

Star Gate 431

Chapter 431: Secrets (II)

“Mmhhh, it is indeed the Skystar Troops.” The old man walked forward, leading Li Hao to their destination. “The person in this camp is from them and has come with the goal of exploring Battle Heaven. While the Skystar Troops have not publicly revealed his identity, they’ve made a report to the provincial government. They intend to have one of their agents in the open and one in the shadows. That makes for greater convenience.

“Ten people have come from the Skystar Troops—one Nova as their leader and the remaining nine of Solars. They are exceedingly formidable and part of the military. They have a desire to work together with us, which sets them apart from typical Solars and Novas.”

Li Hao listened quietly, simply wondering what does this have to do with me?

“Parts of the situation are very complicated as of this moment,” said the old man. “I brought you with me so you could meet the Skystar Troops. My hope is that you don’t become involved in this matter, that those of the eight families do not become cannon fodder.”

As he thought! Li Hao was now certain that the old man really did recognize him!

“The Skystar Troop representative is an initial Nova who just ascended last month. Logically speaking, his cultivation level isn’t that stable yet due to his recent progress. He should stay behind and not be involved in the expedition. We all know that accidents easily occur in Battle Heaven if one does not have a firm grip on their cultivation. But he is an initial Nova. Tell me, do you think there’s anything wrong with this picture?”

“Most likely.” Li Hao thought for a bit. “He either has a special identity, or someone wants to use the ruins to plot his death.”

“Perhaps.” Deputy Zhou smiled. “This person’s name is Yuan Xingwu.”

“I see.” Li Hao absentmindedly inclined his head, then frowned. Yuan Xingwu? Yuan... His teacher? Did this person have something to do with his teacher?

There were too many people with similar surnames in the world, however, so he quickly put it out of his mind. He didn't quite understand what the deputy meant, but the old man would probably explain since he was the one who'd called out to Li Hao.

“Yuan Xingwu is Yuan Shuo's first disciple!” Indeed, the old man continued when he received a lack of reaction. “Yuan Shuo didn't take disciples in his early years, he always operated alone. It wasn't until the rise of the supernatural and him being forced to reside in Silver City for fifteen years that this changed. The first disciple that he accepted fifteen years ago was Yuan Xingwu! He took a second disciple not long thereafter, then a third one that was Chen Yuhua. He said then that she was his last disciple, that the number three was the utmost and enough.

“However, some problems developed with all three disciples. Yuan Shuo was also gravely injured three years ago—possibly ambushed by a Copper Armor. His heart was injured and it ruined his chances of ascension. That was when he took another disciple, hoping to pass on some of the knowledge in the ancient books that he'd destroyed. All sides were happy to see that change of heart. They didn't wish for all of that information to go with him to the grave either!”

Yuan Xingwu!

Li Hao frowned, his teacher's first disciple. The man had called Yuan Shuo his master fifteen years ago, but was now a Nova powerhouse of the Skystar Troops. However, none of that was important!

Correct, none of it was important.

What was important was that Yuan Xingwu had brought soldiers back to Silver Moon and represented the military's supernatural organization for the upcoming expedition. If Li Hao's identity was exposed now, it would mean a lot of things.

Firstly, Yuan Shuo's eldest disciple was back! It was common knowledge that Hou Xiaochen was Yuan Shuo's primary protector all these years. Everyone knew that Yuan Shuo had entered the Summoner of Spirit level and that his final disciple killed six Solars a few days ago. Li Hao was also a Summoner, and the heir to the eight families.

Battle Heaven was possibly the Wangs' ancestral land. Yuan Xingwu's arrival happen to coincide with its opening. There was also Chen Yuhua in White Moon City, Hu Dingfang, the Bais, the White Tigers, and the royal family...

It was all interconnected! Southern Fist had analyzed it for him before.

Hu Dingfang had support in the military from above and below. The Bais supported him, the military supported him, and even Commander Yu threw his support behind him. Thus, Hu Dingfang was promoted to his position.

Madame Bai had gone to see Southern Fist—she might have a tie to the royal family then. And now Chen Yuhua and Yuan Xingwu were in the same location. Hu Dingfang ought to know his wife's senior brother, yes? They were one family when it came down to it. There wasn't a large gap between Yuan Xingwu and Chen Yuhua being accepted as disciples. They should've studied together, so they might be old acquaintances very familiar with each other.

Would there be further ties within this web of relationships and would it have more to do with Li Hao? No wonder Deputy Zhou had wanted to bring him here, but Li Hao still didn't quite grasp his intentions.

Their distance to the other camp shortened as the deputy continued walking forward. "Forget Yuan Xingwu. Let's talk about Battle Heaven. We have more information about it than you might already know about.

"Battle Heaven is indeed the city of the Wangs of the eight families. Or rather, their ancestral grounds. The item that the Gold Armor holds is called the Black Tortoise Seal. According to the records, it has a highly symbolic purpose in addition to being a weapon! It is the control hub of the entire city!

"Having it in your possession might place all of Battle Heaven in your hands. The weapons of the ancients were terrifying propositions. The city might be part of the seal, which would make it much more than an important token.

“In the ancient civilization, the eight families were of the same breath and branches. If something untoward happened to one family, then the core disciples of the other families could wield their tokens in times of emergency!”

