

Star Gate 221

Chapter 221: Hu Dingfang (II)

Yama's leading representative seemed to be on the same level as Violet Moon; he also looked to possess an origin weapon. As Li Hao scanned him from a hundred meters away, the young man vaguely made out something that was either a dragon or a snake swimming through his body.

These origin weapons seemed to take animal shape. Or, that was how they appeared in the balls of light, at least. Their tangible forms may be some sort of weapon. Could it be that animals or monster spirits had been used to forge these weapons back in the day? Animals such as Panther?

Panth barely counted as a dog spirit for the moment—it wasn't truly one in name. Li Hao also wasn't too concerned that he hadn't seen the little black dog all day. The dog was smart as hell and had likely found a place to hide after sensing the abundance of powerhouses.

He's not of the five elements! Li Hao determined with one look at the Revolution King. The shape of his ball of light seemed more like that of a wind supernatural. It drifted around the man—behavior that was similar to the one around Huang Yun.

Li Hao kept looking, there should be another Solar within the Yama delegation. As he thought, he saw the second Solar after the Revolution King shifted slightly. His ball of light was smaller—on par with Hao Lianchuan's. He might be peak initial Solar.

Mm, this guy is good! He's a metal supernatural! Li Hao registered with interest and quickly moved his gaze. A metal supernatural was good, but sadly, he was a Solar.

The young man continued to scan the newcomers; the delegations would likely send all of their powerhouses to forestall any trouble from arising if any stayed behind. Or it might be that they were ready to enter the ruins and couldn't be bothered to return to camp.

There weren't that many from Yama—roughly thirty. There were even fewer from Celestial, just twenty cloaked figures. Sword Sect showed up with the largest numbers at almost fifty. Plainly,

many supernaturals had joined the local organization. It was in quality that they fell short. Judging from the balls of light, some were only initial Darkmoon and even Starlight.

Some small organizations that'd yet to leave also slipped in among the crowd.

Two Solars from Yama and... two Solars from Celestial! Li Hao realized with shock. Celestial had sent such a tiny delegation, but there were still two Solars present. He didn't, however, see anyone on par with the Revolution King's existence.

The young man was further surprised when he looked at the Sword Sect. They seemed to possess another Solar apart from Hong Yitang, but that one kept a very low profile and stayed hidden within the crowd. There were also a few martial masters among their ranks that Li Hao couldn't see through.

So the Sword Sect also has two Solars! The young man concluded with astonishment. This meant that if it wasn't for Hou Xiaochen and Manager Yu, the Night Watchers would be less than the Sword Sect. They only had one Solar in the form of Hao Lianchuan.

What the heck was this situation? It was one thing for the Night Watchers to be less than the three great organizations, but they shouldn't stand even lower than the Sword Sect!

These guys are still so powerful even without Red Moon!

There were even more Sunflares if he was to count that level. Celestial had the most number of Sunflares, not Yama or the Night Watchers. A startled Li Hao made a careful count. Out of Celestial's twenty-two cloaked figures, two were Solars and a potential thirteen were Sunflares. Seven looked to be Darkmoon, and they were stronger than Fullmoon.

The fuck??

Didn't they all say that Sunflares were a rare sight? The Night Watchers had sent seven in their delegation due to the importance of the ruins. Li Hao thought that was a sizable amount, but it turns out that it wasn't much? Had these fellows emptied out their provincial strongholds?

“After some thought, I’ve decided that the expedition shall take place at 6am tomorrow.” Hou Xiaochen walked over and skipped the pleasantries. “Does anyone wish to withdraw? If not, we will enter in the morning! All of us can enter together and then decide whether or not to separate when we run into several forked roads. If we don’t go in together, the doors to the ruins open only once a month. You’ll have to wait for next month or for the others to exit...”

“We can go in together,” the tall Reincarnation King said from a distance. “But there are other details that we need to discuss first.”

“Go ahead.”

“There needs to be a limit on the number of people.”

“How so?” Hou Xiaochen laughed.

“Twenty from each faction!” the Reincarnation King said calmly. “It’s not good for too many people to go inside. Conflicts will easily arise and we’ll interfere with each other’s explorations. Yama, Celestial, the Night Watchers, and Sword Sect will send twenty people each. The smaller organizations can send a combined twenty people. A total of one hundred is enough.”

Too many was indeed not ideal. A disorganized situation would more easily set off extraneous mechanisms.

A cold snort sounded in the midst of their discussions as a violet shadow landed from the sky. “Revolution,” she said coldly. “Have you forgotten Red Moon?”

“I haven’t.” The man frowned. “But Red Moon...”

Is all dead, isn’t it?

His eyes shifted rapidly as his voice trailed off. Figures wearing ghost face masks rushed to join them, giving rise to strange expressions throughout the assembly!

Red Moon still had people! After losing their entire delegation and a few Solars, they still had people to send! Just how many members had the organization sent to Silver Moon?

One had to know, this was just a border province. Out of the ninety-nine provinces of the Skystar Dynasty, Silver Moon was neither here nor there in terms of importance. The three great organizations valued the province, but neither Yama nor Celestial could do as Red Moon and swiftly assemble another batch of powerhouses after a band of elites were slaughtered.

There were roughly twenty of them and they were all quite strong! Several Sunflares could be sensed among them; no one could tell if there were Solars.

Li Hao, however, could. There were no Solars. It looked like Red Moon had lost all of their Solars in the province, but Violet Moon was one herself. Would she be joining the expedition? The young man was stunned by the organization's might. They were incredible to quickly put together another team after losing so many!

He quickly lowered his head as he discovered that not only Violet Moon, but many of the newly arrived Red Moon members were focused on him. Their attention wasn't too overt, but he sensed it all the same. It was the perception of a martial master. These people were all eyeing him!

Damn it! This meant that Red Moon's bigger target was still him. Was it because of Silver City's matter?

"Red Moon is the strongest of the three great organizations, alright!" Hou Xiaochen chuckled. "Impressive!"

The compliment was an obvious attempt to sow discord. But the instigation wouldn't work as the three great organizations didn't care about comments like these.

“We all have roughly the same sized delegation,” Hou Xiaochen continued with a smile. “So limiting numbers doesn’t seem as significant a matter. Those who are willing to enter can enter. There aren’t that many of the Night Watchers present and a portion of us will not be joining the expedition.

“Since Violet Moon is also here, shall we discuss who amongst us should not be attending?” The Night Watcher director’s smile deepened. “Me, Violet Moon, and Revolution will not be entering. Half Mountain of Celestial isn’t here, so we can set him aside. How about the three of us act as checks on each other?”

The Revolution King had no opinion, but Violet Moon bit off coolly, “I naturally wouldn’t go inside if Hao Kong was alive. Now that he’s dead, and by Yuan Shuo’s hand, shall I kill Hao Lianchuan first before we discuss this further?”

If she stayed outside as well, there would be no Solars among the Red Moon delegation. What was the point of them attending the expedition then? Just to send their members to their deaths?

Hao Lianchuan glanced at her and cursed inwardly. So now you think of me when you want to kill someone. Why don’t you talk about killing Director Hou?

“You are a peak Solar and wield an origin weapon,” Hou Xiaochen sighed. “The situation will be difficult to handle if you are part of the team as well. I’d wanted everyone to jointly explore the ruins, but with your personality, you’ll start attacking as soon as you’re inside. Then there won’t be much of a point to this collaborative excavation.

“Not to mention, Revolution will want to enter if you’re there, so I have to be a part of it as well then. Why don’t we just declare war on each other right here and now?”

Stone-faced, Violet Moon didn’t respond. She was going inside! Not just for the ruins, but also because she wanted to capture Li Hao while inside. With Hou Xiaochen present on the outside, it did deter her from taking action.

Of course, the prerequisite was that Li Hao would be part of the expedition as well.

Hou Xiaochen dithered in an awkward position. The Revolution King chuckled at this time. “I have to be part of the delegation if Violet Moon joins. If you’re interested, you can partake as well, Director Hou!”

Would Hou Xiaochen dare? Silver Moon would be engulfed with pandemonium as soon as the doors closed.

“You’re putting me in a checkmate!” Hou Xiaochen laughed and thought briefly. “What a pity that Yuan Shuo ran for it. Let’s wait for a little bit, I’ve notified someone to come. It’s up to you whether or not you wish to participate after he arrives!”

Some looked askance at each other. Who was it? Why did Hou Xiaochen think they could stand against the Revolution King and Violet Moon?

Hao Lianchuan was also very curious. Are there any other Solars apart from me, and one that can counterbalance powerhouses such as Violet Moon?

“Then it’s settled,” Hou Xiaochen didn’t elaborate. “Additionally, I have to say this even though I may be speaking out of turn. It’s best that we cooperate with each other after heading inside! This ancient city is far more than it seems. Otherwise, we Night Watchers would’ve finished our explorations a long time ago. This joint expedition would never be on the table.

“Being in a rush to eliminate your opponents after entering the ruins is not a good idea! If a mad slaughter begins after you’re all inside, you’re more likely to consign everyone to death!

“Additionally, you’ll have to wait until midnight that day after the doors open. If you enter in the morning, you’ll have to wait until midnight to exit. You won’t be able to open the doors yourself. Novas can’t manage it, to say nothing of Solars.”

Strange expressions crossed faces. So the doors of the ruins were that durable? Of course, it also represented just how extraordinary the ruins were. There was no need for Hou Xiaochen to lie to the assembly.

The director wasn't willing to say anything else. He turned to walk back to the tents. "That will be all. Come with us tomorrow morning. If all of you stay here, it will look like you want to encircle and mob the Night Watchers."

The supernaturals outside didn't say anything. They quickly returned to their campsite, which happened to be quite close to the Night Watcher tents.

Chapter 222: Hu Dingfang (III)

Li Hao ignored the outsiders and glanced at Liu Yan next to him. He followed her gaze when he saw her fix a vicious glare on someone. The target of her look was a muscular man. His ball of light placed him as a Sunflare.

That's probably Li Dahu, isn't it?

"Big sis?"

Liu Yan had turned extremely taciturn since arriving at Rift Canyon. She barely said a word these days. She must be burning for vengeance, yet unable to do anything. Her enemy was right in front of her, but there was nothing to be done. It would be a horrible feeling indeed.

"I'm fine," Liu Yan murmured. "I saw Red Moon's people looking at you. You should probably stay out of the ruins..."

"It'll be okay," Li Hao chuckled and shook his head. "Sis, just find a chance to kill that guy. Don't lose sleep over it."

“Don’t think about it, Little Hao. Just keep an eye on your own safety.” That was all that Liu Yan would say. It would be more trouble if she said too much and caused the others to seek out Li Dahu without considering the consequences. Revenge wouldn’t immediately jump to the top of her priority list as soon as she entered the ruins. The right timing had to be identified.

A curious Wang Ming walked over. “Who do you think the director is bringing here? They must be pretty strong. Can it be a powerhouse from headquarters?”

Li Hao shook his head. He had no idea. Perhaps Manager Yu would be going inside? Her ball of light was a little stronger than Violet Moon’s. Perhaps she was the Nova that the director spoke of. Even if not, she was at least a peak Solar. If she entered the ruins, she would absolutely be able to handle the other two.

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The Night Watchers were also waiting. Since Director Hou had confirmed that he wouldn’t be entering, whoever went in his stead was critical. Hao Lianchuan sulked off to the side—no one paid attention to him. Plainly, everyone thought that he wouldn’t be able to stand against Violet Moon and the Revolution King.

A loud rumble sounded near midnight, startling everyone awake. Was it more powerhouses?

Li Hao walked out with the rest and glimpsed an aircraft in the sky. Or rather, a helicopter.

It’s from the army!

The thought flashed through the crowd’s minds when they saw it. Only the military would have equipment like this. It was said that civilian versions existed in the central region, but Silver Moon didn’t have any. Only the military did.

A figure jumped down from the sky, splitting the ground with a roar!

Such a massive disturbance alarmed even the organizations on the outside. They approached the Night Watcher camp as well. The assembly saw an expressionless person when the dust cleared. He was roughly forty years of age with very short hair. His black army uniform was similar to an inspector uniform, but not quite. It was a bit more domineering.

