

Star Gate 281

Chapter 281: Comprehending the Sword (III)

“Wood energy stones are very rare,” Hao Lianchuan explained with resignation. “There might only be a couple wood attributed ones out of fifty. They’re extremely precious. A small piece like this can be sold for thousands of cubes in the central region!”

Despite his words, he still handed the stone to Li Hao. “Absorb its energy with the Breathing Method of the Five Styles! Not only will it heal your wounds, but it’ll strengthen your organs, physique, and even internal force. Mysterious power stones are true healing panaceas and more valuable than those blood pearls. They’re just too rarely seen and contain a plethora of uses!”

“Is... this appropriate then?” Li Hao asked with embarrassment.

Hao Lianchuan rolled his eyes again. Why do I feel like this guy is putting on an act to defraud me of a stone? But him vomiting blood doesn’t seem fake...

This is such a headache!

“It’s appropriate, have it!” Hao Lianchuan said casually. “Don’t worry, It won’t come out of your five thousand cubes! While we need to show a bit of face to Hu Dingfang, you don’t. One mysterious power stone cannot be traded for the breathing method either...”

Hu Dingfang furrowed his brows and glanced at the deputy director before walking off without a word. He tried to stay away from this topic and didn’t like it when others mentioned it either. If it’d been twenty years ago... heads would be bashed in for leaking martial secrets. It would be extremely harmful to his wife’s reputation if word of this spread. Yuan Shuo might not take her to task for divulging the core method of the Five Styles, but veteran martial masters would absolutely be enraged.

Li Hao said nothing else and picked up the wood energy stone to attempt absorbing its energy. A peculiar surge of power rushed into his body when he operated the Breathing Method of the Five Styles. The young man contained himself with effort—this energy felt similar to sword energy!

Of course, it was slightly inferior and not as gentle as sword energy. Its effects weren't as exceptional, but it was far better than violent mysterious power.

Tender wood energy surged into his body, repairing the spleen that'd almost ruptured moments ago. Li Hao's decision to focus on the sword aura caused extreme agitation from the giant mountain. It'd almost shattered his organ.

The young man could perceive that this energy was very useful, particularly for the spleen. The organ was being nurtured by the wood element. However, he still felt a certain regret as the energy was truly a step below sword energy. Sword energy could also extract even purer and better wood energy!

But if sword energy could distill mysterious power, could it do the same to this wood energy stone? If it could, wouldn't the energy be made purer then?

Can this item replenish sword energy? Li Hao wondered, but didn't have a chance to experiment. These mysterious power stones would be a true ultimate treasure if they could!

His organs were strengthening and his body being enhanced, but the effects weren't noticeable.

Hao Lianchuan frowned and gave a reminder when he saw the stone grow dim. "Don't absorb it all, it can recover so long as the color hasn't fully faded away. That is the key point of this treasure!"

What? It can recover??

"Will it recover quickly?" asked the young man.

"Not that quick, but most of its energy will return after three to five years. That's why mysterious power stones are a great treasure. Fifty stones can form a small mine..."

Li Hao was completely speechless! Fifty small stones as a mine? You're joking! They're not even the size of a ball when they're added together.

"Kid," Hao Lianchuan abruptly transmitted when he finished talking. "You absorb energy so quickly that you must have taken in one hundred cubes already. How come there's no change in you? You should be undergoing some sort of qualitative change under normal circumstances. Is something wrong?"

"What?" Li Hao said aloud with obvious confusion.

A morose Hao Lianchuan transmitted, "Logically speaking, a Sunderer shouldn't be absorbing so much energy so quickly and be completely unaffected. Have you secretly advanced to Dominator?"

"What are you talking about, Director Hao?" Li Hao yelped.

"....." Hao Lianchuan decided to stay quiet.

Off in the distance, Hu Dingfang frowned at Hao Lianchuan and transmitted, "What are you blathering on about?"

Hao Lianchuan must be talking about him behind his back! He must be! Why else would Li Hao have looked at him a few times?

Hao Lianchuan wanted to vomit blood from pure frustration. I wasn't talking shit about you! Forget it, the little bastard is incredibly cunning. All he did was look at Hu Dingfang to set the guy on me.

Li Hao ignored the two. Why ask so many questions? You're interfering with me absorbing wood energy.

The young man inwardly delighted at the wood energy stone. His reserve of wood energy was being further added to as well. It'd been the least before—fire and water had stood at six hundred cubes, wood at only three hundred. Another one hundred was swiftly added to its numbers from the stone.

This thing is great! Li Hao scanned his memory to find that there weren't many wood energy stones in the stones that he'd collected either. Getting one for free was just as good!

Of course, this was just an accidental gain. The true harvest was the conversation with Hong Yitang leading to new understanding. It was another step forward in his own path of martial dao.

Martial dao became quite disorganized after peak Sunderer. Everyone was lost as to what the path was after Dominator. Yuan Shuo was perfecting it, but his path wasn't necessarily suitable for everyone. Li Hao was also starting to debate what his road should be. Of course, he was young and had seen too little of the world thus far. He could only obtain a bit of inspiration from other people.

He seemed to have gained quite a bit in terms of sword dao today. He'd been very lost before, having seen powerhouses from the ancient civilization deploy moves such as severing the self, forging bravely forward without looking back, and marching on the heavens... The young man was uncertain how to proceed after witnessing all that.

Today, he gained additional enlightenment. A myriad of changes did not depart from the original principle! The core meaning was still sword intent and the aura. As for how to project the aura, that depended on the situation, the battle, and the adaptation.

Li Hao considered these concepts as he absorbed energy. Others did not register particular sensations, but Hong Yitang took a few more glances at the young man. There was a unique sword intent emanating from the fellow!

Liu Long and Hu Dingfang also looked at Li Hao. Liu Long, of course, remained silent. Hu Dingfang was also slightly confused.

Is that... aura?

He wasn't familiar with Li Hao, but he knew a bit about the Five Styles. As Yuan Shuo's final disciple, it was... surprising that Li Hao did not practice the auras of the Five Styles. He... really didn't know what to say.

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Li Hao didn't care what anyone else thought or saw. It wasn't that he looked down on the Five Styles—his teacher's path wasn't necessarily his.

Alright, fine, it was indeed that he didn't think that highly of the method. He didn't want to lie to himself. His forefather's stroke had cast the Five Styles in a different light!

Other people may not understand, but his teacher surely would. Yuan Shuo had been the one encouraging Li Hao to comprehend that sword. He knew as well that his Five Styles did not measure up to that formidable move! This was why his final disciple did not study the auras of the Five Styles.

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Time passed, bit by bit. Li Hao absorbed abundant wood energy and could vaguely sense that wood, fire, and water were balanced in his body. There were roughly six hundred cubes of each and the wood energy stone was much dimmer than before. As of now, he possessed the least of earth and metal. There were only four hundred cubes of them as the other three had caught up.

The giant mountain was being compressed in the spleen. Li Hao was consuming so much energy not just to nurture his organs, but also to convert the earth aura into an earth sword aura. The mountain began shrinking; it was now just a little bigger than a pillar. The young man felt that he stood a chance of completing the compression before they left the ruins.

Once he succeeded, his earth aura would undergo further changes and strengthen him even more!

One hour... two hours...

Hao Lianchuan had to interrupt his training when black shone through the wood energy stone in Li Hao's hands. "Are your organs still not recovered?" He looked at the stone with heartache. "You've emptied the wood energy stone!"

"It's... a fake stone, isn't it?" Hu Dingfang asked with surprise from a distance. "Or it was mostly depleted already? Li Hao wouldn't deplete it no matter how he pulled from it otherwise. Even you and I wouldn't exhaust it so quickly."

"It must have been used before..." offered a speechless Hao Lianchuan. "Or that a lot of energy has been lost through so much time."

He was lost too! The wood energy stone wasn't that big, but it ought to contain five hundred cubes, no? It was all gone! Li Hao wouldn't be able to digest it all even if he was a cow!

The young man opened his eyes and looked at the stone in his hand with embarrassment. "So it's empty? I wondered why there was no more energy. Here, you can have it back, Director Hao. My injuries are much better, though they're not fully healed..."

"Cough cough cough!" Hao Lianchuan nearly spat blood. Not fully healed yet?!

Li Hao sighed with regret, he'd almost fully compressed the mountain. He'd stopped out of concern that it'd cause too great of a disturbance, but he was almost there. What would result when the earth aura turned into an earth sword aura?

Hao Lianchuan didn't have the strength to jeer at the young man. He picked up the wood energy stone. "Come on, let's leave the city and wait at the ruin doors. It should be soon!"

The doors should be opening soon. They would have to wait until next month if they didn't leave today. However, how many of them would be alive next month?

Li Hao didn't have opinions otherwise—the group quickly walked outside.

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At the same time, the inner city.

The tortoise hovering in the air seemed to open its eyes, looking in the direction where Li Hao and the others were leaving. An heir of the eight families... sword intent... Was that an heir of the Lis?

So weak... so weak that one could not believe this was a representative of the eight families! Did the Lis' Eternal Sword discipline still exist?

Countless thoughts filtered into its mind and were swiftly dismissed. Its line of sight fell downward and rested upon a little black dog...

The tortoise looked at it silently. Had the descendants of those who quelled the monster spirits for the human race become so ordinary?

A certain scene floated up from its memories, but quickly dispersed. It was too long ago, it did not bear thinking. Disaster was upon it if it reawakened. The line of sight vanished a moment later.

Whether it was the heritage of the eight families or the descendant of those who quelled the monster spirits, all were fragments of memory!

The ancient city sank into silence once more and lost its luster.

Chapter 282: The Terrifying Hou Xiaochen (I)

Li Hao glanced back when he walked out of the outer city. It felt like someone was watching him.

“What, are you still thinking of those treasures?” Wang Ming whispered when Li Hao paused for a look. Do they have anything to do with you? Look at how much you’ve harvested on this trip, but you’re still not satisfied!

Li Hao smiled and shook his head, continuing to walk forward. He hadn’t taken this path before.

Darkness enveloped them. The group would reach the door in the cliff face once they made their way through the gloom. There was only one road and it was very dark. This route wasn’t the safest either. Something broke through the air as they walked and flew at them.

Bam!

Hu Dingfang punched outward and redirected the unknown object.

Li Hao frowned, what was that?

Hao Lianchuan knew that the young man was operating in unfamiliar circumstances as he’d been directly transported to the inner city. “There seems to be some strange things on the two sides of this road,” he remarked casually. “They feel like wooden spikes or possibly some sort of mechanism.”

Wooden spikes?

Li Hao found it strange, but didn’t say anything. There was no way out from the sides, the expedition team could only follow the path to the cliff face. The wooden spikes didn’t pose much of a threat, but he felt that they weren’t a mechanism. They seemed more like... something alive!

But that was impossible! How could there be living entities in this place after being sealed shut for eons? Those suits of armor had been dead too—just a sliver of consciousness remained in them. They swiftly crumbled away after they came back to life.

The attacks persisted for some time as the group walked forward, but were easily dispelled each time. Thus, they suffered no injuries, just as no damage had been done when the group first entered the ruins.

Light soon appeared up ahead; Li Hao and the rest had come to a massive plaza. There was a door frame in a cliff ahead—the exit to the ruins.

It was not yet time to leave, so the group stopped. More footsteps sounded in the darkness after a while, resolving themselves to be the Revolution King and the Sunflare who'd threatened Liu Long. Even Li Hao admired the latter at this point—that was some kind of fortune to be Yama's sole survivor in the ruins!

Violet Moon soon joined them, three Sunflares following by her side as well. Apart from those who'd left earlier, these six were the only ones left of the three great organizations.

“Have you two discovered any treasure?” Hao Lianchuan asked merrily to see them emerge.

“It's all inside the inner city. If you want them, Director Hao, go back for them!” the Revolution King said faintly.

Treasure? When would it ever be their turn for treasure in the outer city? The Night Watchers would've claimed it all a long time ago.

Violet Moon and the Revolution King were of the same mind at the moment. The Night Watchers hadn't lost much on this excavation as both of their Solars were still present. Violet Moon and Revolution King might not walk out of the ruins alive if they chose to bicker with each other now.

