

"I'm not downgrading your authority." Hou Xiaochen glanced at his subordinate. "Just that I am well aware of your shortcomings. Our people know to a certain degree as well. They will listen to you when they should, but it's better to be more prepared than not in all things!"

Hao Lianchuan nodded and said in a muffled voice, "The director makes it sound like I'm afraid of the three great organizations!"

“Not afraid, just having to consider too many things.” Hou Xiaochen grinned. “You always worry about incurring heavy losses if we fight them, that the agency will be unable to find its footing in Silver Moon.

“Let’s put it this way. So long as I am alive, the Silver Moon Night Watchers will not be toppled for the foreseeable future. Therefore, you can be at ease.”

Hao Lianchuan nodded. He did indeed fret over too many reservations at times. As the second Solar of the province, he was in charge of administrative minutiae since Hou Xiaochen normally didn’t set foot outside headquarters. He’d watched over much of the Silver Moon agency develop and couldn’t bear to see them die in front of him.

“That is all I will say. If our expedition is successful, the province will be impregnable!” Hou Xiaochen breathed out gently and waved his hand. “Go forth! I hope however many set out today will be however many that return!”

“Director, I will bring everyone back in full!” Hao Lianchuan declared solemnly. “Move out!”

Approximately two dozen people swiftly departed in uniform steps. Standing in the lobby, Hou Xiaochen quietly watched them set off.

However many that set out will be however many that return?

That was almost impossible!

He was well aware of that, Hao Lianchuan was well aware of that. Everyone in the delegation and not in the delegation was aware of that.

It was impossible.

This wasn't their first exploration of Rift Canyon. They'd lost many on previous expeditions that lacked participation from the various organizations. With the three great organizations and some mid and small organizations involved this time, they would be lucky to have seventy percent of their people come back.

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August 20.

A clear day.

Twenty days of furious training and maddened absorption immensely improved the entire Silver City Night Watcher branch. Li Hao emerged from his practice of the Ghost Shadow Sword when word came that Director Hao was here again.

The Silver City Night Watchers were quite familiar with him as he'd come several times in a short period of time.

The law enforcement building.

Hao Lianchuan looked at the group in front of him with a strange look in his eyes. It wasn't easy for him to detect improvements in martial masters, but he could easily sense the changes in supernaturals.

Wang Ming was a Plenilune! Yun Yao and Hu Hao were both Halfmoon, and even Li Meng was almost there!

This exceeded his expectations. They'd improved too quickly! According to his calculations, it would take them another half year to reach these accomplishments. Here they were, having already succeeded!

Plainly, they'd reaped great gains from the last battle. Perhaps they'd obtain more mysterious power than expected. Was it really Darkmoons that they'd killed? That was what Liu Long had said...

Confusion flashed through his mind before Hao Lianchuan quickly tamped it down. This wasn't important, any improvement was good.

Liu Long arrived not long after Li Hao entered the room. The nine members of the Silver City Night Watchers were all present.

Hao Lianchuan had taken time out of his schedule to visit. He couldn't stay for long and cut straight to the chase. "Director Liu, I mentioned before that the expedition to Rift Canyon is about to begin. You said you would consider joining, have you decided?"

"I'll go!" Liu Long responded. "Not only that, but I want to bring people with me!"

Chapter 184: Ghost Shadow Sword (III)

"It's too dangerous, this isn't a lark!" Hao Lianchuan frowned. "The Night Watchers have primarily sent Fullmoons and Plenilunes for the excavation. There will be a few Starlight and weaker Darkmoon on standby outside, render to offer any assistance needed and to stop mundanes from passing through..."

There wasn't a single Halfmoon among the expedition team to enter the ruin. While theirs wouldn't be the largest delegation, it excelled in that it was filled with elites.

"Director Hao, we Silver City Night Watchers have long dwelled in the battlefield and possess a rich breadth of experience!" Liu Long said calmly. "Besides, I don't want to bring that many—just Liu Yan and Li Hao. Li Hao's actually with Professor Yuan, so it's just Liu Yan."

Liu Yan? A faintly frowning Hao Lianchuan looked at the woman. He understood the connotations of the request—Hu Po was in the field. What if something undesirable developed!

“Well...”

Liu Yan looked at the deputy director and interrupted, “Director Hao, I’m not a supernatural. It won’t affect the Night Watchers if I die!”

“It’s not that!” Hao Lianchuan rumbled. “We’re all Night Watchers here, so there’s no talk of anyone’s death being negligible. No one can die! You’ve just entered Sunderer...”

“I’m already mid Sunderer!” Liu Yan clarified, further surprising Hao Lianchuan. He quickly came to terms with it as the gap between initial and mid Sunderer wasn’t too difficult to bridge. He mused over the decision when Wang Ming also spoke up.

“Director Hao, I want to go too!”

“Me too!”

“And me!”

“.....” Everyone from the Silver City branch volunteered.

“Is this a mutiny??” demanded a livid Hao Lianchuan. If all of you go, what’s going to happen to Silver City?! Do you all want to go to your deaths?? A peak Crescent like Li Meng is a greenhorn over there. She’ll be better off guarding the outskirts.

“Director Hao, I’m a Plenilune!” Wang Ming said urgently. “If all goes well over the next couple of days, I’ll set foot into Sunflare! A Sunflare is a powerhouse no matter where we go, right? It’d be a waste if I didn’t go!”

Hao Lianchuan looked at him with obvious astonishment and paused for a bit. “You can set foot into Sunflare?”

He didn't believe it! Not even though Wang Ming had said the blood pearl was useful to him. It wasn't as if a supernatural hadn't absorbed a blood pearl before, the hell was it useful for? It was slightly useful, but far less useful than two hundred cubes of mysterious power.

"We lose nothing by trying..." Wang Ming said sheepishly. "Director Hao, let me go too!"

Hao Lianchuan truly hadn't considered that Wang Ming could already be a Plenilune. "It's not out of the question for you to go..." He thought for a bit. "It's good for youngsters to temper themselves. But it's out of the question for the rest!"

To put it bluntly, they were too weak. They'd be going to their deaths! An excavation wasn't a leisure jaunt; he didn't have the energy or attention to spare for too many.

Chen Jian and the others weren't willing to accept this outcome. They were also Sunderers and this trip was apparently a mission of revenge! They'd heard that it was to kill Li Dahu!

There were strong bonds between the Demon Hunters. When would it be a better chance to kill Li Dahu, if not this time?

"Director Hao, I'm a Sunderer too!" The normally taciturn Chen Jian got to his feet. "Martial masters are more discreet than supernaturals! I'm skilled in defense. The three great organizations must be deeply familiar with the Night Watchers and more likely than not unfamiliar with us. I think we should be of some help if we go."

"A Sunderer?" Hao Lianchuan repeated with surprise, then looked at Wu Chao.

"I'm also a Sunderer!" the man laughed wispily.

The deputy director rocked back on his heels, truly surprised! All of these people had broken through to Sunderer in this tiny Silver City. This was a bit frightening. Sunderers were almost the equivalent of Darkmoon—not a very strong level, but not the baseline either in the Night Watchers.

Liu Long interjected, “It will be Liu Yan, Wang Ming, and Li Hao for the expedition. The others will stay and defend!”

He knew about the dangers they would encounter and what was on everyone’s mind. They could not lose the entire department on this trip! Four out of nine attending was already a large number.

A grin spread across Wang Ming’s face. He wanted to go because there might be benefits to be had, and he knew how strong Liu Long and Yuan Shuo were. If Li Hao wasn’t afraid of death with them, then he was even less afraid of death! Perhaps unexpected gains would be in store on this adventure.

This might also be a chance for Wang Ming to build his reputation! If the Night Watchers were to be highly regarded in the province, it had to come about on the battlefield! If he could ascend to Sunflare and kill a Sunflare, he would be famed throughout the supernatural domain. He was only twenty years old. Killing a Sunflare at twenty years old meant that he would be one of the top dogs in Silver Moon!

“Chief!” Wu Chao and the others protested. They wanted to go too, the Demon Hunters always acted in concert.

“Train well!” Liu Long commanded. “All of you better improve while we’re gone. I’ll conduct an inspection when I return. There will be plenty of chances to fight and to kill. We might be in open war with the three great organizations after the excavation concludes, so there will be plenty of opportunities in the future!”

Hao Lianchuan’s expression shifted slightly. These words... forget it, this is a distinct possibility. So that made for four people on the team—Liu Long and Wang Ming possessed sufficient strength. Yuan Shuo wanted to bring Li Hao, so that was fine too. It was Liu Yan...

She probably wanted revenge, and ardently at that. If they didn't let her go and she slipped away in secret, that might be even more dangerous and troublesome.

"Then it's you four!" Hao Lianchuan nodded after repeated deliberation. "Li Meng and Hu Hao were supposed to go as Professor Yuan's protection detail. Since he has the ability to protect himself now, and there are more and stronger powerhouses from the three great organizations than expected, you two don't need to go anymore!"

"We officially enter the ruins on the 28th! Make sure to arrive before then, I will not be coming to get you."

He had other business to attend to at their campsite; Hao Lianchuan also needed to ascertain how many experts the other organizations had sent for this exploration.

"Director Hao, I'll be there in time with my people!" Liu Long nodded.