Wang Ming started to see the man, a bit dazed by shock. “My... heavens... why is it him?”

“You know him?” Li Hao asked quietly. This person was very strong! It wasn’t that his light was intense—he seemed similar to Sun Yifei. It was the feeling that this person emanated, his temperament. It indicated that he was very, very strong!

“Do you know the local army?” Wang Ming whispered. “There’s three hundred thousand of them stationed in Silver Moon, I told you about it before, right? My family has a bit of power and influence inside. The army is split into three parts, roughly one hundred thousand each. This is Commander Hu of the Tiger Wings, one of the three parts. He commands the Tiger Wings, but the army and Night Watchers rarely act in concert...”

The middle-aged man nodded at Hou Xiaochen and looked at the perimeter.

“Piss off!” His look was as arctic as could be. “If you want to die, I’ll grant your wish once we enter the ruins!”

A few more figures materialized in the distance. Violet Moon looked on gravely. “Hu Dingfang, since when did the army get involved in these affairs?”

Hu Dingfang!

Those who didn’t know him memorized the name.

Hu Dingfang swept her a cold glare and answered aloofly, “Violet Moon, I told you to piss off. Who gave you the right to look down and fly in front of me? Director Hou doesn’t take you to task for it,

but I, Hu Dingfang, will not tolerate you! If you don't piss off now, I'll eliminate the Red Moon delegation first!"

"Hmph!" Violet Moon sniffed, but said nothing else. She turned and left.

Hu Dingfang!

This was out of their expectations. They thought that the Night Watchers would send more powerhouses, but it was the army instead. And it was Commander Hu Dingfang of the Tiger Wings! Since when had the mysterious agency reached an agreement with the military? They hadn't anticipated this at all!

"Ole Hu, it's enough that you're here," Hou Xiaochen chuckled. "Why fuss over them?"

Hu Dingfang inclined his head, his expression still remote. But perhaps he was just naturally that way and not an uncaring person. He scanned the Night Watchers instead of responding.

"I'm not familiar with you guys. Director Hou invited me here just to counteract Violet Moon and Revolution. Do as you should tomorrow. If Violet Moon and Revolution don't make a move, I will not help as well."

Now these words were truly indifferent. Hao Lianchuan curved his lips.

"Hao Lianchuan." Hu Dingfang suddenly settled his gaze on the man, as if he'd seen the gesture. "Would I need to be involved if not for your incompetence?"

"....." Hao Lianchuan nearly exploded on the spot. He answered irately, "Hu Dingfang, I'm not one of your subordinates!"

“You will be tomorrow!”

“.....” Hao Lianchuan was stunned into speechlessness and looked at Hou Xiaochen. Surely not? This guy was in charge of the team? He knew Hu Dingfang, this was an unequivocally merciless, callous, and bloodless fellow. Hao Lianchuan itched all over at the idea of being on the same expedition team as him.

Hou Xiaochen smiled with gratification. There was no helping it, he had to ask the army for help since he wasn't at liberty to enter the ruins. The Night Watchers were used to freedom, so they had to just grin and bear it. Hu Dingfang was from the army and accustomed to rules and regulations. He was a very stern person, so it was inevitable that the Night Watchers were unused to his style.

Hao Lianchuan abruptly felt that there was nothing worth living for. He was done for!

Merriment twinkled in the depths of Hu Dingfang's eyes. He ignored Hao Lianchuan and continued looking around, finally stopping in Li Hao's direction. He likely wanted to identify who was Yuan Shuo's disciple.

After a while, he gave a faint nod. Li Hao blinked and looked at Wang Ming next to him. As he expected, the young supernatural brightened and quickly called out, “Uncle Hu!”

Hu Dingfang started and focused on him, nodding after a moment and reverting to indifference.

Wang Ming paused, perplexed. Huh? Didn't you nod at me just now? I wouldn't bother with a greeting otherwise. He was a bit too afraid of this one.

Neither Wang Ming nor Li Hao could make sense of what'd just taken place. That'd been strange, it was as if Hu Dingfang had been greeting the latter. But I don't know him, does he know teacher?

That was a possibility.

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Hu Dingfang quickly entered a tent with Hou Xiaochen.

Inside the command tent.

“Thank goodness you’re here,” Hou Xiaochen chuckled. “It would be a dicey state of affairs otherwise. Did you see Li Hao? He insists on going in, there’s nothing that can be done about it.”

“Good! As disciples of the Five Styles should be!” Hu Dingfang responded faintly.

“You sound like you’re one of the Five Styles as well,” Hou Xiaochen chuckled. “But I suppose you do count as half of one. Did Yuhua say anything to you before you came?”

Hu Dingfang smiled faintly at the mention of Yuhua. His lips shifted into a barely perceptible curve, but he was indeed smiling. “She said to kill everyone from Red Moon! And to make sure her junior brother gets back safely. Old man Yuan’s disappeared, so she needs to look out for the lad as his senior sister.”

Senior sister!

If Li Hao was present, he would understand. He knew he had a senior sister, one many years older than him. She was in her thirties and according to his teacher, an old hag. She didn’t have much of a future and worked a few jobs in White Moon City to support herself.

However, Yuan Shuo never mentioned that she had anything to do with Hu Dingfang.

“Do as you see fit.” A merry Hou Xiaochen wasn’t surprised. “Old man Yuan’s made a run for it and left us with a great deal of trouble. Yuhua should be fine as she isn’t out in public much. Now that you’re here, Li Hao will be much safer.”

“If you ask me, there’s no need to go to so much trouble!” Hu Dingfang said coldly. “We’ll act tonight and kill them all! We can target the others with a full barrage when they arrive and kill anyone that comes. It will naturally intimidate this group if we kill the entire delegation!”

“You... Ah, forget it.” Hou Xiaochen shook his head and refused the suggestion. “You can take action inside the ruins, but what’s the point of destroying a delegation on the outside? You’re too impulsive, so just speak less.”

“Never mind, then!” Hu Dingfang rose to his feet. “I’m going to turn in for the night. I’ll be there tomorrow morning. Also, can I hit Hao Lianchuan if he doesn’t listen to orders?”

Hou Xiaochen stayed quiet for a very long moment. It was a tough question to answer. Finally, he said in a muffled tone, “It’s up to you.”

“Good, then I can hit him!” Hu Dingfang turned on his heel and left.

Hou Xiaochen didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. It’s not like Hao Lianchuan has offended you, but you always want to hit him! All he did was exchange a few words with Yuhua back in the day and ask if she’d like to join the Night Watchers. Is there a need for this?? So many years have passed and you still carry this grudge. Who says that soldiers are straight shooters and don’t nurse a grudge?

Hou Xiaochen sighed. It looked like he needed to let Hao Lianchuan know in advance. The man may have forgotten his past actions, but Hu Dingfang remembered them clearly! He was very petty in this regard!

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August 28. 5 am.

Activity bestirred the campsite. The delegations were to enter the ruins at 6 am, but Li Hao didn't even know where the ruins were. All he knew was that they were an ancient city. Rift Canyon was massive. Yuan Shuo hadn't had the time to explain where the city was and the young man didn't ask the Night Watchers. He just needed to follow the crowd.

The sky was still gloomy, but the Night Watchers were raising a noisy clamor. Supernaturals of the other organizations decided to go without sleep this night. They showed signs of movement as well.

A group of them swiftly congregated at the center of the campsite. They were a large group, but many of them wouldn't be entering the ruins.

Hou Xiaochen walked out with Manager Yu's support. No one reacted in particular and Li Hao managed to keep his calm, but Wang Ming really wanted to gossip. Did those two sleep together last night?

But as he looked at Hou Xiaochen's smiling face... fear prickled at his back. He didn't even dare whisper.

"Let's go." Hou Xiaochen didn't say anything. Hu Dingfang quickly walked over and stood in front of the crowd, usurping Hao Lianchuan's position.

The deputy director cast a sidelong glance at him. People said that soldiers were honest and frank, but he somehow felt that this guy was awful to the core. Hu Dingfang liked to pick on him for no reason at all. He intensely disliked the bastard.

"Stand up straight! Did you not eat enough for breakfast?" Hu Dingfang turned his head with a rebuke.

Hao Lianchuan wanted to throw fists! Who are you yelling at?! I'm the deputy director here, and the first deputy director!

Chapter 223: Entering the Ruins (I)

According to official government hierarchy, the Night Watchers were half a rank lower than the military. After all, they were subordinate to the Inspectorate to begin with. When it came down to it, the provincial inspector general of Silver Moon was their direct supervisor. He was ranked the same as the commander-in-chief of the local military.

As for Hou Xiaochen, he could be viewed on par with Hu Dingfang. The latter was just one of the commanders of the three armies, which meant that Hao Lianchuan was indeed half a rank lower than him.

Hu Dingfang's hectoring put odd expressions on people's faces. Hao Lianchuan was their superior at the end of the day, so some found the rebuke inappropriate. Not to mention, Hao Lianchuan was a Solar and a decent guy. There are quite a few who were put out with the fact that their supervisor was being publicly reprimanded—even if the person issuing the lecture was here to help them!

Hou Xiaochen wanted to say a few words, but Hu Dingfang preempted him in a mild tone. "What are all of you looking at? Hao Lianchuan and I have a personal grudge that has nothing to do with you. Or does someone want to take over his faults for him?"

"....."

Silence.

A personal grudge? Night Watchers looked curiously at each other. What grudge could these two share?

"Hu Dingfang." Hao Lianchuan was equally at a loss for words. "What kind of grudge do I possibly have with you? Just be frank if you have me in your sights!"

Hu Dingfang ignored him, whereas Hou Xiaochen broke out in laughter.

“Hmm... you do have a bit of one... Just a tiny one. Alright, don’t ruin the pleasant atmosphere now.”

He left with large strides, leaving behind a Hao Lianchuan deep in thought. Do we really share a grudge? But I don’t remember anything!

He truly couldn’t recall any run-ins with the man. A tiny one? No wonder the guy wouldn’t give him the time of day when they bumped into each other before. So we really have one? How come I don’t know about it?

Baffled, Hao Lianchuan slowed his steps and whispered to Manager Yu when Director Hou and Hu Dingfang were deep in murmured conversation. “Secretary Yu, do you know anything about this?”

His memory wasn’t offering any clues. If the director knew, then the manager should know as well.

Manager Yu flicked him a glance and couldn’t be bothered to respond. Hao Lianchuan was growing irritated. The hell! So you won’t tell me, what’s with that expression?

But after thinking it over, he caught up to the manager and muttered, “I’ll tell you a secret, the director doesn’t like spicy food! He always waits for you to leave before secretly throwing it out!”

“.....” Manager Yu looked at him for a while. Director Hou also looked at Hao Lianchuan, but simply lowered his voice, “Don’t be too out of line when it comes to Hao Lianchuan. We’re on the same side here and you can wait to leave the ruins first before beating him...”

Hu Dingfang inclined his head in understanding.

“It has to do with his wife,” Manager Yu finally said. “Think on it yourself!”

Has to do with his wife? Hao Lianchuan thought carefully. I know his wife Chen Yuhua, she's pretty. We chatted for a while a few years back. She's a decently strong martial master. Yuan Shuo was collaborating with the Night Watchers then, so I sought her out a few times...

A few times? So it's because of this? Surely not!

Hu Dingfang shouldn't be this petty and we only talked for a while. It's not like we did anything. Can it be because of Yuan Shuo?

Enlightenment dawned on Hao Lianchuan. Was it because Yuan Shuo was injured three years ago? His wife thinks it's my fault, so she sent Hu Dingfang against me?

That was very possible!

But... it was Director Hou who sent Yuan Shuo into the ruins, not me.

Hao Lianchuan suddenly looked at Hu Dingfang in a new, derisive light. You coward who only picks on easy targets. You don't dare cause trouble for the director, so you come for me instead. I understand now! So this is the case.