“I would never dare!” Hao Lianchuan chuckled. “I’m just an initial Solar, hardly a powerhouse like the two of you! After we leave, you’ll probably be able to join the next expedition even if Red Moon and Yama headquarters send people. It’ll be tough to say if I’m present then as well!”

The deputy director sighed, “An initial Solar like me doesn’t have much of a voice.”

Although he was laying it on a bit thick, he very possibly spoke the truth.

Violet Moon couldn’t be bothered to listen to this bout of hypocrisy and neither was she interested in learning about the man’s worries. She looked at Li Hao instead.

“Li Hao, who knows how many people will be lying in wait for you when we leave,” she said calmly. The Night Watchers will be able to protect you if they bring their full strength to bear, but do you think that’s likely to happen? How many in the Silver Moon branch are willing to protect you, to say nothing of your headquarters?”

The young man didn’t respond.

“Join Red Moon!” Violet Moon curved her lips slightly. “It might not end in your death if you come to Red Moon! I know that you’re afraid of us killing you, but I promise you’ll live if there’s any way that does not require your death. You’ll live a wonderful life!”

“How will you execute your plan of collecting the eight bloodlines if you don’t kill me?” Li Hao said softly. Who are you kidding? Do you really think I’m an idiot?

“That was then,” Violet Moon chuckled. “What did the death of a mundane matter? Were we supposed to train them and bring them back to study how best to handle them? Things are different now. Your teacher has risen to Summoner of Spirit and you have reached perfection for Sunderer of Hundreds yourself. Your value is different, so your treatment will naturally be different!”

“I say, isn’t this uh... a little inappropriate?” Hao Lianchuan burst out laughing. “Your organization killed the other eight families and wants to kill him, and you might be behind the deaths of his parents. Now you want to recruit him? I’m really seeing everything today. If you’re not afraid, Li Hao, have at it!”

What in the blazes was this? Violet Moon was going crazy, wasn’t she, to propose something like this?

“There’s nothing inappropriate about it,” the woman remained calm. “You do not know Red Moon’s purpose, nor would you understand it. Only through joining us will you come to learn of it and how Red Moon is far more grand than you imagine!”

“Heh!” Hao Lianchuan snorted and couldn’t be bothered with anything else.

“You’re simply relying on Ying Hongyue and his inner circle.” Hu Dingfang flicked a glance at Violet Moon. “But will they come to Silver Moon? What basis do you have to be so cocky if they don’t?”

“The might of Red Moon is beyond your comprehension!” Violet Moon turned aloof. “You are gravely mistaken if you think only our leader is strong. Don’t think too highly of your Tiger Wings, Hu Dingfang! In this era of the supernatural, an army of mundanes is not worth mentioning! Sunflares can fight a thousand at once and Solars can take on ten thousand. It is only a matter of time before hot weapons lose their effectiveness in the rise of the supernatural!”

“They’re still effective at the moment!” Hu Dingfang was just as detached. “We shouldn’t have a problem blowing you up for the moment. You can give it a try if you don’t believe me!”

Silence.

The two sides no longer conversed. These kinds of threats were ineffective on each other; the only thing to do now was await the opening of the ruins.

“Just stay quiet after we get out,” Hao Lianchuan transmitted to Li Hao. “There’s no need to pay attention to that woman. She thinks that the three great organizations will be able to threaten Director Hou just because they’re sending more people from the central region. The director is not one to underestimate—he’s a merciless character who prevented even Ying Hongyue from taking your teacher back in the day!”

Li Hao nodded. Was he nervous? Not really. If the Night Watchers were truly outmatched, he’d just make a run for it. There was nothing to be afraid of.

His teacher had gone on the run; he might be able to make it out too if he exercised prudence and caution. These people wouldn’t immediately kill him if they captured him—Red Moon even wanted to take him alive.

Rumble!

The cliff face in front of them suddenly started trembling. It wasn’t long until the outside world could be vaguely seen through the rock. They hadn’t been able to see inside when the expedition team entered the ruins. This entrance resembled a one-way mirror in that only the conditions of the outside could be seen clearly.

There was no danger or anyone beyond the cliff face, just Hou Xiaochen!

Indeed, Hou Xiaochen waited at the door!

Violet Moon and the Revolution King grew nervous. Where were those of the three great organizations? Why was it Hou Xiaochen standing outside?

The two were on edge and their Sunflares even more panicky. Hou Xiaochen was the boss of the Silver Moon Night Watchers... Even though he had no battle achievements to speak of in recent years, he still incited fear!

As they fretted with worry, the cliff face trembled violently and water ripples undulated over its surface. That was the sign that it was time to leave! The Revolution King and Violet Moon didn't dare brashly exit the ruins. Hao Lianchuan and the Night Watcher contingent weren't as concerned. They walked out without a care in the world, Li Hao hot on their heels.

The rest of the expedition had no choice but to follow the team out. If they didn't and the entrance closed, that would truly be a death wish.

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"They're out!" Thankfully, Violet Moon heard a familiar voice the second she walked out. She immediately heaved a sigh of relief! There was too much pressure involved in facing Hou Xiaochen. Her heart could be at ease when she heard the voice as she knew who'd come!

Red Moon had seven leaders with "moon" in their title; they were named after the colors of the rainbow. While Violet Moon was the third generation of her position, she was one of the leaders as well. Her status was high despite not being a Nova—it was due to her position as the Violet Moon.

There were naturally certain reasons as to why she inherited this position, but she wasn't interested in revisiting those now.

The organization possessed a few other renowned powerhouses aside from the Seven Moons. The speaker, for instance, the Red Hair Butcher, was a famous heavyweight outside of the organization. He'd killed countless people and was known throughout the central region.

He was second to only the Seven Moons inside the organization. Red Hair and a few other powerhouses formed the second layer of command in the organization—the elder council.

Red Hair had come, and he was a Nova! Violet Moon instantly relaxed.

Meanwhile, the Revolution King remained indifferent. He'd recognized the speaker from his organization—the Parity King!

Ninth among the ten court masters, the Parity King was much more illustrious than the lowliest Revolution King. Apart from being a Nova, he oversaw sixteen minor hells. Sixteen Solars answered to his banner, accompanying him in his conquests!

He was typically active in the southern region instead of Silver Moon. To think that he was here this time! While he was ranked number nine, he was so much stronger than Revolution.

Both Violet Moon and the Revolution King were leaders of their organizations in Silver Moon, but they were the weakest when it came to strength and skill. The reason for this laid at Hou Xiaochen and Yuan Shuo's feet!

The Revolution King was also the third generation of his title! The first had died to either Yuan Shuo or Hou Xiaochen—no one knew. The second had also died, again to an unknown assailant. More than one Heaven Favored had died in Silver Moon back in the day; someone like Yuan Shuo also never admitted when he killed someone. The only thing that could be certain of was that Hou Xiaochen had killed the second generation Violet Moon, and that he'd done so in front of Ying Hongyue. Everyone knew of this, but the deaths of the previous two Revolution Kings were a mystery.

Chapter 283: The Terrifying Hou Xiaochen (II)

Well, there were no true murder mysteries in Silver Moon. If an esteemed personage died in the province, their killer was either Hou Xiaochen or Yuan Shuo. Even if it wasn't, one wouldn't be making a mistake in going after these two!

Wild thoughts ran through Violet Moon and the Revolution King's minds.

“So you've made it out, Revolution and Violet Moon!” Hou Xiaochen smiled at them. His smile was exceedingly benevolent as he inclined his head at the two. He then turned to Hu Dingfang and the rest of the contingent, deepening his nod. “Not bad!”

Quite a few had survived; it looked like Zhang Ting had not. It is what it is. The director glanced at Li Hao, then at Liu Long. He smiled again. “Well done, all of you! Making it out is good news.”

Those of the three great organizations quickly took to the air and flew toward the perimeter. There was too much pressure associated with remaining inside. The Parity King and Red Hair were waiting for them outside.

“Has Ding Chen not come out?” asked a cloaked person with an eerie voice.

Hou Xiaochen turned for a look, then pivoted back to Hao Lianchuan. “This is Half Mountain, you know him, right?”

“Half Mountain...?” Hao Lianchuan responded with surprise. “Hasn’t he been gone all this time?”

“Cut the nonsense!” Hou Xiaochen interrupted. “He’s asking you a question, where’s Ding Chen? Half Mountain has ascended to Nova,” he added. “Do you think he would’ve been absent otherwise? He is a Nova titan now, so be on your best behavior and answer honestly. Where is Ding Chen?”

“Ding Chen and Kong Qi died inside the inner city,” a wordless Hao Lianchuan answered honestly. “You might know about the situation inside. There’s a Gold Armor that killed Ding Chen with one punch and broke his origin weapon. As we ran, Kong Qi turned a bit silly and insisted on taking to the air. He was shot down by the city’s defensive system!”

The deputy director immediately looked at the cloaked person when he finished. “Don’t say that I’m making up stories, Half Mountain, ask Violet Moon and the Revolution King. Red Moon and Yama do not run with the Night Watchers and they witnessed everything as well. Don’t accuse me of foul play...”

The cloaked person looked at the two mentioned.

“He speaks the truth!” Violet Moon confirmed with a slight frown. “Not only Ding Chen, but I suffered severe injuries too. Origin weapons can’t fend off those monsters!”

“Then... what about the others?” Half Mountain asked coolly. “Are they all dead?”

He could understand the two Solars dying to misfortune, but what about the remaining Sunflares?

“Without the protection of their Solars...” Violet Moon responded calmly. “Don’t look at me, we won’t protect your people for you. The inner city is dangerous beyond imagine and they were all eliminated by the Gold Armor after your Solars died. No one will go above and beyond for yours, so don’t say we left them in the lurch. There was no reason to save them!”

These words were cold-blooded, but they made perfect sense. We did see them get killed, but who would save someone they don’t know that’s not of the same organization?

Half Mountain was silent beneath his cloak. Two Solars had led a contingent of multiple Sunflares and carried an origin weapon, but they were all lost!

Well, no, six had made it out. But this meant that their core strength had all died!

The Silver Moon leader of Celestial brooded beneath his cloak. Their losses had been too great!

“So... you didn’t obtain any treasures from your foray into the inner city?” he asked.

“We did, there’s a lot of powerful origin weapons!” the Revolution King answered faintly not too far away. “Their lowest is sky level and mysterious power stones litter the ground! We picked up quite a few just by randomly gathering them!”

People on the cliffs shifted when they heard these words. There were bystanders all throughout the surroundings, they just weren’t able to draw closer.

“And that’s not it, there’s a puppet above Nova!” Violet Moon jeered. “Victory over Nova supernaturals is guaranteed if you can bring it back! The only thing holding you back from claiming it is yourself! We weren’t strong enough and could barely keep our heads on our shoulders!”

They tag-teamed to showcase how horrific the situation was inside—not to help anyone, but to absolve themselves of responsibility. It’s not that we were weak or incompetent, but that it’s too dangerous inside!

Violet Moon and the Revolution King understood that their immense losses were a grave matter. They would be in grave trouble if their organizations launched investigations into potential wrongdoing. In that case, they would shift the blame to someone else. They wouldn’t assign it to the Night Watchers since it would be a display of incompetence if they couldn’t defeat even Hao Lianchuan.

Therefore, the scapegoat had to be the ruins. Not to mention, it was indeed very dangerous inside the inner city. It was also the truth that the Gold Armor outmatched all of them.

The premises fell silent as everyone understood the reports being made. The treasures were irretrievable as there was a powerful puppet protecting them. Its execution of the origin-weapon-equipped Ding Chen was proof enough of its awful might.

Red Hair, the Parity King, and Half Mountain frowned. That strong? Granted, they weren’t concerned since they were Novas. As strong as it sounded, a puppet was just a construct at the end of the day. It wasn’t some mysterious unknown factor. It was rather the sky level origin weapons and mysterious power stones that sent their blood boiling.

Was all of that real? Red Hair looked at Violet Moon.

“It’s true,” she transmitted with a nod. “There’s at least one sky level origin weapon found in the one place that we investigated. There are also mysterious power stones everywhere. We obtained forty, Yama about the same, and the Night Watchers a little more at fifty...”

The organizations themselves had found some as well, making for total gains of approximately one hundred stones on the expedition.