"Then that's all!" Hao Lianchuan threw a flask at Wang Ming. "Wang Ming, think about it before you use it. It's not cheap and mostly suited for martial masters. Sell it to Liu Long if you're not confident enough!"

With that, he quickly left.

.....

"Chief, why aren't you taking us with you?" Chen Jian was still reluctant to accept the outcome after Hao Lianchuan had departed.

"I'm not the one calling the shots!" Liu Long frowned. "White Moon is in charge. Also, do you guys think that Silver City is very safe right now? Who's going to defend the city if we all go?"

“But!”

“No buts!” Liu Long interrupted and looked at the others. “Keep a weather eye on the city. Trouble might arise before we’re out of the ruins! Also, large numbers of powerhouses are entering the ruins. With both me and Elder Yuan gone, be careful of people sneaking into the city. Silver City is not safe.”

Wang Ming wasn’t interested in the rest of their conversation. He tugged Li Hao off to the side and whispered, “Li Hao, I have the item. So do you think... do we...”

Li Hao chuckled to see him in such a hurry and thought for a moment. “Alright, come to my teacher’s tonight. I’ll help you absorb the blood pearl.

“Give it to me first, I need to make some preparations beforehand.”

“Eh?” Give it to you? Wang Ming worried. You’re not going to take it for yourself, are you?

Li Hao remained looking at him; the handsome young man apprehensively handed over the precious item after a moment. “Don’t... don’t break it.”

Li Hao laughed and didn’t bother with a response. He had his considerations. He didn’t need the blood pearl after reaching peak Sunderer. He needed more to grasp the aura and set foot into Dominator instead.

Blood pearls, however, were more useful for martial masters. He wanted to give it to Liu Yan. She might set foot into latter Sunderer—or rather, she would have no difficulty doing so. It would just be difficult for her to grasp the aura.

The expedition would be very dangerous for her.

As for Wang Ming, Li Hao wanted to use the sword energy to extract some metal mysterious power and combine it with sword energy to make it easier to digest. The mixture might help Wang Ming ascend. It would be more effective than the blood pearl.

Blood pearls were not as effective for enhancing the supernatural as one might think. Li Hao needed to utilize a portion of metal mysterious power and a large quantity of sword energy. The transaction was a loss for him, but he didn't care.

No one had ostracized him after he joined the Demon Hunters. Although he was just bait, everyone protected him in critical moments. Liu Yan dragged him along in her wake even when she was being chased by a Sunderer.

These memories were imprinted on Li Hao's heart, so if he could help the team, he would do what he could. If Wang Ming could progress to Sunflare and Liu Yan to late Sunderer, that would make the Silver City team so much stronger. They would be much more equipped to protect themselves.

Li Hao sidled over to Liu Yan after exchanging a few words with Wang Ming. "Sis, come to my teacher's tonight..." he whispered.

"Not your place?" The woman swept him with a coquettish look. "Is it appropriate to go to your teacher's?"

"....." Li Hao pretended not to hear the response. "There are good things to be had!"

"...don't you take Wang Ming's blood pearl for yourself!" said Liu Yan after she thought for a bit. "As annoying as that guy and his big mouth are, I wouldn't dare use a treasure that costs two hundred cubes even if you gave it to me!"

She guessed that Li Hao wanted to claim Wang Ming's possession for himself. If that was the case, she didn't want it! No matter how much she wished to break through, she wasn't going to unfairly take her teammate's treasure.

Li Hao was taken aback by her reaction—was it this obvious? Is my character that bad? Wang Ming suspects me and Liu Yan also guessed it in a few seconds?

“That’s not it, don’t worry. Just keep watching if you don’t believe me. I won’t take it unless Wang Ming ascends!”

So you’ll take it if he does? Liu Yan laughed. What would be left of the blood pearl after the supernatural advanced? Well, it didn’t matter as much to her anymore. “Very well, am I spending the night? Should I bring a change of undergarments? What kind of style do you like?”

“.....” Li Hao spun on his heel and left. Young widows were terrifying!

Chapter 185: Opening Supernatural Locks (I)

Nighttime.

The Yuan residence.

Yuan Shuo didn’t say anything upon hearing Li Hao’s thoughts and arrangements. He simply offered, “Don’t think of Wang Ming as a fool. He’s not stupid. The metal mysterious power that you extract... If I’m to compare it to other metal attributed mysterious power, I would actually call yours metal elemental power.

“The elemental power that you distill is pure and of a single element. Any supernatural that’s absorbed energy before will instantly detect its difference. Setting aside the fact whether or not he’ll know that’s elemental power, you’ll be in big trouble once he opens his mouth.”

There were already too many who knew about the sword energy. If word got out that Li Hao could extract elemental power, that would be even more trouble.

Li Hao sat down cross-legged on the floor and nodded as he listened. He’d thought about all of this already.

“I understand, but I also know that when there are too many debts, one stops worrying about them. Red Moon knows a lot, Yama might know some about me, and the Night Watchers have possibly guessed another portion. In that case, does it matter if people know a little more?”

The young man flashed a smile. “There’s two possible outcomes in this scenario. First, Wang Ming will be so grateful that he will keep my secret and help me here and there in the future. Second, he harbors other motivations and tells others, whereupon I gain another enemy.”

Did he care about one more enemy?

Not anymore.

After weighing up the pros and cons, this was simply the conclusion he came to. His impression of Wang Ming during this period of contact was that, aside from a tendency to run his mouth, the young man was decent enough. He did seem to be able to keep secrets as he’d never spoken of the tenth person that Li Hao told him about. The precursor was that he needed to be reminded ahead of time.

Yuan Shuo nodded. He normally didn’t interfere in his student’s decisions if they were backed up by proper thought. He would only clearly explain the advantages and disadvantages.

“Then it’s up to you, but be prepared for the consequences!” That was all he would say on the topic. One walked one’s path alone. Even if there were bumps and obstacles along the way, it would be a good thing if one learned that the human heart was to be feared.

.....

Wang Ming was the first to arrive after teacher and student waited for a while. The handsome supernatural beamed widely when he saw Yuan Shuo. “Teacher!”

An honorary disciple was still a disciple at the end of the day. The handsome young man also wanted to curry some favor, given how strong Yuan Shuo was. Unfortunately, the professor gave them a very imposing and dignified impression. Other than Li Hao, the others were a little too timid to approach Yuan Shuo.

The professor sized up the supernatural. “My original plans were not to interfere too much,” he said calmly. “You’re just an honorary disciple and you should be well aware of why I accepted you. However, your little senior brother insists that I use a secret art to help you break through. Helping you is a small thing, but when word spreads of your abnormal rate of improvement... Do you know what it means to the supernatural world if you can easily advance?”

“I understand, teacher,” Wang Ming responded solemnly. “So I’m very thankful to Li Hao...”

“He is your senior brother!”

Wang Ming fell awkwardly silent. That honorific was too hard for him to voice!

Yuan Shuo dropped the topic. “I only have one request, button your lips! If you succeed and others ask you...”

He thought for a moment. How should Wang Ming reply when asked how he’d ascended so quickly? Because of the blood pearl?

No way! He wasn’t the first to utilize the treasure.

“Say it’s because you know the Breathing Method of the Five Styles! The combination of breathing method and blood pearl results in exceptional results at critical moments. It makes it easier to smash through bottlenecks!”

The Breathing Method of the Five Styles!

Li Hao wanted to speak up, but Yuan Shuo swept him a severe glare. It was the breathing method if he said so!

The outside world knew that Yuan Shuo possessed an exclusive breathing method that was useful for supernaturals. The Energy Induction Method that the Night Watchers used contained hints of his involvement. The Five Styles version was almost never taught to outsiders, which was why Brokensky had been tempted by the breathing method.

If it was further known that the Breathing Method of the Five Styles was useful for bottlenecks, it would elicit even more attention and entice more powerhouses to try and seize it.

“The Breathing Method of the Five Styles is not taught to outsiders!” Yuan Shuo asserted. “If anyone asks you, tell them that you learned a simplified version. The main crux was that I operated the breathing method for you so you could absorb the blood pearl!”

Various thoughts ran through Wang Ming’s mind. “Teacher... this...” he said softly. Will this bring trouble? “Why don’t I just say that I have good potential...”

“Bullshit!” Yuan Shuo cursed. “You’d be a Heaven Favored if your potential was that good! You can say that to regular people, but if those like Hou Xiaochen ask you, respond with my explanation.”

“Understood!” Wang Ming hastily nodded.

“Go inside!” Yuan Shuo pointed at the training room. “Clear your mind after you head in and don’t think about anything. Start training when you sense energy entering the room and ignore everything else!”

“Understood!” Wang Ming quickly entered the room without daring to say anything else.

Yuan Shuo closed the door with a wave of his hand and looked at his student. “Send it through the air. It’s fine if you waste some or part of it dissipates. He won’t be able to say much if he does tell others, which will avoid certain trouble.”

It wasn’t unfeasible to send energy through the air, but some dissipation and waste would be unavoidable.

Li Hao thought for a bit before nodding. He didn’t say anything as he knew this was his teacher’s greatest effort in protecting him. They sat down in front of the training room. Yuan Shuo took out a storage box; it was filled with metal attributed mysterious power.

