

Star Gate 191

Chapter 191: Fire Heart Ape, Nurturing the Spirit (I)

Inside the study.

Yuan Shuo felt like he was sitting in a cauldron. A massive ape shimmered into existence in his heart, one that was extremely irritable and struggled madly!

A fire heart ape!

His heart was the cauldron to refine the ape. Apes were vigorous and nimble, yet also hot-headed and testy. The consciousness hearkened to the spirit and mind, which meant that the aura possessed a bit of a consciousness. Under such circumstances, subduing the ape of the Five Styles so that it willingly resided in the heart was a very difficult task.

Yuan Shuo's heart pounded furiously, beating faster and faster! Bringing the fire heart ape under control would impact the cultivation of all five organs and how he reached the next step. The heart was strong—was it feasible to break the balance of the five organs with it?

Yuan Shuo didn't know, so he could only try. He didn't have time to cultivate the five organs at the same time.

"Huff, puff, huff, puff..." The massive ape huffed and puffed in his heart, struggling as it wanted to break free of the heart. It wasn't willing to be constrained thus.

It could not be restrained!

Yuan Shuo had exhausted all methods over the past five days, but failed to keep the ape in place. Although this was just a spirit, he was hard pressed to control it if it didn't wish to remain in the heart.

Five days!

He could sense the passage of time, but success seemed out of reach. Yuan Shuo was neither disappointed nor panicked. He'd still made a few gains after these five days.

"You're forcing my hand!" he sighed. You won't listen!

His heart agitated as a chain materialized over its surface. This was the lock that supernaturals spoke about—the lock of the heart. Since you won't listen and stay in place, don't blame me for clapping you in chains!

He hadn't been willing to try this earlier out of concern that his fire heart ape was too strong. What if it broke the chain? Would he be forced into crossing over as a fire supernatural?

That would be the least desirable outcome, yet there was nothing left to do now but try. He was betting that the ape could not tug the chain apart, that his heart was very strong. He'd absorbed a great deal of fire elemental power and enhanced his heart—which also meant strengthening his lock.

The supernatural locks of ordinary people might snap upon first contact, but when martial masters strengthened an area, they strengthened their locks as well. The fire heart ape may not be able to break it. If it did... then that may be when he broke through.

Yuan Shuo made up his mind and directed the chain of his heart toward the ape.

"Huff, puff, huff, puff..." The huffing and puffing grew so loud that it was thunderous! The ape roared furiously and flailed with both arms, smashing its fists against the chain as it refused to be shackled.

Despite its struggles, the chain descended with inexorable momentum. The lock of the heart confined the heart. There was no escape once the ape entered the heart. Despite its obvious strength, the massive lock stifled it with a tremendous rumble. This rumble sounded only in Yuan Shuo's heart.

Moments later, the fire heart ape was crushed under an enormous lock and chain—the lock of Yuan Shuo's heart was gigantic! No matter how the ape struggled, its efforts were futile. The heart jumped violently as its occupant fought and raged against its constraints.

Boom... boom... boom...

This was the sound of his heart beating. It pounded ponderously for a very long time while blood bubbled out of the corners of Yuan Shuo's mouth without pause. Eventually, the professor flashed a brilliant smile. Success! He'd captured it!

“So this proves that the path to the next level requires strengthening the five organs and supernatural locks...” He committed every part of the process to memory. All of this had to become part of his heritage. He didn't have time to admire his handiwork—Yuan Shuo stared fixedly at the heart, focusing all of his attention on its changes and every trace of modification.

The moment the fire heart ape was completely confined, the heart beat faster. The other four visceral organs also trembled violently in unsteady fashion.

The equilibrium of the five organs was shattered! Blood seeped from the spleen and lungs, a reflection of how it was a little too difficult for these organs to endure the increased rate of blood flow from the strengthened heart.

“So subduing one viscera means the other four need to be strengthened at the same time. Otherwise, they'll be easily torn apart... The stronger the supernatural locks, the better! If they're too weak, an aura will shatter them once it grows too strong. The lucky become supernaturals, the unlucky will find their organs in pieces along with the lock...”

The fire heart ape ceased its struggles as Yuan Shuo focused on new revelations. However, he quickly found something else amiss. While the ape no longer struggled and the chain settled down, it abruptly returned to activity moments later. It was now entangled with the supernatural lock.

Wielding the chain, the ape started howling in his heart.

Fire!

Countless flames appeared in its eyes as the fire heart ape turned into one of fire. Inspiration struck Yuan Shuo and he flared the aura of the Five Styles. Tiger, deer, bear, and bird were still as before, but the moment the aura of the ape appeared, it immediately separated itself from the other four. A powerful fire ape materialized in the air, one with chains wrapped around it.

Rustle!

The sound of swinging chains echoed through the air. As the ape agitated, it suddenly sent out a chain—the blow seemed to pierce through matter!

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Within the yard.

Liu Long and the others sensed a hint of abnormality; they waited. The look in Li Hao's eyes shifted as he saw a flaming red chain shoot out of the house. It came with an incredible aura!

It wasn't due to his special vision that he saw it—everyone could see it. Whether it was Li Hao, Liu Long, or Liu Yan, they jumped and rolled to evade the chain. Wang Ming, however, grew excited to see the chain snake toward him. Maybe it was due to his recent ascension, an inability to dodge, or thinking that he didn't need to dodge. He might even think that Yuan Shuo was testing them!

The young supernatural formed a golden sword without a word and sent it at the chain!

Clang!

After a metallic clang, Yuan Shuo roared from the house, “Get back here!”

The golden longsword smashed to smithereens with a bang and turned to dust. And yet, the chain continued forward. Wang Ming’s eyes widened with dismay and blood welled up in his mouth. His head was about to be pierced through when the chain was suddenly yanked back, like it was under another’s control!

The door opened to reveal a flushed Yuan Shuo. He glanced at Wang Ming and took a second to speak.

“What were you doing?”

“Weren’t... you testing us, teacher?” Wang Ming swallowed hard with lingering fear.

“.....” Yuan Shuo could find no words for a response. Test your ass!

The fire heart ape had raged out of control for a split second and tried to resist. The uncontrolled blow had been a result of its defiance. Of course, it was under Yuan Shuo’s sway as it was locked up, so it was brought to heel again in the end. It was a greater surprise to the professor that Wang Ming was such a naive...ly stupid person!

Test? What test? What is there to test?

“Congratulations, teacher!” A joyful Li Hao straightened up from his roll and casually dusted himself off. Had his teacher succeeded? What was that chain? Dominators were martial masters, but that chain had come out of nowhere and crushed a Sunflare’s longsword of metal. This showed supernatural tendencies!

Did the blazing red chain have something to do with the spirit of the heart?

Yuan Shuo first looked at his contemplative student, then at Liu Long offering him a cupped fist salute. He smiled faintly. “This is just the beginning, there is nothing to congratulate!” He glanced outside as he spoke—the sky was brightening.

Wang Ming came back to his senses and wiped off blood from the corner of his mouth. He looked dumbly at Yuan Shuo. “Teacher... what was that?”

Yuan Shuo was a martial master! A characteristic of martial masters was that they were invincible in close quarters and feeble at long range. He knew of the Dominators’ aura, but that chain had not felt like the aura. It was a long range attack!

A Dominator had instantaneously smashed his sword of mysterious power! It was incredible and incomprehensible!

“Who says that martial masters can only attack close at hand?” Yuan Shuo looked at him sideways. “Did you think I couldn’t do anything to you because you were far away from me?”

“No... that’s not what I...”

“That’s exactly what you meant!” Yuan Shuo chuckled.

Wang Ming smiled sheepishly. He’d thought that he would be able to at least run for his life from Yuan Shuo once he reached Sunflare. He wouldn’t be able to withstand the professor, of course, but that blow sent his head spinning.

“Alright, all of you, come in!” Yuan Shuo turned without speaking further and entered the house, followed by Li Hao and the others. The professor’s hair was unkempt and he entered the bathroom to shower without attending to his guests.

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Wang Ming grew animated as soon as Yuan Shuo left. “That attack was incredible...” he exclaimed. “How did teacher do it?”

To attack through the air and leave no room for him to respond... it was terrifying!

Li Hao didn’t say anything. Liu Long was also thinking back to the blow. What kind of secret technique was that? He’d never seen it before. It wasn’t a weapon—he wouldn’t need to be so shocked if it was. It’d felt like a supernatural ability!

Was Yuan Shuo a supernatural then? Had he crossed over from Dominator and become a Solar?

All sorts of thoughts ran through his head. The group fell silent for a while. Yuan Shuo walked back out in a set fresh clothing after eight minutes. He sat down in a chair, his hair still dripping wet.

“What are you all looking at?” he chuckled when the four looked at him. “Still thinking about it? It’s not a supernatural ability, it’s one of martial dao! I told you long ago that martial masters are not any worse than supernaturals, that they are stronger! Subduing the five visceral organs is key—I subdued the heart. The heart corresponds to fire, which makes it look similar to fire supernaturals. In reality, it’s completely different!

“Supernaturals employ mysterious power, but I use the aura, the consciousness!”

“A physical manifestation of the consciousness??” Liu Long gasped. Was that possible? The consciousness was just a kind of aura, a kind of pressure. How could it be tangible?

“Don’t think too much.” Yuan Shuo glanced at him and collected his thoughts. “I’ll tell you one thing—nurture your organs with internal force! Your aura of water can be directed more toward the kidneys.”

Liu Long raised an eyebrow. Wang Ming also looked at him with shock and surprise. The director didn't react at first, but when he did, his expression chilled. "And what are you thinking of?"

Wang Ming coughed drily. Nothing! He laughed awkwardly and winked at Li Hao, as if saying, "The director has kidney problems! So he'll have problems with... ahem ahem!"

Li Hao was speechless. Not only did Wang Ming not understand any of this, but his mind seemed to be filled with random crap. Although his teacher hadn't said so outright, telling Liu Long to nurture the five organs, especially his kidney, was a tacit guide to the next step.

His teacher had succeeded!

Li Hao was overjoyed, but didn't have time to say anything before Yuan Shuo said, "Everyone out. Li Hao stays!"

This indicated he was going to pass on private knowledge to his disciple. An honorary disciple like Wang Ming didn't have the right to secret knowledge like this.

Liu Long rose and left without a word. Liu Yan followed him after smiling at those in the house. Wang Ming however, was a bit reluctant. Why can't you tell me? But he, too, left after thinking about it.

Chapter 192: Fire Heart Ape, Nurturing the Spirit (II)

When everyone left, Yuan Shuo rumbled, "The five organs must be strong, very strong, or you'll easily die in the backlash! Second, while the supernatural locks are very durable, there are limitations to them. The prerequisite to melding the aura into the five viscera is gauging whether or not the lock can contain the aura!"

"Contain the aura?"

Yuan Shuo said nothing, he simply turned into a massive ape! A long chain was wrapped around him.

“Teacher, is that the supernatural lock?” Li Hao’s eyes shone with light.

“Correct!” responded the fire ape as it turned back into Yuan Shuo. “Or rather, it’s a bridge between the five viscera and the body...” The professor sank into deep thought. “These chains don’t just function as locks. They give me the sense that they lead to all of the secret stashes within the body! The human body is a vault and these chains have it locked away, but also serve as a link.

“We don’t necessarily have to break them... If we do, that means your secret stash is being released.”

Li Hao nodded thoughtfully. “Then, does this mean you’ve ascended, teacher?”

“No!” Yuan Shuo shook his head. “I’ve simply gained more enlightenment and made certain discoveries today. Cultivating the five organs at the same time is as difficult as ascending to the heavens! It is not simply vanquishing tens of thousands after Dominator. I only have one spirit in one of my viscera, so strictly speaking, I have not yet broken through. I’ve just taken one step further in the Dominator level and not yet officially surpassed it.

“In my view, one nurtures the spirit above Dominator. The five viscera summon their respective spirit! Perhaps this stage can be divided into five stages as each organ holds one spirit!”

Summoner of Spirit!

This was the name that Yuan Shuo gave this new cultivation level. Martial masters of this level restrain the spirits in order to nurture them.