Red Hair was slightly moved when he heard the response. They'd picked up so many through a random sifting? Truly? Then these ruins were a bit terrifying and incredibly important.

As they conversed in silence, someone roared in the distance, "We don't care about the ruins or three great organizations, or even the Night Watchers! I just want to know if Yuan Shuo's disciple Li Hao made it out alive??"

The voice was loud and sonorous!

Seeing that someone had mentioned him by name, Li Hao looked at Hao Lianchuan.

"I am Li Hao!" he called out when he didn't indicate otherwise.

A coarse man swiftly ran over to a cliff face and didn't come down it. "You are Li Hao!?" he roared from the top. "I ask you, has your master really advanced beyond Dominator?"

"Probably." Li Hao nodded. "I'm not certain of the particulars."

"Bullshit, how do you not know?!" yelled the man. "That means he's really set foot into Summoner of Spirit, hasn't he?"

"I really don't know," Li Hao said once again. "But my master said he was a Summoner when he killed Sun Yifei..."

"Then he is!" the man threw his head back with laughter. "You, come with me!"

Li Hao looked on blankly. Who was this person? He was a martial master since there was no ball of light around him, but most martial masters were just Sunderers. Dominators were few and far in between—even if he was one, how arrogant did he have to be to tell Li Hao to follow him in front of all of these Solars?

“What are you looking at?” the man barked with laughter. “It’s fine if you don’t know me, it’s enough that I know you! Come with me, the rest of these guys all want to kill you. I’ll let you go when you bring me to your master. That’s safer than staying with them!”

Li Hao was still at a complete loss.

The man began to grow angry when he saw that the young man remained unmoving, then laughed uproariously when he thought of something. “I forgot to introduce myself. I was famous enough in Silver Moon back in the day! I am Southern Fist He Yong! I was not lucky enough to share a destiny with the supernatural throughout these long years, but managed to ascend to Dominator in the central region. However, Dominator of Thousands is not worth speaking of!”

Li Hao’s brain rang with incomprehension. Being a Dominator was... very formidable, but... it was nothing in a crowd of Solars and Novas. You’re... so cocky!

Southern Fist He Yong!

The young man had heard his teacher mention the title once—the North and South Fists of Silver Moon. So this was who they called the South Fist King?

“Don’t be afraid,” He Yong chortled. “I don’t share a deep grudge with your master. Let’s put it this way, none of those who lived from one of his fights hold much enmity toward him. I am indeed not much as a Dominator. Let me further introduce myself—He Yong has lost face for the Silver Moon martial masters. I could not eke out a living these years and had no further path forward. I joined the Skystar royal family a few years ago as their lackey, teaching their sons and daughters martial arts. I might count as a royal martial official!”

Li Hao blinked. The royal family?

The Skystar royal family didn't have much of a presence, but this was still their era. Although the royal family had retreated behind the scenes, they yet retained their strength. The nine ministries also answered to the royal family in name.

The martial masters of Silver Moon hated the talons of the government the most. Just as He Yong said, he was the shame of Silver Moon martial masters with his current profession! And yet, his status was high. An instructor of the royal family could even be considered the teacher of emperors.

"I don't represent the royal family on this trip," He Yong laughed. "Nor could I ever. I just want to find Old Demon Yuan and tell him that I'm still a martial master. I want to see this Summoner of Spirit level for myself! If you go with me and these guys bar the way or even kill me, they'll be antagonizing the royal family. While it isn't much in our times, a camel that starves to death is still bigger than a horse. Who would dare easily set themselves against the royal family?!"

His laughter was filled with arrogance, but also tinges of resignation and sorrow. He didn't say that he'd kill whoever prevented him from leaving, but that whoever stopped and killed him would be in trouble.

What was that, if not sorrow?

The vaunted Southern King of Silver Moon had to make use of these kinds of threats to force some reservation into hearts...

Off to the side, Hong Yitang could no longer stay silent.

"Brother He," He was both a little angry and reluctant to accept the situation. "I thought you would say that whoever dared stop you would be met with a punch to the face and a quick trip to hell!"

“Yo, the Earthturner Sword is still alive!” He Yong hooted with laughter. “We won’t do, we’re too old! Martial masters aren’t good enough in an era with the supernatural! But Yuan Shuo seems to have found a way forward. Therefore, I want to see just how strong Summoner is. Can it kill those greater than Solar? Can it fight Ying Hongyue??”

Chapter 284: The Terrifying Hou Xiaochen (III)

He Yong was an unbridled character completely out of control. His unkempt beard shook as he brayed with laughter. “I’ve been on the road for three days and traveled without stop to get here. It’s a damned shame to not see Yuan Shuo battle the Qimei Staff! Did you get to watch it?!”

“I did, and it was absolutely brilliant!” Hong Yitang called out. “The Five Styles battled the Qimei Staff and the Qimei Staff won by a single move! However, the Qimei Staff King lost his life for it...”

“Really? The Qimei Staff won?” He Yong whooped. “I don’t believe it! Did Old Demon Yuan go easy on him? Hahaha, Sun Yifei did not die in vain. I would think it worth it too if I could witness the splendor of a Summoner of Spirit!

“Kid, are you coming with me?” He looked at Li Hao again. “Silver Moon is not what it once was. Who would dare come and make trouble in those days?

“Whoever came would die!” he barked with laughter. “Whoever didn’t want to die had to cower and call me granddaddy! You had to fight your way upwards and earned the right to stand in Silver Moon only after beating everyone! Wanting to make a stand without killing a few renowned martial masters? Hah!”

He blazed with conceit, as if the glories of yesteryear were still present and this was still his home ground. But bleak undertones lurked within his words. All that the Southern First King could do was reminisce about the past.

“So are you coming with me or not?!” He Yong bellowed. “How come you don’t have any of the fire of a martial master, kid?? They say you killed Qimei Staff’s senior disciple, so I thought you were someone like Old Demon Yuan. Why are you more like the wuss Hong Yitang, who wouldn’t know mettle if it bit him on the nose?”

Hong Yitang smiled ruefully and didn't say a word.

"Senior, I am a Night Watcher." Li Hao took a deep breath. "I am a Silver Moon Night Watcher. Directors Hou and Hao are present and I have my duties to take care of. I cannot leave just like this."

"Don't give me that fucking bullshit!" He Yong shouted. "You're looking to those guys?? Hao Lianchuan isn't worth shit and Hou Xiaochen is a paper tiger. The only thing he can do is posture while he waits for the central region to rescue him. He would've fought back a long time ago if he dared fight back—how could he possibly tolerate other people throwing their weight around in front of him?"

"This guy killed every martial master he came across when he hunted Silver Moon martial masters!"

"Senior He Yong, some things can not be spoken of erroneously." Hou Xiaochen frowned.

"Erroneously?" He Yong snorted. "Would I not know about your background given my position in the royal family? You were part of the Skystar Guards when the dynasty formed this army unit, and you were even one of the three commanders! Don't you dare say that you weren't!"

Expressions shifted among the crowd when this revelation was laid bare. The younger generation were unaware, but the old guard well remembered the chaos of the martial world during those times.

The Skystar Guards assassinated many martial masters when they were active. Each guard was vicious, brutal, and succeeded with uncountable targets. It reached a point where some martial masters went weak at the knees to hear of this army unit.

Despite the strength of Silver Moon's martial world, they were raked through the coals by the Skystar Guards. Of them, their most terrifying were the legendary three commanders.

“How is that possible?” Hou Xiaochen responded with resignation. “How old was I twenty years ago? I’m in my early forties now and would’ve been a teenager then. How was I supposed to be a commander for the Guards? Senior He Yong... are you... confused?”

Confused agreement rippled through the crowd. That was true! The Skystar Guards was formed more than thirty years ago. Even the three commanders of a later period held their posts more than twenty years ago. They were disbanded when the Night Watchers were formed. The legendary commanders were rumored to be Dominators back in the day!

A teenage Dominator?

Impossible!

An old demon like Yuan Shuo reached that cultivation level only when he was almost fifty years old.

He Yong was at a loss for words, but doggedly continued, “Don’t deny it! I don’t know why you’re so strong, so you must be one of the three commanders. And if you’re not, you’re the final disciple of one of them!”

“What in the...” Hou Xiaochen didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. “Whatever, I am if you say I am! Also, the Skystar Guards weren’t as infamous as you say. They simply killed a portion of degenerates who plagued the lands and were the scourge of the martial world! See, aren’t the rest of you alive and well? No one cared about proper sparring. Even a demon like Yuan Shuo only killed people during his challenges. He was wanted, but no one did anything to him. The way you put it makes it seem like the Guards were some notorious, crazed killing machines...”

The assembly cast strange looks at him. Er... were you really part of that army unit?

“Don’t look at me like that,” Hou Xiaochen sighed. “Don’t the Skystar Guards count as the predecessor to the Night Watchers? Whoever speaks ill of the Guards is speaking ill of the Night Watchers.”

It was the same concept! One was an official organization of martial masters and the other one of supernaturals. They were all the same, so it would be off if he, a Night Watcher, did not defend the other.

“Let’s stop the mischief, Senior He,” the director continued. “The royal family has kept a low profile for many years. Would they declare war on the three great organizations for a Dominator like you?”

“Who knows?” He Yong sneered. “The royal family has nothing left but their dignity! They will truly have nothing if they lose even that! The three great organizations are powerful, but so do they retain certain strength!”

“Sure sure, everything you say is right!” Hou Xiaochen chuckled and turned to the other powerhouses. “We’re embarrassing ourselves in front of you. Li Hao’s matter is trifling, the key here is the ruins...”

“Li Hao is no small matter!” Violet Moon snorted.

“How is he not...” However, Hou Xiaochen had no choice but to accept the rebuttal. “Go find Yuan Shuo if you’re of the mind to. The so-called eight families of Silver City? Please, a damned many years have passed and we don’t even know the origins of those stories. Don’t use that as an excuse!

“Everyone, are sky level origin weapons not more valuable than Li Hao?” he asked earnestly. “As for Yuan Shuo... look for him yourself! If you’re really out of ideas, set up an arena and proclaim to the world that Yuan Shuo is martial trash. He may seek you out himself! Isn’t that right?”

Some people blinked. That was... true, those actions might actually draw Yuan Shuo out of hiding. Of course, assuming that he came openly and not in the shadows, executing the organizers without further word for their rudeness!

“I understand if Red Moon has their eye on Li Hao.” Hou Xiaochen turned to the Parity King and Half Mountain. “But you two should not be thus. It’s not appropriate for you to target a young man when you do not grasp anything, correct?”

The Parity King was an imposing middle-aged man. “Director Hou does not need to worry about us,” he said calmly. “We will withdraw if Red Moon withdraws!”

“That’s good!” Hou Xiaochen nodded and focused on Half Mountain.

“I have no particular thoughts,” Half Mountain said coldly underneath his cloak. “Don’t direct your ire at me, Director Hou!”

The two Novas held themselves in check, but Red Hair furrowed his brows.

“You should stay out of it, Red Hair.” As expected, Hou Xiaochen looked at him next. “We can explore the ruins together and split the origin weapons. There is no need to come with so much fanfare for a Li Hao, wouldn’t you say so?”

“You are right,” Red Hair said coldly. “In that case, why repeatedly set yourself against Red Moon on behalf of Li Hao? Silver Moon’s situation is not as good as you think! Hou Xiaochen, are you going to bury the good prospects with your own hands?”

“There’s no reasoning with you!” Hou Xiaochen chuckled ruefully and turned to the cliff faces around him. “Is anyone here from the Night Watcher headquarters? The supernatural organizations got here a few days ago, but where are you? What in tarnation is this?? I am only a Solar, and an injured one at that. Is there any dignity left for the Night Watchers if you still do not show yourselves?!”

No one answered his shouts.

“Is there a need for this?” Hou Xiaochen grew despondent.

“You know, some people want nothing more than open warfare between us.” Red Hair was the epitome of calm. “But we do not wish for there to be open hostilities. Red Moon has never demanded an accounting for you killing the second generation Violet Moon. If you still take a stance opposite to us today, however, Red Moon’s magnanimity will cease to stretch further!”

He was being quite restrained. He first spoke of reason, then of the times. Regardless, taking Li Hao away with him today was the mission that he had to complete.