The professor had traded part of his previous gains for one thousand cubes of the five elements and given them to Li Hao. The young man had absorbed roughly five hundred, leaving five hundred untouched and some unattributed mysterious power. Of those, there were one hundred cubes of metal. That should be enough.

A Darkmoon would never be able to absorb one hundred cubes in one go under normal circumstances. Sunflares would be hard pressed to achieve the task, but Solars wouldn’t have a problem.

Li Hao grasped at the air without another word; metal attributed mysterious power surged into his hand while faint sword energy shimmered over the little sword. Although they’d absorbed a great deal of energy at the entrance to the Qiao ruins, their consumption had also been significant as of late and energy from the sword didn’t seem as rich as before.

Sword energy melded into metal energy and began bifurcating it. A ball of golden energy was swiftly stripped out—it was pure gold!

The energy surged toward the lungs, the organ that corresponded to the metal element. Instead of absorbing it, Li Hao quickly circulated his internal force and shoved it out of his body, sending it through the air into the training room.

.....

Inside the room.

Wang Ming paced back and forth. There didn't seem to be anyone else entering the room—was energy somehow supposed to appear for him to use? He didn't understand the process, but all he could do now was wait.

A ball of golden energy suddenly appeared in his field of vision as he grappled with his thoughts. Indeed, he could sense its existence. As he wondered what this was and if it was dangerous or not, the ball of energy enveloped him without forewarning!

Wang Ming's pupils oscillated violently! What??

The golden energy swiftly flooded his body and assimilated with his own mysterious power in the blink of an eye. It catalyzed a reaction with a loud rumble; all of the mysterious power in his body trembled with forceful ripples. Everything felt like it was going to explode!

His mysterious power agitated furiously and surged in all directions, roiling toward his supernatural locks.

Supernatural cultivation centered on breaking supernatural locks. The first lock opened differed from person to person. Take Wang Ming, for instance. He first opened a lock around his lungs. He hadn't truly understood the action, but became a metal supernatural after that. His second lock was the one of his right arm.

Based on the nine locks that were known to current supernatural knowledge, there seemed to be five locks around each of the five viscera organs [1], four around each of the limbs, and apparently one around the head. No one had discovered that one yet, it was just speculation that there should be a tenth lock around the head.

Golden energy surged into the handsome young man's body, thundering toward his lungs with a large amount of mysterious power. The young supernatural jumped with shock—the five organs were very fragile even for supernaturals. He didn't dare let this energy flood his lungs!

Thus, he forcefully operated the Energy Induction Method. It was also a way of directing mysterious power—he sent it toward his left arm. Out of the five locks he'd discovered, the first was around his lungs, then his arms, and finally his legs. Wang Ming was yet to sense the locks around his other organs.

This time, he planned to send this massive surge of energy against the lock in his left arm.

BAM!

A muffled collision rang from his body—both Li Hao and Yuan Shuo heard it. It rumbled like the energy was ramming something!

Yuan Shuo's lips vibrated outside the door. "He's attacking the supernatural lock! Supernatural cultivation is much simpler than ours, even Sunflares don't need to comprehend the aura. They ascend when they open their locks!"

Li Hao nodded and continued extracting metal elemental energy to send it inside the house. Waves of golden energy undulated into the room while Wang Ming cried out with pain. The mysterious power was less painful than he expected, but the process of opening a lock was heart wrenching all the same.

This was already quite good for the handsome young man. Not only had his previous processes of opening the lock been incredibly painful, the impact of mysterious power rampaging through his body was also extremely agonizing.

Half of the anguish was absent from the equation this time! His eyes widened with excitement, not knowing how Li Hao and Yuan Shuo managed the deed. Too many experienced a mental

breakdown during this process because they could not endure the pain. This was a frequent sight. Right now, his hopes of breaking through seemed immensely higher!

A small chain appeared over his left arm, it was tangible! There was a saying in the supernatural world that these locks were chains restricting the potential of the human body. Breaking them freed the potential, which was why the supernatural grew stronger.

However, Yuan Shuo said last time that these locks were possibly protection instead. Wang Ming could not give consideration to this in his current straits. He would ascend first before thinking of anything else.

Chapter 186: Opening Supernatural Locks (II)

Surges of golden energy slammed against the supernatural lock. While this energy was milder, its ramming effects were better. It seemed to be more forceful than regular mysterious power.

Rustle!

The sound of chains shifting traveled into Wang Ming's ears. The chain that'd manifested on his left arm was thinning from the endless waves of golden energy washing over it. As it grew fragile, so did joy intensify on Wang Ming's face. His chances of success seemed particularly high!

While he rammed the lock again and again, Yuan Shuo suddenly spoke from outside the door. He'd been quiet for a very long time.

"If you trust me, meld the lock's fragments into your other locks when it breaks!"

Wang Ming shook with shock!

Meld the broken lock with his other locks? That would increase the difficulty of opening the other locks. Supernatural locks were fetters and a special energy. Under normal circumstances, it dissipated after it broke. And yet, the professor wanted him to gather the fragments and incorporate them into the locks that were still intact!

Numerous thoughts flashed through Wang Ming's mind, some of them quite uncharitable. But they quickly faded away into nothing.

"Okay... thank you... teacher!" he responded with difficulty. He didn't know if this was the right course of action, but there was no reason for Yuan Shuo to lie to him. As for whether or not this would make future ascension harder, that was a matter for the future. Who knew how long it'd take to ascend to Solar after he reached Sunflare? There were many Silver Moon Sunflares, but only two Solars in the Night Watchers. He was young, there was time to slowly look into this later.

Wang Ming continued attacking the lock, but in a slightly different way from before. He'd sought to just ram it open in the past; it was fine if it completely shattered to smithereens in the process. This time, he controlled himself more and fixed his target in one location. That would prevent the lock from scattering too much when it was broken, preserving the rest to be incorporated into his other locks.

Although that would make the remaining locks harder to break, he would follow things through to the end since he trusted Yuan Shuo. Otherwise, he'd just meld a tiny portion of his broken lock.

.....

Outside the door, Yuan Shuo breathed out gently when he finished speaking. He'd said his piece and wouldn't interfere with how Wang Ming decided. Wang Ming was not Li Hao. If it was Li Hao in there, he would issue a command instead of advice.

Li Hao continued to extract more metal attributed mysterious power. Thirty cubes, forty cubes... he soon reached fifty cubes. It was an astounding speed; Wang Ming would never absorb so much under normal circumstances. But not only did the handsome supernatural inside the training room absorb energy swiftly, the rumbles of ramming the lock and shaking of chains also persisted.

Li Hao had to continue.

Rustle rustle rustle.

Chains shook and trembled as Wang Ming howled with pain. Outside, Li Hao pondered—is a normal ascension supposed to be this painful?

Ascension was an extremely natural process in his view. Just as his teacher and Liu Long hadn't experienced any discomfort when setting foot into Dominator, it was supposed to be an extremely comfortable process.

Sunflares and Dominators were theoretically the same level, but if breaking supernatural locks was always this painful, it rather did seem that supernaturals were defying heaven's will and going against the natural order.

“Give me more at one time,” Wang Ming suddenly roared. “I’m going to make my final attempt!”

Li Hao increased his extraction speed without a word and shoved all of the metal energy into the room. The more he sent in this manner, the more dissipated, but that wasn't anything to be concerned about in this moment.

RUSTLE!!

The sound of chains rattling grew clearer and crisper to the ear. It was accompanied by increasingly loud howls from inside. Just as one hundred cubes of metal mysterious power were almost completely exhausted, Wang Ming shouted with ferocity!

CRACK! came a clear breaking sound. As Wang Ming howled with agony, metal power burst in the room. Yuan Shuo waved the door open, giving Li Hao a clear look.

A chain was breaking. The second it broke, a massive surge of strength erupted from the left arm to meld with the energy in Wang Ming's body and spontaneously strengthen the young man! His metal mysterious power absorbed a great deal of energy in a split second.

In Li Hao's eyes, Wang Ming morphed from a bright moon to a small sun. The broken chain was apparent in front of him and beginning to dissipate.

The newly ascended supernatural grit his teeth and circulated his mysterious power, shunting all of the broken chains into the locks around his legs. Two more chains manifested on his legs, ones that kept him constrained. They grew clearer with the incorporation of the broken chain from his left arm.

Wang Ming didn't care. Mysterious power burst through his body and increased rapidly. There seemed to be a massive pool of energy sealed within the left arm—all of it surged out now to become one with him.

Wang Ming brightened with resplendence! His cries of pain were heightened by excitement; he was so agitated that he wanted to crow with joy!

He'd really done it and it'd taken only one try! The golden energy from an unknown source had been domineering beyond imagination. It wasn't painful, just dominating enough that it rammed straight through the supernatural lock. This had been a much simpler process than when he set foot into Darkmoon.

Wang Ming continued absorbing energy and grasping after what wanted to dissipate into the surroundings. The golden mysterious power in his body continuously grew stronger.

It was a very fast process; the energy in the air dispersed before long and his left arm returned to normal. It no longer felt like it was erupting with power.

Even Wang Ming's pupils were golden in color. He heaved a long exhale and looked around, eyes dancing with excitement. "Teacher, Li Hao, I've... I've ascended!"

Sunflare!