The deputy director was more put out with this fellow than ever. Coward! But his wife really was very pretty. What a pity that she's matched with this stony-faced commander. On the other hand, it was due to his wife's pillow talk that he treated Hao Lianchuan in this manner. That meant his wife was no kind soul either. Hah! Nothing good comes out of Yuan Shuo's discipline!

Hao Lianchuan snuck another glance at a Li Hao keeping such a low profile inside the crowd that he'd almost disappeared. The kid plays a pitiful soul who keeps his head down and is oh-so-innocent... he's nothing good either! He's just like his teacher—they almost fade out of view when they're not strong enough, but when they are?

They're the height of arrogance!

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As Hao Lianchuan's mind churned with gossip, the Night Watchers walked out of their campground. The perimeter was very quiet and divided into several factions. Red Moon, Celestial, Yama, and the Sword Sect were the four main organizations. An additional forty members from small organizations or independent supernaturals rounded out the gathering. They weren't too strong, but neither were they too weak. Darkmoons formed their bulk; there were roughly a dozen Sunflares as well.

Out of the fourteen small organizations that'd originally been present, some had run off after yesterday's battles. Most stayed, but left their weaker members behind. Multiple Solars were attending the excavation and even characters like Violet Moon were entering the ruins. The supernaturals of small organizations were also afraid of death. It was bold enough that they left approximately forty of their members behind.

When totaled with the Night Watchers, there were nearly two hundred people for the expedition team.

The assembly swiftly stirred to motion when they saw Hou Xiaochen and the others walk out. They didn't catch up to the Night Watchers, instead following behind them.

A large crowd of people made decent time under the hazy sky. After roughly twenty minutes, Hou Xiaochen stopped in front of a cliff face. Perplexed, people looked around and found nothing out of the ordinary. Hou Xiaochen pointed at the rock in front of them, "The entrance is here!"

A handful of supernatural ripples manifested to probe the cliff face, but didn't find anything.

"It's hard to discover!" said the Night Watcher director. "If it wasn't for Yuan Shuo leading us here in the first place, we wouldn't know that this location hides an ancient ruin."

“How did Yuan Shuo find it?” someone asked in the crowd.

“We don’t know, he didn’t say.” Hou Xiaochen was calmly collected. “My agreement with him was that he would explore thirty ruins for me. I didn’t ask about anything else. I don’t know how he found this place, just that he almost died in the excavation three years ago. Since you are all here, I’m sure you know a thing or two.”

“Does Yuan Shuo breaking through to Summoner have something to do with this set of ruins?” someone asked.

At the same time, various glances were cast at the Red Moon delegation. Some eyed them very oddly indeed. They’d plainly received yesterday’s news and were familiar with the scarlet shadows and blood pearls. Given how many from Red Moon were here, did this mean that some had brought their blood pearls?

No one desired to take action if they lacked origin weapons, but everyone knew that the Revolution King must have one, as did possibly Hao Lianchuan. When it came to Celestial, no one knew if they carried one since Half Mountain wasn’t here. And since Hong Yitang could establish the Sword Sect and raise a few supernaturals, who knew if he had an origin weapon?

Since this was the case, perhaps these people might have other ideas in mind.

Violet Moon had clearly received the same news and looked around her with a frosty glare. Headquarters had sent word last night for her to be careful. Reinforcements would soon arrive, but she needed to keep a low profile after the expedition. The central region had suffered attacks and some strongholds had been entirely uprooted.

Their losses were heavy! Multiple Solars disappeared after one night and even some Sunflares had vanished.

“Do all of you want to die?” she snapped upon seeing people stare at her delegation. “Either Yuan Shuo released that information or someone wants to fish in troubled waters. If this was the case, Red Moon would’ve had a Summoner of Spirit a long time ago!”

No one responded. It was up to them if they believed or not.

“Violet Moon, there’s no point in discussing this now,” Hou Xiaochen laughed. “I would like to remind everyone of one thing before we set off. Cooperate when you can inside. It’s not that I am worried about you turning on the Night Watchers, but that we truly wish to explore the ruins. If we don’t take full advantage of this chance, it will be tough to say if the ruins belong to the central region or Silver Moon after this.”

The group silently turned over his words. He made sense. Would this place still be theirs after the central region sent their people?

“I won’t say anything else!” Hou Xiaochen sent a ray of mysterious power at the cliff face. Hao Lianchuan followed with a ray of fire energy. Other supernaturals mimicked their actions in short order.

Li Hao didn’t pay attention at first, but he blinked when everyone’s energy was present and became lost in a daze.

Metal, wood, water, fire, earth, wind, thunder, dark...

Each of the eight energies seemed to occupy their own positioning. Upon closer inspection, this bore similarities to something—the eight trigrams!

So it seemed that eight energies were required to access the ruins. The key point was that their layout echoed the eight trigrams.

The eight trigrams? Li Hao suddenly thought of the diagram over Silver City. Did these ruins have something to do with Silver City? His teacher had mentioned the tiny turtle pictograph on the main doors to the ancient city. Ever since the professor learned about the eight families, he felt that the two might be related. There was a line in the folk song that sang of "the big turtle kept by the Wangs".

Other than this, Yuan Shuo didn't have any supplemental evidence to prove that there was a link to the right families. But why did the method to access the ruins seem so similar to the eight trigrams?

Li Hao found it regretful that his teacher wasn't present. Yuan Shuo hadn't mentioned this part before, so the young man would have loved to ask how his teacher found the place and discovered how to open it.

Perhaps there really is a connection... Li Hao tightened his grip around the little sword by his waist. If there was, the sword might be pivotal.

The cliff face seemed to come under an influence as the eight energies were infused into the rock. After a while, the stone morphed into something similar to a mirror—it was becoming translucent!

Some supernaturals gasped with awe and astonishment.

"The ancient civilization was amazing!" someone sighed. The technologies of the past were beyond incredible. Many modern marvels came from exploring ancient ruins, and even martial dao had much to do with the ancient civilization.

Chapter 224: Entering the Ruins (II)

Despite being a newcomer, the supernatural world was also related to the ancient civilization. There was more, particularly in terms of technology, that stemmed from the past. The cars that ran on the roads and the helicopter from last night were all inventions from history.

That Skystar Dynasty had progressed from an agricultural society to its current mix of half sophisticated technology and half supernatural society was all due to the ancient civilization.

The Veteris Institute of Silver City was established for the ancients and Yuan Shuo had originally taught there.

It was said that the dynasty was able to conquer the world thanks to the ancient civilization. The imperial family had possibly excavated a massive ruin back in the day and obtained a large sum of sophisticated items from the rubble. City-level annihilation weapons might have also come from there.

These discoveries made the unification of the lands possible. Otherwise, with the level of development of society in the past, conquering a province meant nothing as one might lose it in another few days. The key thing was, the liege lord might not even know that he'd lost part of his territory.

Not only did the supernaturals gasp with awe, so did Li Hao sigh with appreciation. There was another land behind the cliff face! Did this mean that Rift Canyon had existed since the ancient times? The entrance shouldn't be in the cliff face otherwise. If it'd existed for so long, then the city truly had been buried, right? It couldn't have been constructed underground to begin with, right?

If it had, the ancients were truly remarkable!

Undulations speed across the cliff face like water ripples as it slowly returned to calm. Hou Xiaochen glanced at it and spoke again, "You can enter now. The entrance will be accessible for half an hour. You can go in together or go in one by one. After it closes, the earliest it can be opened again is midnight tonight. It can be opened at midnight for the next three days, but after that, you'll have to wait a month. However, if you have to wait a month... you likely won't make it out alive!"

The assembly jerked with shock.

"Has someone among the Night Watchers lived inside for a month before?" The Revolution King frowned.

"No." Hou Xiaochen shook his head. "There's enormous danger inside. It's already a great feat to make it out alive within the first three days, to say nothing of a month. We explored only the outer

city before—the city beneath us is divided into the inner and outer city. There’s nothing valuable in the outer city, it’s all held in the inner city.

“Therefore, we hope that everyone works together on this joint expedition and makes it to the inner city!” The man smiled. “That will be all for now. You know better than me if you’re familiar with what I speak of. It’s not like you haven’t sent people inside before. What’s the point in asking all these questions?”

Would the great organizations enter without any sort of preparation beforehand?

Absolutely not!

There were plenty of Night Watchers in the agency and not all of them were loyal. There were double agents among them who’d long shared intelligence of the explorations.

No one among the crowd said anything, while Hong Yitang explained, “I really don’t know much. Please don’t misunderstand, Director Hou.”

The director smiled without a word. Is that so? It is if you say so.

As the water ripples stilled, the various organizations stared fixedly at the entrance. Do they go together or separately? Was there danger inside? They turned their gazes to the eager members of the small organizations.

“You go in first!” Violet Moon suddenly commanded coolly.

The small organizations hesitated at the directive. Some were apprehensive while others were excited. They knew that they were being used as scouts. At the same time, they were already here. Were they afraid of anything? Those still on the scene were either unafraid of death or hoping to strike it rich. It might be more dangerous to be the first inside, but it also meant they may have

greater gains. Although the Night Watchers had already conducted a few explorations, that didn't mean anything.

A couple of figures shot forward without requiring a second exhortation from Violet Moon. They smashed into the rippling cliff wall and vanished like a drop of water into a liquid surface. The figures vanished from sight.

Some powerhouses among the crowd utilized special powers to scan the stone surface with shining eyes, but they quickly frowned. They couldn't see anything. Just as their intelligence reports told them, one lost contact with the outside world after entering the ruins. Only a wall separated them, but they were unable to probe what was happening inside.

After precedent was set, the remaining heavyweights of the small organizations threw caution to the wind.

"Let's go in!" one of them grunted. "We're here because we want to take a gamble. There's nothing to hesitate about!"

Another group of people rushed at the cliff face. It might be safer to head in earlier. If they were one of the last ones in, they would have to be on their guard against ambush from the larger organizations. Now that was true danger.

Forty members of the small organizations had all gone inside in the blink of an eye. The Night Watchers were in no hurry.

"Let's make good use of time!" Hou Xiaochen remarked upon seeing that the assembly wasn't at ease. "How about this, the Sword Sect first, then Celestial, the Night Watchers, Red Moon, and Yama."

The Revolution King turned to him with a frown. Why were they last?

“It doesn’t matter what the order is, so long as we’re in the middle,” Hou Xiaochen chuckled. “This is to prevent you guys from allying together and quickly taking us out if you enter first. This is also out of interest for peace.”

“Celestial goes last,” amended the Revolution King. “Half Mountain isn’t here, so they have no voice at the table!”

It was fine for the Sword Sect to enter first. They could be the first line of defense against danger, and they weren’t competent enough to do anything if all was safe.

Hong Yitang didn’t mind. He gave way to the arrangement with a smile. “Then we’ll be off. Everyone, see you inside!”

He was the first to enter the cliff face, followed swiftly by his sect members and daughter. As for danger... if Hong Yitang died inside, there wouldn’t be a good ending in store for his daughter. These veteran martial masters held quite a clear understanding of the world. It was better to keep his daughter by his side so that she wouldn’t become a hostage in another’s hands.

The Revolution King acted decisively after the Sword Sect entered; he quickly walked in with his Yama members. Off to the side, Celestial didn’t protest their positioning. These people in cloaks kept a startlingly low profile.

It was the Night Watchers after Yama’s people. Liu Long grabbed Li Hao with one hand and Liu Yan with the other.

“Stay with me, be careful of getting separated!” he muttered. There was no need to look after Wang Ming—the young supernatural knew plenty of people here.

Li Hao didn’t say anything, he looked around with a bit of bafflement. Where was Panther? Had someone killed it and made it into dog stew? Surely not!

The dog was very smart. Did its absence mean that it was unwilling to enter the ruins? He was about to go in!

That was just as well if it didn't want to. The situation was bound to be dangerous inside, it was just that the outside may not be safe either. Numerous powerhouses might arrive after they left—maybe they would itch for a taste of dog spirit meat when they saw Panth?

Li Hao wasn't able to continue dwelling on this matter, so he set it aside.

Hu Dingfang was the first to enter on the Night Watcher side, Hao Lianchuan would bring up the rear. There were a few in line ahead of Li Hao's trio. When they were all inside, the three rushed the cliff face.