“One has fully summoned the spirits when all five viscera contain their own. After the spirits are grown, it is time to access the secret locales of the five viscera. I would like to call that Refiner of Spirit!”

Slayer of Tens, Sunderer of Hundreds, Dominator of Thousands, Summoner of Spirit, Refiner of Spirit!

“Does a Summoner rival a Solar?” asked Li Hao.

“Just barely!” Yuan Shuo explained. “Don’t draw a direct parallel to the supernatural levels, there’s not much meaning in doing that. Only through battle will we know if Summoners can match Solars and if they are of the same level.

“But now that I have a fire heart ape after entering Summoner of Spirit, I feel that I might be able to match the previous Qiao Feilong in terms of pure strength!” [1] Plainly, Yuan Shuo felt that his current situation could be categorized thus; he viewed himself as an initial Summoner. This level focused on nurturing the spirits of the five elements. It would be an incredible feat once he succeeded.

“Teacher, you are truly beyond this world!” Li Hao exhaled. Yuan Shuo had blazed the path and broken through the defined hierarchy of martial dao!

“I’m only mapping it out in a general sense.” Yuan Shuo shook his head. “Many problems still exist, such as how does one meld the five spirits after they are summoned? Surely they’re not meant to be used separately all the time, that lowers their effectiveness.

“Additionally, is it better to nurture spirits one at a time, or summon them into all of the viscera at once? Which is ideal?

“Not everyone can withstand the breaking of this equilibrium. A cultivation level is greeted with universal acclaim when everyone can reach it, not just one person alone. Cultivation levels accessible to only one are not cultivation levels!”

A level that others could not set foot into was not a new cultivation level.

“I absorbed a lot of fire elemental energy to reach this stage, as well as your sword energy. No one else has access to these resources—how long will it take to nurture the five viscera then? A decade? Two? Fifty years?”

He couldn’t imagine how long it’d take to fortify the five viscera so they could withstand the aura if one had to cultivate step by painstaking step.

“Therefore, our breathing methods need to further improve at the Dominator level. It’s not enough to just adjust the body and strengthen the organs!” Yuan Shuo intoned. “The Breathing Method of the Five Styles is no longer sufficient. I felt that it didn’t matter after I entered Dominator, but now I debate how to improve the breathing method so it can nurture the five viscera as well. We need to make use of internal force and not the five elements, because only you have sword energy. That’s an external resource!”

Was everyone supposed to stop on the path of cultivation once sword energy was exhausted? Yuan Shuo thought further in this moment—how might he modify the breathing method so that this fundamental knowledge could strengthen the five organs? How would he make it accessible to all cultivators?

It wasn’t that he wanted to teach outsiders, but that his disciple needed to learn, as did future grand disciples. Were they supposed to always rely on Li Hao’s sword energy?

The young man admired his teacher’s desire to improve the Breathing Method of the Five Styles. Truth be told, he’d never considered this as he felt that sword energy was enough for the two of them. His teacher, however, looked to the distance. Yuan Shuo meant to advance the entire field of martial dao!

But was it possible?

Li Hao didn’t raise any objections as he could neither support nor convince his teacher otherwise in courses of action. They were on completely different planes!

“You have very good foundations as you’ve been strengthening the five viscera this entire time. It won’t be apparent at your current level, but once you set foot into Dominator, you’ll save a lot of time compared to other people and may be able to immediately summon your spirits!” Yuan Shuo sighed with emotion. “You might surpass me one day... The speed in which I nurture my other four viscera may not match yours.”

“Teacher, you can also absorb sword energy to swiftly develop them!”

Yuan Shuo smiled and tossed the little sword to Li Hao. “Tell me what you sense!”

Li Hao quickly operated the Breathing Method of the Five Styles when he caught it. “Is it almost empty?” he asked with resignation

The sword seemed to be running out!

“I absorbed a little more than planned over the past couple of days because my heart couldn’t take it,” Yuan Shuo coughed drily. “I didn’t dare claim the last drops of energy because we don’t have time to seek out the other stone doors. We might have use for it at Rift Canyon, so I saved a little in case of dire need.”

It really was almost entirely depleted! Li Hao had used a great deal of the refill from the stone door, Yuan Shuo had absorbed a good amount to summon his spirit, so it was fast on its way to fully empty.

Very well then! Li Hao quite understood why his teacher wanted to modify the Breathing Method of the Five Styles. If he didn’t and there were no more stone doors to be found, were they supposed to stop cultivating after sword energy was exhausted?

Yuan Shuo said nothing else; he was actually a little embarrassed. He’d had to draw on the sword to save his life. Sword energy could always be replenished, but Li Hao would be in great trouble if his teacher died.

The professor then went over some of the problems, troubles, and potential situations he'd run into throughout the course of nurturing his spirits. He might be the only one with such experience. It was hard to say if Dominators in other regions had also set foot into this level. If there were, they wouldn't walk the same path.

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Master and disciple conversed for roughly half an hour. The two walked out of the house after a while; they were greeted by the sight of others in conversation. It was mostly Wang Ming doing the talking as he was a young man of more words and questions galore.

"Teacher, have you ascended to Vanquisher of Thousands?" Wang Ming asked excitedly when he saw the two emerge.

"....." What Vanquisher of Thousands! Yuan Shuo shook his head.

The young supernatural drooped slightly. No? What a pity! He was at least Yuan Shuo's honorary disciple. If the professor really had broken through, the young man would be able to make use of this relationship and give himself a strong patron, no?

Liu Long cast a few glances at Yuan Shuo and didn't ask anything. He'd vaguely understood that it might have to do with the next step when Yuan Shuo told him to nurture the five viscera as soon as they met. The director had been feeling quite lost after entering Dominator. What should he do next? How could he improve?

There was a lot to do after reaching Dominator, such as strengthening his aura and internal force. The roads had just unrolled in front of him, but they were also attainable given sufficient time. There would come a day in which his internal force and aura could not be stronger.

What then? There was no path!

Today, Yuan Shuo provided a hint.

“Do we move out today, Elder Yuan?” Liu Long didn’t mention anything at hand. “Director Hao and the others traveled to Rift Canyon a long time ago. It will take us at least a day to make the trip and we might run into trouble along the way. We’ll have to proceed on foot when we’re close to the canyon. We’re setting out a bit late, so we might not make it in time.”

They were almost out of time and still needed to rest after they arrived. He was concerned that Yuan Shuo wouldn’t be able to move at the moment. Closed door cultivation of many days was a significant drain on resources.

“Let’s set out! All we need is some food!” Yuan Shuo chuckled. “Hao Lianchuan is probably beside himself with anxiety and cursing all of us!”

The agreed upon time was yesterday. The others might be there, but he wasn’t. The director had to be cursing up a storm!

Liu Long also chuckled, this was highly likely.

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At the same time, Rift Canyon.

Hao Lianchuan was indeed swearing inside a tent. He was supremely irritated. “Find a way to get a message to Silver City, what is Yuan Shuo doing??”

The professor didn’t seem to have set out yet! It was already the 26th and Silver City was approximately one thousand kilometers away. The roads weren’t easy to take and not everyone in

that group could fly. They might have to cover the last bit on foot, were they trying to make it down to the wire?

But it would consume a lot of resources for martial masters to walk here, wouldn't that just be reading trouble for himself?

Hao Lianchuan didn't understand it. Was Yuan Shuo throwing his weight around so much that he'd forgotten martial masters could not fly? Did he think his Birdshot technique could cover a thousand kilometers?"

"Don't be in a rush, Director Hou," said a middle-aged woman beside him. "There's no need to be in a rush now. The other factions won't dare start the expedition without Yuan Shuo. He's the leading expert in this field, after all..."

Hao Lianchuan cursed inwardly instead of responding. That was easy to say! The key thing was that the 28th was the most suitable day for explorations; it was why the Night Watchers had chosen this date. They might have to wait a month if they missed this day, and who knew what would happen during this time?

Chapter 193: Joint Administration From Nine Offices (I)

"Do you want me to bring them here?" asked a brawny man in a muffled voice. "Or have Huang Yun go?"

Huang Yun was extremely fast and skilled at moving through the earth.

"That's alright!" Hao Lianchuan shook his head. "Now is not a good time to leave—everyone's keeping an eye on everyone else. Be careful of being assassinated if you move by yourself."

There wasn't much danger to Yuan Shuo as one, it would cause a great disturbance if one of the powerhouses left and two, everyone still hoped that the professor could be involved in the expedition. Thus, they wouldn't raise a hand against him in the short term.

Hao Lianchuan breathed out heavily and changed to a solemn topic. “Has anyone caught sight of Sun Yifei?”

“No, but someone in Rift Canyon saw him by the bridge a few days ago...”

True worry appeared in Hao Lianchuan’s face. Would Sun Yifei attack Yuan Shuo before the excavation began? If that was the case, all sides would erupt in war before anyone entered the ruins. The Night Watchers would never let Yuan Shuo die like this.

What a hassle!

“These people were the instigators of bedlam in the history of Silver Moon’s martial world,” someone sighed explosively. “People died everyday then. Now that Sun Yifei is back and Yuan Shuo is coming... the chaos of the martial world won’t be returning too, will it?”

The assembly immediately fell silent. Some still recalled the events of decades ago!

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Silver City.

Li Hao and the others hopped into a car—it was Liu Long driving. There was quite a distance between Silver City and Rift Canyon. He wasn’t at ease letting Li Hao or Wang Ming drive.

There were four humans and a dog in the car. Panther had beelined for the car and jumped straight in. Neither Li Hao nor Yuan Shuo minded. If Panther didn’t go where the two of them went, that would make it a stray dog. They would come back together if possible. If not, all three could go down together in the ruins.

The passenger seat.

Liu Yan was in charge of relaying intelligence. Some came from the Night Watchers, some from Silver City's own efforts.

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"Rift Canyon is approximately one thousand kilometers away. It's very wide at another one thousand kilometers across. Widely regarded as a calamity for birds, it extends three hundred meters into the earth at its deepest and several dozen meters at its shallowest.

"Rock cliffs form both sides and some ruins can be found in its depths. Based on ancient records, it might have been a city in times long past. The entire city was buried in the canyon after the ground caved in.

"On this expedition are the Silver Moon branches of the three great organizations, two mid-sized organizations, and fourteen small organizations. This does not rule out the participation of independent supernaturals!" Liu Yan looked back at Li Hao. While Wang Ming and Yuan Shuo most likely understood the situation, Li Hao did not. "Based on our information, supernatural organizations with Solars are considered mid-sized. Those with only Sunflares are small organizations. On this excavation, the mid-sized organizations can possibly match the three great organizations. The three greats have not stationed their main force in the province, whereas the mid-sized organization may be sending out most of theirs!"

Li Hao nodded as he knew she was talking to him.

"Of the two mid-sized organizations, one is called Light Island and the other is Sword Sect," Liu Yan continued.

Li Hao nodded again and his teacher suddenly interjected, "The leader of Sword Sect should be the Earthturner Sword of the Seven Swords—Hong Yitang."

“Do you know him, teacher?” Li Hao wasn’t asking whether or not his teacher knew the man, but if there was a grudge between the two. Please speak frankly! You killed three of the Seven Swords and even obtained the heritage of the Ghost Shadow Sword! So how severe is the grudge between the two of you?

“There’s no enmity between us!” Yuan Shuo huffed as he grasped the connotations behind his student’s question. “I’m not familiar with him. The guy was more low profile back in the day—some of the other Swords were more prominent, some more mysterious. The Earthturner Sword was neither here nor there. He didn’t stand out or catch the eye. Not many people like him died then as no one would really come kicking down his door!”

“.....” The rest didn’t know what to say. Kick down his door? So that’s what all of you guys did in those times?

“Is the Sword Sect’s swordmaster Hong Yitang?” asked Liu Long from the driver’s seat. “There’s nothing about that in our intelligence and come to think of it, my father was in touch with the Earthturner Sword back in the day...”

“Don’t try to call on old ties, there’s no point!” Yuan Shuo remarked faintly. “Your father’s been dead for many years, so whatever relationship they might’ve had scattered long ago!”