That'd been so easy!

"So you have!" Yuan Shuo sighed instead of congratulating the supernatural. He'd witnessed a few things when Wang Ming smashed through the lock and was of the increasing opinion that the supernatural locks should not be brashly opened.

A great deal of energy surged out of Wang Ming's left arm after he opened the lock. The young man absorbed it in full to help him swiftly develop to Sunflare. But while he was stronger, Yuan Shuo had a hunch that the handsome supernatural had further depleted his potential.

The lock and chain seemed more like a nurturing mechanism, one to nourish the body! Although Wang Ming's left arm hadn't been able to deploy much strength prior, could the special force it contained have naturally undone the lock if the lock hadn't been forcefully ripped through?

Would that result in even greater strength?

Would martial masters have to feel for their supernatural locks to take another step forward? Not in the sense of breaking them, but to encourage them to open on their own? Would that create greater potential and strength?

Yuan Shuo sank into deep contemplation, feeling a distinct absence of joy for Wang Ming's ascension to Sunflare. It was Li Hao who flashed a broad grin.

"Congrats, Ole Wang!"

Wang Ming beamed widely, delight written all over his face.

"I'm only twenty, so I might be the youngest Sunflare in the province!" He might've set a record today!

“Then that’s even more cause for celebration!” Li Hao laughed. “You’re the youngest Sunflare, Sunflare Wang!”

“It’s all good!” Wang Ming was beside himself with happiness, but could tell that Yuan Shuo didn’t seem to be as happy as he portrayed himself to be. “Teacher, I know that you think the supernatural may not be the proper path, but I’m thinking that the legitimate way and future you speak of might be very far off! They might be beyond, or far beyond Solar, but can I make it to that step?”

“Now that there are powerhouses above Solar in the supernatural world, my dream is to catch up to them! I don’t ask anything of the future, only that I live a magnificent here and now! If there comes a day in which it’s possible to make up for my potential, it might be easier to do so if I’m stronger. If it’s impossible to recover, then I have no regrets in life either. At least it was a magnificent one!”

These didn’t sound like sentiments Wang Ming would hold. Li Hao grew lost in thought as he listened—I only ask that I live a magnificent here and now... The future was unfathomably remote!

Would the straight-shooting, at times oblivious Wang Ming harbor this kind of awareness?

That seemed beyond Li Hao’s imagination.

Yuan Shuo also started and looked at the honorary disciple he didn’t pay much attention to. I don’t ask anything of the future, only that I live a magnificent here and now!

“You...” the professor laughed a different laugh from usual. “Well said! I’m the one who is stuck in a mental loop. That’s true, leading a resplendent present and sweeping through the land is just as well! Martial masters—regular martial masters—are riddled with old wounds by the time they reach Sunderer. The stronger the martial master, the greater the latent wounds. I was so injured when I was a peak Sunderer that I could not make it to Dominator. Did I never think about this before I reached Sunderer? That the more I battled, the more I would be injured?”

Of course he did!

But even so, he still issued challenges all over the place. As he thought of his younger self and how he advised Wang Ming and the others now... he suddenly found himself laughable. These were all youngsters!

He felt they should not be implementing their current course of action because he'd been in their shoes before. But who wasn't like this in their youth? Any regrets later on could be addressed, with no losses suffered if they could not be recovered from.

"Not bad, Little Ming!" Yuan Shuo smiled and nodded in approval. Wang Ming also chuckled happily.

Li Hao, however, muttered, "Are these words really from you?"

"....." Wang Ming's expression dimmed and he huffed after a while, "No, they're from Director Hou. I'm just borrowing them. Some say he was injured when he was younger and thus impeded his future, that he shouldn't have reached beyond himself in the field. The director says that he once shone with so much brilliance that even Ying Hongyue had to bow his head. That is enough, he has no regrets!"

The leader of one of the three great organizations had to give way in front of Hou Xiaochen. He retreated without the enemy he'd come for. It was one of the few times that Red Moon suffered a defeat.

On the other hand, Hou Xiaochen walked away with an injury that he could not recover from. Some felt it wasn't a worthwhile trade, but he did not agree. He'd once reigned over Red Moon—not a branch, but its headquarters!

Yuan Shuo sank into thought once more, it was Li Hao's turn to laugh.

"That's more like it, I was wondering how Ole Wang could say something so heroic!"

“And why can’t I?” Wang Ming half rolled his eyes. “Li Hao, I’m a Sunflare now!”

Chapter 187: Opening Supernatural Locks (III)

A smiling Li Hao looked at Wang Ming. So what of Sunflare? He wanted to test what a newly ascended Sunflare without the aura of a martial master was capable of. There was nothing to fear about this level!

When it came to battles between Dominators and Sunflare, Li Hao was of the opinion that Dominators were more frightening. Sunflares just possessed stronger energy.

“That’s enough.” Yuan Shuo smiled to see the two young men bickering. “Little Ming, you should focus on controlling your mysterious power since you’ve just ascended. Don’t let the energy dissipate! Have you mastered the breathing method that I taught you?”

“I have!” Wang Ming hastily bobbed his head up and down. The simplified version of the Breathing Method of the Five Styles was easy to pick up, he’d learned it long ago.

“Operate the breathing method twenty-four hours a day for the next couple of days. While it’s not on par with my Breathing Method of the Five Styles, it’s better than the Night Watcher Energy Induction Method. Keep it going to reabsorb mysterious power that would otherwise dispersed. It will also somewhat suppress your supernatural ripples. If it isn’t a powerhouse or someone specifically paying attention to you, it’ll be difficult for them to discover that you’ve broken through.”

Wang Ming blinked. Operate the breathing method twenty-four hours a day? Supernaturals didn’t need to do so.

“Remember, have it in constant motion!” Yuan Shuo repeated. “Try to fashion it into muscle memory and sheer instinct, so that it operates even when you are unconscious or dead. This is something that martial masters must do. You are not one, but I hope you can do so!”

“There’s benefits to this, Ole Wang!” Li Hao quickly bobbed his head. “Continuous operation creates the same effect as holding your breath. Utilizing it through instinct will strengthen your body and keep you in a state of constant vigilance.”

“I understand, then I’ll try to do so over the next couple of days.” Wang Ming nodded.

“Stay here during that time and leave only when you exude the same amount of mysterious power as you did before. This will prevent you from being detected by others—it’s important to keep some aces in your back pocket!” Yuan Shuo’s ears suddenly twitched and he looked at Li Hao.

The young man was looking back at him. He’d also heard something; perhaps Liu Yan had arrived. They’d started off auspiciously tonight—Wang Ming had successfully ascended. If Liu Yan also made it to late Sunderer, then the weakest of the expedition team this time would be late Sunderer.

Li Hao even wondered if their group was strong enough to go head-to-head with some of the organizations joining the expedition. Two Dominators, one Sunflare, himself at peak Sunderer, and another late Sunderer... that made for a formidable squad!

“I need to leave for a bit!” Li Hao excused himself to his teacher’s nod.

Wang Ming wanted to say something, but Yuan Shuo cut him off. “Stay here and absorb some of the other four elements as well!” He plonked down a storage box. “There’s some of the others in here. Absorb them in minimal quantities.”

I’m a metal supernatural, what do I need other elements for? Wang Ming wondered with confusion. That will cause mysterious power to conflict with each other.

“Just absorb it!”

Very well then, Wang Ming recomposed his expression. He didn’t dare ignore Yuan Shuo even though they were technically of the same cultivation level now. The professor cut down Solars like he drank water. Wang Ming couldn’t do the same, not by far.

.....

Outside the house.

Li Hao opened the door to see Liu Yan standing in the yard. The woman cast a quick look around and whispered, “Who’s here? I could sense a burst of cutting mysterious power from far away. Is it a Sunflare?”

“Guess!” Li Hao grinned.

She brainstormed for a moment and asked incredulously, “Has he really ascended?”

Everyone knew that Li Hao was going to help Wang Ming absorb the blood pearl, but... had the latter really succeeded in advancing? That was incredible!

“Mmhmm!” Li Hao nodded merrily. “That’s another layer of protection for exploring the ruins!”

Delight dawned on Liu Yan’s face as well. The stronger their team was, the better. At the same time, she looked oddly at Li Hao.

“You’re the same age as him and even a few months older. Li Hao... are you really not jealous?”

It seemed very strange to her sometimes. Was the young man really as indifferent as he appeared to be? He was a peak Sunderer and thus superior to Wang Ming, but now that the younger lad had progressed with Li Hao’s help, didn’t he feel overtaken and left behind in the dust?

“What am I jealous of?” Li Hao chuckled. “Sis, everyone’s path is different and we seek different goals. The more important thing is that Wang Ming is not a bad guy, he just talks too much. Plus, he’s technically my junior brother!”

What was there to be jealous of? He’d truly never envied the handsome young man—there was no need to. When Li Hao recalled the stroke of that day... that was where he set his sights at. He wouldn’t be jealous even if Wang Ming advanced to Solar, to say nothing of Sunflare.

And so what of Solar, so what if one was greater than Solar? They would only meet with one outcome if they fought against that blow. Death!

Li Hao labored strenuously so that he could one day deploy such a stroke!