Li Hao frowned. These important tokens... might be a sword or blade? But his teacher could also use the blade, so perhaps the blade could be used by whoever wielded it. Was his teacher one of the eight families, or was the blade not truly being utilized?

He was starting to be confused by the old man. While he'd gained some information, he still wasn't certain what the deputy intended or wanted.

“Deputy Zhou, I am just an ordinary Silver Moon Guard. I don't understand why you share this with me.”

The deputy paused, at a loss. “Don't they say that you're very smart? Forget it, I'll be direct. Everyone else can stay away from Battle Heaven for this expedition, but you must enter. Whether it's Hou Xiaochen or Yuan Xingwu, those who know a little of these secrets hope for you to enter the inner city or even take the Black Tortoise Seal. You might be the only one who can!

“We know it, the royal family might know it, the nine ministries may not be unaware of the possibility, and the three great organizations are also possibly acquainted with this information. In other words, apart from those with no backgrounds, everyone might know that you are the key!

“Your circumstances are both very safe and very dangerous! You are safe in that no one might hurt you before you claim the Black Tortoise Seal. But as soon as you do, it may be your death sentence. If you take it, that also means the item is unsealed. It can be directed to recognize a new master or divested of certain destructive abilities...”

Li Hao remained quiet. What did that have to do with him and what did the deputy want?

“I don’t mean anything by this. You might know my grandson, Zhou Qin, the one with the tiger. I’m just reminding you of a few things. Both you and Yuan Shuo are very loyal people, but don’t let this affect your judgment.

“And secondly, don’t brashly try to obtain the Black Tortoise Seal! Remember, don’t be greedy!” Deputy Zhou cautioned solemnly. “It’s not a good development that the seal or Battle Heaven has appeared. The city’s materialization means that some other problems will swiftly occur or even great trouble aroused as a result. The internal workings of Silver Moon are not a united whole. While we’re not at the point of blatant enmity with one another, we do have certain differences in philosophy!

“The ancient ruins of the eight families represent eight seals. Unsealing one of them might affect the rest. It could cause some ancient existences to descend upon us once more. It could be good, but it could also spell our doom!

“The secrets of Battle Heaven are not as simple as they seem. They’re so much more complex!”

Li Hao could no longer contain his shock and confusion. “Where does the deputy know all this from?” he muttered.

“Ancient records,” Deputy Zhou sighed softly. “There are many who know this, not just us. They know it and pretend not to. Let’s put it this way—we say that the supernatural domain appeared twenty years ago, but it was here much earlier. It started from Silver Moon. Our province is the origin of the supernatural rise!

“Outsiders think it started in the central region, bah humbug! The supernatural erupted in Silver Moon! Why else do you think Ying Hongyue and the others could set foot in it so quickly? They were earlier than those in the central region!

“It was just that all of the mysterious power that came into being in the province was instantly absorbed by a mysterious existence or seal! It turned us into an incredibly impoverished land for energy.

“Ying Hongyue knows about this, some of the credit for the supernatural awakening goes to him. Some people explored a certain ruin back in the day and broke some things, causing our world to shift. These people are now titans of various factions!” Deputy Zhou sighed with emotion. “They are Ying Hongyue, the Yama King, and the Celestial Sword Immortal. Also among their number was the commander-in-chief of the Skystar Guards, the lord of Yonder Mountain—one of the Seven Divine Mountains...

“They are now renowned throughout the lands!”

Li Hao’s heart shook. So these people had all been part of the same team? Or had they just known of each other and happened to explore the same ruin, causing the supernatural to erupt? So they knew the changes to the world that were coming and were able to make preparations beforehand, leading to the rise of the three great organizations?

What were the Seven Divine Mountains? This was his first time hearing of them. And who was the commander-in-chief of the Skystar Guards? He knew of Cannibal, Laughter, and Sickly, but not who their leader was. The martial world only knew of the three commanders.

He’d never fathomed that Silver Moon was the origin of the supernatural rise!

“Remember this, there are only two possibilities after Battle Heaven is unsealed,” Deputy Zhou emphasized. “First, the supernatural might erupt again and vast quantities of mysterious power will raise the dynasty’s supernaturals up another level. Countless people might swiftly break through and reach the next level of existence. The second is of disaster!

“Regardless of which possibility it is, it means disaster all the same at this stage. It is not a good idea to suddenly facilitate large numbers of powerhouses through the opening of a second wave of the supernatural domain.”

Chapter 432: Secrets (III)

“Who... are you?” Li Hao’s heart shook. Was the old man really just a deputy director general?

“Me?” Deputy Zhou smiled. “Don’t worry, I mean you no harm. Not just me, but the entire provincial government means you no harm. Neither I nor Director General Zhou wish to see any mishap befall you. I tell you this only to help you understand... and not be hoodwinked by certain people.”

“Director Hou?” Li Hao frowned. “The director wants nothing more than to claim the Black Tortoise Seal. So this means that he wants to do something to me too?”

“That’s not necessarily it, just that Hou Xiaochen has bigger ambitions than most. It’s normal for him to have his own thoughts. He wants to leverage this opportunity to set foot into the next stage. The director doesn’t wish to live out the rest of his life like the rest of us. Thus, he’s been raising the greatest fuss in Silver Moon over these years.”