It was as if the lights were extinguished when one died in the martial world. Unless it was a friendship for the ages, a descendant would gain nothing after the person in question was dead for so many years. What relationship was there to speak of?

Liu Long said nothing further.

“Does this mean a lot of martial master powerhouses from those times have crossed over to the supernatural world?” Li Hao couldn’t help but ask. “Why do we see so few of them in the Night Watchers?”

Whether it was Hao Lianchuan or Hou Xiaochen, neither were renowned martial masters before they became supernatural.

Yuan Shuo remained silent.

“Um... I know a little about this,” Wang Ming whispered. “Silver Moon’s martial world was a chaotic bed of unrest in that era. Martial masters rampaged through the land even in the early days of supernatural rise. When the Night Watchers were established, the orders from upstairs were that we should avoid recruiting martial masters whenever possible!”

The Skystar Dynasty had even outlawed martial activity for a while! This was all due to the sheer mayhem caused by martial masters. While martial masters didn’t harbor ambitions of supremacy like modern day supernaturals did, they were more brazen, unscrupulous, and wanton.

They could fill the countryside with corpses in their quest to become greatest beneath the heavens. If you attack me today, I’ll attack you tomorrow!

Thus, the Night Watchers didn’t dare add martial masters to their ranks. That made for a scarcity of former martial masters to be found among the agency’s ranks. It was at the supernatural organizations and their complete lack of scruples that martial masters could be found aplenty. Some organizations were even founded by martial masters.

“There will certainly be Solars from the three great organizations among the expedition,” Liu Yan continued. “As for how many and who, we have no information on that. The two mid-sized organizations will likely also send Solars. Meanwhile, we will see plenty of Sunflares from the fourteen small organizations. Director Hao is leading the Night Watcher team and we’ve sent seven Sunflares ourselves.”

The Night Watchers had fielded quite an expedition team as well. Yuan Shuo kept his eyes closed in repose as he listened to Liu Yan’s overview.

“Don’t pay attention to only the people.” He opened his eyes. “There’s also the ruins themselves to consider! When I explored them three years ago, I nearly died there!”

The injury to his heart was from that excavation.

“A Sunflare led the team, but he died there. We also had some Darkmoons with us. Keep in mind that Sunflares were very valuable three years ago. The supernatural has developed so quickly that three years ago, all Sunflares had hope to become Solars!”

“That’s right!” Wang Ming piped up when he thought of something. “I’d just joined the agency three years ago and remember a supreme powerhouse dying on that mission, along with some Darkmoons...”

Yuan Shuo ignored him and continued, “Those ruins are not ordinary ruins. They’re an ancient city!”

Ruins were delineated by size. A grave could be called a ruin, but the one on the agenda this time was a city! Of course, the bigger the ruin, the greater the harvest and opportunities.

“An ancient city?” A solemn Liu Long kept his eyes on the road. “An underground city?”

“Yes!” Yuan Shuo responded calmly. “A city buried beneath the ground, but it retains its original appearance due to the presence of an ultimate treasure. That treasure envelops the city and is what the Night Watchers want!”

A city buried underground, yet preserved in full because a treasure had halted the immense destruction resulting from landslides.

“One treasure can protect an entire city?” Liu Long’s eyes widened. Could it still safeguard the city after all these years and changes wrought by time?

“It can.” Yuan Shuo nodded. “A treasure like that does indeed exist! That’s why the entire supernatural domain of Silver Moon has gone into a frenzy. Even though the Night Watchers and three great organizations do not get along and are at each other’s throats in the central region, they are willing to explore together for this purpose.

“Profit propels the heart. How many other treasures must reside in a pristine ancient city? Ancient tomes, origin weapons, ancient technology, martial dao and supernatural knowledge of the ancient era... Perhaps all of that awaits discovery. There might also be other rarities that are mightier than we can imagine!”

The professor murmured to himself when he recalled a certain memory. “I excavated a ruin once, not a big one, but guess what I found?”

No one had an idea; they listened raptly.

“A tree!” Yuan Shuo revealed. “A tree that had been buried for countless eons. It’d withered away, leaving only its trunk behind. No one paid attention to it at first, but when someone accidentally knocked a hole into the trunk, everyone felt a powerful force—vitality!”

The professor was both nostalgic and yearned for the tree of his memories. “We saw a drop of water, a different kind of water, buried in the center of the trunk. It evaporated as soon as the trunk was opened, but the power it exuded caused some of the ancient trees around it to spontaneously bud and grow branches. They instantly turned into towering trees. When we were swept by the power, all of us felt that we’d become ten years younger!” Yuan Shuo shook his head with wonder.

“It has much to do with that drop of water that I can maintain prime condition at seventy years of age. If it wasn’t for my injuries, I might’ve even set foot into Dominator. This is a rarity, a gem left by the ancient civilization!”

Emotions swelled in the car! A drop of water sealed for tens of millions of years had reverse-aged people and elicited new growth from old trees when it evaporated. What kind of treasure was this??

It was unimaginable!

Seventy years old was indeed the beginning of decline for martial masters. But Yuan Shuo still had his sights set on Dominator when he was seventy. It was a pity that he was injured, or he might've succeeded a long time ago.

“Elder Yuan, are there treasures like that in this city?” Liu Long rumbled.

“I don't know, but it's possible,” Yuan Shuo responded. “This ancient city has yet to be excavated because we've been unable to enter it. To be more exact, we made it to its outskirts. Just the outskirts alone killed a lot of our people.

“The outskirts? What's the source of danger there?” Liu Long continued to ask. Yuan Shuo was one of the few who knew these things; others who also knew might not be as forthcoming.

“I'm not entirely sure what it is.” The professor hummed uncertainly to himself. “Sparks exploded when we entered the area and burned a lot of people to death!

“That was only the beginning. Countless blades shot out of the darkness not long after that and killed many people. Finally, when there was only me and the Sunflare left, we heard footsteps...”

Footsteps??

Living people?!

The others jerked with shock. There were people alive in the city? How was that possible?? How many years had it been since the city stood in the ancient times?

No one was sure; it was impossible to determine. The era recorded in the ancient records was completely cut off from present day. It was now the time of the Star Calendar. There couldn't be anyone alive in a city like this, even if it'd been perfectly preserved!

They would've long decomposed to nothing!

Chapter 194: Joint Administration From Nine Offices (II)

"It was indeed footsteps we heard, but of course, they might've belonged to a puppet." Yuan Shuo couldn't determine if the source had been living or not. "In any case, we only heard the footsteps and didn't see their source. But we were ambushed—an existence in the darkness attacked us! It was very strong, I only saw a flash of light before the Sunflare died!

"I quickly ran away and couldn't divert enough attention to the dangers we'd encountered before. A sharp blade drove itself through my heart. Thankfully, I am a martial master and my internal force can contain itself. I hastily sealed off the hole and was lucky to make it out alive."

The professor sighed. "I don't actually want to come back to this blasted place, but I must. The Night Watchers have sent in people over the years, but very few survive and most don't discover anything. Therefore, they wish for me to help them explore again."

"So teacher, does this mean you didn't actually see anything?" Li Hao frowned.

"I saw some things," Yuan Shuo chuckled. "I saw many things at first. There was even some light for us to see the entire city by! The darkness didn't appear until later, like someone had turned off the lights. From what the Night Watchers report back, later expeditions were met with nothing but pitch black!

"All of us must be careful. Very, extremely careful." Yuan Shuo hesitated before saying, "I'll tell you a secret that you're not allowed to share with others!"

The group quickly nodded.

“Keep one thing in mind after you head instead, try not to leave the ground!”

Leave the ground? What did that mean?

“Do you mean we should stand in place?” Wang Ming quickly asked.

“Not that,” Yuan Shuo said softly. “I mean try not to take to the air if possible. Don’t fly. I suspect there’s an anti-flight restriction in the ancient city. A lot of people died that day, and the conclusion I eventually reached was that it might have had something to do with the fact that they all flew or jumped. This isn’t to say that you cannot leave the ground at all, but that there are certain limitations in place. Also, take note if there’s the sound of footsteps around you.”

A city that may have prohibitions over its airspace. Any violation of the rules resulted in death, and it was still in operation despite eons of burial. What terrifying technology!

Modern day cities could not do this by far. If there was an anti-flight restriction, it had to be enforced manually. Visual confirmation had to take place. Any that were overlooked would be permitted to carry on.

“Don’t tell anyone about any of this!” Yuan Shuo said meaningfully. “The Night Watchers have gained some of this intelligence, but a lot of the other organizations are exploring the city for the first time! The more the city takes out, the better!”

Everyone nodded again. Such was the benefit of experience. Yuan Shuo had come back with certain gains after surviving his encounter.

“There are many more dangers apart from this,” Yuan Shuo continued. “Threats might appear around any corner. Remember another thing—don’t touch anything. Don’t even touch the ancient weapons and treasures that you see. Danger might come for you if you disturb them.”

“We can’t touch them?” Wang Ming asked with disappointment. “Then what are we exploring for? If any treasures we find have to remain untouched, aren’t we just on a field trip to our deaths?”

What was the point in that?

“Their main target is inside the city! They believe that the key to controlling the city is at its core. It might be the origin weapon that envelops the entire metropolis! Whoever claims the origin weapon will reap all the profits. Therefore, everyone’s primary goal should be the origin weapon!”

An origin weapon that could shroud an entire city and still operate after countless years of suppression beneath the earth—how strong would it be?

Some supernatural organizations lacked a solid base. If they claimed the ultimate prize and could subsequently withstand the Night Watchers’ annihilation level weapons, they would be able to swiftly forge a massive city and migrate some citizens over. That would create a sound bulwark to their rear and truly make their name!

Supernatural organizations were mysterious affairs even to this day. It was one of the reasons why they didn’t dare reveal their headquarters. Solars and Sunflares might be able to escape being locked onto by hot weapons, but the weaker members couldn’t. Once their weaker members were dead, the organization was dead. Without a future and just a few powerhouses, what kind of organization was this?

“Then this means everyone’s going to be gunning for the origin weapon inside the city,” Li Hao thought for a bit. “I understand this motivation coming from the mid-sized organizations, but the small ones? Do Sunflares want to lay hands on it too?”

In their dreams!

“That’s not it.” Yuan Shuo shook his head. “Their primary goal is the treasures inside the city. They want a piece of the pie after the larger organizations claim the origin weapon. They don’t know that they can’t touch the other treasures, so they’re all here for a share of the profits. Not only that, but why shouldn’t they fight for a chance to possibly claim the origin weapon?”

“If they get it, they can throw everything else away,” Yuan Shuo chuckled. “Who cares about the organizations or their homeland then? Take the origin weapon elsewhere and hide for a period of time. They can show themselves when they’ve grown into their strength. Who will dare provoke them then? Therefore, some are here with that kind of mentality.”

Li Hao was well aware of the benefits of the origin weapon. Take Stellaris, for example. No matter how it was as a treasure, the energy it contained was incredible. Li Hao’s fast rate of improvement and Yuan Shuo setting foot into Summoner of Spirit all had to do with the little sword.

An origin weapon that could protect an entire city was also plainly incredible beyond words. It could withstand endless eons of dirt and rock, holding up against pressure exerted by hundreds of millions of tons of matter. What if that power was used to protect one person? Would it mean that no one in the world could smash such defenses?

Invincible defensive power!

Li Hao thought back to what his teacher said to him last night, that this ancient city might have something to do with the eight families. The professor seemed to recall seeing a turtle on the gates to the city.

Indeed, a turtle.

There was a line in the folk song of a big turtle kept by the Wangs. Although that made for a forced connection between the eight families and the ancient city, if the eight families had been mighty in the ancient civilization, the ruins were only one thousand kilometers away from Silver City. Would this ancient city have nothing to do with a nearby satellite city?

It was one thousand kilometers now, what if the two cities had been very close in ancient times? If all powerhouses were as fast as the swordsman that Li Hao had seen, what did a thousand kilometers matter?