Red Hair did not want to make an enemy out of Hou Xiaochen. Some people couldn’t wait for the two to fight so they could determine what condition the Night Watcher was in. But... what was the point in that?

Hou Xiaochen sighed and glanced at Li Hao next to him.

“Little fellow,” he whispered. “I told you before that I might not be able to protect you if your value isn’t high enough. See here, a Nova wants you and won’t take no for an answer. No one from upstairs is willing to defend you and your teacher’s run off. Don’t look to Hu Dingfang either—Solars aren’t dependable and Novas will easily do him in.

“I... am in a difficult position,” the man sighed. “What do you think I should do, little guy?”

Li Hao thought for a moment and extended his hand toward the director. Hou Xiaochen smiled and stretched out his hand as well. When the two hands clasped together, an incomparably keen sword qi circulated in Hou Xiaochen’s body. Unfathomably heavy earth aura interspersed with sword intent bloomed next in his body.

Li Hao looked at him, unmoving. Hou Xiaochen answered with a smile as well. Their hands slowly separated.

The director smiled and clapped Li Hao’s shoulder. “Even if you were closer to my heart... it would still be difficult for me to take action on your behalf. But... there’s no helping it since I’m your

director! Wouldn't that be too humiliating to let someone else take you? Who among the Silver Moon Night Watchers would follow my orders in the future, wouldn't you say?"

"I'll follow all of your orders, director!" Li Hao nodded.

"Good boy!" Hou Xiaochen chuckled and looked at Red Hair. "Red Hair, Li Hao says that he'll follow my orders in the future and be a good boy. Don't make trouble for him. Leave when I count to three and I'll bring you into the ruins later on. There's treasure to be had."

Red Hair glowered ominously!

What kind of tone was this? Was he coaxing a child??

Numerous figures began appearing in the surroundings. The Parity King grabbed the Revolution King and vanished on the spot. Half Mountain immediately disappeared as well. Red Hair frowned, while Violet Moon looked around warily.

"Are you certain that you want to protect him, Hou Xiaochen?"

"One!" Hou Xiaochen raised one finger with a smile.

"Hou Xiaochen..."

"Three!" He suddenly skipped two and blinked out of sight. The Flaming Phoenix Spear that Hao Lianchuan carried disappeared as well.

Chapter 285: The Terrifying Hou Xiaochen (IV)

In the air.

Red Hair wanted to say something, but his expression abruptly changed drastically. A fiery phoenix with chillingly indifferent eyes appeared in his mind the next second!

Trouble was upon him!

Red Hair threw his head back with a howl and erupted with formidable fire energy that rivaled a blazing sun. It was far more domineering than the power that Qiao Feilong or Sun Yifei had brought to bear in their peak condition. It erupted with spontaneity!

Roaring, Red Hair smashed out a punch that threatened to split the heavens and fracture the earth!

Others in the surroundings saw a man wielding a spear appear out of nowhere. The spear was flaming red and completely lacked any presence. It was ice cold, but also blazing hot. It stabbed into Red Hair's chest, running him through!

Red Hair punched in response, but his blow came too late.

A cough sounded in the air—Hou Xiaochen pulled out his spear with a cough and swept it through the void. Red Hair's eye-catching head with red locks vanished with a bam! A white handkerchief appeared in Hou Xiaochen's hand; he wiped his mouth upon another cough. Freely flowing blood dyed the handkerchief red. He smiled gently and brandished his spear through the sky again.

Kaboom!

A bolt of thunder and lightning crashed through the sky as Violet Moon transformed into lightning and fled for her life!

"Now now, is there a need for that?" Hou Xiaochen chuckled. "I didn't say I'd kill you. I can't bear to, not with how docile you are. And you're one of the Seven Moons. Ying Hongyue might come for me if I kill you too. Red Hair's just part of the elder council, so it doesn't matter if I kill him. Honestly!"

Continuing to chuckle, the man looked down and beamed at Li Hao. “See, Uncle Hou is still pretty strong! It’s just that I normally don’t fight because I’m injured. I cough blood as soon as I do anything!”

“.....” The silence was stifling. There was no sound other than the escaping bolt of lightning.

He Yong quietly felt his way back from the edge of the cliff and took off running. Half Mountain shimmered in and out of sight before fully vanishing. The Parity King turned into a gust of wind with the Revolution King and disappeared without a trace. Powerhouses in the surroundings withdrew one after another.

Run!

No one dared remain behind. That move...

No one dared imagine it and no one could believe it! Hou Xiaochen... the sickly Hou Xiaochen almost bedridden for many years... This was his first time taking the field in all this time and his first offense, but he killed a Nova with one spear jab!

Hou Xiaochen was so terrifying that it was suffocating.

Some powerhouses hiding in the cliffs registered the development with highly unpleasant expressions. A few of them wore black uniforms—standard Night Watcher issue! They quietly retreated, only solemnity and fear on their faces. Hou Xiaochen! He’d... actually made a move!

.....

On the ground.

Li Hao's jaw dropped, Wang Ming's jaw dropped. Everyone gaped foolishly upward.

Hou Xiaochen casually threw the Flaming Phoenix Spear to Hao Lianchuan and walked down from the sky, wracked by a coughing fit that intensified the color of blood on his handkerchief.

He flashed an urbane smile and approached Li Hao. "Is Uncle Hou impressive?"

"....." Li Hao swallowed hard before saying nervously, "Yes!"

"That's more like it!" Hou Xiaochen laughed and looked around them. "That did it. See, haven't they all left? They've been running their mouths nonstop these days. I would've jabbed them all to death a long time ago if it wasn't for Hao Lianchuan taking the Flaming Phoenix Spear. They were so annoying!"

He looked at Hao Lianchuan with disappointed frustration. "You didn't kill a single person with the Flaming Phoenix Spear! I wouldn't have handed it to you if I'd known that would be the case!"

Hao Lianchuan opened his mouth, but found himself at a loss for words. If I'd freaking known that you could kill a Nova with one strike, I... I... He didn't know what he should say!

It was now that everyone understood why the three great organizations didn't dare run afoul of their director, despite losing so many people in Silver Moon. He was too strong! He was ridiculously strong!

And the key thing was, he was mercilessly decisive when he acted! He'd said that he'd give them to the count of three, but he attacked when he reached two!

"Alright, time to go. This place won't open again until next month. Let's head back. Ole Hao, clean up the premises. The bones of a Nova are precious, so we can't waste them. Bring them back with us!" Beaming, Hou Xiaochen then patted Li Hao's shoulder. "Little Li is not bad! Although you're not as strong as your teacher, you're worth one instance of protection from me. Your teacher

promised to explore thirty ruins for me when I protected him, so what do you think you should do, Little Li?”

“.....” Li Hao couldn’t find any words. He smiled stiffly, “I belong to the Night Watchers in life and my ghost belongs to the Night Watchers in death!”

“.....” It was Hou Xiaochen’s turn to blink with stupefaction. “Ah... that’s... a little overkill. Be more specific!”

“I attack where you point!” Li Hao declared.

“Very good, you’ve got potential!” Hou Xiaochen grinned. “You’re better than your teacher. He didn’t keep his word and ran off before he finished thirty ruins. Don’t imitate him now!”

Li Hao continued smiling stiffly and didn’t say a word. Director Hou wrapped his arm around the young man and enthusiastically brought him up into the sky. The director was in quite a good mood!

There were still people hidden in the surroundings; they all watched from far away.

Hou Xiaochen!

His name would be known throughout Skystar Dynasty after today! Killing a Nova with one spear thrust! Silver Moon was still the place that once inspired fear in people’s hearts! After biding his time for so many years... No, perhaps it’d simply been that he hadn’t found anyone worthy of protecting in all this time. Hou Xiaochen didn’t seem to care about keeping a low profile, or he wouldn’t have killed a Nova so easily today.

They finally understood why Hou Xiaochen hadn’t been active since his last battle. There was no one who posed a sufficient threat to him and no one who dared threaten him!

.....

The news swiftly traveled in all directions—the ruins were a mere afterthought in all of them. The main topic of discussion was Hou Xiaochen of Silver Moon.

How strong was he? Were his injuries real or fake? Was he one of the three commanders of the Skystar Guards of old? That would make him a Dominator twenty years ago!

All of Silver Moon was suddenly quiet. There were no powerhouses kicking up a fuss. The Parity King and Half Mountain were gone. Other Novas that dominated any place they visited ran off without doing anything in the province. Only Red Hair was eternally left behind. This place had buried too many Red Moon powerhouses already.

.....

In the car.

Hou Xiaochen was still coughing. A petrified Li Hao sat next to him, doing his best imitation of a senseless zombie.

“Don’t be afraid, I don’t bite!” Hou Xiaochen laughed after his latest coughing fit. “Be a good boy and I’ll give you the big red shadow when we get back. You’ll be something then! A Nova scarlet shadow is an incredible nutrient!”

He laughed at himself. “I’m actually concerned that you won’t be able to digest it... Forget it, we can deal with that later. Little fellow, you get three days off after you get back. Report to me when you come back to work, understand?”

“Understood!”

“Good boy!” Hou Xiaochen ruffled his hair and then... kicked him out of the car. “Go on, go back to Silver City first and enjoy your vacation. Relax some. You have my word that no one will dare come for you at this moment!”

“Thank you, director!” Li Hao heaved a sigh of relief only when the car drove off into the distance.

Holy fuck that was scary! His blow felt like it rivaled the Gold Armor’s punch! No, maybe it was even stronger. The soldier killed a Solar, the director killed a Nova!

.....

In the wilderness outside Rift Canyon.

An unmoving Li Hao stood dumbly on the spot. He grew lost in thought as the car slowly drove away. Someone appeared in the distance after an indeterminate period of time. Liu Long was here—he’d sprinted his way over at top speed. Wang Ming bounded along in his wake.

The two stopped beside Li Hao. Wang Ming was still in a state of being shocked senseless, whereas Liu Long’s mind was clear. There was stunned amazement clear to see in his eyes.

“Li Hao!” Liu Long called out, snapping the young man back to his senses.

“Chief!” The young man nodded.

“Are you alright?”

“What can happen to me?” Li Hao laughed, then turned serious. “Chief... do you think he’s really injured or fake injured?”

“I don’t know.” Liu Long shook his head, hard pressed to conceal his shock. “Too strong! He’s so strong that I don’t think we’re on the same plane at all! To think that Silver Moon would host such a character!”

Hou Xiaochen was well known in the province, but he was just the leader of the Night Watchers in a border province to the rest of Skystar Dynasty. He didn’t rank in the top three of the provincial rankings either.

The provincial government, the military headquarters, the Inspectorate headquarters... any of those leaders outranked him. But it was such a person today who cowed Skystar with one move! It was more incredulous than when Yuan Shuo killed a late Solar as this hadn’t been a battle, it’d been a complete trouncing!

Indeed, the results were so absolute that people suspected Red Hair still would’ve died had he been a little bit stronger.

Wang Ming was still dazed; he slowly came back to himself when he heard their conversation.

“Who cares, he’s our superior. This is great! The stronger the better!” He suddenly looked at the two with great agitation, thinking of something only now. “Li Hao, we’re rich!”

“.....” The two stared blankly at the young supernatural. What was he mentioning this for? Yes, they’d struck it rich inside the ruins, but he didn’t need to wait until now to be excited, no?

“I don’t mean that,” Wang Ming continued excitedly. “I mean that the director just killed a Nova!”

Yeah, so?

The two failed to understand. There was a dead Nova out there that Hao Lianchuan had been asked to clean up. Do you think that no one wants it and it's available for you to scavenge? What are you thinking of?

Chapter 286: Silver Moon's Reaction (I)

"Violet Moon's run off and Red Moon's people are pretty much all dead," Wang Ming spoke rapidly. "Have you guys forgotten that there's still three Red Moon Sunflares out there? Everyone's scared witless and fleeing for their lives, no one's thinking about the Sunflares! The Night Watchers are busy picking up the pieces, so it's free game!"

How were they still not getting it? No one was looking after the three Red Moon Sunflares that'd just emerged from the ruins!