Li Hao was already repeating a litany of fuckity fuck fucks to himself. What the hell?! So the internal dispute in Silver Moon is centered on Hou Xiaochen and the provincial government? So that argument they had before wasn’t an act, but an actual disagreement? And Deputy Zhou is representing the government in this conversation because he doesn’t want me to help Hou Xiaochen get the Black Tortoise Seal?

The young man understood the situation now! No wonder this old man insisted on a walk in the middle of the night to say all these things to him. This was employing both logic and emotion to prevent Li Hao from being a spear in someone else’s hand. But who knew if the provincial government wasn’t trying to do the same?

If he believed the deputy, that would create a rift between him and Hou Xiaochen. If Li Hao could take the Black Tortoise Seal and decided not to, that might cause another set of problems. Maybe all of this was to move against Hou Xiaochen instead!

Li Hao’s litany of internal swearing grew more varied. Damn it, there were no good people here! They were all making trouble for him in the dead of night. However, these words did give rise to second thoughts in the young man’s mind. Perhaps this was exactly what the deputy wanted; he might also represent Director General Zhao.

The deputy had specifically mentioned Yuan Xingwu's arrival. Was that to warn Li Hao away from Yuan Xingwu, or to express that the provincial government didn't trust the man?

A headache throbbed at Li Hao's temples, but he quickly discarded everything he'd just heard. Screw all this! He had his plan of attack. If He Yong and Hong Yitang joined the expedition, then he would stick to their sides like glue. Forget Hou Xiaochen and the others. He Yong and Hong Yitang were also powerhouses and he'd saved them once. That they hadn't attacked him then most likely meant that they wouldn't attack him at all. They would protect him even better knowing that he could help them suppress what they didn't want.

So all of you can forget tricking me! Li Hao cursed silently. I'm going to be with two powerhouses and I'll have Ole Hong erupt with full glory at key moments. A Hong Yitang at full strength might even be stronger than Hou Xiaochen. One down was one less to worry about then. I'll kill you all!

Mhmm, he wouldn't do anything to Hou Xiaochen so long as the man didn't do anything to him. After all, the director had truly sheltered Li Hao and Yuan Shuo. That was not a facade. There was no need to make an enemy out of Hou Xiaochen for the sake of an unfamiliar Deputy Zhou.

Li Hao was much more at ease when he sorted his thoughts out. I have two backers and I recently found them by myself! None of you know about them, eh?

Those two knew that the young man could help them suppress undesired states, and that each incident further strengthened their locks. They would likely be very willing to help Li Hao so long as there were sufficient mysterious power stones around that the young man could make use of.

Deputy Zhou grew resigned when the young man continued to be quiet. This kid could really keep himself in check! They arrived at the camp he spoke of moments later.

An extremely dignified middle-aged man in his forties walked out to greet them. He was Yuan Xingwu, meaning that he'd been in his twenties when he became Yuan Shuo's disciple. That was an older age to be accepted as a disciple. Li Hao had only been eighteen when he joined Yuan Shuo.

No, he hadn't even been eighteen and had felt he was old enough already. Was Yuan Xingwu really as old as he looked?

Li Hao said nothing despite the thoughts running through his mind. Was there a mistake somewhere? But this man was indeed a Nova.

Li Hao wasn't mistaken; Yuan Xingwu looked older than he was, but he was close to Li Hao's estimations. He was thirty-eight this year and had become Yuan Shuo's disciple when he was twenty-three. However, he'd possessed some martial foundations then and wasn't a complete rookie like Li Hao.

Neither did it count as him joining Yuan Shuo as an already trained individual. Yuan Xingwu was yet to become a Slayer when he was twenty-three. The supernatural had just begun its rise in that age and progress was difficult for martial masters. Arduous training that led to establishing oneself as a Slayer in one's twenties was a respectable showing.

On the other hand, Yuan Shuo had only prepared to bide his time for a short while. Who would have thought that it'd turn out to be more than ten years in the small backwater of Silver City?

Yuan Xingwu had been given the Yuan surname from Yuan Shuo. The eldest disciple lost his parents at a young age and was thus regarded as a natural harbinger of disaster. Despised for his misfortunes, he didn't even have an official name until Yuan Shuo accepted him. Yuan Shuo shared his surname with his disciple and also gave him the name of xingwu—revitalizing martial dao.

The name bore a significant meaning. Martial dao was already showing signs of decline then. Bestowing his first disciple with such a name reflected Yuan Shuo's unique thoughts.

Li Hao observed the man through his visor. He'd never heard his teacher mention this man, but had heard of Chen Yuhua a few times. That Yuan Xingwu had made it to Nova meant that he had a certain amount of experience in the supernatural domain. Perhaps he'd crossed over many years ago. Li Hao frowned, but didn't think more on that.

Everyone had their own paths. Persisting with martial dao might not have been a good choice in that age. When even Yuan Shuo had been bottlenecked at Sunderer of Hundreds, where did that leave

others? Veteran martial masters like Sky Sword had chosen to set foot into the supernatural, so taking this step wasn't necessarily a mistake.

Yuan Shuo wasn't opposed to crossing over to the supernatural either. He hadn't been against that path for Li Hao and had even been ready to become supernatural when he was a Dominator. It was only later that he discovered the great drawbacks to this field and gave up the plan, also warning Li Hao not to take that step.