After them, Red Moon and Celestial entered the ruins. There were only a few Night Watchers and a scattering of members from other organizations left outside before long. Not all of Red Moon went inside; some Darkmoons remained on the outskirts. It wouldn't be a loss if they died. If no one touched these Darkmoons, they could wait for reinforcements to arrive. Various heavyweights were rushing to Silver Moon on account of Yuan Shuo's matter. they just needed a bit of time to make the trip.

Those who stayed behind swiftly vanished. Each of them were highly on edge as they were deathly afraid Hou Xiaochen would kill them.

The Night Watcher director, however, didn't deign to look at them. It was pointless to kill them. He simply watched the stone wall gradually return to a cliff face. A black dog appeared at the last possible second and rammed itself at the wall.

Manager Yu was about to stop the animal when Hou Xiaochen shook his head.

"Let it go inside," he chuckled. "I hear that it's Yuan Shuo's dog."

“Yuan Shuo...” The manager looked around with furrowed brows. “Is he still nearby?”

Being a martial master, it was easy for Yuan Shuo to hide himself if he wished to.

“It’s hard to say. Whatever Yuan Shuo does is normal. Who knows where he’s holing up to recover, or perhaps he’s not in hiding at all,” Hou Xiaochen continued chuckling. “Let’s go, the entrance has been sealed off. Let’s come back for a look tomorrow night. I wonder if anyone will rush here today. Our neighbors might arrive if they’re fast enough—I don’t think we’ll see anyone from the central region yet.”

The central region was so far away that some more time was needed. However, there were other provinces near Silver Moon. The various larger organizations might redeploy their powerhouses on an ad hoc basis, more neighboring Night Watchers might present themselves. Who knew?

Manager Yu helped him back to camp. “Will battle break out as soon as they’re all inside?” she asked softly.

“It shouldn’t, they’ll want to get a handle on the situation first. They’re all supernaturals—while impulsive, they’re not idiots. If they start killing as soon as they’re inside, who knows if anyone will make it out alive?”

.....

At the same time, above the cliffs of Rift Canyon.

A figure appeared with a soft cough, its complexion pale. It looked at Hou Xiaochen in the distance and at the newly sealed off cliff face. A faint smile spread across its face.

“It’s up to you now!” The figure looked to the horizon. There would be powerhouses here soon. It walked away from the scene and was soon greeted by a person stepping out from a boulder.

Yuan Shuo coughed and looked at the newcomer with surprise. “What are you doing here?”

“Master!” The newcomer appeared very young and delicate, but wore a sturdy combat outfit and a braided ponytail. She half grumbled, “I came with Dingfang last night, but I dropped out of the helicopter first. I knew you would still be here!”

“Hmm?” Yuan Shuo frowned.

“Junior brother is here, would you leave ahead of time without watching him enter the ruins or seeing if Hou Xiaochen handed him over?” Chen Yuhua complained. “You’re deeply injured, but you’re still lingering in these surroundings. I knew that you’d relax only after personally seeing junior brother enter the ruins. As I thought, I found you here!”

“What are you doing, waiting for me?” Yuan Shuo frowned and left with large strides.

“Master, are your injuries bad?” Chen Yuhua quickly caught up to the professor. “Everyone’s looking for you, come back to White Moon City with me. The army barracks are the safest. No matter how bold they are, they won’t dare attack the army! The Tiger Wings’ campsite is perfect for you to rest and recover in...”

“Piss off!” Yuan Shuo snapped impatiently.

“Master!” Chen Yuhua protested in hurt tones.

“Who’s your master?” Yuan Shuo denounced cold as he talked. “When I accepted you, I wanted to have you inherit my legacy. You’re my final disciple on the path of martial dao, Li Hao was meant to be the heir to my knowledge! The Five Styles, the Breathing Method of the Five Styles! Which one didn’t I pass on to you? My thoughts were that you’d strengthen my Five Styles discipline if you could cross over to Dominator.

“But you decided to go to White Moon City. I don’t care if you decided to join the army or Night Watchers, but you taught my breathing method to Hu Dingfang!” Yuan Shuo snarled with fury. “I would’ve slapped you to death with one palm strike if this had been twenty years ago! This is a betrayal of your master! Would Hu Dingfang have his accomplishments of today with that potential? You good-for-nothing!”

Chapter 225: Entering the Ruins (III)

Yuan Shuo was livid with rage! The woman in front of him was the final disciple he’d been prepared to pass on all of his martial heritage on to. Li Hao was an accident; the boy hadn’t been ready to learn martial dao. But this woman, his youngest disciple back in the day, had privately handed out martial tutelage to others!

This was why Yuan Shuo very rarely mentioned a senior sister to Li Hao. On the rare occasion that he did, he described her as an old hag and said there was nothing noteworthy about her. It was apparent from this that the professor was still put out with this disciple. And given his temper, he really would’ve cleaned house if this happened when he was younger!

“Master, I know I’m at fault.” Chen Yuhua looked woeful. “But you had so many enemies back in the day and Dingfang was already a high ranking officer in the army. His potential is good and he can protect master if he’s stronger...”

She’d only hoped to better protect her master, but unauthorized dissemination of martial dao was indeed a great taboo in the martial world. Granted, the martial world had almost vanished by that time.

Yuan Shuo remained stony-faced and strode ahead of her.

“Master, look, Dingfang can protect junior brother now that he’s strong.” Chen Yuhua followed behind the old man. “Hou Xiaochen is a wily old fox and junior brother may not be safe by his side. With Dingfang present, he’ll have to consider Dingfang’s feelings even if he doesn’t think of you...”

“Piss off!” Yuan Shuo snapped; he couldn’t be bothered with what the woman was saying.

“Master, you can refuse to recognize me,” Chen Yuhua continued doggedly. “But you’re in a very dangerous situation right now. Junior brother will also face danger when he exits the ruins. I’d like junior brother to enter the Tiger Wings. He’ll be safer there than with the Night Watchers.”

Yuan Shuo turned back to regard her with a frown. “If you dare make haphazard arrangements or intervene carelessly, I’ll execute both you and Hu Dingfang! Is a late Solar supposed to be very strong? And you, just look at how you are after setting foot into Dominator! Are you worthy of calling me master?! You’re less than Liu Long as a Dominator! Don’t call me master, you don’t have the right to!

“I taught you a perfectly good Five Styles and the five auras,” the old man breathed out balefully. “Gathering all five is very difficult, so I told you to break through after collecting two or three. You decided to advance at one!

“It’s harder to comprehend the aura as a Dominator!” Yuan Shuo raged. “Why do people like us continuously refuse to set foot into that level? Are you that highly capable? You’re a trash Dominator! You taught martial dao to Hu Dingfang without my permission! Fine, I won’t speak of this. But you broke through to Dominator ahead of time for that piece of shit! Do you have any respect for your master?!”

Chen Yuhua couldn’t muster a response. She had indeed advanced prematurely in order to save Hu Dingfang. She’d grasped only one aura, and the weaker deer aura at that. It created the situation that although she was a Dominator, she wasn’t that strong. She was more on par with an ordinary supernatural. Even though it’d been a few years since her progression, she could only fight some mid or late Sunflares. Peak Sunflares were beyond her.

Plainly, this did not measure up to Yuan Shuo’s expectations. The old man was thick in the throes of anger.

“Your potential is exemplary and you grasped the aura early on. You were the greatest hope of my Five Styles discipline, but these results?! I could’ve forgiven you for privately passing on knowledge if you’d melded the five auras together. But you crippled your martial dao for him! I’ll kill him sooner or later!!”

This was his true final disciple—would he have accepted someone with poor potential and comprehension? But after a trip to White Moon City, she lost herself, the secret art, and her martial dao future.

The deer aura? She might as well not break through then!

No one would've guessed that this particular Yuan Shuo disciple had entered Dominator a long time ago. Everyone thought that those of this cultivation did not exist in the martial world. Yuan Shuo never mentioned it to outsiders. He didn't praise or boast about it because it was a humiliation, not an honor.

A Dominator who comprehended only the deer aura? What use is that? To run away with? Is this all that the strongest heir to my Five Styles is good for?

Chen Yuhua had nothing to say. She lowered her head and changed topics after a while. "Master, come to the army barracks. It's safer there. I've prepared good food and wine for you. I've also notified people to hunt down Red Moon powerhouses to see if we can extract some blood pearls for your recovery. Also, Dingfang said that he would emerge from the ruins with some blood pearls..."

"Piss. Off!" Yuan Shuo shouted once more.

"Don't be mad, master," Chen Yuhua continued in the face of her teacher's wrath. "It's been so many years. Not to mention, junior brother is a Sunderer now too, right? You've entered Summoner of Spirit and the Five Styles discipline is known far and wide. I'm just a woman—I'd be losing face for you if I'm considered your final disciple. Junior brother seems quite good. See, I can send my husband to look after him now that you're indisposed. Otherwise, how can a Dominator like me look after him, wouldn't you say so?"

"Bullshit!" Yuan Shuo cursed again.

“Master, we can’t stay here for too long,” Chen Yuhua consoled. “The enemy might come for us! Come with me first. Ah, yes, I got in contact with senior brother two years ago. He’s doing well enough! We can find a day to catch up with him...”

Yuan Shuo’s footsteps halted and he frowned. “Is that one still alive?”

“Don’t hold your grudges for so long, master,” Chen Yuhua comforted. “Senior brother was only protecting you that year...”

“More bullshit!” Yuan Shuo snorted. “He’s not my disciple either, Li Hao is my only disciple! How the fuck does a Slayer who crossed over to the supernatural dare say he’s my disciple? I told him to ascend as a Sunderer, he insisted on doing so as a Slayer! Tell him to get the hell away from me!”

He wasn’t opposed to his disciples joining the supernatural world, but he’d hoped for his senior disciple to ascend as a Sunderer. The man couldn’t help himself and crossed over as a peak Slayer. It’d caused Yuan Shuo no end of heartburn for a long time.

“Don’t be like that, master,” Chen Yuhua said quietly. “You need to accept it even if for junior brother’s sake! Senior brother’s done quite well for himself, he joined the Skystar Troops that the Ministry of Military Justice created in the central region! It’s the ministry’s premier supernatural division and he’s now a Solar...”

“Hah!” Yuan Shuo jeered again. “Are Solars supposed to be something? I’ve already killed a bunch of them! If he’d listened to me and ascended as a Sunderer, he might be greater than Solar now given it was the early days of the supernatural world. A Solar? Don’t embarrass yourself!”

“.....” Chen Yuhua was completely speechless. “Master, not everyone can meld the five auras like you. Otherwise, the martial world wouldn’t have only one Old D—Grandmaster Yuan.”

A livid Yuan Shuo looked at her. What had she wanted to say? Old Demon Yuan? Was that something she could say?

“Hu Dingfang, is it?” he asked coldly. “You learned it from him because he calls me that everyday, doesn’t he?”

“...no!” Chen Yuhua hastily shook her head. This was bad! Dingfang would be done for if she confessed!

“I’ll collect from that piece of shit sooner or later!” Yuan Shuo snorted coldly. “I won’t fuss about this because I’m in a good mood. Don’t claim to anyone that you’re my disciple.” The old man sniffed dismissively. “You grasp the deer aura. The deer corresponds to the liver and the liver to the wood element. You can try nurturing your five visceral organs. The deer aura can be melded into the liver to summon the spirit of the wood deer!

“But don’t try this brashly,” he said after a few pointers. “You can ask Li Hao if there’s anything you don’t understand.”

“Master!” Chen Yuhua exclaimed with excitement. Was her master... not as angry anymore?

“Don’t say you’re my disciple, you’re not anymore!” Yuan Shuo sneered. “I tell you this only to let you know that martial masters have a far brighter future than your Hu Dingfang!”

He pushed off into the air and swiftly vanished into the sky. Chen Yuhua quickly followed in pursuit, but it was impossible to catch up to the old man. Yuan Shuo had vanished amid the desolate plains.