Li Hao and Liu Long's jaws dropped as they stared at Wang Ming, dumbfounded. Hot damn! This was what the guy was thinking about at this time? Unbelievable! Not even Li Hao had given thought to this.

"There's a metal attribute among them..." Wang Ming continued urgently. "I remember that one of them wields metal energy. C'mon, Sunflares only go so fast, they must still be in the area. Li Hao, doesn't this make us rich?"

Well, fine, so this was why the handsome supernatural was thinking of those Sunflares.

"Are we going or not?" Wang Ming urged. "We need to hurry before other people realize the same thing. There won't be anything in for us then!"

Li Hao looked at Liu Long, who looked back at him. They grinned ferally at each other. Although Wang Ming was being a little insatiable and probably blinded by greed, he was right. If they didn't claim the three Red Moon Sunflares now, there would be nothing left a while later.

Once the rest of the Night Watchers reacted, remembered the existence of the Sunflares, and grappled with the allure of the scarlet shadow, they might truly close in. The agency was already on

such poor terms with the organization that one less Red Moon member was one less enemy. There was nothing else to consider.

Li Hao had no more questions and quickly set course for a certain direction. The Red Moon members were all too visible to him. Their scarlet shadows were an undeniable beacon. They were a threat to others in normal times, but right now, they would cause the death of their handlers. Those brightly colored things were so visible in the dead of the night that it was impossible for their keepers to hide from Li Hao! Any other supernatural might be able to make it out of the wilderness since they were less conspicuous.

A mosquito's leg was still meat!

Setting aside the mysterious power that the three Sunflares contained—that was just a minor matter—the key was that they'd all entered the inner city. Although they may have handed in all of the mysterious power stones that they'd found, but... just what if?

What if they hadn't?

What if they'd kept some for themselves?

Liu Long and the others had kept some for themselves, would these Sunflares be so circumspect as to truly turn in all of their gains? Even if they were, might they wait to do so after they left the ruins? It was very possible!

Added to that the scarlet shadows...

For Li Hao in his current stage of development, killing Red Moon members was to his greatest benefit. He sped over the ground, swiftly followed by Liu Long and Wang Ming.

They were two Dominators and one Sunflare going against two mid Sunflare and one late Sunflare. No one was weak to any degree!

Wang Ming was so bold not because he thought himself as strong, but because he knew how mighty Li Hao was. The young man had almost killed him with one stroke earlier and they'd jointly killed a mid Solar together.

Would there be any difficulty in eliminating three late Sunflares, particularly when their targets were scared witless?

.....

Within the wilderness.

Three Red Moon powerhouses shuddered with dread. It'd been the middle of the night when they left the ruins, but so many powerhouses had been present at the canyon that their supernatural abilities lit up the surroundings like it was day. In actuality, it was still the dead of night.

Three Sunflares trembled in their hiding place. They'd chosen to take cover the second they left Rift Canyon—they didn't dare to attempt a brash escape. Who knew how many heavyweights were running through the surroundings? It would be disastrous if they accidentally ran into an enemy!

Elder Red Hair was dead, and leader Violet Moon had fled! The rest of them who'd exited the ruins had likely been arranged to leave the province early on since they came with a bundle of Black Armors. These three were the only Red Moon representatives in all of Silver Moon now and lost their wits the moment that Red Hair was run through.

Thankfully, everyone had been shellshocked and Hou Xiaochen didn't have the effort to spare for insignificant minions like them. That was how they were lucky enough to retain their lives.

Currently, they hid inside a boulder.

Yes, a boulder.

One of them was an earth supernatural and deployed his power to hollow out the entire boulder. The three took shelter inside and sealed the boulder shut again, as quiet as they could be. This was the safest hiding spot at the moment.

As for bending the earth to go underground... There was exceedingly high pressure below the surface. Their concealment would be useless if it was too shallow, but they would have to contend with the oppression by the dirt if they wanted to go further.

The three Sunflares had given it some thought—when would they dare leave this place? ...not for another couple of days! They apprehensively hunkered down mutely inside the boulder, fearful expressions twisting their faces and not saying a word.

Their powerful organization had sent a Nova titan from the central region, but he'd been dispatched by a single spear jab!

How unforgettable a scene that was!

It induced more despair and terror than the Gold Armor killing Ding Chen with one punch. Perhaps the Celestial Sunflares had felt the same horror when they were exterminated. The three didn't have further effort to spare for their Celestial counterparts since they were all dead.

The surroundings gradually quieted down; faint breathing sounded as all three softly exhaled at the same time.

"Will Lady Violet Moon... remember us?" one of them breathed.

It wasn't a viable course of action to stay here forever, but they truly didn't dare make a run for it on their own. They could only hope for even stronger personages from the central region to return with Violet Moon—they would be able to leave then.

“I don’t know...”

“Don’t talk!” hissed the third person. None of them should talk. Although they were hidden in the middle of the boulder and not a peep could get out, they could not go wrong with being prudent during this period of time.

It was too dangerous!

The three fell silent.

.....

Outside the boulder.

Li Hao stared wordlessly at the three noticeable balls of light inside the boulder, then at the three blindingly obvious scarlet shadows hovering next to the rock. It’s crystal clear that they’re here, what are they hiding like this for?

Of course, it was due to his unique abilities that he could see so much. Who would pay attention to a particular boulder in a field of rocks and investigate its internals? Normal people wouldn’t do such a thing.

Liu Long looked at Li Hao; the young man vaguely shook his head. He made a hand gesture for the chief to wait. Li Hao began accumulating his strength.

Accumulating for what?

His strength to compress the earth sword!

Indeed, the mountain was only the size of a pillar in his spleen at present. He'd held off from continuing to force it smaller; now was when he wanted to try again. Rocks were just as well—they counted as the earth attribute! Would his earth sword aura be formidable? He really wanted to try.

The three inside were the perfect targets for practice. They were unmoving and didn't pose the slightest threat. It gave Li Hao more time for his first experiment with the earth aura sword. Such nice people they were!

The earth sword was continuously compressed and compressed in his spleen until it was fashioned into the form of a heavy sword. After some thought, the young man finalized it as the broadsword wielded by the Silver Armor.

That weapon's keenness had been unbounded, but its cutting force overpowering. The Silver Armor's final strike had also been unforgettable. He'd felt that it wasn't a good match with the sword aura that he'd perceived before, but now held the opinion that that strike was very suited to the earth sword aura!

The Earthturner Sword trembled slightly in his hand. It was a formidable treasure—Hong Yitang had said it would be useful up till Summoner of Spirit. But as Li Hao shaped the earth sword aura into being, the sword trembled in response. It was as if this was the true Earthturner Sword!

Changes gradually filtered through Li Hao's aura. When the broadsword took shape, he sensed that it could meld into the sword aura and become a true earth sword aura!

Earth and sword as one! It was a more apparent feeling than when he set foot into Dominator. He'd felt that he fused the auras together when he advanced, but that'd felt very contrived and unnatural. But in this moment, they were quite naturally one.

Li Hao flashed a grin and raised the Earthturner Sword. He thought back to the Silver Armor's stroke as he looked at the giant rock in front of him...

His aura abruptly shifted! To forge forward without pause! To strike at the nameless enemy in the firmament and view death as a return to their origins...

“Strike!” Li Hao grunted when he proved unable to contain his emotions. He was very agitated, impulsive, and couldn’t help but give voice to his feelings with this stroke. Despite knowing that proceeding soundlessly was the best course of action, was he afraid?

The three Sunflares inside the boulder heard his grunt and reacted with dismay when they sensed the incoming attack!

The boulder split open and all three wanted to rush out. They didn’t know who it was that’d come, but fleeing was the first course of action. And yet, it felt like Mount Tai bore down on them as soon as the rock shattered.

An earth supernatural?

The earth supernatural among the three roared and let loose with his power. The metal supernatural condensed countless spikes and shot them at the enemy they’d yet to lay eyes on. Meanwhile, the last water supernatural sent a water dragon churning toward Li Hao...

The three reacted extremely swiftly and decisively. Not only that, but three scarlet shadows also rushed Li Hao upon a barked command. They’d been hidden nearby out of concern for discovery. The soundless and formless shadows were often Red Moon’s key to victory.

However, they underestimated their enemy’s strength this time.

Bam!

An enormous broadsword descended and sliced through the earth supernatural’s shield of earth. The metal spikes were blown up and the water dragon sliced into two.

The broadsword continued descending!

Boom!

The earth supernatural stepped forward, but was pressed into the ground by the weapon and had all of his bones crushed to smithereens. When the broadsword continued its descent, the supernatural exploded loudly!

He was stunned beyond belief even at death. What was this??

Chapter 287: Silver Moon's Reaction (II)

Not a supernatural ability?

...martial master!

This was a martial master! A person flashed through the hapless Sunflare's mind. It was Hong Yitang and this was the Earthturner Sword! It was his move of turning heaven and earth upside down! But why did Hong Yitang wish to kill him?

The Sunflare had no more time to think as his exploding body marked the end of his mental activity.

The metal supernatural jerked back with wide eyes. He was the strongest among the three at late Sunflare, yet he wasn't able to cut down a mid Sunflare with one stroke no matter how he erupted with power. Did they face a Solar??

He turned to flee, but the broadsword was yet to finish descending. It crashed to the ground as unbounded gravity bore down on its target, covering the supernatural with blood through cuttingly sharp rays of sword qi.

The broadsword came to a rest with a rumble, crushing the metal supernatural to death!

He was better off than the metal supernatural since he didn't explode, but this was the result of one sword stroke! A mid earth Sunflare had been detonated and a late metal Sunflare crushed by the lingering momentum...

There was no desire for battle in the water Sunflare. He just wanted to run!

And run he did as Li Hao's sword rested in the ground, peeling away in the opposite direction of the young man. However, the sound of waves traveled into his ears and a fist appeared. Liu Long had been poised, waiting on the side. He rushed out like a leopard on the hunt and smashed out with his fist!

The Nine Forged Force crashed into a terrified Sunflare, one that only wanted to run!

The supernatural had proceeded only twelve meters forward when the punch connected with an audible collision. Not only that, but the fist ran the target through!

Liu Long's expression was detached as he delivered multiple hits during his attack. It rankled that he hadn't been able to kill Li Dahu with one punch on the excavation; that was a lesson engraved on his heart. He'd tried to brainstorm every manner of way possible to break through a Solar's defenses when he fought Zhang Ting. His confidence grew greatly after killing the woman.

This punch was the summation of his experiences in the ruins. It bore through the mid Sunflare's chest, whereupon Liu Long's fist flashed like a shadow as he delivered a dozen more. He didn't stop until the other was a quivering heap dead on the ground.

Battle was over in the blink of an eye; the three scarlet shadows abruptly stopped right in front of Li Hao's forehead. Having lost their instructions, it was more like they'd delivered themselves on a silver platter.

Wang Ming rushed in from the distance—Li Hao had wanted him to wait for a bit and come after the fighting started. He'd sprinted to his comrades as soon as Li Hao made his move and...

Nothing! The battle was over!

Liu Long was cleaning up the battlefield and Li Hao was stabbing at empty air with a small sword. Who knew what he was doing? Wang Ming... continued to be confused.

That was it? It was over? Three Sunflares were dead? They'd beaten up Darkmoons, not Sunflares, hadn't they? What was he here for?

Wang Ming was completely befuddled. That was his state ever since emerging from the ruins. So... there was nothing else to be done?

He didn't return to his senses until Li Hao finished disposing of the scarlet shadows and absorbed their power. The handsome supernatural looked at Liu Long, but the chief continued rummaging through the bodies instead.

"There are indeed mysterious power stones!" the man exclaimed with excitement. "But not many—these guys weren't that bold and hid only one stone each. There's one of earth, metal, and water. It looks like they dared to keep just one stone that corresponded to their element."

Combined with the thirty-two that the trio had gained before, this made for thirty-five total stones!

"Um... Director Liu," Wang Ming said haltingly. "Let me... let me take care of cleaning up the battlefield next time."

I didn't do anything and don't even have to clean up the battlefield! I'm so useless! Will I be counted in for the next operation if things are like this?

This won't do!

Li Hao was busy digesting the scarlet shadows. He didn't see the diagram of the eight trigrams this time. It looked like that manifested only in Silver City.