Yuan Xingwu spoke, interrupting Li Hao's thoughts. "You can just summon me if you have need, Deputy Zhou. There is no need for you to go to the trouble of making a trip in the middle of night."

"No worries, I'm just stretching my legs!" the deputy laughed. "I'm here to see General Yuan as a representative of the provincial government. I have certain things to discuss with the general."

"This way, please!" Yuan Xingwu welcomed the deputy into the tent without further word. Li Hao also made to enter, but a Solar blocked his way.

"This is the Silver Moon Guard that's escorting me..." Deputy Zhou smiled.

"That means he's one of Director Hou's, isn't he?" Yuan Xingwu frowned faintly. What was the deputy doing, bringing one of the Guards as his bodyguard in a meeting with him, nonetheless!

"It's fine, the Silver Moon Guards have a complicated background. Not everyone there is deathly loyal to Hou Xiaochen. This Guard is a descendant of a friend and has always been on good terms with me."

Yuan Xingwu gestured to his man, permitting Li Hao into the tent. The young man didn't care if he was inside or not, but he might as well listen in on the meeting since he was here.

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There was almost another world inside the tent—it was very spacious. The two men sat across from each other; Li Hao stood behind the deputy, a quiet and still figure.

“I’m here on behalf of Director General Zhou with three questions. So long as General Yuan gives me a straightforward answer, the provincial government and Commander Yuan won’t have any opinions about what you do.”

“Please go ahead!”

“Firstly, have the Skystar Troops come here to prevent Hou Xiaochen from taking the Black Tortoise Seal?”

Yuan Xingwu frowned, then nodded. “Yes! This is not my personal desire, but orders from upstairs. As part of the military, the Skystar Troops must follow orders.”

“Good!” Deputy Zhou laughed. “Secondly, will you be taking the the Black Tortoise Seal if you can remove it?”

“Yes, we will take it with us if we can claim it.” Yuan Xingwu readily admitted his intentions without any attempt to conceal his thoughts. “Because if we can touch it, that means the Black Tortoise Seal is just an ordinary origin weapon!”

“Thirdly, Orange Moon and Yellow Moon might give up hunting Yuan Shuo and come here instead. Will the Skystar Troops kill them if you encounter each other in the ruins? Granted, chances are low that you can do so.”

“We will if circumstances permit!” Yuan Xingwu rumbled. “But if circumstances do not permit and taking action will lead to the deaths of my brothers... I will not risk their lives!”

“Very well, I understand now.” Deputy Zhou smiled. “If you don’t mind, could you answer something off topic?”

“Please speak frankly, Deputy Zhou.”

“Li Hao might come as well and enter Battle Heaven. Will you risk your own life to save him if he runs into trouble?”

“Does Deputy Zhou care deeply about this?” Yuan Xingwu frowned. Did this have to do with the provincial government?

“I am just curious because Li Hao is a very bold person and easily opts for a risky decision. His feud with the three great organizations runs deep. I’m worried that the Skystar Troops will create some unnecessary trouble if they act haphazardly.”

Yuan Xingwu pondered the question. “My answer is the same as before. I can take the risk, but I won’t have the others do so. Li Hao is my junior brother in name, but I am unfamiliar with him. I am duty-bound to save him, but my brothers have no reason to lose their lives for a stranger!”

“Mmhhh, very well!” Deputy Zhou concluded his questioning and rose to his feet. “That is all I have.”

Just three questions—or four, rather. No one knew what Yuan Xingwu was thinking now, whereas Li Hao was very calm. He wasn’t surprised by the responses and even felt that there was no need for the other to save him. Yuan Xingwu was right, they weren’t familiar with each other. In fact, it was the young man’s first time hearing of this name.

If it was up to him, he might’ve replied with, “I’ll save him if I can and I won’t if I can’t”. Therefore, Li Hao didn’t find anything inappropriate with the response. However, had Deputy Zhou asked this to demonstrate that Yuan Xingwu did not bear kind intentions toward Li Hao?

If that was the case, then the deputy's efforts would be in vain.

Chapter 433: Secrets (IV)

Li Hao was much more composed than the deputy thought. The young man never held the opinion that there was a need for anyone to go to any trouble on his behalf. Even when he encountered the scarlet shadow, he only hoped that his teacher would help him after he first helped Yuan Shuo progress to Dominator. Before that, he'd rather take everything in his own hands.

Favors were the hardest debt to discharge in the world! Some could never be paid off. They were too troublesome.

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Li Hao escorted Deputy Zhou back to the military camp after they left the tent. Yuan Xingwu sent off the deputy, his thoughts a mystery.

"Wang Ming's information isn't complete," Deputy Zhou said when they walked a long distance away. "I have a complete copy that's more or less correct, unless someone's hidden themselves very deep. Have a look."

He fished out a small pamphlet from his pockets. "This is all the information that we've collected so far. Also, what you see and hear may not be true. None of your teacher's disciples are simple characters. It was already quite complicated when Hou Xiaochen asked Hu Dingfang to lead the last expedition. Hu Dingfang is Chen Yuhua's husband, while Yuan Xingwu is Chen Yuhua's senior brother. Therefore, the Skystar Troops say they're at odds... but reality is difficult to gauge."