Liu Yan took a deep breath and said nothing else. Li Hao kept a very low profile, one so low that not many knew he was already a peak Sunderer. But compared to that, what was so frightening was the high visibility portion of his humility.

So what of Sunflare? He meant it when he said he wasn’t jealous. If he was, he wouldn’t have helped Wang Ming advance. Meanwhile, the young man said nothing more other than to lead Liu Yan to another room.

It was much easier to combine a blood pearl with sword energy than to split out mysterious power. All he needed to do was have Liu Yan swallow the blood pearl, infuse some sword energy into her, and wait for them to naturally meld together. There was no need for other action on his part.

A Sunflare level blood pearl and sword energy was enough for Liu Yan to digest for a while. She stared at it for a long time when Li Hao took it out. She’d guessed that the young man might keep some of the blood pearl for her use when he told her to come by, but she hadn’t thought that he’d retain the entire pearl!

That indicated that Wang Ming hadn’t utilized it in his ascension.

Liu Yan lowered her head, not saying a word. A while later, she swallowed the blood pearl, still not saying a word. The Demon Hunters...

She thought through a lot in this moment. She thought of Liu Long and the others. There were very few members in the Demon Hunters, but they all cared deeply for each other.

Liu Long was a warm-hearted team captain. While he appeared coldly aloof, Liu Yan knew that was only a facade. He'd decided to exact revenge for Liu Yan the second he heard that Li Dahu was in the ruins.

And not just Liu Yan—if anyone else on the team encountered a similar situation, Liu Long would take action without extraneous speech. He silently looked after everyone and kept all of their secrets. And today, Liu Yan suddenly felt the same from Li Hao.

Trustworthy and dependable!

Liu Long was irreplaceable in the team's hearts; he could be fully trusted. No one else knew all of the secrets, just him. He never voluntarily spoke of secret knowledge to outsiders and utilized all methods possible to help the team.

Liu Yan swallowed the blood pearl with a complicated look in her eyes. As she stared at Li Hao, she suddenly said, "Don't be so good to me in the future, I'm afraid I might develop feelings for you. There is... no room in my heart for you!"

Li Hao started. This didn't seem like her typical teasing or a joke. There is no room in her heart for me... The young man didn't think much of it, just that it sounded like there was someone already occupying her heart?

Liu Yan smiled happily, but her lips were also curved with a trace of loneliness. A figure gradually materialized in her mind's eye. He was eternally standoffish and coolly arrogant, but the more one got to know him, the more one understood that this was a true, indomitable man!

But she never voiced or even demonstrated her feelings. Liu Yan was very affectionate toward all newbies. She was thus to Li Hao and had been so to Wu Chao and Chen Jian. She'd also acted this way to their dead comrades—he was the only one that she rarely put on a coquettish act for.

The more one cared about a person, the less one would act that way.

Liu Yan closed her eyes and ceased thinking about the topic.

Li Hao seemed to have guessed something and asked carefully, "Does... the chief have a wife?"

He really didn't know.

Liu Yan's eyes snapped open and she looked at Li Hao.

"She's dead!" the woman answered after a prolonged pause.

"....." Li Hao didn't press for details. So Liu Long was also a widow? Did he occupy Liu Yan's heart? The young man wasn't sure of the details.

Everyone said that there was something between the two, but after entering the team, Li Hao found that there didn't seem to be a special relationship between them. Liu Long treated everyone in the same caring manner. He didn't pay particular attention to Liu Yan.

The young man put all of that out of his mind. If Liu Yan really did like the chief... that was just as well! The captain was a good man. Other than trying to play it cool by wearing a trench coat day in and day out, there didn't seem to be anything bad about him.

I wonder what he does when he vanishes for a day or half a day every week? Is he taking care of a man's needs?

Who knows!

Mm, a middle-aged widow. If that's what he's doing, that'd be normal too. But anyway.

Li Hao conducted some sword energy into Liu Yan's body. There was nothing else for him to do after that. He watched and waited silently.

.....

Liu Yan opened her eyes after roughly an hour.

"I'm almost there, I can almost project my internal force from my head. I've accumulated enough, now I need to consolidate for a bit. The eyes are the main issue..."

Li Hao gave an overview of what his teacher had taught him about strengthening the tear glands when he heard this. Soon enough, there was a crying woman in the room.

The young man swiftly backed out. It'd be impossible to explain himself if someone saw him in a room with a crying woman in the middle of the night. Outside the door, his teacher looked at him meaningfully.

"She seems... the captain..." A resigned Li Hao said softly.

"That's normal." Yuan Shuo inclined his head with a smile. "Someone like Liu Long is quite appealing. His brains just aren't good for much. Other than that, there's not much one can criticize about him."

Li Hao laughed awkwardly. Likely everyone's brains weren't good for much in his teacher's eyes, himself included.

.....

No one said a word that night. Wang Ming and Liu Yan focused on consolidating their new cultivation level and growing accustomed to their new strength. Instead of resting, Li Hao and Yuan Shuo perused books of common knowledge, as opposed to martial dao. On the other hand, Li Hao strongly suspected a book from the third row hidden under his teacher's book cover.

Liu Yan left first in the morning. Wang Ming stayed to further consolidate his level.

Chapter 188: The Martial World of Silver Moon (I)

Li Hao and Yuan Shuo stayed up all night reading. Wang Ming opening his supernatural lock left a lasting impression on the two. The professor mused over certain notions throughout the night. In the morning, he suddenly looked at his student.

"Wang Ming has seen five supernatural locks—one around each of his limbs and one around his lungs. From there, he set foot on the path of being a metal supernatural."

Li Hao put down his book and looked at his teacher.

"If we look at it from the perspective of single elements, opening the lock of the heart would probably make one a fire supernatural," Yuan Shuo continued.

Li Hao nodded, those were his thoughts as well. Thinking deeply, the professor gently rapped his knuckles against the table.

"What if all five elemental locks were opened?"

All five? Li Hao looked quizzical.

“Like you strengthening the five visceral organs—if someone discovers all five supernatural locks of these organs and opens them at the same time, what happens then?”

The young man thought for a moment and responded, “Neutralization between the five elements and then... equilibrium? And transmutation into internal force?” Li Hao laughed after voicing this theory. However, his teacher remained very calm.

“And why not?” he said apathetically.

Li Hao cut off mid laugh. What did his teacher mean by that?

Yuan Shuo tapped his head and sank into contemplation. “Even if the balanced five elements are internal force, they shouldn’t count as simple mysterious power. When I entered Dominator of Thousands, I sensed my internal force nurturing the five elements!” Caught in the throes of mental struggle, he looked at his student. “There is no path beyond Dominator! What can withstand tens of thousands?”

“I’ve been thinking that the weaknesses of martial masters at this level lie with the internal organs. If my organs reach unparalleled heights—if I can cultivate them to the point where their locks naturally open, will there be a surge of strength like the supernaturals experience? Will I be transformed from inside out and enter a new domain?”

Yuan Shuo had felt Wang Ming’s surge of power all too clearly when the young man opened the lock on his left arm. The human body was a treasure trove! He didn’t want to forcefully smash the lock and cause his internal force to be devoured, his body occupied by external energy. What would it look like if his own organs were strong enough to open the locks?

“You’ve been nurturing your organs.” The professor looked at Li Hao. “Do you think your locks have become stronger or weaker?”

“Stronger!” Li Hao answered honestly and thought for a moment. “I could sense their existence before, but now they’re harder to detect! It’s like a wooden barrel has become deeper and can hold more energy, so it’s harder for my supernatural locks to appear.”

“Are they still there?”

“They are!” Li Hao nodded emphatically. “They must be. I would sense it if they weren’t.”

“Then what if your organs are strong enough to open the locks? If the locks can be opened normally, do you think you’ll erupt with power?”

The young man mused silently. This was unknown territory, it was difficult to say. From what his body told him...

“It’s possible!” Li Hao answered with reasonable confidence. “The five organs have absorbed so much elemental energy, but they’ve only grown a bit stronger. Where has all the mysterious power gone? Has it dissipated? Impossible! There must be a place inside the organs that stores all of this energy!”

“That is my guess as well!” Yuan Shuo smiled, then said slowly, “The five visceral organs store energy so that it does not fade away. They should be full, yet not congested.” [1]

Li Hao understood this notion. The ancient tomes recorded that the five viscera were organs that stored qi, holding it in so that it did not scatter.

“The five viscera are often correlated with the six bowels.” Yuan Shuo thought a bit more. “The five viscera should be full, yet not congested, whereas the six bowels should be congested and not full...”

He mused over numerous theories, taking a while to say, “Let’s set the six bowels aside for now, they’re even more abstract! The five viscera are sometimes called the five viscera spirits or the five

spirits. Dominators nurture the mind and spirit! The spirits are connected to the five viscera and from them spring the five spirits...”

“I use the five animals to nurture my spirit!” Yuan Shuo suddenly said after rapidly processing his thoughts. “The spirits of the five animals... the spirits of the five viscera... One spirit per organ! I nurture the five spirits to break my supernatural locks. Do you think I have a chance to climb higher if I employ this method?”

Li Hao swiftly postulated the feasibility of this suggestion. He understood that his teacher meant to use the five auras of the Five Styles to smash through the supernatural locks of the five viscera organs. Or rather, he meant to absorb or further nurture them, not just simply break them. He would then meld the five auras and spirits of the five animals to break through to a new cultivation realm.