Although the professor had been angry earlier and wanted to shake off Chen Yuhua, he’d done so through walking. There was no leaving anyone behind when walking. All he needed to do was operate Birdshot if he truly wished to be free of Chen Yuhua. He hemmed and hawed for a long while, even explaining the process for attaining Summoner in the end.

It was all in interest of taking a few more glances at this disciple he’d once held great expectations for. Chen Yuhua had followed at his side for a full ten years—a time much longer than Li Hao.

Yuan Shuo was truly heartbroken, a state that eased only when he himself broke through to Summoner.

Chen Yuhua gave chase, but could no longer catch sight of Yuan Shuo. Sorrow set in; it was difficult for her to accept this outcome. Her master was too stubborn. She'd gone to Silver City a few times over the years but was always thrown out. Yuan Shuo smashed everything he could lay hands on and threw an incredible fit, refusing any chance of her returning.

Things were a bit better now, possibly because of his new disciple. Her little junior brother performed well when it came to martial dao, bringing splendor to her master's sealed heart.

Chen Yuhua sighed as she failed to catch up to Yuan Shuo, then quickly roused her spirits. Master had given her the method to Summoner, indicating that he still thought of their relationship. He was just too stubborn to speak of it. This was good!

The caveat was that nothing happened to her junior brother. Otherwise, with her master's temper, if her junior brother was lost and Chen Yuhua unsuccessful in attaining major accomplishment in martial dao, the traces of warmth she'd seen today would quickly freeze over.

Dingfang, you have to protect junior brother well. If he dies in the ruins... master might really execute you! Chen Yuhua grew worried again. Her husband was leading the expedition team, but it would be enormous trouble if her junior brother was injured at all. Hu Dingfang would never find favor in her master's eyes then.

.....

At the same time, inside the ruins beside massive city walls.

Hu Dingfang's head was about to split open.

“Where’s Li Hao?!” A headache was going to break his brain! His wife had urged again and again that he needed to ensure Li Hao’s safety, so where was the young man?!

Stubborn old fart Yuan Shuo had wanted to move against him for the longest time, so Hu Dingfang had hoped to alleviate the tension by protecting Li Hao well on this expedition. But where had the young man gone??

The army commander panicked. I’m dead! They’d all come in together, but Li Hao, Liu Long, and Liu Yan were mysteriously missing when he counted heads. Fuck! Those two could vanish, but nothing could happen to Li Hao!

Hu Dingfang wanted to cry. He was the vaunted commander of the Tiger Wings, but he really wanted to bawl his eyes out somewhere.

Why is life so hard?? He looked around, finding that those who’d come in earlier were already gone. Those entering later swiftly vanished near the entrance. Only the Night Watchers remained, and they were all looking at him.

“Li Hao and the others are gone?” Hao Lianchuan didn’t have much of an expression on his face, he was just confused. “Did they get transported elsewhere? But it’s fine, this has happened before, it’s just a rare sight. Three vanishing at the same time is even rarer—they might really have been transported elsewhere.”

“Really?” Hu Dingfang seemed to see a ray of hope and grabbed the man’s arm. “He’s not dead?”

“What’s wrong with you?” Hao Lianchuan blurted out. The heck? Why are you reacting like this instead of leading the team? They were just transported elsewhere, it’s not like this has never happened before!

Hu Dingfang was overjoyed instead of angry. As long as he’s okay, as long as he’s okay. It’s fine if you die, Hao Lianchuan, but Li Hao can’t. If he dies, life won’t be worth living after I go back.

“Come, let’s explore the ruins!” Hu Dingfang waved his people onward. He needed to find Li Hao as soon as possible. Although the young man wouldn’t necessarily die in the transportation, it was also a hassle that he was lost.

If he accidentally runs into danger and I’m not by his side... I might as well despair now than for him to be beaten to death later.

Chapter 226: Mysterious Ancient City (I)

Lights seemed to be flashing in the distant gloom, like the eyes of wild beasts glowing in the wilderness. That was how it came across to Li Hao.

It was dead silent around them. They walked on hard stone blocks and traveled down an uninhabited alley. That was, uninhabited until faint breathing sounded next to them.

This was when Li Hao realized they were not alone. He tilted his head to see a very nervous Liu Long next to him. The man wasn’t in clear focus given the dark, but the eyesight of a Sunderer was very decent. He could make out most of the shapes he saw—being only slightly affected by noise and interference.

Liu Yan was also panicking on the other side and whipped her head to and fro. Having just set foot into late Sunderer, the deathly quiet was a bit stifling.

Footsteps seemed to sound by their ears, but it was like they were separated by another layer—they weren’t that clear. The trio thought it was the Night Watchers at first, then quickly realized that it wasn’t.

These footsteps rose and fell and continued without end, but they didn’t approach the trio. It was as if they circled around the group, but didn’t draw closer.

Yuan Shuo’s words echoed in their minds at this time. You will hear footsteps in the ancient city. When you hear footsteps, that means danger is upon you! But he’d also said that the footsteps sounded only in the last, innermost part of the city he’d penetrated. He’d entered through the city gates and explored his way further, almost reaching the inner city before hearing the footsteps.

“Gulp!” someone swallowed hard. Li Hao didn’t think it was himself, was it Liu Yan? Or... was it the captain? The captain was afraid?

To be honest, the young man was also a bit frightened. Where were the others? Where was the rest of the delegation? Based on Hou Xiaochen’s words, they should be together after entering the ruins. They should all be at the entrance. Why was there only the three of them at this place?

“Chief...” Li Hao called out softly. Echoes suddenly returned to their position. “Chief...”

The three jumped with shock!

Reality was rapidly proving that audaciousness wasn’t truly the middle name of martial masters. The three subconsciously drew closer to each other, wanting to draw warmth from their companions. This forsaken place was chilly and sinister, it was terrifying!

They felt a certain degree safer after establishing close proximity to each other, but the footsteps by their ears never stopped. They paused briefly when Li Hao called out “chief”, making the trio pale with horror. Had they been heard??

They looked at each other. Liu Long forced himself to snap out of his terror as he was the team leader and a Dominator, but he was cursing up a storm inside. I knew the ruins were dangerous, but I didn’t know that they’d be so scary right upon entering!

“Don’t be afraid!” he mumbled very softly. Only martial masters would hear him with their superb hearing. However, he didn’t speak with a lot of confidence. Thank goodness they were here together. If one person had suddenly appeared here by themselves, they would likely be petrified with fear.

Liu Long looked around—they were in a tiny alley. Tall walls surrounded them and some light could be glimpsed up ahead. The lights that were as if ghostly fire also came from the end of the passageway.

The three looked at each other. What should they do now? Do they wait or move forward? Both retreat and advancement were tough to decide. Li Hao was the bolder one in the end. There was no helping it, they were here already.

He'd felt the same way when scarlet shadows visited him everyday and he'd been the only one who could see them. While their current circumstances were more terrifying, at least there were three of them. He caught the other two's attention and gestured to the front.

Go there!

They couldn't remain here forever. This little alleyway wasn't spacious. Once enemies were upon them and attacked from both front and back, there would be no place to run. They couldn't see how tall the walls were around them and if the structures were easy to destroy. The trio didn't dare mount brash attempts at this point in time, in any case.

Li Hao stooped and felt the ground. The durable stone felt cool to the touch, but a careful mental probing brought heart palpitations. These stone blocks... seemed to contain a terrifying power! Something brewed inside and there was no edge to be felt. The young man followed the block to the walls, his expression stiffening as he did so. They seemed to be one entity! There were no cracks between the ground and walls, it was like they were one whole!

His teacher had said to not haphazardly leave the ground. Li Hao swallowed hard. Who would dare leave the ground? It was terrifying! What kind of awful place was this??

The three didn't make a sound; Liu Long was exploring as well. When he touched something that looked like a crack underneath, he realized that it wasn't a crack. It might just be decoration to break up the smooth surface of the stone.

The three carefully picked their way forward, their movements so light it was as if they imitated cats. The sound of footsteps up ahead grew clearer and the light grew brighter as they approached. The sound was frightening them out of their wits. Each step seemed to stomp on their hearts.

When they approached the end of the alley, Li Hao nearly screamed to feel someone pinching his arm. He barely forced the reflex down and wanted to erupt with curses when he saw that it was Liu Yan gripping him!

What are you pinching me for at a time like this?! Go pinch Liu Long!

In actuality... he quickly discovered that she was pinching both of them. This woman was bold and killed without blinking, but she was truly terrified at the moment. She shook as she looked ahead, the men followed her gaze. They'd been too distracted by her pinch to notice, but they froze when they saw what she was looking at!

There was a humanoid figure pacing around in the patch of light up ahead. Footsteps echoed in their ears—it came from that figure's feet! Yuan Shuo had said that the footsteps might belong to people in the darkness!

The ancients?

How was that possible?!

There was no possibility of living people here. This place had been sealed for countless eons. It was impossible for anyone to survive without food, drink, or knowledge. But their eyes defied that reality, and the figure seemed to sense something as well. It suddenly stopped at the end of the alleyway, casting a glance in Li Hao's direction.

The trio's hearts almost stopped in their chests! They were unafraid of a strong enemy, just of the unknown. They wouldn't be fearful if the figure suddenly introduced itself and said it was a Solar or Nova. But the figure didn't say a word!

That was the most horrifying part of the encounter. To suddenly find someone staring at them in the darkness of an ancient city sealed for eternity, and to be able to see that person... What kind of feeling was that?

I do not move if the enemy does not move.

The trio remained still as long as the figure didn't move. Everyone seemed to be caught by a petrification art. After an indeterminate period of time, possibly one minute, three, or five minutes...

The three heaved a sigh of relief when the figure vanished and footsteps appeared again. It was suddenly much more relaxing to hear the sound of footsteps. When they suddenly vanished would be another source of fright.

The three advanced gingerly, hunched over and movements gentle as could be. A short distance took several dozen seconds to cover before they reached where the figure had paused. Li Hao poked his head out of the alley—his scalp immediately crawled with numbness and he stiffened in dread! Liu Long likewise stuck his head out when he felt the young man's tension. His scalp also tingled with horror! Liu Yan was the next to carefully look outward, finishing off a trio of heads that didn't dare move.

There was a large avenue outside the alley and many, many dark figures within it. To their left was the figure that'd just disappeared from their alley; there were many more of its brethren to be found on the right!

The three heads shot back into the alley. More footsteps were approaching them. The sounds were so uniform that they seemed to originate from one person, but the trio could tell that it was a small squad. It looked to be roughly eight figures—no one dared take a clear look.

The footsteps were growing closer. Li Hao wanted to retreat, but Liu Long pressed down on his arm with a slight shake of the head and held his breath. This was not a moment for action—it would too easily draw attention.

Three stiff Night Watchers waited on the spot in apprehension. A small team of black figures steadily approached. The trio was afforded their first clear glance of the figures when the first one passed by the alley.

Soldiers!

Shock shook their hearts. These weren't random black figures, but soldiers dressed in black armor! Their armor was cast from a solid whole, even their helmets, and fully enveloped their wearers. Weapons hung by their sides.

It was a team of ancient soldiers! They moved along the avenue like wraiths, stepping forward in unison and passing by the alley. No one looked at the trio, no one noticed them, or perhaps no one discovered the three trespassers.

The footsteps continued in complete tandem. This was a highly trained squad of elites. They seemed to be on their usual patrols. Day after day, year after year!

Liu Long, Liu Yan, and Li Hao were so stunned that they could barely come back to their senses. Were these people alive? Patrolling soldiers?

It was hard to imagine—were there really large numbers of living people in this ancient city?

Li Hao's expression shifted slightly and he shook his head. "They... don't seem to be alive!" he murmured in a barely audible voice when the footsteps receded. The senses of martial masters were very keen. He couldn't sense any breathing, heartbeats, or balls of light beneath the armor. What were these things?

Neither did the young man believe that anyone could survive in this completely sealed off city for so long.

"Puppets?" Li Hao offered after thinking it over. He'd memorized many old tomes and some recorded the existence of puppets in the ancient times. They were sometimes indistinguishable from real people—certain techniques and methods could create puppets that even had flesh and blood. The only thing they lacked was a consciousness.