Li Hao pretended to not hear any of it. Don't talk to me about this nonsense! There's no use! My goal in the ruins is very simple—get stronger. He wanted to comprehend the water and wood auras, as well as collect mysterious power stones and origin weapons for the little sword. As for other matters... he'd promised Hou Xiaochen that he would help the man obtain the origin weapon, so he would. Who cared about a second eruption of the supernatural or disaster developing when the city was unsealed?

Why think so much? What does it have to do with me? Is the world ending relevant to me? If we're going to die, we can all die together!

Deputy Zhou suddenly felt that he was preaching to deaf ears and was quite disheartened by the situation. The young man kept himself in check very well! Nothing he said was getting through! He'd said so much, but it was like Li Hao hadn't heard a word he said. He didn't offer anything in response and didn't seem interested in learning more about Yuan Xingwu.

"Li Hao," the deputy finally voiced what he was most curious about when they were almost back at camp. "Why don't you ask about how many secrets we know? I might tell you."

The young man remained silent, baring his teeth in a grin when the deputy remained looking at him. "When it comes to secrets... there are no more secrets when the enemy is all dead. Secrets can be buried!"

"....." Deputy Zhou furrowed his brows and looked sharply at Li Hao. This answer was wholly unexpected. What did the young man mean by it? Were his bloodthirsty tendencies that strong, or was he saying this on purpose to elicit a reaction?

Li Hao couldn't be bothered to share more of his thoughts. It wasn't that he was bloodthirsty or not curious, just that he was thinking back to what that murderous fiend had said in the illusory realm. Surrender if you know what's good for you. I'll kill all those who don't!

Everytime Li Hao thought of these words, he felt that there was no point in interrogating enemies for secrets, showing mercy, or forcing them to capitulate. I have the strength to kill you all, and I will if you don't commit suicide!

Mhmm, things were just that simple! That free and easy mindset was what he should look up to!

Therefore, Li Hao was truly not interested in the secrets that these people kept. Perhaps they considered those little pieces of information near and dear to their heart and were deathly afraid of others knowing. Whatever it was, it was all jokes.

When he possessed sufficient strength, he would kill them all with one stroke no matter what the secret was. Just hang onto your precious little bits. You have nowhere to share them in death! One's greatest regret might be having unvoiced secrets at the moment of death. What a pity that would be!

Deputy Zhou gave up the notion of holding a conversation. He walked forward, sighing to himself. This was exceedingly bizarre. Yuan Shuo hadn't taught Li Hao how to kill, so was the young man truly too bloodthirsty in his very nature, or had some unexpected occurrences taken place along the way?

Li Hao watched Deputy Zhou return safely and thought back to everything he'd heard and seen today. He suppressed it all in the depths of his heart. So there was civil discord in Silver Moon. How interesting. But was it real or a sham? Regardless, whoever survived to present day in Silver Moon was no kind soul.

He walked forward instead of leaving the camp. Wang Ming was still waiting for him. The handsome supernatural suspected the oncoming armored soldier as Li Hao, but he wasn't certain.

"You were looking for me, brother? Answer me this first, what kind of animal is Panther?"

"....." Li Hao jerked to a halt. This kid exercised caution when he shouldn't and was completely blind when he should! "A dog!"

Wang Ming beamed. "You're finally here! Where were you earlier?" I waited a long time for you!

"Come out!"

"I'm grounded."

"Come out, it's fine."

Alright then. Wang Ming looked at the soldiers guarding the entrance and took a step forward. Much to his surprise, they didn't react. They wouldn't let him leave before. Therefore, Wang Ming set this aside and quickly walked toward Li Hao.

The young man turned and left, leaving Wang Ming to catch up to him. They put some space between themselves and the military camp before Li Hao addressed Wang Ming.

"Who told you to ask Classified Affairs for information?" he asked wearily.

"Huh?" Wang Ming blinked. "I... didn't? What would I do with them? I just asked some friends to poke around for me."

"....." Li Hao didn't know what to say. Ooookay.... so Deputy Zhou didn't say a single true word just now, did he?

Well, granted, the man hadn't known who he was at first. So he'd said that on purpose? I have absolutely fuck all to say about what I just endured then. These people lied at the drop of a hat after being officials for so long. They felt absolutely no cognitive dissonance about it. It was impossible to say which of the deputy's words had been true and which had been false. Neither did Li Hao want to dwell further on this.

"Where's the information?" Although he'd gotten a copy from Deputy Zhou, Li Hao trusted Wang Ming more. Besides, a quick comparison would reveal truth from falsehood.

"Right here..." Wang Ming took out a large notebook from the inside of his jacket. Li Hao casually tossed a ring at him.

"Storage ring. Don't shove everything into your clothes next time, that looks pitiful!" He didn't lack storage rings for the moment as he'd collected a great deal. The six Solars possessed storage rings, as did the seventeen Solars and two Novas that'd died later. Yu Xiao and Huang Jie also had one each, which meant that Li Hao had twenty-five of them. He'd given one to Liu Long and kept the rest for himself.

Wang Ming was overjoyed! This was an expensive object.

“You’re the best, senior brother!” He fawned over his senior brother as best he could, but Li Hao couldn’t be bothered to listen. He took a look at the handsome supernatural and thought for a bit. “Breakthroughs are easy for supernaturals, all you guys need to do is to break your locks. You see five of yours, right?”