Modern day flight supernaturals could cross this distance in roughly three hours. Powerhouses of that era might instantly bridge the distance! One thousand meters was no separation at all.

Thus, when his teacher mentioned that the city might have something to do with the eight families and that the origin weapon might be the turtle of the Wangs, Li Hao started pondering what he might be able to do this time.

Stone door, ancient city...

Did the stone door have something to do with this ancient city? His teacher guessed that there were eight stone doors total and that the indentation at the one they'd visited could be filled by either a turtle shell or mallet. It was a round shape, in any case. Could the turtle shell here be the key to opening that stone door?

The car left Silver City as the group conversed. Li Hao had rarely left the city since birth. He'd visited the neighboring city once when his parents still lived, then stayed in Silver City after growing up. He might be least knowledgeable about this world out of everyone in the car.

They continued driving down the road when the car exited Silver City. It was a very spacious road that made for easy driving.

"You look like you've never seen this before," Wang Ming laughed heartily as he knew Li Hao didn't know anything. "This is a road that Skystar Dynasty built two years ago. The government wished for roads to cross all ninety-nine provinces to better administer their territory, but things have been a mess since the rise of the supernatural.

"Some places are inaccessible as the roads weren't maintained. Some were repaired, but there's been a lack of chances, labor, and resources to maintain the rest after all these years. Therefore, many roads are impassable throughout the land.

"Some people even purposefully destroy the roads so they can break free of the dynasty's control," Wang Ming sighed. "There are nearly ten billion people scattered over ninety-nine provinces! One

province is a kingdom unto itself. The overseers of some places have long wished to be independent.

“Silver Moon is part of the borderlands and it’s rare that we are so quiet.”

The borderlands...

The ninety-nine provinces were so vast that they covered more than half of the world. But that didn’t mean this territory ran without end. To the north of Silver Moon and past a few mountain ranges was another nation. However, Skystar citizens rarely paid attention to it.

There was once war between the two sides, possibly one hundred years ago. Silver City had been the heart of Silver Moon then. It was a city of war that could wage battles against their neighboring nation. But after one hundred years, the two countries were nearly completely isolated from each other.

Silver City was no longer a strategic locale and Skystar Dynasty had almost forgotten there was another nation on the other side of the mountain. The importance of the border greatly decreased.

Without enemies, the borders represented nothing but distance. Who cared about a piddling little nation who hadn’t dared attack for one hundred years? Apparently, their territory wasn’t even as big as Silver Moon.

Even Li Hao had only read about the other side in books. His father and grandfather’s generation had had no dealings with them. There was no war. He vaguely recalled that the other side was called Great Li.

As for why it was called thus, what its governing system was, what its population numbered, had the supernatural appeared among them... no one knew. No one cared!

There'd been no war for a hundred years and there were several massive mountain ranges in between. They were nearly two different worlds. The Skystar Dynasty could barely keep ahold of its ninety-nine provinces, so who had time to spare for the other side?

A province on the fringes like Silver Moon was very unimportant these years. If it wasn't for some of her powerhouses still being active in the scene, the people might've forgotten that the dynasty had such a province.

Chapter 195: Joint Administration From Nine Ministries (III)

Various thoughts floated to the fore of Li Hao's mind. He gazed upon rises and falls of the grassy plain around them, watching wild rabbits cross the road. Trees lined the road, some withered away, some snapped into two. It didn't seem likely that anyone was maintaining this road either.

"Silver Moon's not too chaotic, so why is the provincial government so lax when it comes to the surroundings around the cities?" asked Li Hao. The others might understand this, but he truly didn't.

"The supernatural world appeared twenty years ago and the Night Watchers were formed after that." Being a White Moon native and hailing from a powerful family, Wang Ming more or less knew some of the particulars. "The agency's formation didn't have much of an impact at first, but as the land's powerhouses grew stronger, the Night Watchers needed to wield more authority.

"Conflict already existed between the provincial council, army headquarters, and Night Watchers. While it wasn't large-scale conflict, it existed all the same, particularly from the provincial council. The provincial council directly answers to the dynastic government, yet the Night Watchers are under the Inspectorate. Though they're not of the same system, the provincial council has long wished to take Night Watcher reins. And so some clashes occurred..."

Li Hao looked on silently. It looked like struggles for power were inevitable no matter where one was.

"Has Skystar Dynasty lost control over the provinces?" the young man continued asking.

“I don’t know,” Wang Ming answered with a half smile. “They say that roughly twenty provinces are still under dynastic control. But apart from that, the dynasty does not exercise authority in the other regions.”

Three-fourths of their domain was out of control! This exceeded Li Hao’s expectations! He’d thought that only a province here or there was disorderly, but to think that all of the others were intractable apart from two dozen!

Skystar Dynasty was the first dynasty in all of history to unify the land. When it came to unification, one didn’t mean just a few provinces—it was all of the central plains! Everything beneath the heavens had been conquered!

Only some of the more remote kingdoms, such as the Great Li Dynasty, were deemed too small and too far to be worth the effort. Separated by multiple mountain ranges, they remained unconquered.

It’d taken fifty years of battle to conquer the land and establish the dynasty. It was nearly two hundred years since its founding and the imperial family had long retreated behind the scenes.

Eighty years ago, Skystar Dynasty proposed a system of joint administration from nine ministries. The imperial family then stepped behind the curtains to enjoy the fruits of their labor, but no longer participated in actual government. That was given over to the nine ministries, of which one was the Inspectorate!

Of course, not a small branch like the one in Silver City, but its headquarters. Even now, the Night Watchers were grouped under the Inspectorate. It was a testament to its strength that it could stand toe-to-toe with the dynasty’s military faction and local army.

The local army was relevant only to Silver Moon—it answered to the Ministry of Military Justice. All of the dynasty’s military power answered to this ministry.

The Ministry of the Inspectorate was in charge of local security. In some ways, it was weaker than Military Justice, but it oversaw more matters and thus boasted of more personnel in its ranks. It was more deeply involved in the dynasty’s particulars.

“The Night Watchers are still the government’s only official supernatural agency,” Wang Ming continued. “But I hear that the central region is starting to build other supernatural agencies! The Skystar Troops that the Ministry of Military Justice is forming are said to be all supernaturals.

“The Ministry of Administration is creating a Supervisory Office, apparently to recruit supernaturals.

“The Ministry of Commerce is establishing the Trade Security Committee, also to recruit supernaturals...”

Li Hao listened intently, these were the trends of the times! He hadn’t paid attention or cared about them before. He’d yet to explore all of Silver City, much less the world. The world was big, far too big! Many were those who never walked out of Silver City, and if they did, many were those who never walked out of Silver Moon!

What central region, what nine ministries, what imperial family... Everything was far too removed.

“Then why don’t all of the ministries build up the Night Watchers together?” he asked.

“Heh!” Wang Ming laughed, as did Yuan Shuo and the others.

“Such is balance!” Yuan Shuo called out. “You’re too young, Li Hao. The Inspectorate is just one of the nine ministries. The supernatural wasn’t that strong when the agency was first formed, so it was fine to give it jurisdiction over the supernatural world. But now that the supernatural grows stronger by the day, do you think the other eight ministries are comfortable letting the Inspectorate oversee all of that domain?”

Very well then! Li Hao understood the logic, but he still felt that the government should concentrate its strength when facing the various supernatural organizations. It was too decentralized as things stood.

“Have the three great organizations grown so powerful?” The young man frowned. “To a certain degree, most of the ninety-nine provinces still listen to the nine ministries. Add to that hot weapons that operate on a large scale... are we unable to bring the three great organizations to heel?”

“It’s not that simple!” Yuan Shuo was the one to answer as he had more knowledge. “We’re not sure how strong the three great organizations are either, and they definitely have some provincial backing! The provinces use them to plague the central region and curb the dynasty’s power. They seek independence and supply intelligence, weapons, people, and resources to the organizations. Meanwhile, the organizations are comprised of supernaturals with perplexing methods of operation and numerous heavyweights. Thus, it’s hard to eliminate them!”

There wasn’t a singular, straightforward reason for why the supernatural world had risen to such prominence. An important reason was that it had significant backing. The dynasty had been in control for two hundred years and ruled over ten billion people. Troubled times were upon the world and Skystar was losing control. Many ambitious characters hoped for the world to grow even more chaotic and for the government to fully lose control!

This was common knowledge, but what of it? There was no evidence of anyone’s ulterior motives, and even if there was, the highly placed personages ready to mutiny had long made their preparations. A chain reaction would occur as soon as they were threatened.

The entire world would spontaneously collapse.

“I will not make considerations or pass judgment since I do not sit in that position!” sighed Li Hao as he didn’t fully understand their rationale. “Based on my thoughts, governance by the nine ministries is an optimal system. Apparently, the times were truly chaotic eighty years ago when the imperial family still held power. No one checked their authority and they randomly killed innocents, haphazardly proclaimed judgment, and utilized an unclear set of laws and regulations. That was real disarray! But now that the nine ministries jointly administer the land, commerce booms, agriculture prospers, urbanization increases, everyone goes to sleep with a full belly, and all manner of technology is improving...”

What was the point of overthrowing the order of things? It was the people who suffered when unrest gripped the world. The young man regarded the nine ministries with a certain favorable light.

While they weren't completely fair and held their share of problems, at least no one in Silver City had heard of anyone dying from hunger in eighty years of ministry rule.

That had been a common occurrence eighty years ago.

Now that the imperial family was curtailed, it wasn't as unbridled as in years past, despite exercising numerous privileges. It kept an exceedingly low profile—wasn't this a good system of governance?

Did the lofty personages up there wish to be the next emperor? But after experiencing the rule of the nine ministries, did the people want an emperor over their heads again?

Li Hao was willing to bet that if the general public was polled right now, ninety-nine percent of the population would not be willing to be under the fist of an emperor. The rest were either idiots or would somehow benefit from an imperial arrangement. How could one succeed without support from the citizenry?

While those were his thoughts, he didn't voice them. All of this was too far removed from him, it was the concern of greater characters. Silver Moon didn't show signs of wanting independence, or perhaps he was too far down in the rank and file and completely oblivious to the desires of those higher.

The car sped over the road, leaving Silver City behind until it vanished in the rearview mirror.

.....

“A car's coming!”

The road was damaged beyond repair on Rift Canyon's outskirts, less than fifty kilometers from the canyon proper. It used to run straight through the terrain, to Rift Bridge at its end. The bridge that

spanned the entire canyon had cost a colossal amount of effort and resources to build. It'd been blown up a dozen years ago, severing the connection between north and south of the province.

North and south were fully connected when Rift Bridge stood. Commerce flowed freely between the cities of either side in a thriving picture of prosperity. Now that north and south were separated, the entire province's economy had shrunk.

Silver Moon made multiple attempts to rebuild the bridge, but they ended without result. Fewer and fewer people these days raised the idea of restoring Rift Bridge.

Someone at the end of the road stared at the approaching car and muttered, "Do we rob it?"

"Do you have a death wish?! Can't you see that's an Inspectorate car?"

"So what? It's not like the Inspectorate's hand stretches here!"

Murmuring could be heard behind a massive boulder. The Inspectorate was an organization of note, but that was within city walls. What of it outside the cities? It'd long lost its prestige upon the rise of the supernatural. It was one thing if it was Night Watchers in the car, but even they had to exercise caution in the wilderness.

Several martial masters and Starlight conversed quietly from their cover. In modern society, those who dared commit robbery in the wild were no ordinary people. Certain martial masters and Starlight were weak, yet unwilling to answer to others. Thus, they turned to a life of robbery and thievery.

If they were lucky, they nabbed a few treasures for themselves. If not and they ran into a powerhouse, then that was the way the chips fell. Since they were unlucky, they were wood on the chopping block for their would-be targets.

As the conversation carried on, the current speaker suddenly realized there was no sound around him. His face drained of color when he looked back and he twitched to get away, but a staff slammed down and smashed his head to pieces!

Three people walked out from behind the boulder. They were two young men and one young woman; eight corpses lay strewn around them. Some had been smashed to death by a staff, others had their throats crushed.