Could that have been a team of puppets used to patrol the ancient city back in its day?

The trio didn't know and couldn't theorize an answer. The ancient civilization was too far removed from them.

Chapter 227: Mysterious Ancient City (II)

The three didn't dare leave the small alley. Just seeing the soldiers when they poked their heads out had been too terrifying. Now that the squad moved away, they dared take another peek.

This time, they were overawed by the sight. An enormous wall towered roughly one hundred meters ahead of them. The entire one hundred meters between the wall and alley was the avenue.

It was an exceedingly spacious thoroughway!

Was this an ancient passageway? Were all of the ones in this city so spacious?

And that wasn't the reason behind the awe. The trio's gazes followed the wall up, their jaws dropping as they did so. It was so very, very tall. Li Hao finally saw its top after a long while—it was almost one hundred meters tall!

A one hundred meters tall wall?! That was almost thirty stories tall! And this was a wall of the ancients?? Are you kidding me, this is more like a city wall! No, not even city walls are this tall!

Li Hao's gaze sharpened as he took a close look. There seemed to be dark figures on the wall—puppet soldiers! A tower on the wall was also staffed with dark figures. More soldiers?

Liu Long found what Li Hao was looking at and once more swallowed hard. What kind of place was this??

“An inner and outer city...” Li Hao shook as he remembered something. “This looks to be the intersection between the inner and outer city. Teacher mentioned that this was where he heard the footsteps, and here he saw a city door etched with a turtle!”

Was that where they were? The alleyway belonged to the outer city and the wall in front of them was the wall around the inner city?

According to Night Watcher intel, they were placed within the outer city after entering the ruins. Explorers were usually deposited next to the outer city gates. Residential neighborhoods could be found in the outer portion, and they had to travel through various dangers before arriving at the inner city.

Could it be that the trio had been dropped off here? Why weren't they with the others?

Li Hao sank into deep contemplation and stroked the little sword. Did it have to do with Stellaris? If that was the case, why wasn't he sent directly into the inner city? Why was he at the intersection of inner and outer? Both advancement and retreating were impossible!

If they went back, that would be the outer city. It'd be fine if they encountered the Night Watchers, but what if they ran into Red Moon or Yama?

And if they advanced... who were they kidding?

No ripples emanated from those dark soldiers, but according to his teacher's words, footsteps often appeared in the darkness. When they did, they represented danger. A Sunflare could die to a single sword stroke.

The swords were the weapons that the soldiers were equipped with. That meant to say that these soldiers without any superhuman ripples were strong enough to kill a Sunflare with one blow. That was horrifying!

This was as far as his teacher had made it to, he hadn't been able to enter the inner city. Thus, Li Hao knew nothing about it and didn't dare brashly investigate. As he turned over these thoughts in his mind, a shriek seemed to come from behind them.

The marching soldiers vanished on the spot and sprinted toward the source with extreme speed. Not only that, but the trio's shocked eyes registered more Black Armors from the darkness. They quickly vanished and ran for the outer city.

Plainly, the shriek had alerted these soldiers.

"It's the people who entered the ruins!" The three quickly determined. Judging from the sound, they weren't too far away, but that voice had been very soft. Even if they were close by, they wouldn't be visible without a bit of travel. And yet, they'd alarmed the soldiers that patrolled for countless eons!

"The black-armored soldiers are extremely fast... They seem on par with Sunderers in my view."

At least forty soldiers had taken off running. Meanwhile, the patrols in this area weren't affected. Black shadows still roamed the city wall and more soldiers appeared in the premises. They continued to make their rounds like the shriek from the outside city hadn't occurred.

"Elites!" Liu Long explained next to Li Hao's ear. "If these soldiers aren't puppets, they're elites among elites! Even Hu Dingfang's Tiger Wings, supposedly the most elite force in Silver Moon, pale far in comparison to these soldiers!"

Their demeanor, efficiency, speed, reaction time, and defensive system were invincible. Men were quickly on the scene if something developed, but the patrols, sentries, and defensive systems that should be in place continued to operate smoothly. Liu Long considered that if these soldiers were all Sunflare level, it would be unimaginable.

An army that was so well coordinated... If that was the case, then even a ten person squad of initial Sunflares could withstand a Solar. Under normal circumstances, ten initial Sunflares were hard to stand against Solars. Mid or late Sunflares wouldn't have the same problem.

“What should we do?” Li Hao wasn’t thinking of this. He looked at Liu Long with a question. What do we do now? Forward or backward seem like tough calls either way.

They didn’t dare continue forward and didn’t dare start backward. Should they just stand here, wait for others to arrive and follow them? ...who were they kidding with that last option??

Liu Long also looked at Li Hao. What should we do? I don’t know either. I don’t know anything about this place, how do I know what we should do?

If they advanced, they were faced with a large expanse and watchtowers. If they were discovered, how would they fight so many soldiers? Even though the group hadn’t personally seen the soldiers attack, they could tell from speed alone that these Black Armors weren’t useless ornaments.

Liu Long struggled with the decision and threw it back to Li Hao. “What do you say? You’re a student of the Ancient Civilizations department. You should know better than me in these circumstances.”

“.....” Li Hao had nothing to offer. The man made sense! But... but... I’ve never encountered ruins with soldiers that still existed in them. The Institute’s never taught us about them either! They taught us how to determine our location, analyze feng shui, identify true or fake ruins, locate sources of water... these kinds of things. If only teacher was here!

How he missed his teacher! If Yuan Shuo was here, he’d just need to follow his teacher’s instructions. He was too young, inexperienced, and wet behind the ears. He was in a panic himself.

But after hearing Liu Long’s response... Li Hao decided to make the call. The team captain’s right, I’m from the Veteris Institute and my teacher is an excavation expert. Am I supposed to dishonor his name? Can I not grow and develop in his absence?

Moments later, Li Hao fished out a small disk from his pockets. Under Liu Yan and Liu Long's confused looks, he busied himself for a bit. When he finished his preparations, he plucked one of his hairs and blew it onto the disk.

The hair started spinning on the disk and eventually slowed down. Its two ends happened to point at the two ends of the alley. Liu Long could tell that Li Hao was determining their position and identifying the best way forward, but wasn't it a waste of effort with the hair pointing to both entrances?

Li Hao, however, observed the disk carefully and muttered, "We go from the back, not the front!"

"Why?" Liu Yan whispered.

"This is the method of plotting via force fields," Li Hao murmured. "The hair root points at the inner city because the force fields are stronger there and more dangerous. Therefore, let's go to the outer city first. I don't know why we were separated from the others and sent here. Perhaps that gives us first mover advantage, but we'll more likely than not turn into cannon fodder since we don't know anything about the inner city!"

It was a certainty that there were plenty of treasures in the inner city. If Li Hao had his teacher's abilities, he would head directly inside and save himself a lot of trouble. The key thing was, he didn't possess that strength. In that case, appearing here was a very futile outcome. They should head to the outer city instead!

He didn't want to be someone else's canary in a coal mine, that was far too dangerous. It might also be a good opportunity to ambush someone else from the front. If there was a good chance and the proper timing, it might result in unexpected benefits.

"We can ignore the greatest treasure inside the city. For us, killing some bad guys and stripping them of their mysterious power may not be worse than entering the inner city. We can even hunt down some Red Moon members and extract their blood pearls."

What could be found inside the inner city? So what if there were piles of origin weapons? Could they lay claim to it? Could they take it outside?

Li Hao's mind operated clearly again. There was nothing more important than improving his strength. He wasn't a Dominator yet.

Liu Long and Liu Yan didn't say anything. The young man suddenly had the lead as he was a student of the Veteris Institute and his teacher a known excavator of ruins. He quietly led them into turning around and walked toward the other end of the alley.

"Try not to create any sound and don't talk much. These soldiers seem to hone in on location from sound! That shriek drew a lot of them away. They didn't see us even when we were hiding just next to them. If they're puppets, they may be equipped with sound recognition systems..."

The two listened without asking questions. All they needed to do at the moment was to just follow Li Hao.

The alley was only five hundred meters long. The trio set a moderate pace and approached the other end after a while. Footsteps could be faintly heard again. Li Hao held his breath; they saw a black shadow pass by the alley after a while. It was one of the Black Armors, but just one.

When it left, Li Hao took a peek outside. This time, he could identify where they were. They were in one of the streets of the outer city, one that ran into an ancient marketplace. He saw some unique flags with characters on them. They were different from modern writing, but being the professional that he was, Li Hao could still call upon his knowledge though he'd withdrawn from school.

He could barely make out one word—tea!

The place in front of them with a banner hanging from the front might be a tea shop. Time seemed to rewind in this moment, painting a scene of people jostling in crowds that throned a busy street. Food vendors hollered for business, passersby shopped various wares and stopped for tea or food...

The young man grew momentarily dazed. This was his first time seeing such a perfectly preserved ancient ruin! He'd perused some similar material before, but they were all recorded after the ruins were destroyed and buried in the ground. None of them were able to mentally transport explorers away like this and place them in how life had been back in the day.

Chapter 228: Mysterious Ancient City (III)

Li Hao quickly snapped back to his senses. This was no time to marvel at archaeology, it was very dangerous! His teacher had said that these ruins were hazardous, filled with sharp blades that suddenly appeared, footsteps that heralded death, and flames that instantly burned a person to death. Perils lurked everywhere.

Another shriek echoed in the distance; it was slightly pained!

Li Hao's ears twitched—it wasn't too far away from them. It might be from the next street over! There were also faint sounds of weapons clashing against each other. Were the black-armored soldiers fighting the newly arrived supernaturals?

"Let's go!" Li Hao darted out of the alley and made for the street across the way. Liu Long and Liu Yan quickly caught up to him. While they didn't know the young man's goal, all they needed to do was follow him at this stage. They didn't know anything here.

.....

As Li Hao drew close to the shriek, he saw a battle underway in a plaza. Just as the young man surmised, it was black-clad soldiers on one side, roughly forty of them. On the other were the independent supernaturals and small organizations that'd come in first.

Blood splattered the ground. Black-armored soldiers had suddenly appeared alongside the footsteps, but their arrival brought the extinguishment of light. It used to be that Li Hao and the rest could see things clearly because there was illumination, but now this place was frightfully dark.

It wasn't until a fire supernatural lit his mysterious power that the crowd could see that armored strangers had suddenly appeared around them. Color drained from their faces—how could there be anyone here??

“It's the Night Watchers!” someone roared. Only the Night Watchers had explored these ruins before, so their first thought was that these people were all Night Watchers! The agency had left people behind!

Footsteps sounded; a Black Armor appeared next to him the moment he called out. The soldier walked on the ground instead of flying or leaping around. A sword was unsheathed with a schick and sank into flesh, separating head from neck. The person who'd cried out was summarily executed without another word!

He was decently strong as a Fullmoon, but counted among the weak for this expedition. Even so, Fullmoons were powerhouses in Silver Moon. And yet, he'd been slain with one stroke by a Black Armor!

Not only that, but the fire supernatural who'd lit a flame gasped as footsteps sounded in his ear. Three swords shot out of the void, aimed high, middle, and low. They sealed off all directions and connected at the same time, sectioning the man into three.

Spontaneous elimination!

The fire supernatural was a Plenilune close to Sunflare, but he hadn't been able to defend against the attack either!

Firelight faded away. Someone wanted to scream with terror among the crowd, but another person with a rapidly shifting expression quickly said, “Don't make a sound and don't create light...”

He felt danger around him as soon as he spoke, but he needed to remind his peers! Instead of creating more sound, he punched outward and sought to dive into the ground. Shock filled his face instead.

He couldn't!

He couldn't bend the earth!

Damn it, his skills were inapplicable here! He never thought there would be a ground that could inhibit the earth bending skills of an earth supernatural. His punch had come with considerable force and sent a soldier reeling. But because he couldn't escape into the earth, a sword appeared in front of his chest the next moment and stabbed deep.

Powerful earth energy exploded to defend its master, but more footsteps sounded in the blink of an eye. Five swords appeared, jabbing at his head, throat, temples... All of his vital points were targeted by a sword, and enormous force powered them!