“Yes!” Wang Ming affirmed excitedly. “I’m a genius!”

Five supernatural locks meant that he could make it to Nova. The caveat was that he possessed sufficient capital to do so. Otherwise, seeing even nine locks would be useless. However, five locks did make him a genius. Hao Lianchuan could see only four and thus stopped as a Solar. He would have to pay an incredible price to manifest his next supernatural lock.

“Will you be able to ascend to Solar if I give you enough metal mysterious power?” Li Hao considered the problem.

“I can’t.” Wang Ming shook his head after mulling it over. “It’s not just a matter of mysterious power at that stage and it’s rather dangerous for us to ascend as well. There seems to be another test to go from Solar to Nova. I’m not sure of the details, but it might have to do with some stuff on a mental level. Solar is not a problem with sufficient energy, but it needs to be absorbed bit by bit.”

He couldn’t digest so much at once.

“What if there was sufficient power of the kind that helped you break through to Sunflare?”

Wang Ming’s eyes lit up! He’d advanced to Sunflare because of special metal energy that Li Hao had sent him. He couldn’t forget it even now. It lacked the violence of mysterious power and was very gentle. It was quite comfortable to absorb and he’d almost moaned in pleasure.

Most importantly, the effects were amazing! It didn't tax his body as much after he broke through. Thus, he looked at Li Hao with a burning gaze. Was his senior brother going to give him more valuables?

Li Hao looked back at him and said after a moment, "I know many supernaturals, but not that many are close to me. Those willing to help me at crucial moments are even less. You guys count as my junior brothers and sisters at the very least. Would you be willing to take a stand for me if I run into danger?"

"Of course!" Wang Ming quickly said. "Is there any doubt? But... you... can't go against my family. I won't stand for that."

"Why would I ever do that?" Li Hao grinned. "Take this batch of mysterious power to Hu Hao, Li Meng, and Yun Yao. I won't be visiting them. As for you, let's wait until I exit the ruins."

He knew many supernaturals, but these were the first that he'd met and his teacher had accepted them as honorary disciples. Although that'd been a random impulse, it meant there was still a tie between them.

Supernaturals found it easy to ascend, martial masters found it hard. If the amount of energy that'd gone to Liu Long's organs had been gifted to Wang Ming instead, the latter would've become a Solar a long time ago. It wasn't exaggeration, just the truth. He would be far down the Solar path.

There were many drawbacks to the supernatural domain and their truly powerful wanted to convert to martial masters. It could be seen from this that their people knew of their path's inherent problems. Thus, their next step at the Nova level was to consider how to convert to martial dao.

However, Li Hao didn't think that the supernatural was all bad. Some of their methods were very formidable. He tossed another storage ring to Wang Ming. "There are some items for cultivation inside."

“You really are the best, senior brother!” Wang Ming fawned. Too bad he wasn’t a girl, it would be much more comfortable that way.

Chapter 434: The Ruins Open Again (I)

Li Hao didn’t mind Wang Ming’s flattery and was ready to leave when the handsome supernatural said, “Oh, wait, my grandfather says that the official Silver Moon authorities won’t be sending that many people when the ruins open tomorrow. Director Hou got you a spot, but the others can’t go inside...”

Li Hao frowned slightly. “What about wandering cultivators?”

“They can enter if they pay the entrance fee!”

Struck dumb by the response, Li Hao nodded and quickly departed.

An exuberant Wang Ming peeked into the storage rings when Li Hao left. His joy deepened as he took stock of what he had. So many storage rings! Why had Li Hao suddenly become so generous?

He quickly returned to the army camp and jumped in fright when his grandfather appeared as soon as he came back.

“Did you go out to meet a friend?” he asked calmly instead of berating his grandson for flouting orders.

“Yes.”

“I hear they were a Silver Moon Guard?”

“Yes!” Wang Ming nodded. “A martial master friend I used to know. He’s doing well for himself in the Guards, so he came to me to catch up.”

“You need to think things through.” Wang Peng looked at his grandson. “I won’t interfere with your matters, but you need to be very cognizant of one point—even though no one speaks of it and everyone avoids it, the eight families can detonate at any time!”

With that, he left. He didn’t say too much as he just wanted his grandson to see certain things clearly. The eight families were an enormous keg of gunpowder. Red Moon had always set their eyes on the eight families and quite a few others were silently watching them. That no one talked about them didn’t mean that no one was paying attention.

In reality, all of the true powerhouses were keeping a close eye on the matter!

It wasn’t necessarily a good development that his grandson was growing so close to Li Hao. However, Wang Peng didn’t spell it out. It was up to Wang Ming’s own choices.

Wang Ming curled his lip after his grandfather left, not thinking much of the warning. They can detonate at any time? So what? Fortuitous opportunities will come only if that gunpowder ignites! His grandfather lived a life of prudent caution, which resulted in him losing the position of the White Dragon commander. It should’ve been his and was almost certain to go to the Wangs.

The family had sent Wang Ming to the Night Watchers to stabilize their footing afterward, but as it turned out, Hou Xiaochen’s attention was on the Silver Moon Guards instead of the Night Watchers. It turned out to be another bad investment!

At the end of the day, his grandfather earned nothing for his efforts apart from a middle-of-the-road title that would’ve been his regardless. What use was that?