Chapter 196: Letter of Challenge (I)

Sun Moxian walked at the head of the trio and considered the car in the distance.

“Is that them?” he asked softly.

“It should be!” the young woman murmured.

“Why doesn’t master come here and kill this Yuan Shuo?” frowned the youngest—a Slayer. “What are we issuing a letter of challenge for?”

Indeed, a letter of challenge. Sun Yifei was neither here in person nor in hiding. He sent his disciples to intercept Yuan Shuo on the route that the professor was sure to take. He wanted to openly deliver a letter of challenge in public view!

“This is the custom of the martial master world,” Sun Moxian replied softly. “Remember this, junior brother! When master agreed to fight Old Demon Yuan and lost at Rift Bridge, that resulted in an internal demon...”

“An internal demon?”

“It’s not what you think, it might be better described as a lingering knot of emotion. Master left for distant lands after losing to Yuan Shuo. He then crossed over to the supernatural and became a Solar, but still bears the name of the defeated in the world of martial dao! If he wishes to redeem

himself, he must issue an open challenge to Old Demon Yuan and emerge victorious. Only then will he wash away the disgrace of yesteryear!”

“But...” The Slayer junior brother didn’t understand. Was there a need for this? It was a different style from the central region.

In the central region, strength was king. It was enough to win—there was no need for letters of challenge or whatnot. One could win through even ambush or assassination. The dead had no right to talk. Since master was stronger than Yuan Shuo, he should charge over and smack the old man to death! Who would dare say his master was lesser then?

“These are the rules of Silver Moon’s martial world!” Sun Moxian repeated in solemn tones. “Be on good behavior in a moment.”

“Huh?” The young man and woman looked strangely at him. Be on good behavior?

“This is Yuan Shuo—Old Demon Yuan!” As their senior brother, Sun Moxian had to remind them. “He is merciless and cruel, the murderer of half of Silver Moon’s martial world back in the day. We are here to deliver a challenge, not to die. If he kills us for perceived slights, we’ll have died for nothing, even if master kills him!”

The two sucked in sharp breaths, that was true. They faced an absolute fiend! This was an existence that’d killed countless people.

The trio said nothing else and began waiting. The car in front of them slowed to a halt. The rest of the road would jolt the vehicle too much, so the occupants might as well walk. Four humans and a dog alighted after a moment.

.....

Liu Long walked in front, Yuan Shuo behind him. After a while, Liu Long looked into the distance with a faint frown. He furrowed his brows. “There’s a scent of blood!”

Blood was in the air as soon as they arrived near Rift Canyon. There was almost no one to be found here, had a fight broken out between the supernaturals?

Yuan Shuo didn't say anything—he simply looked in the relevant direction and continued walking forward. Li Hao also swept a glance over the area. There were no supernaturals there as he saw no balls of light. He also remained silent. Even if there was anyone, they were either a mundane or martial master.

“What are we afraid of!” Wang Ming laughed heartily in an abundance of courage. “With our strength, even Solars will die if they come for us!”

They had a Dominator who'd killed a Solar, another Dominator, one Sunflare, and two Sunderers. This level of strength afforded one complete impunity no matter where one was. Well, maybe not in the central region. There were too many powerhouses there.

The silent group made steady time on foot. There were several dozen meters to Rift Canyon. That wasn't too far for martial masters. It was almost dark from when they'd set out this morning. They still hoped to reach camp before night fell, just in case anything happened in the darkness.

They saw an enormous rock after walking a while longer. Three people stood next to it, dressed in slightly different accoutrements compared to Silver Moon. Identifiable as martial masters, they seemed better off than the Silver City group. Their materials were obviously more luxurious than the ones used in Silver Moon; golden thread could be seen glimmering from their hems.

The group was unfazed as it was three youngsters. In fact, they could hazard a guess at the trio's identity because each of them bore a long staff on their back.

The Qimei Staff King!

Of course, the three in front of them weren't likely to be him. They were more likely to be disciples.

Li Hao darted forward without waiting for Yuan Shuo to issue a command.

“Li Hao of Silver City, disciple of the Five Styles King. What business might the senior brothers and sister have?”

Li Hao! Sun Moxian awkwardly raised cupped fists, unsure whether he was performing the courtesy properly. Whatever, it was fine so long as it was close enough.

“Sun Moxian of the Sagittarius province, eldest disciple of the Qimei Staff King! I am here on my master’s orders to deliver a letter of challenge! My master will meet the Five Styles King in battle tomorrow on Rift Bridge!” A letter shot at Li Hao as he spoke, sandwiched between internal force. The energy was powerful and the paper fragile, yet it was not destroyed.

The internal force erupted when Li Hao reached out a hand to accept it. The young man utilized his fingers as a sword and instantly crushed the force, calmly catching the letter. “I accept this letter on behalf of my master, as for the challenge...”

“I will be there on time!” Yuan Shuo responded calmly behind his disciple. “Tell Sun Yifei to drop this act—he’s a supernatural now! I’d like to see tomorrow if he’s improved after all these years in the central region running around with Ying Hongyue!”

Sun Moxian shook, but didn’t dare say anything. He raised a cupped salute again. “The letter has been delivered, we await the Five Styles King tomorrow!” He swiftly departed, followed by his junior brother and sister.

It wasn’t until they were a distance away that the Slayer muttered, “Senior brother, why didn’t we say any of the tough talk that master wanted us to deliver?”

“.....” Sun Moxian didn’t respond until they were yet further removed from the scene. “Those are master’s words, we don’t need to repeat them. There’s no point in talking tough, that old demon doesn’t play by the book. It’d absolutely be a loss if he beat us to death. And if battle commences

tomorrow... Silver Moon's martial world has the custom of disciples fighting first to warm up the field. I will meet that Li Hao in battle!"

The other two blinked. Why?

"Senior brother..."

"I infused the letter of challenge with a hint of aura, wanting to knock Li Hao down a peg. But he easily crushed it, which means he's late Sunderer or half step Dominator!"

Both of the youngsters' eyes widened.

"Surely not? I heard from Red Moon that Old Demon Yuan accepted him only three years ago, and he wasn't taught martial dao at first. He's a Slayer at most, how can he be a Sunderer?"

"Even if he is, initial Sunderer is the most he can manage. How can he be a late or even half step Dominator? That requires the comprehension of the aura..." The two couldn't believe it. Was this possible?

Sun Moxian shook his head after momentary consideration. "It's tough to say, we just need to be more careful. It is just as master says, powerhouses abound in Silver Moon's martial world. We're martial geniuses in the central region, but here it seems that Sunderers can be easily found in the streets."

The trio quieted down and swiftly departed.

.....

At the same time.

“He’s still the same after almost two decades,” Yuan Shuo sneered upon glancing at the letter. He looked at Li Hao. “Why did you catch it? I thought you’d choose to dodge it.”

“I can’t let master lose face!” Li Hao smiled innocently. “You’re martial masters of the same era and his disciple was here with a challenge. A life is nothing, dignity is everything! How could I lose face for my teacher? Face is more important than living for those of us in the martial world!”

“.....” Yuan Shuo nearly burst out laughing. What are you talking about?? He held himself in with effort. “That Sun Moxian is not a simple character. He seems to have comprehended the aura. To think that Sun Yifei can raise such a young half step Dominator—that is quite something!”

A half step Dominator was much more difficult to attain than a Sunflare. All Sunflares needed to do was break three locks, a feat that depended on potential and absorbing mysterious power. Enlightenment, however, was required for martial masters to enter half step Dominator. Enlightenment was a very mysterious, abstract concept at times. Someone whose intelligence was unparalleled might find comprehending the aura out of reach.

“I understand why Sun Yifei has brought his disciples with him!” Yuan Shuo looked at Li Hao again. “Think carefully on this. Stay off the battlefield if you can tomorrow!”

They’d remained in hiding for so long; there might be a large audience for the challenge. It was not a good development if Li Hao was exposed.

The young man liked to keep a low profile, but shook his head this time. “This is different! Teacher once dominated Silver Moon’s martial world. Upon your withdrawal, you have accepted a final disciple in Silver City. Wouldn’t it be the height of mortification if I can’t handle even Sun Yifei’s disciple?”

It had truly been an era in which face was more important than one’s life, particularly for the old guard of martial masters. Biding one’s time depended on the period. It would be true humiliation only if Li Hao lost without a fight. Supernaturals might not understand or care about this, but martial masters would.

“I’ll go!” Wang Ming seemed to have understood as well. “Teacher, I’m your honorary disciple. Honorary disciples are disciples too! Watch me wipe the floor with that guy!”

“You?” Yuan Shuo flicked a glance at him. “It’s not that I’m underestimating you, but if Sun Moxian isn’t a rookie... It’s 70/30 if you’re in the field!”

What did that mean?

70/30?

“70/30... Does teacher mean that I only have a seventy percent chance of winning?”

That’s too low! I’m a Sunflare and he’s not a Dominator yet.

“You’re thirty, he’s seventy!”

Wang Ming’s nostrils flared with indignation, now this was insulting him!

“I’m a Sunflare...”

“You’ve just become a Sunflare!” Yuan Shuo laughed. “Is that impressive? It can be, and Liu Long might not be a match for you if he wasn’t a Dominator. As a peak Sunderer, he was yet to comprehend the aura despite his strength reaching perfection. A false half step Dominator like him would never stand against a Sunflare.”

Martial masters without an aura would never be able to go against a Sunflare. It was a difficult call to make once they grasped it. 70/30 might be a bit over the top, but it would certainly be even odds. It was hard to tell who would win.

“I would never defeat a Sunflare if I didn’t comprehend the aura!” Liu Long also inclined his head. “Enlightenment depends on the strength of the aura, one’s experience, and one’s level. It is indeed tough to determine who would be the victor.

“Elder Yuan, Sun Yifei set tomorrow as the date in his letter, didn’t he? But it’s not time for the expedition yet and everyone hopes for you to be a part of it. Is Sun Yifei going against everyone’s wishes...”

Chapter 197: Letter of Challenge (II)

“Who knows?” Yuan Shuo answered calmly. “Either Sun Yifei is so dominating that none of the three great organizations or Night Watchers can stop him, or he’s probing for someone else. Or perhaps his mission is to injure me so gravely that I have no choice but to obey orders once we’re inside the ruins. That prevents me from giving them trouble with the amount of strength I have.”

Liu Long’s brows were tightly knitted together. He looked at Li Hao, then at Yuan Shuo. “If we answer the letter and Elder Yuan’s strength is exposed... Will it adversely impact the expedition to come?”

Their capabilities would be revealed ahead of time. Everyone would be on guard if the professor was stronger than Sun Yifei. At the same time, he might very well be beaten into severe injuries if he was weaker than the Qimei Staff King. It wasn’t likely that Yuan Shuo would die, because the excavation hadn’t happened yet.

No matter how they looked at it, it seemed a losing proposition.

“Then we’re exposed!” Yuan Shuo snorted. “We keep a low profile only when we lack sufficient strength. It’s fine to stand out from the crowd once we have the capabilities to back it up. Whoever dares provoke us will find their faces beaten in!”

He rather seemed like the old demon of old in this moment. So they would be exposed then! He could beat everyone to death if he could kill Sun Yifei. In fact, his old opponent would be a perfect barometer to examine the strength of Summoner of Spirit so that he didn't overestimate himself. Yuan Shuo kept his nose down before due to a lack of strength. But now... he wasn't afraid!

"You caught the letter of challenge so excitedly without concern for exposing your strength." The professor suddenly looked at his student. "Out with it, do you have something in mind?"

"I do, teacher." Li Hao smiled. "That sword requires bravely forging ahead! To sever the self and seek blood... That disciple looks quite strong to me and he knows the aura. He's a perfect opponent! My own aura of the sword might take shape if I'm able to cut him down."

"So... you plan on concealing the aura of the earth?" Yuan Shuo brightened.

"Yes!" Li Hao nodded. "Very few will think that I've comprehended the earth since my internal force presents itself in the shape of a sword. I'd like to use the strength of late Sunderer to fight him. I may stand a chance of comprehending the aura of the sword if I win!"