Was that possible?

Li Hao didn’t know; the only thing he was certain of was that it might be very dangerous. Roads to the unknown were always thus. Each step was fraught with peril, but also accompanied by great harvest.

What kind of cultivation level would his teacher be if he succeeded? The Vanquisher of Ten Thousands that he spoke of?

No!

Certainly not!

If the spirits of the five animals broke the locks of the five viscera, that would be the equivalent of breaking five supernatural locks. In the supernatural world, that would make one of the fifth level—greater than Solar. Therefore, his teacher would skip past the Solar level and set foot straight beyond Solar.

Of course, that was based on supernatural divisions. It was different for martial masters.

“I think it’s worth a try!” Yuan Shuo laughed when the young man looked at him. “How will we know if it’s feasible or not if we don’t try? Apparently, Sun Yifei will be in attendance at the ruins. I may not be able to match him with my current strength. Or rather, it will be nearly impossible to!”

Regardless, the professor didn’t find that embarrassing. “He is a late Solar,” he sighed with emotion. “I had to put my life on the line when I killed the initial Solar that was Qiao Feilong. If I fight Sun Yifei... I might die. I can lose to anyone, but I refuse to lose to someone I once defeated!

“Those who I have conquered must always live with the specter of my magnificence over their heads. I will not have it be the other way around when I am old. Sun Yifei won’t do, and I will have my revenge on Ying Hongyue sooner or later when the opportunity presents itself!”

“So you’ve decided, teacher?” Li Hao asked solemnly.

“I have!” Yuan Shuo mulled over his response. “I started considering this when you began nurturing your five organs. My thoughts solidified when I saw how much power resides within after Wang Ming opened his supernatural lock last night. I want to cultivate the five organs! Fortunately, my Five Styles is a perfect match!

“The five organs foster the five auras and cultivate the five spirits. When the five spirits emerge from the five viscera, I either die or I ascend beyond Dominator!” The professor looked at this student. “The heart, liver, spleen, lung, and kidney correspond to tiger, bear, deer, ape, and bird. One viscera for one animal! Heart, fire, and ape. The fire attribute rules the heart and the ape is attributed to fire! The heart nurtures the ape, while the spleen nurtures the bear as both are of earth! The tiger walks into the kidney, strengthening it and the body. The bird corresponds to the lungs and deer to the liver...”

Yuan Shuo reeled off strings of theories and various trains of thought, assigning the five spirits to the five viscera so they would ultimately break free—smash through the locks.

Li Hao listened intently, understanding that if anything happened to his teacher, that would be the end of his heritage. Was it correct to have the five organs nurture the five spirits? If there was a way available to the ancients, they would not walk it in this manner. They could not have all practiced the Five Styles, to say nothing of anything else. Not everyone would've mastered the auras of the Five Styles, so his teacher's road was his alone.

Perhaps it traveled in the same direction as the ancients, but the details were most certainly his teacher's own invention. Li Hao may not even be able to imitate his teacher due to the need to master five auras, but it was a way at least!

"Little Hao, I want to cultivate my five organs right now!" Yuan Shuo smiled toothily. "I shouldn't see a change in strength in the short run, but I most likely won't see further improvement if the five spirits do not break free of the viscera. So I think about it a little more... and probably first use the fire energy from Qiao Feilong to see if I can raise a fire heart ape."

"As it should be, teacher!" Li Hao hastily said. "We have four hundred cubes of the five elements and two hundred unattributed left. Use it all, teacher!"

"I'd wanted to save them for you to swiftly strengthen the five organs after you ascend to Dominator." Yuan Shuo glanced at the young man. "But now... we will not be short of them if I succeed! However, I'll need a portion of sword energy too..."

"As you'd like, teacher!" Li Hao took out the small sword and offered it to his teacher.

Yuan Shuo might meet with powerful enemies in the ruins. Late Solars were strong, but if his teacher brought his full strength to bear as well as the stone blade and Incantation of the Blade of Blood, he might not lose. If there were powerhouses greater than Solar, however, he would be dead without a doubt!

He might stand a fighting chance if any one of the five viscera spirits could be formed. Of course, it'd be better if all five spirits could be nurtured. They didn't have enough time for that though. There was only enough to try for a fire heart ape.

“I’ll make an attempt with one viscera spirit,” Yuan Shuo said. “If I fail, you should do the same if you have a chance to in the future! Equilibrium between the five organs might be the best result. One organ dominating the others might lead to drawbacks.”

“Don’t worry teacher,” Li Hao responded solemnly. “I have committed everything to heart. If you fail, I will kill all of your enemies and bring their heads to your grave when my spirits break free of their organs!”

Yuan Shuo threw his head back with laughter. Was this demoralizing? Not at all! Only gratification. Well said! This was how things should be. He would walk this path first and leave some experience behind for Li Hao. It would be a beautiful story if the young man succeeded and offered his enemies’ heads at his grave.

“I’ll take the sword and blade, as well as all of the mysterious power,” Yuan Shuo concluded. “Based on my calculations, I should see some initial results within five days. Go home and come back after five days. If I succeed, we will head to Rift Canyon that day. If I fail and my heart shatters, take everything and hand the real sword and blade to Hou Xiaochen. He will protect you!”

The real sword and blade! Plainly, Yuan Shuo felt that Hou Xiaochen had likely guessed that Li Hao had given him a fake sword. If the professor failed, there would be no one protecting Li Hao. Liu Long could not do so. The only one who could in all of Silver Moon was Hou Xiaochen.

“Teacher!”

Yuan Shuo laughed when his student wished to speak. “Go on! I would like to carve a path through martial dao myself. Inspiration has struck today. Since I have determined the direction, I should try it. Whether I fail or succeed, I will have a clear conscience!” He patted Li Hao’s shoulder with a benevolent smile.

Li Hao lowered his head, not saying a word. “Then... master... I will return home!”

Master...

In the world of martial dao, one who passed on knowledge was both teacher and master. Li Hao was just used to calling Yuan Shuo teacher as he'd learned civil subjects before, not martial dao. The habit stuck after he started learning martial dao, but today, he changed the honorific.

This was the first time, and it might be the last.

Both master and disciple were decisive sorts. Since Yuan Shuo had decided, Li Hao knew there was no stopping him. Neither did he have the right to. He sank to his knees and kowtowed.

"I await your emergence from seclusion, master! If you fail, I will go to White Moon City and keep a low profile for a few years. When I succeed, I will eliminate all of your enemies from this world!"

Chapter 189: The Martial World of Silver Moon (II)

"Hah!" Yuan Shuo barked with laughter. "I'd still rather do it myself!"

"Then the two of us will cut down all of teacher's enemies together!"

"Your bloodlust is too strong... Get outta here!"

Li Hao rose and left. Yuan Shuo watched him go with a smile. A moment later, he exhaled softly. Spirits of the five viscera, the fire heart ape... From today forth, I will raise this ape! People say that I am an evil monkey spirit. Very good! I'll show you a true evil simian when my fire heart ape takes shape!

Sun Yifei? Late Solar? You want revenge on me, don't you? Bring it! I beat you into jumping off the bridge in Rift Canyon all those years ago and we meet on the same battlefield this time. Don't you think you're something after throwing yourself under Ying Hongyue's banner—he's also someone who knelt at my feet all the same!

.....

At the same time.

The border of Silver Moon province.

A person walked across the land. Tall, limber, and in his forties at most, he bore a long qimei staff on his back. Though his hair was graying, the look in his eyes was uncommonly sharp. He didn't appear that old apart from unkempt hair that flowed past his shoulders. Several youngsters followed behind him.

"Master, we've finally made it to Silver Moon province!" One of them exclaimed with joy when they saw the territory marker. They were finally here!

Up ahead, the Qimei Staff King also glanced at the stele erected in the ground. His lips curved in a smile tinged with melancholy. Twenty years! It'd been twenty years since he left, twenty long years since he last set foot in his homeland.

After he lost to Old Demon Yuan, the demon was trapped in Silver Moon for these twenty years. Sun Yifei had thought the old man would die a Sunderer, but to think the old guy would reach into Dominator and slay a Solar!

That was just as well! Bullying the weak was beneath him; revenge was more his pursuit. But neither was killing a Sunderer on his deathbed worthy of his attention.

Ying Hongyue wished to kill Yuan Shuo not just for revenge. He also nursed other motives such as interrogating the old man for the contents of certain ancient tomes, locations of ancient ruins, and the Breathing Method of the Five Styles. Sun Yifei, however, didn't care about any of that. He was back for one reason only—to kill Yuan Shuo and tell the old man that Sun Yifei was back!

Not only that, but he'd brought some of his most prized disciples as he'd heard that Yuan Shuo had been moved to take action for his final disciple Li Hao. Red Moon was also apparently after the young man.

It didn't matter! He brought his disciples with him so they could kill Yuan Shuo's disciple. They were all martial masters, not supernaturals. He'd raised them over the past twenty years to inherit his martial legacy!

It might not be fair if he easily killed Yuan Shuo. He wanted his disciples to kill Li Hao so as to prove that the Qimei Staff was greater than the Five Styles.