One sword sank into his throat with a soft sound, followed by a second, a third...

All of the swords found their target and the earth supernatural sagged to the ground. He was a Sunflare! Not only did his skills prove ineffective in this place, but he died without understanding the circumstances.

Quiet draped over the premises while the group was horrified beyond belief. They didn't dare make a sound or create light to see by. Darkness shrouded them, freezing their thoughts with fear. Enormous regret assailed them! They shouldn't have come! What were these soldiers in black armor? Night Watchers? Who were they kidding?

The Night Watchers would've brought out this force a long time ago if they possessed it. Others had been able to estimate these soldiers as moderate Darkmoons. But they didn't exude energy ripples, making them more like martial masters.

Martial masters, however, at least breathed and had a heartbeat. These soldiers didn't seem to have anything. They deployed their weapons in a very methodical way as opposed to random haphazardness. They were so well-coordinated that it was unbelievable!

One could avoid the first stroke, but maybe not the second. And after that came a third and fourth!

There were only approximately forty people present from the small organizations, roughly the same number as the Black Armors. Some had died before reaching this spot, and now more had just died to the soldiers. Even though there were numerous Sunflares among the group, none of them dared make a sound or move a limb. They didn't even dare give rise to stronger energy ripples.

When supernaturals didn't dare utilize their abilities, their reaction speed, battle capabilities, night vision, and other skills were less than martial masters. Martial masters excelled in terms of physique. Their bodies were very durable even if they didn't deploy their internal force. Thus, martial master night vision was excellent, but supernaturals had to rely on their mysterious power to bolster their eyesight in the dark.

They could only vaguely discern faint outlines in the gloom. When someone in the expedition activated their power for a better look, sharp swords swiftly cut through the air. That educated the remaining supernaturals that energy ripples, sound, and light would all attract attention. It was safer to not move.

These Black Armors didn't seem to be alive, utilizing sound and supernatural ripples to determine the direction of their targets. So... did that mean the survivors would be safe if they didn't move?

Flight supernaturals could no longer contain themselves when they felt a black shadow approaching them. One of them swiftly shot into the sky to escape from this place!

Being able to fly was often the most surefire way to preserve oneself. This particular supernatural was fine at first when he soared into the sky. As he exulted in the joy of escaping, a ray of light abruptly shot through the air. He didn't have time to stop or evade it. Instead, he exploded like he'd been hit by a missile!

The ray of light also illuminated the ground, revealing the supernaturals in hiding. They cursed inwardly and were shocked out of their senses. What was that?? A flight supernatural had been obliterated by a ray of light!

The key thing was, the ray brought clarity to the situation on the ground. Black Armors searching for the interlopers focused with sudden accuracy and attacked.

“Ah!!” Screams and shrieks abounded!

Black metal swords slashed through multiple throats or ran through numerous heads. A powerhouse couldn't withstand the pressure and unleashed fire energy with a roar, sending out searing flames with a burst.

Boom!

A Black Armor was sent flying and fell to the ground. While it wasn't incinerated, everyone could see it struggle to regain its footing. That brought hope to the heavyweights in the crowd. Joy dawned on their faces!

While these soldiers were strong, they weren't invincible. They could still be taken down! Some more Sunflares rose in resistance at the sight, further exposing the limits to Black Armor strength. Despite their synchronization, multiple soldiers were sent flying. Since the supernaturals were fighting, they didn't care about making sound anymore.

“These suits of armor seem to be supernatural objects, they're hard to destroy! Knock them back and attack them through the air. Also, don't fly ourselves. There might be an air restriction in place here...” Those more knowledgeable and experienced quickly identified the various prohibitions of their area.

They could not fly! Flying past a certain height would result in that ray of light that annihilated a Sunflare. Who dared fly after that? The supernaturals fought back en masse!

Some took advantage of the chaos to run. Cursing, the Sunflares caught in battle fled as they fought. There were more people entering the ruins behind them. They needed to find the large organizations as those had Solars and origin weapons. They didn't want to needlessly go to their deaths anymore!

As strong as the Black Armors were and as many as the soldiers had killed, they could only watch as multiple powerhouses fled the scene.

Soldiers that'd fallen to the ground picked themselves up after a while. They gave chase, chasing the trespassers to the end of the plaza. As the survivors fled for their lives, these soldiers seemed to receive a command that recalled the entire squad.

Black Armors vanished in the dark, walking toward Li Hao and the others. The sound of footsteps slowly faded away.

When they were gone, the trio finally dared to exhale their breaths and wipe away foreheads dripping with sweat.

Fuck, that was scary! Those soldiers looked to be only Darkmoon, but they were undying. Those that'd been incapacitated could stand up at the end and walk off like nothing had taken place. There'd been at least a dozen Sunflares in that group of supernaturals. A couple had died in the blink of an eye and more than a dozen Darkmoon slain. They'd lost half of their number, but didn't take out a single Black Armor.

This was horrifying!

Out of the trio, only Liu Long could truly stand against initial Sunflare at the moment. Li Hao might be able to, whereas Liu Yan would have a difficult fight on their hands. If they ran into a handful of Black Armors, that would be the end of the road for them.

It was awful! And there hadn't been that many soldiers on the scene. The trio knew that there were plenty more near the inner city.

Fuck!

Could this ancient city even be explored by humans?

“Let’s... go....” Liu Long was wavering. There was a difference between being brave and rushing to one’s death. After seeing the soldiers in action, he felt that just five of them would absolutely be enough to kill him. And the key thing was, the enemy wouldn’t die! That was the most despairing of all!

Chapter 229: Three’s Company

“Go? Chief, are you crazy?” Li Hao licked his lips. The chief had gone crazy! Go where? “So many people have died up there, that’s all mysterious power!”

The chief must be crazy. He loved mysterious power, but wanted to leave when the ground was covered by it?

Liu Long’s jaw dropped at the young man. You’re the crazy one! What are you going to do if the Black Armors come back? You want to be rich so badly that you’re going to throw your life away for it!

“Chief, they’re just killing trespassers and are alerted by light, sound, and flight. That’s not much of a problem if we keep the noise level down. They must be back to the inner city by now. Let’s hurry before someone else comes along and brings the soldiers back.” A bold thought suddenly struck Li Hao. “Chief, why don’t we... just follow these guys from now on?”

If they kept quiet, didn’t talk too loudly, didn’t create light, or fly... then the Black Armors may not be able to discover them. The guys from outside might not know all this and fights may break out. The trio could follow the soldiers around and collect the corpses! There was so much mysterious power for the taking, which was exactly what he needed. Energy of the five elements was best. Wind and thunder would do too.

Liu Long and Liu Yan gaped. To seek fortune in the midst of danger was something they could do given their daring, but approaching the battle site before the soldiers responsible for this slaughter were safely far away...

They truly hesitated at the idea.

“C’mon!” Li Hao ignored them. What was there to fear? Black Armors didn’t seem alive. If they were puppets, they must be subject to specific commands. There would be no issues so long as the trio didn’t violate those commands. This was also recorded in some ancient books.

Chief and Liu Yan don’t get it, they just know to be afraid. In these circumstances, it’s more dangerous to randomly run around. Li Hao tossed all worries to the back of his mind. Was there anything more alluring than mysterious power at this time?

He swiftly ran up to the plaza, but turned pale as he scanned it. The ground... seemed to be devouring the flesh and blood! Not only that, but it was drinking the dissipating mysterious power as well!

The young man swallowed hard as his heart skipped a beat. The earth! He’d sensed a unique power in it before. Did... it devour corpses and mysterious power?

My heavens! Is this city alive?

Sweat beaded his forehead, but he couldn’t give any consideration to this. He set his jaw and began picking up the larger body chunks.

No wonder the soldiers didn’t clean up the battlefield or move the corpses, there was no need to. The remains would vanish after a while like they never existed. A demonic air and unspeakable evil permeated this ancient city! It was horrifying beyond belief!

Li Hao quickly gathered a few body parts and fled when he filled his storage box. This was damned terrifying, the ground ate people!

.....

It wasn't until the trio returned to their earlier alleyway, putting some distance between themselves and that plaza of execution, did composure start to make its way back. Li Hao gave a long exhale. Danger filled every nook and cranny of this ancient city!

They didn't dare enter the shops that lined the streets. Li Hao had wanted to go inside one, but he and Liu Long sensed danger at the same time—it was the instinctive reaction of a martial master. Thus, they didn't dare set foot inside and ran back to the alley.

They didn't know what lay in wait inside the shop. Perhaps something similar to Black Armors? Regardless, it was not a place to venture into.

Li Hao contemplated for a moment as he looked at the energy storage box in his hand. "Chief, sis." He looked at Liu Long and Liu Yan. "Stand guard at the two ends for me for a bit. I want to cultivate."

"Now?" Liu Long frowned. This wasn't a good time to train. It wasn't a problem for them to stand guard as the young man cultivated; he had no need for pure mysterious power after he became a Dominator.

It was similar to how Yuan Shuo hadn't cared about mysterious power at first. It was useful to him only when Li Hao could distill pure elemental energy for him to strengthen his organs. Liu Long was the same, so he didn't think of being cut in for a share when Li Hao collected the energy.

Liu Yan was even less likely to say something. She knew the young man had a unique energy that was very useful to martial masters. Li Hao training at this critical moment might result in significant progress into Dominator. If that was the case, that would help everyone.

"Now!" Li Hao nodded. "Some of the supernaturals from the small organizations have escaped. They'll certainly encounter those who entered afterward and probably join forces with them. In that case, the soldiers might not be able to stop them if their forces swell. We don't dare enter the inner city, so we'll bump into them sooner or later. Therefore, I want to use this opportunity to see if I can make it to Dominator."

Liu Long said nothing else and walked to the end closest to the inner city. He stooped without making a sound. His position would prevent Black Armors from entering. Liu Yan went to the other side.

Li Hao calmed his breathing and decided to grab his final opportunity with both hands. There wasn't much sword energy left. His teacher had chosen to absorb scarlet shadows instead of sword energy because he wished to preserve the final dregs for his student. Yuan Shuo likely hoped he could set foot into Dominator.

The young man grasped two kinds of aura, but neither of them were that strong. They were only fledgling auras, but they might be strengthened if he melded them together. That could be enough to propel him into Dominator.

Melding...

There was no ideal opportunity that gave rise to the blending of sword and earth. But somehow, his teacher had managed to fuse five auras together in his past. That spoke to a requirement of skill and talent. According to Yuan Shuo's teachings, there were commonalities between all auras. Finding those, magnifying the commonalities, and focusing on those would give one the chance to combine the auras.

It was very simple, yet also difficult.

Li Hao's present task wasn't to meld his auras, but to strengthen his organs. The auras and rising to Dominator would come later and could be situation dependent. Strengthening the organs was the true foundation to future progress. When he was a Dominator, he could choose to quickly summon his spirits as opposed to slowly walking through the method. He needed to enhance his organs so that when he was a Summoner, the elevation of one organ would not shatter the other four.

Before the Breathing Method of the Five Styles was modified, it was likely only Yuan Shuo and a few veteran Dominators would be able to nurture the spirits without destroying the organs.

These veteran Dominators would subconsciously strengthen their organs if they didn't find a way forward after dozens of years at their cultivation level. A strong inside and outside was the goal of all martial masters.

A new martial master such as Li Hao would find it easier to ascend to the heavens than strengthen his organs if he didn't have the aid of elemental power. He reached a hand into his storage box and took out a piece of bone.

Blood and other liquid still clung to it, but he was impassive to sights such as these now. After scanning it with his senses, he determined that this was fire energy. Fire energy was more commonly found and it strengthened the heart!

As the Breathing Method of the Five Styles operated, sword energy seeped out of the sword at his waist. Compared to what it had been before... Li Hao could only say that he'd been oblivious in his youth and wasted it extravagantly. Even the dog had enjoyed a great deal of it! Now that he sensed how feeble the current was, there was nothing to do but regret past actions. Thankfully, the sword energy could still distill mysterious power despite the slower flow.