He would command two auras if one of the sword also took shape. If he then melded two auras together, Li Hao might set foot into Dominator.

Wang Ming abruptly realized something at this point and exclaimed, "What are you talking about? Aren't you mid Sunderer, Li Hao?"

The situation seemed less right the more he listened to it! Late Sunderer? Perfection? The heck? Didn't he know what level Li Hao was at? Why did it seem like he'd slept for decades in the blink of an eye?

Li Hao smiled without responding.

"Let's head over to the Night Watcher camp." Neither did Liu Long reply. "We should discuss with Director Hao no matter what. Who knows how many will be watching tomorrow, so it's best to have someone keeping an eye on things."

The group nodded and made quick time to Rift Canyon.

.....

At the same time, at the bottom of the canyon where a patch of tents stood.

“Someone under Master Sun has brought a letter of challenge to Yuan Shuo!”

Ghostfaces.

The Red Moon camp.

“Let him do so since Sun Yifei insists!” rang an uncaring voice from the tents. The speaker addressed Sun Yifei by his name, making the speaker a Solar at the very least. Plainly, Red Moon wasn’t very satisfied with Sun Yifei’s challenge.

For one, it exposed his presence at Rift Canyon. The organization was none too pleased at how brazen Sun Yifei had been upon arriving in Silver Moon. He didn’t bother to conceal himself or his traces whatsoever.

Two, everyone needed Yuan Shuo to lead the way. Not to mention, more than one faction had their eyes on the professor. This was someone who killed Brokensky, after all! He still possessed a high level of strength. If he actually hurt Sun Yifei, that would be a blow to Red Moon.

Thus, the others were happy to watch the show. Only the Night Watchers and Red Moon were in for a headache. It was a late Solar facing off against a martial master who could kill Solars. Everyone would be happy if either one of the two died, or both were heavily injured. Even if they lost an expert with Yuan Shuo’s death... They could accept his death if it really came to that.

“Should we stop it?” hesitated the Ghostface outside the tent.

“How?” the one inside answered quietly. “It’s hardly the first time that Sun Yifei has been so cocky in Red Moon. Who does he listen to, apart from the leader? Not even Violet Moon will be able to order him around if she comes.”

The organization’s highest representative in Silver Moon was Violet Moon, but she wasn’t here at the moment as she was at White Moon City. Thus, the speaker inside the tent was in charge of the campsite. He was also a Solar!

Thus was the might of Red Moon on display. The dead Brokensky, Sun Yifei who’d just rushed to Rift Canyon, Violet Moon at White Moon City, and the Solar on site here made for four Solars already. Without Sun Yifei, it meant that three Solars were stationed in Silver Moon.

As for Ying Hongyue’s son killed in earlier combat... No one cared about him. Ying Hongyue had plenty of sons and grandsons. One sent to Silver Moon either possessed too little potential and was thus unsuited for the central region, or needed to be tempered because his potential was too strong.

Plainly, the one who’d died didn’t have the best potential. Granted, his father was only initial Sunflare, hardly an impressive cultivation level.

.....

The Night Watcher camp.

Hao Lianchuan also received word. He paced inside a large tent, a headache hammering at his temples. How unlucky to run into this as soon as they arrived!

“Damned Sun Yifei!” Hao Lianchuan cursed. “Making trouble before the expedition even starts. He’s a late Solar looking to battle a newly ascended Dominator. What the hell, how shameless can he be?! I’ll meet him myself tomorrow!”

He was beside himself with infuriation! He’d thought that Sun Yifei would wait until the expedition was over to issue a challenge. The man had to keep the bigger picture in mind, didn’t he?!

Just look at him, he didn’t care at all. He wanted to fight tomorrow! Was Hao Kong over at the Red Moon camp complete trash?? Why couldn’t he keep his own people in check??

Hao Lianchuan cursed at the Solar in charge of the Red Moon delegation. Being another Solar, he’d thought that Hao Kong could induce Sun Yifei to toe the line. Now he realized this was the furthest thing from the truth. Sun Yifei didn’t care about him in the slightest!

Huang Yun and others were also present inside the tent. The atmosphere was a bit grave. A late Solar! They were still wary of such characters. Apart from Director Hou, who among the Silver Moon Night Watchers could guarantee a victory against Sun Yifei?

“Director Hou, although it’s not good news... it’s not bad news either!” someone said softly. “Sun Yifei is certain to participate in the expedition, so it’s a good thing to get a gauge of his abilities now. Otherwise, we’ll be going in blind. We know he’s a late Solar, but how strong is a late Solar? We can have Yuan Shuo suss him out and find a way to interrupt the battle at a crucial moment.”

Lack of knowledge during the excavation would make it difficult to manage their foe.

“Who knows how many people are waiting to watch the show tomorrow!” Hao Lianchuan frowned. “They can’t wait for the two to fight to the death. These old guard martial masters still go at it with the same style!”

Such was the culture of Silver Moon’s martial world. It’d always been this way! These fellows fought to the death at the drop of a hat, even knowing full well that strong enemies encircled them

on the outside. It left openings for outsiders to swoop in. Such situations occurred many times in the past, it wasn't just limited to Sun Yifei and Yuan Shuo.

The key thing was, these martial masters learned nothing from past lessons. Or rather, they insisted on this course of action despite knowing what the results would be!

"I'll persuade Yuan Shuo to abandon the challenge when he arrives." Hao Lianchuan's temples throbbed. "If Sun Yifei dare comes, I'll let him know that this is Silver Moon, not the central region. His word is not law here!"

He was ready to raise the Flaming Phoenix Spear if Sun Yifei dared come. He would blast the shit out of the man! Although it wasn't his preference to expose the origin weapon so early, he had no other choice.

The assembly of Night Watchers looked at each other, no one knowing what to say. Sun Yifei's appearance did indeed upend a lot of plans.

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At the same time.

Conversations abounded in all of the major campsites. Sun Yifei had issued a challenge to Yuan Shuo! Martial masters from two decades ago, and enemies at that, had run into each other at Rift Canyon. They were about to engage in battle. Some people were expectant, others were nervous.

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At another campsite—the Sword Sect campsite.

A middle-aged man with a sharp look in his eyes laughed when he heard the news. “As I thought, the Qimei Staff King and Old Demon of the Five Styles are certain to fight when they encounter each other! When Sun Yifei was defeated at Rift Bridge, he couldn’t stand the humiliation and jumped off the bridge. We all thought he died, to think he’d come back alive and be a late Solar!

“I am so looking forward to this fight. What a pity that one has become a supernatural and the other has just set foot into Dominator. Their strength is not of the same level. But Old Demon Yuan has melded the auras of the five animals, so he shouldn’t be too weak even though he’s just set foot into Dominator. Brokensky well deserved his death. We’ll have a good show on our hands even if the old demon is defeated tomorrow!”

Plainly, he had high confidence in Yuan Shuo. It wasn’t that he believed Yuan Shuo could win, but that he would present a peak battle between the two greats even if he lost. That was Yuan Shuo!

“Father,” said a young woman next to him. “Was Yuan Shuo really that powerful back in the day? Why does it look like he’s the worst now? Ying Hongyue and Sun Yifei of Red Moon, as well as father have all long made it to the supernatural world. Why has he remained at Sunderer for twenty years?”

If the old demon was so strong, why hadn’t he set foot into the supernatural earlier? Perhaps he’d be the same level as Ying Hongyue now.

The man in front of her was the Earthturner Sword of the Seven Swords of Silver Moon, Hong Yitang. He mused over his daughter’s words and shook his head. “It’s hard to say, but it might have something to do with his enormous accumulation of foundations.”

Enormous accumulation?

His daughter somewhat understood, but not really.

Chapter 198: Letter of Challenge (III)

“Yuan Shuo was a half step Dominator in his heyday, one that melded five auras together,” Hong Yitang explained. “Regular Sunderers might need one thousand cubes of mysterious power to break their supernatural locks, whereas Yuan Shuo could need five thousand!”

“Where was so much mysterious power supposed to come from in that age? Not to mention, he was forced to cower in Silver Moon after Ying Hongyue came into his strength. He had to withdraw to Silver City, which naturally meant that he missed the best possible timing for a breakthrough.”

“Is he that strong?” his daughter exclaimed. “Five times the usual consumption??”

She knew of her father’s historical feats and the enormous amount of mysterious power he’d exhausted in order to cross over. It was thanks to his backers that he barely made the ascension. He was now a Solar, a powerhouse in his own right, and had founded the Sword Sect.

Yuan Shuo needed five times what her father required! No wonder he’d been unable to ascend.

“Do you think there’s no reason behind his title of Old Demon Yuan?” Hong Yitang laughed. “He calls himself the Five Styles King, which is what others say to his face. In reality, they call him the Beast King! The Less Than Human King! He’s cruel and ruthless—he would’ve died to enemies long ago if he didn’t have some skill to his name! Three of the other six swords that bore the same title as me died in battle against him!”

“Was father less than him as well?” This was the adoration of a daughter toward her father. Under normal circumstances, some casual boasting from Hong Yitang would be the end of it. However, the man thought for a long moment and shook his head.

“Indeed, I was less than him!”

Astonishment crossed the girl’s face. Her father always brimmed with confidence when he spoke of the martial world of the olden days. A lofty pride filled his face and he was dismissive of any martial master from the central region, even if they bore an illustrious reputation now. But he just admitted to his daughter that he did not rival Yuan Shuo. Was this person that terrifying?

“It’s the truth!” laughed Hong Yitang, unbothered by his daughter’s surprise. “It’d be one thing if we were approximately of the same strength or he was just barely stronger than me, but he was far better than me! I’ll let you in on a secret, I never went anywhere he was back in those days, just in case that brought trouble down on my head. He liked to spar with strong people—but often ended up killing opponents when he sparred!

“That’s why I didn’t accept the two letters of challenge that he issued. You wouldn’t be here today if I did.”

“Father, can we watch the fight tomorrow?” Hong Qing’s interest was piqued. On one side was a powerhouse that even her father proclaimed inferiority to. He had just entered Dominator of Thousands, but could beat Solars to death. On the other was the famed Qimei Staff King of the martial world. He’d built a name for himself in the central region after reaching late Solar. It would be so cool to watch the two of them fight!

“That’s just as well, you can get to know more of the world!” Hong Yitang nodded after thinking it over. “You are a Sunderer now, if you cannot break through to Dominator, you should prepare to cross over to the supernatural as a Sunflare. These people have all grasped the aura, particularly Yuan Shuo! It might help you to observe them.”

Older generation martial masters looked down on the supernatural even when they themselves were supernatural. They trained their children in martial dao and had them reach Sunderer first. Only when their offspring continuously failed to comprehend the aura did they consider letting the younger generation absorb mysterious power and cross over to the supernatural world. Progress would not be hindered in this way and Sunderers usually made the direct leap to Sunflare.

Advancing to Dominator was the first choice if it was a possibility. The martial master would try to sense the aura, then opt to cross over to the supernatural if that was out of reach. This was commonly seen not only in Silver Moon, but the central region as well.

The powerhouses dominating the central region were mostly of this ilk. They either had their roots in martial dao or were Heaven Favored. These two types were the thorniest characters in the central region.

.....

The news spread all over Rift Canyon before Yuan Shuo arrived. Countless powerhouses hoped to witness a battle between two martial masters so well known that they were household names.

Li Hao's group arrived when the sky turned pitch dark. A row of tents stood in front of them. While the rest of the group was unfamiliar with the setup, Wang Ming knew it well.

"We're here, I see familiar faces!" he said excitedly when they were still a distance away.

"Professor Yuan's here!" someone called out lowly up ahead.

"The people from Silver City have arrived!"

Hao Lianchuan walked out to meet them before they reached the campsite, disregarding how it might reflect on him.

"It's one thing to be so late," he grumbled before reaching the group. "It's another to accept a letter of challenge!"

What in the world?! Accepting a letter of challenge in the Silver Moon martial world meant agreeing to battle. There was room to maneuver only when the letter wasn't accepted.