And for Wang Ming, he was assigned to Silver City after becoming a Full Moon and advanced rapidly. He was already a mid Sunflare now and Li Hao had just mentioned a desire to invest more heavily in the young man. Perhaps becoming a Sunflare or even Nova wouldn’t be a problem!

Wang Ming might have a big mouth and look very silly at times, but he wasn't a fool. The energy that'd come from Li Hao had been too special. Wang Ming felt that if there was enough of it, he'd be a solid peak Solar, if not Nova. It wouldn't take too long either.

His grandfather had started exploring the supernatural twenty years ago, but just barely made it into peak Solar. He'd only done so because pressure had grown too much lately and the family had exhausted its coffers to push Wang Peng to those heights.

Since the family itself wasn't destined for great fortune, then Wang Ming would create their fortune through drawing close to someone who could. He immediately threw his grandfather's words to the back of his mind. The eight families... What a pity that my Wang family isn't the Wangs of the eight. But at least I'm Yuan Shuo's honorary disciple.

.....

Li Hao didn't care how Wang Ming was. As bumbling as he might be, he was sometimes very reliable. At the very least, he always accomplished the tasks set to him. Li Hao perused the information from Wang Ming and compared it to his observations, slowly grasping a clear picture of the situation. There was no hurry to look at what the deputy had given him.

A figure flashed out of the darkness—Liu Long.

“Who did you walk off with earlier?” He'd been waiting outside and had been confused to see Li Hao leave with an old man.

“Deputy Zhou of the provincial government.”

“Ah... he recognized you?”

“Yes.”

Liu Long was surprised, but not that startled. He fell in step beside Li Hao. “It’s best to have as little to do with those guys as possible. They’re scholars who’ve been officials for decades. They’ll say whatever they need to whoever they wish at whenever they want.”

Li Hao started laughing. “Chief, have you heard of Yuan Xingwu?”

“Hmm?” A surprised Liu Long nodded. “Of course, your eldest senior brother. Both he and your master were in Silver City when I was on duty there, so of course I know him. We met a few times. Other than being a bit extreme at times, he’s a fine guy. I rather admire him.”

“He’s extreme?”

“Yes,” Liu Long explained. “He can be a little much. Your master was suppressed by others after the rise of the supernatural, but he was more agitated and furious than your master. He eventually went against Yuan Shuo’s wishes and left home. That’s pretty much it, I’m not sure where he went after that. You saw him?”

“Yep.” Li Hao didn’t offer anything else. “The ruins will open the day after tomorrow. Will you be going inside, chief?”

“I want to, and I will if I can. If I can’t... you’ll be on your own.” Liu Long did want to participate in the expedition, and not for the potential treasure. He just wanted to see more fights between powerhouses. As a martial master, he wouldn’t be able to improve if he always fought those weaker than him. He’d just barely set foot into Summoner. Now was when he should spar with powerhouses and quickly improve.

“Then let’s wait and see,” Li Hao hummed with thought. “If it comes down to it, we’ll pretend to be wandering cultivators. But that’ll be more difficult because they might all have our pictures. If we have to, we can wear a mask or cloak or something like the three great organizations. I’m sure no one will look that closely at us then.”

The three great organizations had always been thus—when had the person beneath the disguise ever been investigated? Many wandering cultivators would be doing the same.

“Are you not going to wait for the director?”

“Let’s get inside first.” Li Hao led Liu Long back to the little town that the Demon Hunters were resting at.

.....

September 27.

There was no grand challenge this time. The battle between Yuan Shuo and the Qimei Staff was just a month ago, but it seemed like it’d been eons for many.

Yuan Shuo was still rampaging through the central region. Red Moon remained hunting him, but they couldn’t lay hands on the old man. He had an incredible plethora of methods and techniques. He could conceal his presence, change his appearance, hide, counter track...

He was skilled at them all since he had nothing else better to practice during all those years in Silver City. Not only that, but Yuan Shuo was particularly familiar with the terrain, people, and culture of the central region. He escaped being surrounded multiple times and came back to kill his pursuers instead. The Red Moon powerhouses were being run into the ground as the old demon of yesteryear once more displayed his tenacity and brutality.

.....

At the same time.

The three great organizations stirred uneasily.

At the Red Moon camp.

Blue Moon frowned ferociously, an expression echoed by Green Moon. There was no sign to be seen of Tidal Wave. According to their agreement, she was to return before the 28th even if she couldn't kill Li Hao. They were to enter the ruins together. The presence of a Nova was significant to the expedition.

"It's not just Elder Tidal Wave, but the Revolution King and the sixteen hell masters under the Parity King have yet to return as well," Violet Moon gave a quick report. "Our people have gone to Ash Mountain, but it's a very dangerous place. There are major monster spirits there and they ran into a Solar level one along the way. They decided to retreat after losing a few. They were unable to find traces of Elder Tidal Wave or the others."

"So many people hunting a few martial masters..." Green Moon grumbled. "The strongest of them is Li Hao and he has not reached the Nova level. And they still lost him?? Is Tidal Wave an idiot?"

It was not good that the elder had not returned even now.

"Forget her if she really doesn't make it in time..." Blue Moon said after some thought.