The young man was in good spirits—not because they'd killed three Red Moon Sunflares or that he'd killed a late Sunflare with one stroke, but that he had a new understanding of the earth sword aura. Upon experimentation, he found it much stronger than before.

So Hong Yitang's theories were useful—this blow was proof.

“Let's hurry and deal with it all so we can leave!” Li Hao was in wonderful spirits. They needed to vacate the premises quickly since battle had been over just as fast.

Liu Long swiftly destroyed the battle site; Wang Ming joined in to help. Everything was soon wrapped up and the three left without further word.

.....

Not long after.

Hao Lianchuan rushed to the scene with a couple Sunflares. He looked in the relevant directions where he registered some ripples.

“There was a battle here.” He frowned slightly. “I don't know if it involved the Red Moon members... but the site's been cleaned. There must have been deaths!”

He carefully cast his senses around the surroundings. There seemed to be a ray of sword intent here, but it wasn't blatant.

“Do we continue looking for them, director?” asked a subordinate.

Hao Lianchuan recalled there were still a few Sunflares from Red Moon present only when he finished with the Nova’s body. Hou Xiaochen could forget about them, but he couldn’t. Sunflares were a threat. Now that they were in open hostilities with Red Moon, how could he let any of their members go after they killed one of their Novas?

He’d tracked them all the way to this spot without catching up with them. A disturbance had come from this direction earlier, but he was too late despite sprinting over at top speed.

Had a Solar made a move?

Hao Lianchuan wasn’t too sure, but the feeling he’d received earlier mapped a bit to a Solar. Countless powerhouses were hidden among the province at the moment, so it was difficult to judge who was responsible. It might very well be Red Moon’s members that were dead—they were the only organization that the general public felt safe in attacking at the moment.

“Let’s go back!” Hao Lianchuan gave up the chase. They’d wasted enough time here; White Moon City would be the heart of the situation to come. Who knew how much trouble there’d be after Director Hou killed a Nova with one jab?

.....

Serenity teeming with undercurrents of tension filled the night. It was the calm before the storm.

White Moon City entered its highest state of alert after Hou Xiaochen returned. The Tiger Wings demonstrated increased movement; the city’s Inspectorate turned out in large numbers and began investigating the city.

The provincial government was an uncharacteristic hotbed of activity—lights blazed from every corner.

Hou Xiaochen might rebel!

Such was some people's judgment, but they couldn't be certain. He'd taken the field himself after continuously waiting in vain for reinforcements from the central region. If the man led the Silver Moon Night Watchers in open rebellion after killing a premier heavyweight... Plus the Tiger Wings and Inspectorate...

Unrest would shake Silver Moon.

Not only that, but precedence was often the most feared. Once he began, it might start a chain reaction across the lands!

It was a small matter if individual powerhouses ran out of control. The key thing was that Hou Xiaochen represented the Night Watchers and a partnership between the Inspectorate and local army. That wasn't a matter of one or two powerhouses, but an enormous shift in the entire governmental system. That kind of upheaval was intolerable.

As much disorder beset Skystar Dynasty now, even with the appearance of a few hotly ambitious characters who wished for independence, there wasn't a titan that'd appeared among the ninety-nine provinces that called for more.

Hou Xiaochen might be one.

.....

The provincial government.

Not only were Silver Moon government members in attendance, but so were some special guests. One of them wore an Inspectorate uniform.

“Who would’ve thought that Hou Xiaochen would keep himself so deeply hidden!” intoned a man with short hair and a sharp look in his eyes. He looked at the rest in the small conference room. “We knew that he was no simple character when he fought Ying Hongyue to a draw all those years back. The central region has wanted to send him elsewhere many times, offering him promotions and ennoblement. The Ministry of the Inspectorate even made him the unusual offer of being deputy inspector general at headquarters. He refused them all!”

Being one of the nine ministries, the central Inspectorate’s inspector general was one of the nine movers and shakers within the dynasty. To be his deputy would make Hou Xiaochen a major character within the government. Compared to his current identity, it was a promotion three grades higher!

But even so, Hou Xiaochen declined to acquiesce.

“As we thought, he wanted to mutiny a long time ago!” sneered the man. “He refused his redeployment orders so many times and decided to step out of hiding this time. I say that he’ll be rebelling very soon...”

“Ahem!” coughed an old man with slightly graying hair. “Be careful with your words! It is Hou Xiaochen’s mistake to refuse his orders, but his duty to kill a Red Moon Nova. He remains part of the dynasty so long as he has not hoisted his own flag. We cannot speak wildly. Otherwise, which one of you will claim responsibility for forcing him into rebellion?”

Those in the conference room looked at the old man. He was nominally the highest leader of silver Moon—the director general of the provincial government.

Hou Xiaochen colluded with the army and was of one mind with the Inspectorate. Only the administrative government ignored him and frequently reminded its superiors that proper attention needed to be paid to the province. Hence, those from the central region traveled here as soon as they fled Rift Canyon.

“Master Zhao...” The speaker wanted to continue, but was interrupted by a cough. The sound made the rest of the conference room noticeably uncomfortable.

Hou Xiaochen loved to cough! Silver Moon denizens all liked to cough at random times. Apparently Yuan Shuo nursed the same habit. Were they all feeble and weak??

This Master Zhao, Director General Zhao, had been a scholar before. He was Silver Moon’s highest leader when the supernatural rose. As such, those upstairs gave him abundant good treatment. He crossed over to the supernatural, but only barely made it to Sunflare after twenty years.

Sunflare... while he was older, it didn’t make for poor health!

The others grumbled inwardly, but stayed silent. As weak as the old man was, his status was high. The network of relationships as Skystar City was very complicated, so they weren’t willing to interrupt him.

“Everyone, we should not be hasty!” the old man said slowly after coughing some more. “We should wait to see what develops. Hou Xiaochen will not raise the banner of mutiny unless there is no other choice left to him. At the moment, I think we can still make some appropriate overtures. Keeping such strong battle strength in Silver Moon will strengthen the province. If he is willing to head to the central region, he will dominate the battlefield for the dynasty. It is not a good thing to force him to take up arms!”

Chapter 288: Silver Moon’s Reaction (III)

“Master Zhao, do you mean that we just... leave him alone?” frowned the short-haired man. “He purposefully called for central region reinforcements today when he plainly had the strength to resolve the situation. His actions were blatant insubordination!”

“.....” Master Zhao chuckled and whispered, “Don’t think too much. Perhaps he just wasn’t willing to take action. I think we shouldn’t come to these conclusions for the time being. After all, he’s someone who killed a Nova with one jab from a spear. I trust that no one here wishes to see him forced into rebellion?”

“I recommend that we all sit down for a talk! The talk should include the three commanders from the army, the inspector general from the Inspectorate, Hou Xiaochen, myself, and you representatives from Skystar City. We should have a conversation!”

“A conversation?” questioned Short Hair. “Is he willing to? Maybe he’ll kill us on sight!” He fell silent for a moment. “Additionally, I have another matter to speak of. Headquarters previously sent a special agent to Silver Moon to supervise certain cases. She’s gone missing!”

“A special agent gone missing?”

“Yes, a mid Solar Night Watcher with an origin weapon. She followed them into the ruins and didn’t come out!” Short Hair elaborated. “Both person and origin weapon are gone. We made inquiries through special channels and learned that she vanished without a trace after entering the city. I suspect...”

“I’ve heard about this,” the old man started coughing again. “Apparently, the inner city is very dangerous. There may be existences beyond Nova inside. Only Hu Dingfang and Hao Lianchuan would have a chance of killing your Solar, but they stayed with the other Solars the entire time. Would Violet Moon and Revolution cover for them if they truly did anything?”

“You can doubt and question Hou Xiaochen,” frowned the old man. “But you cannot overreact to the slightest rustle! Nor can you wildly fabricate charges against someone! I am dissatisfied with certain of his actions and even more displeased by his collusion with the military, not to mention him turning the Inspectorate into a figurehead...”

“But!” The old man’s tones turned severe. “That does not mean that the blame for everything can be laid at his feet! That is very untoward! Skystar City has sent only powerful supernaturals this time, why didn’t they send a civil official with a clear head?”

He ignored the less than pleasant expressions finding themselves onto the group’s faces. “This is most inappropriate! Might is not the only answer! If you are strong enough to do anything, then what do you need us for?”

“You people are impulsive and do not proceed down the proper path!” he snapped out with irritation. “I understand your intention—you mean to blame the Night Watchers for your agent’s death, regardless of what the evidence indicates. You will force someone into insurrection even if they don’t wish it!”

He slammed his hands on the table with towering fury. “Is this how you operate?! Are you confident in subduing him if Hou Xiaochen revolts, or perhaps you’re sure of killing him? You want to bring his head to Skystar City to bask in the accolades, don’t you??”

The more he listened to these people talk, the less right it seemed and the less patience he had. So these were the kind of bastards that the capital had sent!

He was very irate!

Some among the group scowled, while some remained silent. The old man had a high status, after all. Despite their strength and Short Hair being a Nova—indeed, a premier existence and a Heaven Favored—he could only hold his temper with a frown.

“Master Zhao!” Short Hair’s frown deepened. “Very well, we will talk with him according to your wishes, but I will not be in attendance. I leave this in your hands out of concern that we will clash as soon as he sees me. I will enter the city tomorrow morning or the day after, please keep my presence a secret.”

“And what is the meaning of that?” sighed the old man. “Do you think he doesn’t know you’re here?”

Entering the city tomorrow morning or the day after... was naturally an attempt at a disguise. It would be proof that they hadn’t rushed to Silver Moon in time.

But was Hou Xiaochen a fool?

As the supernatural domain rose, it gave rise to a group of supreme supernaturals who occupied important positions, yet were without ability, talent, and virtue! How had the government failed to send a single dependable mainstay of the dynasty to oversee the Silver Moon matter? Instead, it sent a couple of strong brutes to the border province. How would this accomplish anything?

Fatigue set in and the old man waved his hand. "Very well, I understand! You should go rest. I will communicate the best I can with Hou Xiaochen. Strife will not beset Silver Moon in the short term!"

Short Hair rose without a word. He was followed by his compatriots as they left the conference room. They'd reached the limits of their patience with the old man. He was just a Sunflare, but dared to put on airs in front of them!

.....

The old man glanced at his deputy when they left and sighed again. "It looks like the nine ministries also think that strength is the most important character trait. Ability, intelligence, and tactics are all secondary. People like us are about to be made obsolete!"

His deputy was also advanced in age and white speckled his hair. He wore glasses that were almost ineffective in his years and paused in the middle of perusing some material.

"Director General." He lifted his head with a smile. "It is time to accept the reality that a new era is upon us! Unrest persists in the central region, the war goes on unabated, so strength is naturally king! The nine ministries are rapidly thinking of ways to increase their own. How will they keep the unruly powerhouses in check if they lack sufficient power?"

"What do you think I should do?" the old man sighed.

"You made a decision long ago, didn't you?"

“Perhaps?” There was no end of sighs for the old man today as he looked around wearily.

The contingent from the central government had given him a heavy blow. He’d thought that familiar faces would arrive in Silver Moon—they’d were all exceedingly clever and keen of judgment. He didn’t dare say that it would dispel Hou Xiaochen’s thoughts of rebellion with any of them present, but that at least the man wouldn’t be impulsive even if he was of the mind to.

But look at who was here—some good-for-nothings who couldn’t wait for Hou Xiaochen to mutiny! They were deathly afraid that he wouldn’t rise up—where would their own deeds of merit come from if he didn’t? How would they tell their superiors that Hou Xiaochen was wrong and they were right?

“Evil and monsters come forth in large numbers when a towering building is about to fall!” the old man quoted as he stood with increasing resignation. “Strength is king and there is no peace for the people. How many still truly keep the people in mind these days?”

“I’d thought that Hou Xiaochen was the leader of a rebellion and a traitor, but now it seems that he is a rare fine person! How lamentable, absurd, and deplorable!”

The old man slowly left as he shook his head. He’d suppressed the Night Watchers from growing stronger all of these years and tried his best to send Hou Xiaochen away. It was too dangerous to have such a person in a border province. It was not good that he enjoyed such prestige in Silver Moon. Now it looked like the newcomers were more than ninety-nine percent less than him!