Yuan Shuo flicked a glance at the man and ignored him. Li Hao, however, stared dumbly at the director. Indeed, he went completely wooden as Hao Lianchuan looked very different from before. There seemed to be a blazing phoenix scurrying inside him!

What the heck?

The phoenix seemed to be alive and exuded an unparalleled presence of fierceness from Hao Lianchuan's body. It wasn't a supernatural presence, but an unspeakable one of power and might!

Hao Lianchuan was talking to Yuan Shuo when he sensed the gaze. He was jolted by surprise when he saw the look in the young man's eyes. What you looking at me like that for? This kid is as bad as they can get!

He would think that he'd scared the lad if things were as before, but now he would only suspect the boy was cooking up another devious scheme.

Li Hao ducked his head as soon as the director looked over, as if he was afraid. He was more shocked than anything. What was that? Was that... the origin weapon? That was the only possibility that came to mind. Could origin weapons be concealed in the body? Why couldn't his sword do the same? How convenient it'd be if he could manage the same with Stellaris! He could take it out whenever he wished and not worry about losing it.

And it felt... so incredibly powerful!

There was an extra person between them and the origin weapon was hidden inside Hao Lianchuan's body, but it still gave Li Hao an overwhelming sense of dominance. It was as if there really was a phoenix waiting to break out of the man.

Li Hao ceased looking at Hao Lianchuan and surveyed the surroundings instead. There were many little moons—all Darkmoons. There were many little suns—Sunflare. There were even a few close to Qiao Feilong's level—peak Sunflare. The Night Watchers had indeed invested a great deal of resources in this expedition.

Next, he turned his gaze to a very low key woman in the crowd. Standing next to a Darkmoon, she bore undistinguished features and was thirty-some years old. Like the rest of the crowd, she regarded the newcomers with curiosity and happened to meet Li Hao's gaze.

The young man instantly shifted his eyes away like a shy and timid boy. He snuck glances around him through lowered lids, but inwardly cursed up a storm. Who says there's only two Solars in the Night Watchers?! Who says Hao Lianchuan is the only one here?! What's with that woman??

She was a Solar, and a very strong Solar. She was stronger than Qiao Feilong and even a bit stronger than Hao Lianchuan. She might be a mid Solar!

Liar! You're all liars! Li Hao continued swearing. The intelligence wasn't accurate at all. Perhaps the woman carried a treasure similar to Li Hao's mirror, one that hid her presence. No one else seemed to detect her, even his teacher.

She's hiding herself deep! Can she possibly be an... enemy?

Li Hao's heart skipped a beat. It was hard to say. Perhaps she was a spy from the three great organizations. Should he tell Hao Lianchuan? But if she was from the Night Watchers, Hao Lianchuan might not know anything. Perhaps Hou Xiaochen was behind this. Would he be accidentally causing trouble if he revealed this to Hao Lianchuan?

And how am I supposed to explain how I know about her when no one else does? A headache troubled Li Hao. Why do I seem to have run into trouble right upon arrival?

.....

The woman that Li Hao took note of looked at the young man, then continued assessing Yuan Shuo and the others with the same curiosity as the crowd when nothing untoward presented itself.

She paused briefly when she saw Wang Ming. Sunflare! She knew about Wang Ming, but he'd only been a Fullmoon when he left. He'd crossed over Plenilune in just a few days and entered Sunflare. This kind of speed was unfathomable!

The woman took a few more glances before quickly changing her focus. She cared more about Yuan Shuo and Liu Long's condition. Liu Long was hard to determine, he seemed to have reached Dominator. As for Yuan Shuo... he was impossible to make out. There was only the faint sense that he seemed to have a fiery temper, that there was fire inside of him!

It felt like a volcano about to erupt! The woman blinked, surprised. As expected, there was no one undeserving of their name when it came to an illustrious reputation! Yuan Shuo was very strong.

The professor glanced sharply at her as she continued her observations. Coldness glinted out of his eyes like light from a sword. He frowned at the woman, then looked at Hao Lianchuan.

"Have your people cease their usage of surveillance arts on me. You won't be able to handle the consequences if I lose my temper!"

Hao Lianchuan blinked. Was there someone doing that? He looked behind him and didn't discover anything out of the ordinary.

"Don't randomly peep at someone!" He frowned all the same. "To do so is very rude, behave!"

He'd issued reminders to everyone beforehand, was someone still probing Yuan Shuo? He hadn't sensed any supernatural ripples; was old fart Yuan purposefully picking at him? That was also very likely!

Irritation brewed in Hao Lianchuan. I'm just lecturing you with a few words, look at you getting impatient! You use your age and the fact that you set foot into Dominator as an excuse. You really don't respect me after killing a Solar!

"You're not allowed to fight tomorrow!" He stormed off after these words. Yuan Shuo wasn't allowed!

Yuan Shuo flicked a glance at the huffy director and chuckled. “Has Hao Lianchuan forgotten that i’m not actually a Night Watcher?” he muttered to Liu Long.

“.....” Liu Long had nothing to say.

Those around them heard the response. Everyone’s expression was tight—some wanted to laugh while others wanted to erupt with anger. The reply even made it to Hao Lianchuan’s ears. He, too, was resigned, but didn’t bother saying anything else.

Yes, he’d indeed forgotten that the old thing wasn’t one of them, but his student was! I’ll summon your student for a talk tonight and send him back to Silver City if you don’t listen! And truly, Li Hao needed to speak some sense into his teacher. What was he being so eager about going to his death for?

Chapter 199: A Low Key Arrogance (I)

There were limited numbers of tents in the campsite. Therefore, it was rather decent treatment that the Silver City delegation was given a large one of their own. As for no special consideration for the fact that one of their members was a girl... that was all too normal. As superhumans, this was to be expected.

It was rather the presence of a dog that elicited surprise from some and indifference from others. Superhumans were an eccentric lot. No one cared so long as the dog didn’t interfere with proper business at hand.

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The Silver City group made a perfunctory round of their tent. Yuan Shuo wanted to rest, Liu Long wanted to discuss their upcoming mission and tasks with Hao Lianchuan. Li Hao grabbed Wang Ming to make new friends.

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“Li Hao, this is Elder Huang, you know him!” Wang Ming was quite free-handed at times. Under normal circumstances, people usually brought new friends to meet others of the same level. Wang Ming was still a Darkmoon in many people’s eyes, but the first person he introduced Li Hao to was the Sunflare Huang Yun.

The two had met before, after all, so they were familiar with each other. Making a social call meant an introduction, a request to look after the one being introduced. Being a Sunflare powerhouse, Huang Yun shared his tent with only one other person despite not being assigned one of his own. There was a bulky man in his tent who was as dark as night. He seemed to be an honest, friendly person. Dense earth energy surrounded him, an obvious sign that he was an earth supernatural.

Huang Yun smiled when he saw Wang Ming visit with Li Hao in tow. He was quite close to Wang Ming and familiar with Li Hao.

“Hello, Elder Huang!” Li Hao said bashfully with a tone of inexperience. He was obviously a young man wet behind the ears when it came to networking. The young man looked at the earth powerhouse after greeting Huang Yun. “Greetings to this big brother!”

“Big brother?” laughed the earth powerhouse. “I’m old enough to be your dad! My name’s Zhao Huan and I’m a chief commissioner from White Moon City!”

“Zhao Huan is an earth supernatural,” introduced a smiling Huang Yun. “He’s very good at earth bending! It’s hard to fly through the skies, but even harder to fly through the ground!”

They welcomed the two young men into the tent.

The tents were big at this campsite, making for spacious lodgings. Thanks to an earth supernatural in residence, simple structures had been raised inside. There was a table, a raised platform for a bed, and others. It was much more comfortable than the other tents and more comprehensive.

Wang Ming walked inside with Li Hao, looking enviously at the cups and bowls on the table. “It’s definitely better to be where Uncle Zhao is! Earth supernaturals will excel in building cities if there are no battles to be fought!”

“Little Wang, your metal attribute is not bad either,” Zhao Huan threw his head back with laughter. “If there really are no battles in the future, I’ll build a city and you reinforce it with metal. We’ll craft a metropolis together!”

The two were plainly comfortable with each other given how they joked around. They didn’t ignore Li Hao either. Huang Yun waved them into chairs and looked kindly at their latest addition.

“Li Hao, you should speak some sense into your teacher regarding Sun Yifei’s letter of challenge. Your teacher doesn’t have any friends or family, he’s in contact with you the most over these years. You’re his final disciple and his personality is fiery and stubborn. Sun Yifei is so very strong at late Solar. Brokensky absolutely cannot compare to him...”

He wanted to influence Yuan Shuo through Li Hao. It was not the best choice to fight at this moment. It would benefit all of the other factions to the detriment of only the Night Watchers and Red Moon. In fact, Red Moon wouldn’t be affected much. It was the Night Watchers that would suffer the most.

“I’ll try!” Li Hao nodded solemnly. “But my teacher can be inflexible, so my words may not have much of an effect.” He shook his head with some regret and lowered his voice. “Elder Huang, I asked Brother Wang to bring me here because I want to understand the situation. I’m embarrassed to ask other people and have bumped into Elder Huang a few times...”

“What would you like to know?” Huang Yun smiled.

“Well... um... I’m wondering if there’s anyone among us Night Watchers who can handle Sun Yifei, apart from Director Hou?” Li Hao asked worriedly. “I hear that many organizations might have sent Solars for the expedition and none of the factions are too pleased with us. We’re very strong—Elder Huang and everyone are premier Sunflare elites. But... can we... handle so many Solars?”

He actually wanted to know if these people knew about that woman's existence. Sunflare was the core of Silver Moon's strength. If they didn't know, then he'd have to probe Hao Lianchuan. The sudden appearance of a mid Solar was someone he had to get a handle on.

"You don't need to worry too much about that," Huang Yun responded after some consideration. "The various organizations are not a tight knit whole, even when it comes to acting against the Night Watchers. Differences in opinion exist. The two mid-sized organizations actually partner with us more because they're local factions. The three great organizations only have branches here—their main force is in the central region."

"So this means that Director Hao is our only Solar?" Li Hao had to ask directly since this wasn't what he wanted to hear.

Huang Yun nodded, there was nothing to hide about this. "There's no helping it, only Directors Hao and Hou are Solars among the Silver Moon Night Watchers. Director Hou can't leave his post, which means Director Hao is here alone.

"But don't be thinking that this makes us weak! We have seven Sunflares with us for this expedition. Other than me and Ole Zhao, there are two peak Sunflares among the rest!"

He was an initial Sunflare and Zhao Huan was a mid Sunflare. Li Hao didn't ask about them because their suns seemed too small to his eyes. As for the peak Sunflares... The young man cross referenced against the suns he'd seen earlier. It should be one man and one woman, both middle aged.

"Director He of the water attribute, and Director Zhou of the metal attribute," Wang Ming interjected when a baffled look appeared on Li Hao's face. "There is one director and five deputies among the Silver Moon Night Watchers. Director Hao is the first deputy director below Director Hou. Of the remaining four, we have Director He—peak water Sunflare. You know, the crabby looking auntie..."

Huang Yun and Zhao Huan raised their eyebrows at him. This kid has some nerve! Although she is on the auntie level, that doesn't mean she likes being called that. You'll be in for it if she catches you!

“I know Director Zhou better!” Wang Ming chuckled. “I’m a metal supernatural too, so I often ask Director Zhou for pointers. He’s the handsome uncle who was standing next to Director Hao, he had a sword on his back! He’s a peak Sunflare and who I think is most likely to be the third Solar among the Night Watchers.”

Metal supernaturals were adept at offense. Since Director Zhou was the same attribute as Wang Ming, the latter was very familiar with him and quite worshiped the man.

Huang Yun and Zhao Huan did not refute the handsome young man. Director Zhou was ferocious when attacking and he was a veteran Sunflare. It wasn’t impossible for him to progress to Solar.

Li Hao flashed a grin. He was now familiar with four out of seven Sunflares. After exchanging some more words with the two in the tent, he made his excuses. This was just a social call, so it wouldn’t do to stay too long. It was dark outside, so they couldn’t continue chatting forever.