His disciples were respectively peak Slayer, peak Sunderer, and half step Dominator. He didn't know what level Yuan Shuo's disciple was. Li Hao might be very weak, but the weakest of his disciples was a peak Slayer. Thus, Sun Yifei brought his weakest disciple on this trip. If Li Hao couldn't fight even his weakest disciple, then he couldn't be blamed for bullying others with superior force.

"Master, are we going directly to Rift Canyon or to Silver City?" asked the half step Dominator in the rear. "With master's strength, I don't think there's anyone in Silver Moon who can stop you. If going to the canyon takes too much time, why don't we head straight to Silver City, kill Yuan Shuo, execute his disciple, and end the Five Styles legacy!"

"Don't think too lightly of Silver Moon!" Sun Yifei looked back at his disciple. "Even our leader suffered a defeat when he once visited the province."

"Yes, this disciple understands! I heard that it was the leader of the Silver Moon Night Watchers—Hou Xiaochen—who took a stand. But it was because reinforcements came from the central region that our leader was forced to leave. Hou Xiaochen simply benefited from internal reinforcements..."

"It's not that simple!" Sun Yifei flicked a sideways glance at him. "Our leader was already present when Hou Xiaochen made his move. Why didn't our leader stop him? Was it only because Hou Xiaochen possessed a high status that our leader waited for him to finish killing so they could fight alone?"

Youngsters always thought too simply. Sun Yifei valued these martial disciples more than he did his supernatural disciples. He... didn't actually like the supernatural that much, even though he was one himself now. Learning and inheritance weren't too important in the supernatural world. Other than a

few supernatural techniques, there wasn't much knowledge to speak of. It was just absorbing energy, breaking locks, and learning some techniques.

It was a marked difference from the path of martial masters. The master and disciple relationship in martial dao made it easier to foster bonds of kinship and pass on experience, battle methods, techniques and others. So while he had a few supernatural disciples who were already Sunflare, he didn't really care about them.

Sun Yifei wasn't meant to reach Dominator back in his day. After he was defeated as a half step Dominator and his aura damaged, he had no choice but to cross over to delay his decline. He would never return to the path of martial dao. Therefore, he hoped that one of his disciples would be able to advance to Dominator.

His eldest disciple who'd spoken, for instance, already grasped a rudimentary aura. There was hope for him to rise to Dominator, so Sun Yifei held high expectations for him.

"Moxian, do not think little of Silver Moon!" Sun Yifei truly valued his eldest disciple, so he made this an earnest teaching moment. "Located on the borderlands since the ancient times, Silver Moon's martial culture thrives and prospers! Her martial masters were renowned throughout the land twenty years ago, before the supernatural appeared!"

"Martial masters from Silver Moon dominated the ninety-nine provinces of the world. After the Skystar Dynasty united the world, they had to order a temporary ban on martial activity due to unrest among Silver Moon martial masters!"

"Though it was the end times for Silver Moon's martial world twenty years ago, they still produced numerous powerhouses—including old demons like Yuan Shuo. While he wasn't a Dominator, he killed many Heaven Favored in the initial days of the supernatural rise and made his name known throughout the lands!"

"Silver Moon's martial world is built with deep foundations. Who knows what nook and cranny might hold a Dominator?" Sun Yifei waxed eloquent. "There aren't many clashes between supernaturals and martial masters these days. Some of the older martial masters have either retired

to their mountain abodes or bide their time, waiting for the right moment. Some have even completely changed themselves to become leaders of supernatural organizations.

“Of the three great organizations, the leader of Red Moon comes from Silver Moon. Additionally, the leaders of Celestial and Yama are both related to the province to a certain degree. There are many powerhouses in the titanic central region of your eyes, but what of it?”

Sun Yifei still spoke highly of his homeland, despite his enemy residing here. Powerhouses yet remained in Silver Moon. Many walked out of the province’s martial world. Ying Hongyue, for instance, was a representative figure of their time despite being at odds with the government. He came from Silver Moon. So while the province gradually declined in the supernatural world, the name of Silver Moon was still well known in Skystar Dynasty.

And despite its continuous downturn, the dynasty that’d conquered the world was not yet fully toppled. Who knew if Ying Hongyue could lead his organization into carving out territory for himself?

“This disciple understands!” Sun Moxian bobbed his head. Next to him stood a young woman wearing a long staff on her back. Her hair was tied in a neat updo, presenting an exceedingly competent demeanor.

“Master,” she asked. “I have heard of the might of Silver Moon’s martial world. But no Dominators have come from it in recent years. It’s the central region that has produced quite a few, and many are active on supernatural battlefields. There are even rumors of Dominators looking to advance beyond Dominator, so why has martial dao declined so rapidly?”

She often heard of the magnificence of Silver Moon’s martial world. Not only did her master speak of it, but so did martial masters of the older generation. But based on what she knew, no Dominators had come from Silver Moon in many years. A rare sight of them could be glimpsed in the central region. She and her master had visited several of them; none of them hailed from Silver Moon.

“Silver Moon’s decline...” Sun Yifei shook his head with resignation. “Its martial world has not truly withered. If we must be frank, it has to do with us. We accelerated its downfall. Many of Silver

Moon's martial masters carried the hope of ascending to Dominator back in the day—many, not just one or two!

“Those times were denoted as Silver Moon's last frenzy! Whether it was me, our leader, or that Yuan Shuo... we all fought with extreme viciousness and killed many half step Dominators. Among our opponents were the Seven Swords of Silver Moon, the Three Spears, Fists of North and South, Blade Kings of the Cardinal Direction, Thunder Legs, Worldcarver, Iron Shirt...” The powerhouses that Sun Yifei listed were almost all half step Dominator. Even the ones who weren't were practically there.

There were a lot of people!

It had been a resplendent era, the final era of madness before the rise of the supernatural. Silver Moon's martial world had been on the cusp of its ascendancy, yet...

Sun Yifei sighed emotionally. “Out of the Seven Swords, three died to Yuan Shuo. Two of the Blade Kings did as well and he pierced through Iron Shirt with his Five Styles. That old thing took out half of the martial world by himself! The rest were dispatched by me, our leader, and a few others...” he chuckled.

And so, Silver Moon's martial world declined!

Jaws dropped among the baffled disciples. So Silver Moon's martial world had been ended by its own people!

“Then... why did Yuan Shuo never reach Dominator?”

“His ambitions were too great!” Sun Yifei responded coldly. “The guy practices the Five Styles and trains in the auras of the five animals. Most martial masters have focused on one aura since the start of time, but that wasn't for him! He wanted five auras and to combine them all! “Therefore, I'm not surprised at all that he can kill a Solar after becoming a Dominator. Either he never breaks through,

or he is a premier Dominator once he does. Just melding five auras into one makes it completely reasonable that he can cut down Solars!”

He valued Yuan Shuo highly. Or rather, everyone placed great emphasis on every martial master from Silver Moon back in the day. This was a guy who slayed half of the province’s martial world, one who combined the auras of five animals!

Even the lofty Ying Hongyue would be slapping his own face if he said that Yuan Shuo was trash because he didn’t set foot into Dominator. Which other Sunderer could meld five auras together?

Hou Xiaochen protected Yuan Shuo not only because the man could explore ruins, but also because he held the faintest sliver of a hope that the professor could rise to Dominator, that the final hope of the province’s martial world would remain alive.

“The five auras of the Five Styles...” Sun Moxian was left speechless. “Did he really do it? I can’t do two, much less five!”

He finally began to understand why his master placed much importance on this man. This kind of character was not to be underestimated, even though he’d only just set foot into Dominator. Being a half step Dominator himself, he fully understood how hard it was to advance with one aura.

But five??

Chapter 190: The Martial World of Silver Moon (III)

“Master, so it was through true strength that Yuan Shuo was able to kill a Solar, not by employing cheap tricks?”

“Of course!” Sun Yifei answered emphatically. “How can any tricks be involved? What tricks are there to be played in the absence of true strength? The supernaturals of the central region are arrogant and outrageously conceited. They think it’s pure coincidence that Yuan Shuo killed Brokensky, that it was an accident or an ambush. Bullshit! Those fellows belittle martial powerhouses just because they lucked into strength. There’s no growth possible for them!”

Although he himself was a supernatural, contempt was clear in his voice. It didn't necessitate an explanation. Sun Yifei looked around with obvious pride.

"I would still rather be a martial master if I have the chance to. I will be one that exceeds Dominator! So what of late Solar? Remember this well, Moxian, martial masters have a far brighter future than supernaturals!"

Such words from a late stage Solar would shake the supernatural world if it became public knowledge.

Sun Moxian quickly nodded and couldn't help himself, "Then... master..."

"Are you worried that he'll kill me?" Sun Yifei chuckled. "I am no ordinary Solar. Remember, I am a martial master who almost made it to Dominator! I have also killed late Solars in the central region—they're nothing worth mentioning! Yuan Shuo is strong in my eyes, but he delayed his development for many years. I actually wish that he has the strength to fight me! It would be a real pity if I kill him easily."

His battle spirit flared to life; he looked forward to their battle with extreme anticipation!

"Master, which do you think is stronger—Yuan Shuo or Grandmaster Cloud Above?" asked Sun Moxian.