It was up to Silver Moon denizens to save Silver Moon!

.....

At the same time. The Night Watchers.

Hou Xiaochen smiled in the direction of the provincial government seat. Next to him, Hao Lianchuan was giving a detailed report of the excavation. The Night Watcher director didn't seem very interested; he remained looking at the government building.

"Ole Hao, do you think Zhao is laughing or crying at the moment?"

"Huh?" Hao Lianchuan blinked, cut off mid-sentence. What are you talking about? Who are you talking about?

"I mean the one in the provincial government."

"Oh!" Hao Lianchuan jerked with understanding. "That old fart is stubborn and pigheaded. He's probably worrying over how the director might take his head!"

"Then you'd be wrong!" Hou Xiaochen chuckled. "That old fart isn't afraid, and what would I do with his head? You make it seem like I'm a bad guy. It's not good to have that kind of impression of me, Ole Hao. When have I ever done this sort of thing over the years?"

"....."

Fine, Hao Lianchuan had nothing to say to that.

"Then what of the ruins, director?"

"Let's leave that for next month!" Hou Xiaochen's chuckle turned into a light cough. "Alright, that's it then. Don't come to me over the next two days unless you have official business. I'm in a spot of pain as my old wounds have flared up. Let me know when Li Hao comes to White Moon City in three days."

“Understood!” Hao Lianchuan nodded, but inwardly muttered, old wounds flare up? Is that true or not? Even he didn’t believe the story of old wounds anymore. Who are you fooling—you killed a Nova with one move even though you’re supposedly injured!

This guy liked to consider himself a parent as he treated everyone else as children. He was a bully!

.....

On the way back.

Li Hao frowned ferociously. Liu Long also frowned ferociously. Wang Ming was very confused by their silent brooding. What was running through their minds?

“Have you two... not collected enough treasure yet?” he asked.

Li Hao came back to his senses with a shake of his head.

“I know that my teacher’s gone missing,” he said in a strange tone. “But the key thing is... I don’t know if I’ve lost anything else!”

Huh?

The two looked at him with confusion.

“It’s probably Liu Yan...” Liu Long sighed. “I forgot to ask if she’s gone to White Moon City or back to Silver City!”

He'd lost Liu Yan! Meanwhile, Li Hao wasn't worried about Liu Yan. She was fine—Hou Xiaochen had been there! He'd lost the dog!

"Where's Panther?" The young man's frown deepened. "The dog's gone missing ever since going to Rift Canyon. I didn't see it when I went inside and didn't see it when we came back out. Has it gone missing?"

Liu Long was also quite regretful when he thought of Panther—this was a dog that'd learned his Nine Forged Force.

"It's probably... been made into dog stew somewhere? So many powerhouses were present for the expedition and the dog is fat with a gleaming coat. Perhaps someone found it tasty."

Li Hao flicked a glance at Liu Long, the chief made sense. But he was Panther's owner and the dog had eaten a lot of his sword energy! If someone had turned it into dog stew... what a loss that'd be! Even I didn't want to eat Panth.

But the little black dog was indeed missing. Li Hao didn't know if it'd run off or what. He could only sigh. Forget it, I've lost even my teacher. What's another dog added to the mix?

The car slowly drove forward. They'd driven to the canyon a few days ago, who would've thought that no one would steal the car? Then again, those present at Rift Canyon were either powerhouses or power powerhouses. Who would want a car?

A person suddenly leapt out in front of the car as they conversed. Li Hao's eyes widened with shock and Wang Ming stomped on the brakes. A martial master!

Li Hao would've discovered them ahead of time if it'd been a supernatural. Only martial masters would spontaneously appear before they could discern who it was. He took a close look at the face plastered on the windshield. The messy beard gave away who it was.

Southern Fist!

One of the two Fist Kings of Silver Moon. He Yong!

Chapter 289: Return (I)

South Fist King He Yong had run off in abject terror when Hou Xiaochen made his move. To think that he would reappear here at this point in time!

Liu Long and Wang Ming jumped out of the car, both highly alert and incredibly surprised. This guy had some nerve to appear right after Hou Xiaochen left! Did he mean to attack them? Wasn't he afraid of Hou Xiaochen responding with fury if he dared act like this in Silver Moon?

"Senior He Yong," Liu Long broached with a solemn tone. "What business might you have?"

He Yong's eyes widened when he flicked a glance at the team captain. "Dominator? You're a martial master too! Kid, what is your name?"

"Liu Long!"

"Liu Long?" He Yong thought for a bit and laughed. "Silver Spear's son, right? Who would've thought that you'd rise to Dominator after your father's death? It looks like you've received quite a few pointers from Old Demon Yuan."

He didn't think that anyone in Silver Moon could easily progress to Dominator without help from Yuan Shuo, particularly a martial second generation like Liu Long. Indeed, these martial second generations did not have the benefit of experiencing the great rises and falls of He Yong's time. That was a period of turbulent wind and rain!

"But you won't do!" He Yong was highly arrogant and immediately dismissed Liu Long. He couldn't even be bothered to look at Sunflare Wang Ming. He instantly brought up his purpose when Li Hao alighted from the car. "Little fellow, take me to your master!"

“I don’t know where he is.” Li Hao shook his head.

“That’s fine!” He Yong roared with laughter. “You’re his final disciple. He’ll eventually come to you even if you don’t know where he is! I’m in no rush, I’ll wait for him!”

“What does senior want with my master...” Li Hao furrowed his brow.

“To fight!” He Yong declared with extreme self-assurance. “I want to witness the might of a Summoner!”

“Sun Yifei died in battle, he was a late Solar...” Li Hao reminded, but he’d already guessed at He Yong’s motive. These older generation martial masters didn’t seem to fear death. They wished to see the glories of Summoner of Spirit for themselves.

He Yong also meant to protect Li Hao with the words that he said on the cliff. Of course, it might be that he didn’t wish to see martial dao heritage be ended. He just couldn’t be too obvious about the latter.

Li Hao wasn’t exactly negatively inclined toward these martial masters, it was just that they loved to fight too much, which made them quite annoying at times.

“So what?” He Yong sneered. “Sun Yifei’s qimei staff ended a long time ago. He was a fake martial master! I am a real deal Dominator and I’ve been one for many years! I’ve had three blood transfusions, my bones and meridians are very strong. Do you take me for an ordinary Dominator??

“I might have failed to find the path above Dominator, but I have not been crippled over these years! The royal family has nothing but treasure! I’ve strengthened my meridians, changed my blood, and even absorbed vast sums of mysterious power stones. None of this is what the likes of what you can imagine!

“Old Demon Yuan is pretty impressive at killing Sun Yifei, but I don’t believe that he’ll be able to run right over me!”

He was very confident that if he proved to be less than Yuan Shuo, he would be able to strike back at the very least. He Yong had failed to locate the path to Summoner, but he hadn’t been idle during his employment with the royal family. He’d partaken of countless treasures and immensely enhanced all areas of his body.

Li Hao could also sense how strong the man was. He might even be a bit stronger than the young man at present—it was just a feeling that spoke to him. One had to know that although Li Hao had just risen to Dominator of Thousands, he’d comprehended the earth sword aura and absorbed vast sums of mysterious power to strengthen his organs. He did not match the current Yuan Shuo, but wasn’t far off from when Yuan Shuo initially broke through.

It was after Yuan Shuo’s advancement that he fought a Solar, utilizing the Incantation of the Blade of Blood to kill an initial Solar. Li Hao could probably do the same in his current state!

Of course, whether or not he actually could would have to be tested in battle. But the man in front of him possessed some real strength to his name since he appeared slightly greater than Li Hao.

“Kid, what are you thinking about?” He Yong demanded with impatience upon seeing Li Hao sink into deep thought. “I’ll follow you if I can’t find your master!”

“Sure” Li Hao grinned. “I’m going to White Moon City in three days. Senior can come with me!”

He Yong’s expression changed. Hou Xiaochen!

“Don’t try to scare me with Hou Xiaochen,” he snorted. “Am I afraid of him? He’s a man of the dynasty so long as he hasn’t raised the flag of rebellion. Would he dare kill me?”

“But there’s no helping it if he does mutiny...” He Yong mumbled. “Anyway, there’s no use trying to scare me off with him! I’m not leaving unless your master shows his face!”

“Martial uncle Earthturner Sword Hong is also nearby...”

“Supernatural trash! Don’t bother me, I don’t have time for him!” He Yong cursed irately at the mention of the famed martial master who’d made the crossover.

“Senior, isn’t it inappropriate to force someone to do something against their will?” a frowning Liu Long interjected. “We have official duties to take care of and don’t have time to entertain the senior...”

“Entertain?” He Yong snapped. “Why does Yuan Shuo not show himself for a battle after progressing to Summoner and demonstrating the might of martial dao to the world?”

“Too many people wish to kill my master,” Li Hao replied solemnly. “Aren’t you forcing him to come out to his death, senior? Is this what you wish? You would force him out to satisfy your selfish desires? How many people will come for him then?”

He Yong paused, then quickly blustered in the same vein, “Who cares?! I’ll kill whoever comes!”

“.....” Li Hao, Liu Long, and Wang Ming looked at him wordlessly. This guy was crazy. Kill whoever comes? Who do you think you are?

“What are you looking at me for?” He Yong sneered; he wasn’t crazy. “When Hou Xiaochen calls for an insurrection and Silver Moon rises with him, Yuan Shuo will have to sweat for him all the time since the old demon’s enjoyed his protection these years. Who will dare kill Yuan Shuo with Hou Xiaochen there?”

“How can you spew nonsense like this?” Wang Ming grumbled. Li Hao frowned as well. “Our director is wholeheartedly devoted to the public, what is this talk of rebellion? You don’t have impunity to create rumors like these just because you’re with the royal family!”

“What do you know, little shit stain!” He Yong snorted. “Hou Xiaochen will revolt sooner or later! He has to go to the central region if he doesn’t. The nine ministries will not permit such a mighty presence to stay on the border and watch tigers fight from afar so he can identify a good timing for his own plans!

“They’ll make him go to the central region even if that forces him to take up arms! He’s a traitor if he doesn’t go! He might even be the chicken killed to scare the monkeys, and he has no choice but to be the chicken! Yes, it’s a lot of trouble for there to be someone in open revolt as sparks of flames can set the prairie ablaze, but the dynasty will benefit once they are extinguished and the lands cowed by a show of might!”

New thoughts struck Li Hao and the others. Forcing Hou Xiaochen to take up arms! That was true—everyone’s theories were that the dynasty didn’t dare commit such an action. What would happen to the other territories once the government forced a major official into a corner?

However, the government’s movers and shakers were no fools. What if they could swiftly stamp out Hou Xiaochen?

The first to lead a rebellion was someone who killed a Nova with one spear jab. Would others with similar ambitions still nurse the same thoughts if he was swiftly executed after he declared his intentions?

They wouldn’t easily reveal their motives even if they did.

Killing a chicken to scare the monkeys!

Therefore, according to He Yong's explanation, the dynasty would continue forcing Hou Xiaochen to move to the central region. They might really charge him with the crime of high treason if he refused to go!

This was a possibility that they hadn't considered before. They hadn't thought this to be a likelihood as the border region would all be engulfed in chaos if one province fell to disarray. The dynasty wouldn't dare run that risk. But now, He Yong spoke of another potential!

"What, are just a few random words enough to scare you guys?" He Yong threw his head back with laughter when the trio fell silent. "Don't worry, it won't happen that quickly. Procedures will be observed even if they wish to force Hou Xiaochen into rebelling. They'll have a conversation first, then draft him three times with three promotions. All of those will be publicly announced!"

"He might be offered the position of deputy director of the Night Watcher headquarters today, then given the chance to lead the Night Watchers tomorrow. He might become the first deputy of the entire Inspectorate the day after that. If he still refuses to obey after the three promotions, then he will be labeled a traitor!"

"The dynasty follows the proper order in doing things, they don't go at it haphazardly," He Yong continued laughing. "Of course, that doesn't take into account some fellows creating trouble in Silver Moon and forcing that guy down this path anyway. The situation is even easier then—they just need to be ready to take him out!"

Li Hao frowned slightly and changed the topic again. "Senior, I really don't know where my master is. You can follow me if you wish!"