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Wang Ming left with Li Hao after a while. Since they were making rounds, they would visit everyone one by one. Thus, the handsome supernatural brought his colleague to meet some of the other Sunflares. Everyone was very polite to Yuan Shuo’s student.

Gu Mei was a mid wood Sunflare and the healer of the entire group. Liu Ping was an initial thunder Sunflare with tremendous offensive ability. His stature was diminutive as he was a full head shorter than Li Hao, but he packed quite a loud voice.

Li Xiangdong was a mid Sunflare of unique abilities. He shared the same surname as Li Hao and his abilities were so special that it made him the eyes of the team. Li Xiangdong was in charge of surveillance. According to Wang Ming, this Night Watcher could hear everything within a few kilometers—even ants crawling over the ground.

The setup of the team made sense. Offense, intelligence, medical, and defense were all accounted for. Add to that the wind attributed Huang Yun being adept at escape, it made for a formidable delegation.

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When Li Hao walked out of the last metal supernatural Zhou Huaimin's tent, his cheek muscles were almost frozen in place. He'd been smiling for so long! As a junior and meeting all of these great personages for the first time, he naturally had to present an amiable front.

Everyone was nice to him on the surface. The two deputy directors even gave him a pep talk. Of course, many were those who wished him to talk some sense into Yuan Shuo and not fight with Sun Yifei.

"Ole Wang, why don't we also visit the Darkmoons?"

Wang Ming almost stumbled over his feet! He was tired as he was the one to make the introductions each time. His mouth was dry and his throat was scratchy after repeated openers. Now they were to visit the Darkmoons? What was the point of befriending Darkmoons?

That could wait until tomorrow. A casual conversation could be struck if they ran into the Darkmoon Night Watchers.

"That's enough for now, Li Hao!" Wang Ming wasn't very willing.

Li Hao smiled and looked silently at his compatriot. His stare made Wang Ming uncomfortable. What are you looking at me for? Show some respect for powerhouses. I'm a Sunflare! Regardless, he capitulated with resignation after a while.

“Fine! But I’m not too familiar with some of the Darkmoons either. Not all of them are from White Moon City, some were redeployed from elsewhere. The same goes for the Sunflares, some come from Flare City.”

Li Hao nodded and turned to a tent with a massive sun. That woman was in there.

“That seems to be...” Wang Ming followed his line of sight. “Let me think... Oh, where the female supernaturals are gathered.” He narrowed his eyes at Li Hao. “Are you going to pay your respects or trying to pick up girls?”

The kid laid eyes on the ladies’ tent as soon as he looked around!

The Night Watchers had sent roughly fifty people for the excavation. Not all of them would enter the ruins, a portion would stay outside. Roughly thirty would actually be part of the expedition, and there were approximately ten females total. The Darkmoons slept four or five to a tent. Li Hao was looking at one of them.

Chapter 200: A Low Key Arrogance (II)

“Let’s go take a look!” Li Hao flashed a grin and beelined for the tent of ladies. He muttered as he walked, “Female supernaturals... and so many in one place. That’s a rare sight. Ole Wang, do you think I can sire a Heaven Favored if I marry a female supernatural?”

Wang Ming was at a complete loss for words. Where the heck did you get this idea from?! I haven’t heard you speak of it before, ever! Look at you showing your true colors as soon as we’re away from home!

Li Hao chuckled and didn’t bother to explain himself. Was that person listening? It was best if she was!

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Inside the tent.

The ladies were awake. Some were cultivating, others were chitchatting. They were all Darkmoons and the expedition was close at hand. General nerves stretched heartstrings taut, making it impossible to sleep.

“Someone’s coming!” One of them broke off their conversation.

“Who?”

“Hello!” Wang Ming’s voice rang out. “I am Wang Ming and I’m here with Professor Yuan’s student to visit everyone. May I come in?”

“Wang Ming?” One of them recognized the name and lowered her voice, “It’s Big Mouth Wang...”

“Don’t say that, he’s not bad. He’s got good potential—apparently he’s discovered five locks. He’s strong and a metal attribute...”

“And Professor Yuan’s student, is it the little boy that gets shy easily?”

“Should be.”

Murmur murmur.

The chattering of women traveled out from the tent. Nothing flickered across Li Hao’s face, but Wang Ming’s expression changed. As a Sunflare, his hearing was much better than before.

Big Mouth Wang??

Who’d given him that nickname?!

You're the big mouth! Is my mouth big?? Not at all!!

This is all Li Hao's fault. I didn't want to come!

The tent flaps quickly lifted and the woman that Li Hao had taken note of walked out. Falling on the thin side, she looked to be between her thirties and forties. Wang Ming seemed to know her and smiled when he saw their greeter.

"So Sis Zhang is here!"

"Brother Wang, introduce me," Li Hao quickly said in a small voice. He was a shy little boy who didn't even dare raise his voice!

Wang Ming chuckled merrily as he cursed inwardly. Yeah yeah yeah, keep putting on that act! How would he not know what type of person Li Hao was after being in contact with the young man for so long? This was a fellow who didn't react to Liu Yan teasing him. Did he have a shy bone in his body?

"Hello, I'm Zhang Ting, a water Fullmoon!" The woman dimpled when she heard Li Hao's words and extended her hand, seeming to want to shake Li Hao's.

Supernaturals rarely shook hands during introductions. The same went for martial masters—they only shook hands if they wished to test each other. The gesture easily revealed many things about the superhuman, particularly martial masters. Internal force was contained inside the body and difficult to detect from external appearance.

This woman wants to shake my hand...

Li Hao was a rookie and a weakling in other people's eyes. There was nothing about him to hide. Shaking hands was an exchange between equals, a show of respect.

Wang Ming didn't think much of it.

Li Hao flashed a bashful smile and stretched out his hand, lightly clasping the other's. He quickly withdrew his hand and quietly said, "I'm Li Hao. I'm from Silver City."

The other ladies also walked out of the tent, regarding Li Hao with curiosity before greeting Wang Ming.

When Zhang Ting saw that no one paid attention to Li Hao, she drew him into a conversation like the understanding big sister she was.

"Li Hao, is this your first trip away from home?" she asked softly with a gentle smile.

"Yes!" Li Hao nodded. "I was always in Silver City before."

"Then how are you here at such a dangerous time? You're a Slayer, right? You haven't made the crossover yet, right?"

"I'm not a Slayer..." Li Hao shook his head. "My teacher doesn't want me to say anything, but I'll tell you a secret, Sis Zhang. Don't tell anyone—I have great martial potential! I'm a Sunderer, but Brother Wang and the others don't believe me."

Zhang Ting chuckled delightedly. What a cute little greenhorn! A Sunderer! She'd sensed it earlier that Li Hao may not be a Slayer. The handshake had only been for a split second, but she'd perceived that Li Hao might be a Sunderer. Indeed, little greenie here didn't know anything and spilled his secrets without further ado. He rather resembled Big Mouth Wang in that regard.

“Big sis believes you!” Zhang Ting chuckled. “You can come to me if you need any help in the ruins. You’re so young, so you can ask me about anything you don’t understand.”

“Thank you, Sis Zhang!” Li Hao bobbed his head up and down with pleasure; his mind rapidly flew through calculations. This woman is absolutely a mid Solar and a water supernatural like she claims. Not only that...

She seems to have an origin weapon on her.

It felt different from Hao Lianchuan’s fire phoenix—that phoenix seemed alive. It was very obvious and detectable at a single glance. It flew around with immense strength. When it came to the woman, Li Hao didn’t notice it with his first impression. Now that they were face to face, they were so close that he could see everything about her.

The young man postulated that she had an origin weapon because he saw a small snake swimming through the big ball of light that was a hallmark of Solars. It was a very transparent snake that was very small. One might not notice it if they didn’t look at it carefully, particularly when a Solar’s light was so bright.

Now that Li Hao knew more about the supernatural world, he seemed to be able to notice more. He could even observe certain unique qualities, such as the other’s light being particularly bright around the four limbs, but that the left arm was noticeably dimmer. This indicated that the woman had opened the locks on her right arm and legs. Water was attributed to the kidney, so she’d likely opened the lock around her kidney as well.

Opening four locks made one a Solar, so her left arm was possibly a source of weakness. The strength between her four limbs was not balanced.

A mid Solar with an origin weapon...

Li Hao didn’t know if it was an origin weapon or not, but he knew that anything that could be stored inside the body was not an ordinary object. This woman was terrifying if it was an origin

weapon! Hao Lianchuan's weapon seemed to be stronger, but she wouldn't necessarily lose if they faced off in frontal combat. She was holding her cards close to her chest.

If there was an ambush... Hao Lianchuan might suffer misfortune.

Who arranged for her to be here?

Wang Ming concluded his conversation and looked merrily at Li Hao. "Let's go to our next stop. We'll be on our way then, Sis Zhang."

Zhang Ting nodded and watched until they were out of sight.

"Do you have a fetish or something?" Wang Ming muttered after they'd put some distance between themselves and the tent. "You talked to Sis Zhang instead of the chicks next to you. She's thirty, if not forty! And her looks... there's something seriously wrong with you, man!"

"She speaks softly and I like her voice," Li Hao answered pleasantly. "The younger ones only wanted to talk to you. What was I supposed to do?"

"Pfft, it's not like I like them!" Wang Ming stuck his nose in the air. "I'm different now and need to look further. Perhaps I'll be able to take a Solar or greater than Solar for my wife in the future..."

"They're all really old!" Li Hao reminded.

"And what do you know, that's just in Silver Moon!" Wang Ming sniffed. "Some of the Heaven Favored in the central region awaken as Sunflare! They cross into Solar in less than three years. Apparently, the youngest Solar is only twenty years old."

"Wow, that amazing?"

“Of course, so I’m setting my sights there!” The two made their way to other tents as they chatted. Li Hao turned into a bystander, watching Wang Ming carry on conversation. He offered a few words only when people addressed him, the very image of a socially awkward person.

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The sky was completely dark after two hours. Li Hao finally returned to his tent. Liu Yan was missing.

“Liu Long just came back,” said the resting Yuan Shuo without lifting his head when Li Hao displayed a confused expression. “He took her in the direction of Yama’s campsite. They may be around there.”

“Teacher, won’t that result in conflict?” Li Hao frowned.

“With Liu Long there, it shouldn’t.” The professor glanced at Li Hao. “You’ve been off since we arrived here and run around with Little Wang. Out with it, what have you discovered?”

The young man looked around them.

“Someone who can eavesdrop on my conversation is not worth guarding against,” Yuan Shuo said lazily. “It’s all the same.”

If there was such a powerhouse, it wouldn’t matter if they could hear the conversation or not. Li Hao swiveled his head at Wang Ming. The handsome supernatural had just entered the tent; Yuan Shuo called out, “Find whoever’s in charge and get me some food. There’s nothing to eat around here!”

“.....” Why don’t you send Li Hao? Fine, I’m more familiar with this place. Wang Ming left without a word.

“Zhang Ting, water supernatural,” Li Hao began only when they had the tent to themselves. “Mid Solar, possibly has an origin weapon. She was seventh to the left of us. A skinny woman in her thirties.”

“I know.” Yuan Shuo nodded. “I felt being pried into when she looked at me. I thought it was a special ability, so this is the case!”

He was neither surprised nor angry, just very calm.

“Hao Lianchuan likely doesn’t know about her. She’s either Hou Xiaochen’s hidden pawn or one of an even higher up Night Watcher. Or, she belongs to the three great organizations.”

These were the only possibilities, none other.

“To be part of the Night Watchers until now and pulling the wool over everyone’s eyes right under Hou Xiaochen’s nose...” Yuan Shuo smiled. “Forget that. I’m going to meet Hao Lianchuan later. I won’t say anything and tell him to use the special communication method to contact Hou Xiaochen. I’ve been wanting to speak to the man for a while. You can come with me and observe Hou Xiaochen. Get to know him.”

Hou Xiaochen!

Li Hao was very curious about this person. His teacher was impressive alright! He was still debating whether or not to tell Hao Lianchuan while his teacher was already preparing to contact Hou Xiaochen.