Fire elemental energy was swiftly extracted, leaving behind unattributed mysterious power to strengthen the body. Meanwhile, fire elemental energy enhanced the heart. The bone appeared to be from a Darkmoon as it didn't contain much energy. Li Hao continued with another piece when it was quickly depleted.

It was said that mysterious power was stored at some organizations' secret bases or in ruins. Some origin weapons could also produce it on their own, or produce it with the help of certain methods. Mysterious power contained by the human body was the lowest quality and least efficient. Beggars couldn't be choosers, though; this was the only way available to Li Hao as he needed such a vast sum.

Yuan Shuo had absorbed one thousand cubes of fire energy to strengthen his organs and nurture the fire heart ape. If Li Hao wished to reach his teacher's level or even approach it, his organs would have to absorb another eight hundred cubes after the two hundred of each element he'd taken before. Only then could he safely summon his spirits.

Of course, strengthening all five visceral organs was an immensely difficult task. He could simply focus on one at first. Li Hao set his concerns aside first and absorbed however much he could take in. He didn't differentiate and took in any energy that came his way. Wind energy lightened the body. Thunder energy strengthened the physique. All of that could be absorbed.

The crux of the issue was the dwindling reserve of crucial sword energy. Would there be a chance to replenish it within this ancient city? After all, it looked to be connected to the eight families.

One minute, five minutes, ten minutes...

Booming sounds traveled from a distance after half an hour. A solemn Liu Long quickly returned to the young man.

"Cease cultivating as soon as possible. A team of one hundred Black Armors just vanished, probably to stop more newcomers. It's not just Black Armors this time, I saw one that was potentially a centurion because its armor was bronze!"

Bronze-armored soldiers had appeared after the black ones! If Black Armors were Darkmoon, what were Bronze Armors?

Sunflare?

These soldiers were highly trained and undying. How strong would a Bronze Armor be? Just their black-armored brethren could kill multiple Sunflares, so would a Bronze be capable of killing a Solar?

Li Hao gravely contemplated the situation and swiftly paused his absorption. There wasn't much left. At the same time, it had been a decent harvest. He'd absorbed roughly eight hundred cubes of mysterious power, which filled him to capacity. However, it hadn't been an even distribution of elements. Fire had been the most at three hundred. He'd managed to absorb some of the other five except water, which meant that his kidneys were noticeably weaker than the others at the moment.

“Let’s go take a look!” The young man rose to his feet and swiftly congregated with Liu Yan at the other end.

“Be careful,” the woman kept her voice down. “This street didn’t seem all that right just now...”

Chapter 230: Three’s Company (II)

The street hadn’t seemed that right? Their locale was dusk and gloomy—had Liu Yan seen a Bronze Armor instead?

“Just now...” she continued as Li Hao turned over her words. “I don’t know if it was because of that battle in the front, but an earth supernatural suddenly crept in from that direction. He happened to bump into patrolling Black Armors, so he ducked into a nearby house. A ghastly scream sounded almost immediately and I’ve heard nothing from the house since then.”

That supernatural had plainly wished to utilize distraction from the fighting to explore the surroundings. He had to look for cover when he ran into more soldiers and encountered danger as soon as he entered a house.

He’s dead!

Li Hao and his comrades poked their heads out, looking at the houses on the two sides of the street beyond the alley. The city appeared particularly sinister at the moment. The teahouse’s banner still fluttered in the air, but none of the trio had the desire to investigate the premises.

BOOM!

Another explosion sounded from the street over. The disturbance was much greater than before; a powerhouse must be on the scene. Multiple Solars were in attendance this time. As strong as Black Armors were, they were only of the Darkmoon level. They weren’t able to bring their previous level of domination to bear. The soldiers were slated for death and destruction—there was no alternative as the gap between them and Solars was too great.

Explosions echoed repeatedly and even roared commands could be heard. “These black-armored men are strongest because of their equipment. Their strength comes from the ground, so earth types shall put down a layer of rock on the ground to cut off their source of strength!”

Li Hao didn’t know how the other side was fighting, but he sucked in a faint breath when he heard the instructions. Who was this? They were really something!

It wasn’t until now that he understood why Black Armors never left the ground. He knew that there was something special about the city’s ground, but who would’ve thought that this mysterious powerhouse would identify the key detail in the blink of an eye?

Black Armors drew their strength from below!

So did this mean that the ground provided a bottomless source of energy for these soldiers, enabling them to be undying and constantly battle ready?

“Black Armors...” Liu Long thought rapidly. “Does this mean we can take out these soldiers as long as they’re not allowed to touch the ground?”

“This may not be a good development.” Li Hao frowned. “Those guys will come across us soon after they eliminate the soldiers!”

He didn’t know why he and his comrades were in front of all of the explorers, but the Night Watchers were assigned to the middle of the pack. According to the entrance order, it was very likely the Sword Sect or Yama fighting in front of them. He couldn’t draw definitive conclusions when it came to the Sword Sect’s attitude, but Yama... Li Hao at least knew that he and Yama wouldn’t mix together.

“Let’s go take a look!” The young man decided to observe from close quarters. It might’ve been a Yama powerhouse calling out earlier—it didn’t sound like the Revolution King’s voice. It might be the other Solar within their delegation. He hadn’t spoken during the assembly outside, but it looked like he possessed a keen eye.

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A pitched battle was underway when Li Hao, Liu Long, and Liu Yan surreptitiously made their way over. It was both Yama and Sword Sect delegations. Li Hao observed two Solars among the Sword Sect. There was a female apart from Hong Yitang—possibly his wife, bed partner, or disciple.

Who cared? Li Hao didn't.

The two organizations were temporary allies for the being, pitting four Solars against Black Armors. There was also a peak Solar in the form of the Revolution King to consider. The other three Solars didn't make a move. No... Yama's metal supernatural was on the field. He was fighting the Bronze Armor that Liu Long had spoken of. The other Solars were more observing the battlefield.

Numerous Black Amors had fallen to the ground and a few were suppressed by earth supernaturals! Li Hao saw Li Dahu, self-styled Hu Po, confine a Black Armor with a single punch. It was like he'd brought Mount Tai down on his opponent, sealing the soldier away within a mountain of dirt.

The soldier struggled at first, but its movement gradually weakened until it stilled.

Li Hao's eyes widened with surprise. The large organizations were different, alright! The small organizations possessed a fair sum of Sunflares, but they were completely helpless in front of the soldiers. There weren't that many powerhouses in action at this moment, but they quickly broke through the combined battle array of one hundred Black Armors.

Soldier after soldier was restricted. They were either sealed away or isolated from the ground. When cut off from their energy source, their strength began to gradually weaken.

There were approximately eighty people present from the two large organizations and of smaller organizations that'd fled earlier. Black Armors did not hold an overwhelming numbers advantage. On the other hand, with Solars anchoring the clash for the expedition, the battle was entirely one-sided.

The Darkmoon Black Armors were gradually weakened to the point in which they couldn't lift their heads. Only a dozen Black Amors and that Bronze Armor was still fighting after the blink of an eye.

The Sword Sect, Yama, and others had lost only a dozen people. That was a far more superior feat to the earlier group of would-be explorers.

Li Hao and his companions didn't even dare to breathe too loudly. Thank goodness they were all martial masters. Otherwise, they wouldn't dare sneak in peeks at such a close distance.

So strong!

They were finally witnessing the might of the great organizations. The metal Solar brought overwhelming strength to bear against Bronze Armor. Although bronze clad soldiers were just Sunflare, their defenses were invincible when equipped with the armor. It swiftly shattered confinement from earth supernaturals; it would take more than that to seal it.

"It's just mid Sunflare." The Revolution King frowned from the back. "But the blade and sword can't seem to hurt it. A Solar can't break through it... which makes this set of armor a first rank supernatural treasure!"

This trip would be well worth it if they could seize these suits of armor. Instead of emerging with an overall loss, they would have benefited handsomely instead. The nearly one hundred sets of black armor were also far from ordinary. They could be used to raise a supreme company of troops, and they also seemed to be more suited for martial masters!

Martial masters lacked supernatural ripples and the armor seemed to be able to conceal one's presence. Martial masters also possessed immense physique, so if they were equipped with the black armor...

The Revolution King's mind churned rapidly through various possibilities.

Thanks to Yuan Shuo, martial masters were showing signs of an upswing these days. The various organizations had never forsaken nurturing martial masters, primarily due to a desire to train reserve troops for supernaturals.

But what if martial masters could be equipped with these suits of armor? This equipment contained high defenses against supernaturals! So long as the martial master inside didn't die, a Sunderer would be able to withstand a Sunflare.

The Revolution King reached out for a Black Armor as he mused, demonstrating the power of a peak Solar. The soldier struggled in his grasp for a bit, slowly ceasing to move. The man closely observed his quarry, frowning slightly.

"Is that... not a person inside?"

It didn't seem to be!

He wasn't sure what the specifics were—it wasn't optimal timing to access the inside of the armor. He could force it open if he wished to. A soldier on par with a Darkmoon could not withstand his attacks.

At the same time, this was treasure. Why damage it? Weren't they conducting this exploration for treasure?

The soldiers began sagging upon losing their connection with the ground. They didn't hold themselves with the same support as before.

"Revolution King, let's open one up," said Hong Yitang. "Let's see the internal structure of these things and what makes it possible for them to exist for so long!"

The Revolution King thought for a moment, then nodded. A blade of wind appeared in his hand. Powered by a peak Solar, the blade easily sliced open armor that Darkmoons and Sunflares were unable to damage.

Everyone, including Li Hao and his companions, fixed their stares at what was inside. Although the trio couldn't see the scene too clearly, they were also very curious what could be found within.

"Hmm?" A startled exclamation came from the battle site.

"A skeleton?" Hong Yitang was likewise stunned.

Li Hao and the others' hearts skipped a beat when they heard this. A skeleton? So there really were people inside?

"They're really... soldiers!" exclaimed the Revolution King. "But they're dead soldiers. So this city used to employ these suits of armor and martial masters as soldiers?"

That was incredible!

Someone really had been inside the armor, but they were a decayed skeleton. The bones crumbled away the moment the armor was opened and blew away as dust, instantly gone! The skeleton had been preserved in the first place due to the armor creating a perfect seal. Thus, it spontaneously disintegrated when the armor was opened.

The Revolution King turned his attention to the armor and flicked a glance at Hong Yitang. Being quick on the uptake, the latter quickly said, "If Yama desires these items, they naturally belong to you. But if there are more treasures later, the Sword Sect is a major organization as well. We cannot leave empty-handed. What say you, Revolution King?"

He knew that the Yama leader had his eyes on the armor. Although the soldiers lost their endless source of energy once isolated from the unique terrain, just the armor's structure and durability

alone made it exceedingly valuable treasure. If they could be copied and used to forge a martial master army... the results were unimaginable.

“Very well, my thanks to Swordmaster Hong!” The Revolution King smiled. Although he didn’t want to give any treasures to his counterpart, that was another Solar he spoke to. Hong Yitang had numerous Sunflares under his command and with the danger of the ancient city right in front of them, it wouldn’t do to erupt in open hostility.

Hou Xiaochen was right. They weren’t of a mind to kill each other after witnessing these dangers for themselves. Just one group of a hundred soldiers had caused them significant casualties. The two great organizations had lost roughly a dozen men and the independent supernaturals roughly two dozen. That made for more than thirty supernaturals dead, and only two hundred were present on this expedition.

They’d lost one-sixth of their strength just by scratching the surface of these ruins! Although most of the dead were Darkmoons and a few Sunflares, they were all elites in the outside world! Silver Moon’s premier strength on display in this expedition.

It was best that Hong Yitang recognized the situation that he was in.

“Yao Cheng, take care of that Bronze Armor as quickly as possible!”

Yao Cheng was the other Yama Solar. He quickly answered, “Milord, I just can’t bear to damage this armor!”

The Bronze Armors were even stronger! It wasn’t that he couldn’t subdue his opponent, but that he didn’t want to bring force to bear. As a metal supernatural, he was most adept at attack. He could bring down a mid Sunflare soldier, but what if he damaged the armor beyond repair in a furious rally?