"You don't have any clues?" He Yong stopped laughing. "I hear that he was injured. Has he died on the way?"

"Surely you jest, senior." Li Hao smiled. "My teacher is an academic matched by no other and his martial learning runs to the heavens. How would he die in a nameless place?"

“That’s good!” A hint of cold glinted in He Yong’s eyes. “It really would be a pity if he died. That old demon was no end of trouble for us back in the day!”

Li Hao couldn’t be bothered with him. He neither liked nor disliked this man. He could follow them if he wished, Li Hao didn’t care. Martial masters were just that oblivious sometimes!

He Yong made to follow the trio when they returned to the car.

“Are you going to take the car too, senior?” Li Hao raised an eyebrow. “Martial masters are better served walking...”

“Why?” He Yong blinked. Why should he walk?

“Walking is the best precaution against ambushes,” Li Hao explained. “My teacher explained this once and it doesn’t matter for us since we’re all amateurs. But since senior is an expert and possessed a great reputation in Silver Moon, you might have your share of enemies too. It would be such an unnecessary death if you were ambushed! We’ll drive slower, senior. You can stretch your legs as you follow behind us.”

He Yong thought for a moment, that did make certain sense. Martial masters did indeed like to walk, but it was more than one thousand kilometers from here to Silver City! As fit as he was, that would be the death of him!

“Senior, can it be that the Fist Kings are only adept with boxing methods?” Li Hao questioned upon seeing the man’s reaction. “I see, then hop in, senior! My master is well-rounded and usually walks because he is skilled with the Five Styles. He is first class in both the fists and levitation skills. He walked when we traveled to the canyon and didn’t fall the slightest bit behind. I thought senior would be the same, but just remembered that you are the Southern Fist, not Southern Leg!”

“.....” He Yong stared at Li Hao, then sneered after a moment, “Who do you think you’re looking down on? True martial masters are all well-rounded, we’re just good in different areas. Piss off, I’ll follow you!”

Li Hao gestured for Wang Ming to drive off. They were leaving! There was nothing else to say to this man. He was convinced that he would find Yuan Shuo if he followed Li Hao, so he would not easily give up unless he was beaten up. As someone who kept a low profile and respected his elders, why would the young man do that?

Part of the reason was that this guy was so poor that his clothes were threadbare. There was no point to killing martial masters. He Yong traveled alone, without any possessions other than his fists. Was Li Hao supposed to kill him and cut off his hands to use as gloves?

Chapter 290: Return (II)

The car swiftly started up; He Yong was in no hurry to follow. He watched silently for a bit, snorted, and ran off to wheel out a motorcycle from behind a boulder.

Yes, a motorcycle!

The engine ignited with a roar. He Yong hopped on and raced off in pursuit!

Do you take me for a fool, little punk? I'd be daft to run for a thousand kilometers! The strongest martial master wouldn't be able to react in time if meeting an ambush when running for so long. Just come out with it if you can't be bothered with me, don't spin this bullshit! You're just as bad as your master.

.....

Inside the car.

Li Hao didn't care when he didn't see the old man upon a backward glance. He looked at Liu Long instead. "Chief, are you familiar with the Southern Fist?"

“Superficially. Southern Fist He Yong is known for his superb boxing methods. My father once told me when I was young that He Yong is brave of heart and meticulous of mind. He looks like a brute, but is actually rather shrewd.

“He Yong vanished soon after the rise of the supernatural,” Liu Long rummaged through his memories. “So he made it into the royal family to avoid struggles with the new domain! He was a martial master close to Dominator—martial masters were still very popular in Silver Moon then. I don’t know if he advanced to Dominator before joining the royal family or if it was the other way around. Dominators are feted wherever they go!

“Although the royal family has retreated behind the scenes, they are not wholly without prestige or wealth. They still grasp some family fortune and strength. The exceedingly famous Black Armaturas [1] from years past are still under their control.”

The Black Armaturas!

History spoke of it as an exceedingly strong army unit that had conquered the lands.

“The royal family came into their power through excavating ancient ruins,” Li Hao suddenly said. “Don’t the Black Armaturas sound like the Black Armors?”

“They do!” Liu Long nodded. “They’re very similar—both have invincible defenses and cannot be destroyed! With martial masters forming the bulk of forces on the battlefield in those days, almost no one could break through their defenses. They swept through the ninety-nine provinces and quickly took even Silver Moon. It’s plain to see how strong they were!

“He Yong looks to have had quite a good time of things after joining the royal family. Coming to the province to spar with Professor Yuan is certainly one motive, but he may have other ones as well.”

Liu Long was also meticulous of mind and quite intelligent—it was only Yuan Shuo who looked down on him. Li Hao felt that the chief was quite fine.

“He is a royal representative,” Liu Long continued. “According to He Yong, Director Hou exposing such tremendous strength at the canyon means that the nine ministries will either force his requisition or make the director revolt. If He Yong represents the royal family, he might have the intention of secretly contacting the director!”

That wasn’t impossible either. The royal family wasn’t necessarily truly willing to step out of the spotlight.

A headache started developing the more Li Hao listened. “It’s getting more complicated, this is such a mess! Isn’t it nice for Director Hou to hold down the fort in Silver Moon? Why do the nine ministries have to send him elsewhere. Isn’t that just creating trouble?”

“It’s a normal course of action,” Liu Long heaved a heavy breath. “They’re just looking at things from a different perspective. If you were their general directors, would you be at ease letting an incomparable powerhouse with unparalleled prestige operate by themselves on the border? One who’s refused orders quite a few times? Do you think they can sleep easy at night?”

Hell no!

Hou Xiaochen refusing to go to the central region was an enormous problem.

“So why does the director refuse to go to the central region?” Wang Ming couldn’t help but ask from the driver’s seat. “There might be more opportunities there. It’s a waste of his talent to stay in Silver Moon.”

The trio didn’t understand why Hou Xiaochen did not follow his deployment orders. Protecting the province and holding down the fort here may be only one of the reasons, but that didn’t mean it was all of the reasons!

If he really couldn’t set Silver Moon aside, he could direct more resources and attention to the province from the central region. All might still be well at home then.

Hence, there must be other factors in play that Li Hao and the others weren't aware of and couldn't be bothered to guess.

Li Hao didn't care. At the moment, he was taking inventory of their gains.

Thirty-five pieces of mysterious power stones. Eight hundred cubes of water energy in the storage ring. Wang Ming had collected nearly one thousand cubes from the Celestial Sunflares, and another eight hundred from the three Red Moons that they'd just killed. That made for a sum total of almost twenty-six hundred cubes.

One broken origin weapon, half to Wang Ming, half to Liu Long. Six hundred absorbed cubes of wood, fire, and water for himself, as well as four hundred of metal and earth. These were enormous gains as well. He'd taken six Sunflare level blood pearls too.

Indeed, he'd obtained another three moments ago. Although scarlet shadows weren't blood pearls, they were the same for Li Hao. It was just one step different in procedure.

Blood and qi frothed in his body and his internal force thrummed vigorously. He was more than ten times stronger than when they embarked on the expedition! The group had left Silver City on August 26, the battle with Sun Yifei was on the 27th, they entered the ruins on the 28th, and now it was the 1st.

September 1st! It'd only been five days altogether, but incredible changes had taken place in Li Hao's strength.

Teacher's heart absorbed more than one thousand cubes of fire energy and he spent a few decades nurturing his organs. That's not something I can measure up to. His other four organs should contain at least five hundred cubes, so this means teacher might have absorbed fifteen hundred cubes of fire energy...

That was compared to Li Hao himself! This meant that taking in roughly five hundred cubes would only place him on the same level as when his teacher had yet to absorb energy. Therefore, he fell far beneath Yuan Shuo.

The young man looked at his storage ring and took stock of the mysterious power stones inside his body... A keen light shone out of his eyes. If his five elements could be balanced and reach one thousand cubes each, then he would roughly be on par with the level of his teacher's organs.

All he would lack then was the aura! If he could nurture multiple auras and meld them into the sword aura, then he might be the next Summoner of Spirit!

I need four hundred of fire, water, and wood as well as six hundred of metal and earth. That's a total of twenty-four hundred cubes.

There was enough mysterious power if none was shared with Wang Ming and Liu Long. As for mysterious power stones, his consideration was whether or not they could replenish sword energy. Sword energy was the key—refilling it with origin weapons was beyond his abilities!

Mysterious power stones were beyond his abilities as well, but they happened to have thirty-five on hand.

Li Hao had displayed two kinds of sword intent to Hou Xiaochen in order to demonstrate his value, as well as his strength as a Dominator. Now that his secrets were known, he needed to swiftly increase his strength so that these people's information always lagged behind reality!

"Chief," he said as his thoughts traveled here. "I still need four hundred cubes of water, fire, and wood..."

Any of these would satisfy him at the moment, and he continued before they had a chance to respond, "We only have two hundred of metal and four hundred of earth. I'll hold onto these for now—that's roughly eighteen hundred cubes.

“The remaining eight hundred are mostly water and a little bit of fire. You get five hundred, chief, and the remaining three hundred goes to Wang Ming...”

Wang Ming didn't say anything as he focused on the road, three hundred was a generous allotment. He hadn't contributed much in the field. Li Hao should take the most since he killed most of their targets, but the handsome supernatural did want to complain.

“I want metal energy!” It was fine if Liu Long wanted water energy, so was Wang Ming supposed to work with the remaining fire energy? He wanted metal energy!

“I have use for metal energy,” Li Hao rebutted. “Also, you need to absorb some energy from the other elements. It doesn't matter if that doesn't result in increased strength. You'll die sooner or later if you take in too much metal energy!”

“Why?”

“Your organs aren't in balance!” Li Hao responded. “Stop asking questions, this is from teacher, not me. Go ask him if you don't believe me.”

Fine then! Wang Ming had no other choice but to fall silent. On the other hand, Li Hao wasn't the type to lie to him about this. Of course, this didn't preclude the possibility that he was pulling the wool over an honest guy because he wanted to claim all of the metal energy for himself!

Li Hao was taking eighteen hundred cubes out of the twenty-six hundred they'd collected, but no one felt that it was an inappropriate distribution. The young man made some quick calculations—he would only be missing four hundred cubes of metal and two hundred of earth before reaching the equilibrium of one thousand cubes each.

He didn't mention the five thousand that the Night Watchers had promised, that could wait until White Moon City. There were always the mysterious power stones if not. Li Hao abruptly opened his mouth and began dry heaving.

Liu Long watched with blatant disgust. Granted, his thoughts of passing the stones through his system were even more disgusting.

The young man quickly threw up a dozen stones. “We have thirty-five stones when we add the three we just got. They vary in size, so if we measure them in units of marble size, we have roughly fifty units of stones.”

Given their different sizes, this was the only way to discuss the mysterious power stones as a whole.

“I’ll take twenty-five, chief takes fifteen, Ole Wang takes ten. Are there any dissenting opinions? Let’s talk it out if there is.” Li Hao was in charge of main distribution as he’d killed the Yama and Red Moon members. Thus, he made the decisions without further ado.

“Nope!” Wang Ming grinned from ear to ear. His greatest accomplishments were not here—they laid in his two advantageous moves when they killed Zhang Ting. Those had created more openings for Liu Long and Li Hao, a fact that Li Hao took into consideration. Otherwise, Wang Ming would not have been allotted so much based on his later contributions.

“That’s fine!” Liu Long inclined his head.

Li Hao took a piece of stone and placed it on the little sword, waiting for... nothing to happen!

The young man’s eyes widened. Was this method unviable, or was he approaching it incorrectly? The little sword had acted on its own to eat the little snake and black shadow that Qiao Feilong’s wife had turned into. Why didn’t the same happen for mysterious power stones?

Li Hao frowned, if this didn’t work, then sword energy might not be enough to raise his organs to one thousand cubes each. That would be very troublesome.

Do I have to... cut into it with the sword?

Energy did not seep out of mysterious power stones. Perhaps it needed to be cracked open for it to take effect.

Being a decisive sort, Li Hao brought his sword down on the stone. A dense surge of rich earth energy percolated through the car. The little sword seemed to stir, but it still lacked the interest to absorb any energy.