Grandmaster Cloud Above was a premier martial master in the central region. He once slayed a peak Sunflare with one sword stroke on a supernatural battlefield and met a Solar in direct combat. While he wasn't able to kill that Solar, he injured the supernatural to the point that the Solar had to run for his life.

There were a few elite martial masters in the central region who could defeat Solars. It kept the embers of hope and anticipation alive for some of the martial masters in that region.

"Cloud Above..." Sun Yifei thought for a bit. "Cloud Above's been in closed door cultivation after injuring that guy a few years ago. Some say that he's found the path beyond Dominator. If it's Yuan

Shuo, the old man should only be on par with Cloud Above from a few years ago since he's just broken through. Yuan Shuo should still be unable to rival him for the moment."

That's good! Sun Moxian relaxed. Cloud Above had only injured an initial Solar, but his master was a late Solar who'd crossed over from being a martial master. In that case, it seemed that despite being very strong, Yuan Shuo would not be able to match his master.

They stood next to the boundary marker as they conversed about Silver Moon's martial world. The names of central region powerhouses came up one by one. Dominators and Solars were the usual, with very few Sunflares or those above Solar.

After a while of conversation and a brief overview of the glories of yesteryear, Sun Yifei took one large step forward and entered Silver Moon territory. He set course for Rift Canyon instead of Silver City. He wanted to defeat or even kill Yuan Shuo in Rift Canyon! That was where he'd once been defeated, and that was where he'd crawl back up to regain his dignity!

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White Moon City.

Hou Xiaochen sat in an office chair, watching messages fly by. One caught his eye. "Sun Yifei has crossed Silver Moon borders with three disciples!"

"Sun Yifei..."

He's here!

Hou Xiaochen drew his brows together. This was a thorny character. Would Hao Lianchuan be able to manage him? It was too soon after Yuan Shuo's breakthrough, so he likely wasn't a match for Sun Yifei. Even if he advanced rapidly and reached peak Dominator, he would still be hard pressed

to rival a martial master turned supernatural. It was rather Hao Lianchuan and the Flaming Phoenix Spear who might be able to defeat or hold off the newcomer.

A knock sounded from the door before Manager Yu entered. “Director, there’s news from the central region that a rebellion has started in our neighbor, the Northern Ge province. The situation is critical, so they wish for the director to travel to Northern Ge with the origin weapon and help settle the chaos!”

Hou Xiaochen’s eyes narrowed sharply; he recovered his calm in the next second. “Reply that Hao Lianchuan has led a team to the ruins. There is no one else to hold down the fort at White Moon City, so I cannot leave!”

“Understood!” Manager Yu lowered her voice. “The Revolution King of Yama and Violet Moon of the Red Moon organization would like to meet with the director outside the city.”

“And what are they afraid of?” Hou Xiaochen laughed.

“That the director will secretly make a move from the shadows!” Manager Yu smiled. “They are well aware of the director’s strength, so they want to take up your attention with everything possible so that you will not be free to go to the ruins.”

Such was the strength that Hou Xiaochen employed! The leading representatives of Yama and Red Moon in the province had come together to prevent Hou Xiaochen from leaving the city.

“Very well, tell them I await them at the summit of Mt. White Moon. Don’t they dare not show up!” chuckled the director. “And what of Celestial’s Half Mountain?”

Celestial also had a leading representative in Silver Moon. He styled himself as “Half Mountain” and was exceedingly mysterious.

“There is no intelligence regarding Half Mountain. It has been very long since his last appearance in the public eye. Either he is in seclusion from an injury, or he’s ascended!” Manager Yu gave her judgment.

Hou Xiaochen inclined his head. It was possible that the supernatural had broken through.

“Forget it then, ignore him. There’s nothing that can be done if he’s advanced. The Celestial organization operates in an even more bizarre manner than Red Moon. They are very difficult to get a handle of.” Hou Xiaochen looked in Silver City’s direction, retracting his gaze after silent consideration.

Yuan Shuo’s reappearance had induced him to change some plans. How much remained of the Old Demon Yuan? The old demon who’d almost single handedly caused an extinction event in Silver Moon now focused on health and refinement of character. With his low profile, it was difficult to determine his current strength.

Chuckling, Hou Xiaochen looked in the direction of the central region. It was such chaos there that even the Night Watchers were affected. Some were in favor of war, some didn’t want to fight. Some wanted to defend, others wanted to attack. Complete pandemonium reigned!

Who knew if Skystar Dynasty could continue its rule? What kind of bedlam would engulf the ninety-nine provinces if it fully collapsed?

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Time passed day by day.

Silver City.

Li Hao immersed himself in martial dao these days, training without sleep for hours on end. He rarely returned to his massive house, spending most of his time in the law enforcement building and training, constantly training.

The Nine Forged Force, Five Styles, and Ghost Shadow Sword.

He repeatedly practiced the three secret arts. While he'd reached five levels with the Nine Forged Force, it wasn't enough. Liu Long could employ all nine when he was a half step Dominator. His father could also utilize nine layers, so Li Hao felt that he was far from enough. Five layers was too little.

He also experimented with how to rapidly switch between the Ghost Shadow Sword and Nine Forged Force, particularly the latter!

The Nine Forged Force required its own breathing method, consigning the Five Styles and Ghost Shadow Sword to supplemental positions. This was not to Li Hao's desires as he could not utilize them in conjunction. He polished every step and move, trying to examine how he might use them together.

After an indeterminate period of time, he stabbed forward with his sword and swiftly withdrew it. His next exhale became a sword of white smoke! He immediately tried to shift to the Nine Forged Force when he breathed out, wanting to exhale five layers of sword qi in one breath. His first breath was successful, but while he instantaneously switched breathing methods, there was nothing in his second breath.

"It still doesn't work!" Li Hao frowned. The key to shaping his breath as a sword lay in his lungs. The lungs were of the metal attribute and could open its supernatural lock if it was strong enough. Then, could he connect the second stroke to his move if he stored more qi?

All he could manage now was one successful exhale—it was hard to keep going. This was due to limitations created by insufficiently strong lungs.

“Teacher says that the spirit of the lungs is the bird...”

Of the Five Styles, the bird aura corresponded to the lungs since both were of the metal attribute.

“Assigning auras of the Five Styles to the five visceral organs... But it doesn’t necessarily have to be this way. That’s just the best choice because teacher succeeded with his auras of the five animals.” Li Hao’s thoughts turned back to himself. He’d grasped a sliver of the aura of earth. The earth element mapped to the spleen, where blood and qi were strengthened. Now he looked to master the aura of the sword. The sword mapped to metal, and metal to the lungs. Was it a logical conclusion to draw that he could use the aura of the sword to replace that of the bird?

Though he theorized as such, Li Hao didn’t dare make the attempt. The aura of the sword was so sharp that there was nothing but death ahead if he wasn’t careful.

Not to mention, he wasn’t even a Dominator yet.

What he needed to do most at the moment was to strengthen his aura of earth and condense the aura of the sword—not achieve the same accomplishments as his teacher and meld five auras into one. He would be entirely satisfied if he combined the aura of earth with that of the sword. That would open the door to Dominator and even place him beyond Liu Long as the chief only possessed one aura. Not to mention, his sword aura was hardly commonplace!

He’d only created a sword of internal force at the moment. The real aura of the sword was yet to appear. Li Hao was well aware that it might take the spilling of blood for the true sword aura to form!

How was there a sword that never saw blood? It might take this expedition to the ruins for him to hopefully complete the aura of the sword.

Li Hao turned over many notions and trained for a while longer. He performed a general clean up when he looked at the clock on a nearby wall, then strode out of the basement. It was already dark outside. Midnight.

His teacher had said to go to him after five days. It was the fifth day as the clock had already ticked over to August 26. The expedition was set to begin on the 28th.

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The Yuan residence.

Li Hao waited in the yard, watching silently. It'd been five days! Would his teacher emerge from his closed door cultivation of the fire heart ape?

A yawning Wang Ming walked out of the house. He'd been here these days as well, focusing on making the breathing method an instinctive reaction. He operated it day and night without leaving the house. He wanted to talk to Li Hao when he saw the young man, but the latter waved him off as he was unwilling to talk. Wang Ming had to stay silent as well.

He knew a little of the situation after these days. Yuan Shuo seemed to be in seclusion and wasn't even eating as he hadn't walked out of his study. After a few days of absence, Li Hao's sudden appearance meant that the professor was possibly wrapping up.

The two sat in the yard, waiting silently. The sky was still dark and there was no movement from the room. There were no ripples of internal force or surge of mysterious power. Just dead silence.

The sky brightened after an indeterminate period of time. Liu Long arrived, bringing Liu Yan with him. It was the 26th and there were roughly a thousand kilometers to travel before they reached Rift Canyon. They couldn't drive the entire way and it'd take at least a day to reach the location. They might miss the exploration if they didn't set out today.

Liu Long nodded at the two young men when he saw them waiting in the yard. He didn't say anything, just quietly waited off to the side. He'd guessed that Yuan Shuo might be looking for the way forward during these days of continued unavailability. Liu Long could only look up to Yuan Shuo for doing so.

He himself had just entered Dominator, so he was far from the next level. Yuan Shuo had only broken through a few days before him, but he was already marching toward the next cultivation level.

An unknown level!

Various thoughts and concerns kept the four company as they waited for the professor to emerge.