"Forget it?!" Green Moon snapped. "It's not just the problem of one Nova. It would've been best if Tidal Wave had captured Li Hao. Killing him would also do. If worst came to worst, she could call off the hunt and both of them could come back. We have more chances in the ruins! Now look at this, both of them have disappeared and you want to forget it??"

She snorted with obvious dissatisfaction. Blue Moon was trash! He'd summoned so many people here, but made a grave misstep all the same! It was only to be expected, that bitch's son was pure and utter trash!

Blue Moon flicked a glance at Green Moon. As the second generation of his position, his status naturally wasn't as high as this one. But as one of the Seven Moons, it wasn't the first time that Green Moon had treated him in this manner. It was rather Violet Moon that she showed some respect to, even though Violet Moon was a third generation.

Violet Moon had an impressive backer. He did not.

"Then we wait," he said calmly. "We can wait another day. If she is still not back tomorrow, we'll have to set out for the ruins and then see."

What else could they do? Green Moon only knew how to complain; she didn't do anything proper.

Violet Moon could bear the situation no longer. Although Blue Moon sometimes took the law into his own hands, he still actually took action, despite not finding much success. Upon seeing that Green Moon wanted to continue her tirade against him, Violet Moon spoke up.

"Aunt Peacock, let's first discuss what we should be doing in the ruins after we enter the ruins tomorrow." The day was at hand, but the delegation didn't have any plans.

Green Moon's furious expression softened slightly when Violet Moon spoke. "Our leader gave us a few words before we came. Our first target is still to either capture Li Hao or bring his corpse back. The second is to determine the true nature behind Battle Heaven..."

"What true nature?" Violet Moon asked with surprise. Wasn't it just to seize the treasures? Origin weapons and others, no?

Green Moon wasn't that certain herself, she could only say, "That's what our leader said. He didn't set any concrete targets. Also, don't touch anything in the city and be careful of Hou Xiaochen. It will be very difficult to kill him, but we can try to force him to continuously use his strength."

Chapter 435: The Ruins Open Again (II)

The Red Moon delegation collectively frowned, not understanding their leader's intentions.

“When I left, the leader said that Hou Xiaochen cannot sustain long intervals of strength. He is very strong, but he must conclude battle quickly. Therefore, we will whittle away at him bit by bit.

“Additionally, all we need to do when we reach Battle Heaven is to determine if it is the real Battle Heaven.”

“.....” This left the group even more confused. The real Battle Heaven? What did that mean?

Green Moon was equally resigned. This was how their leader operated at times. His words made absolutely no sense.

“Our leader means to say... he means... I don’t know how to explain it either. You guys know his style. All he said that we’ll naturally know if it’s the real Battle Heaven. If not, we won’t feel it either.”

The group exchanged wordless glances with each other. Forget it, they weren’t going to dwell further on this. They understood in the sense that Ying Hongyue didn’t have specific demands, other than Li Hao being the only concrete goal. Plainly, the young man was more important than any origin weapon in their leader’s eyes.

It was all the more confusing. Was Li Hao really that important? In that case, why didn’t they bring their full strength to bear against the young man? Why did they split up their forces to hunt Yuan Shuo? Or was Yuan Shuo equally as much of a threat?

Additionally, their leader couldn’t easily leave their headquarters, or it’d give government agencies such as the Night Watchers a chance to dismantle a core Red Moon position. But there were many powerhouses among the elder council, some of whom were listed on the Divine Masters Ranking. Why had they gone missing as well?

While the Seven Moons of Red Moon were the leading figures of the organization, things were a bit complicated. Whether out of loyalty to past relationships or simply a lecherous nature... Ying Hongyue had assigned purely women to the first generation of Seven Moons.

It wasn't until the second generation that men such as Blue Moon were chosen. Therefore, the strength of the Seven Moons was inconsistent. Some were weaker than those of the elder council, but none of the elders complained. Everyone knew that Red Moon answered to one family. Ying Hongyue was the leader, so it didn't matter if his lovers were the leaders or not.

Although some of the delegation were still very confused as to their mission in the ruins, they also knew that Ying Hongyue had an eccentric temper. He would explain more if one caught him in a good mood, but explode with rage if asked when he was in a sour mood. An irritable Ying Hongyue was a frightening prospect.

.....

Not only was Red Moon discussing their plans, but so was Yama. The Parity King was the most infuriated of all. He stalked around their camp with a glowering expression. It was one thing that the Revolution King had yet to return, but his sixteen hell masters had also gone missing!

He'd given orders that if they failed to catch up to Li Hao, they should rush back before the ruins opened. And yet, his men were well aware that the ruins would open first thing tomorrow morning, but there was no sign of them to be seen.

Where the hell were they??

Ash Mountain was very dangerous.

Parity's strength would greatly increase with his sixteen hell masters. He was just a mid Nova if they did not return. Highly cantankerous, he kept sending scouts to look for his men.

You bastard Revolution! Die if you must, don't drag my people down with you!

.....

As the three great organizations urgently waited for word of their own, the night grew long without any clues. The clock ticked over to the 28th.

The ruins would open again when dawn broke; people crowded the entrance before any rays of sunlight hit the horizon.

A group of Night Watchers and Silver Moon Guards surrounded the cliff face, preventing the crowd from pressing up to the entrance. The two government institutions were under enormous pressure as there were too many people and experts present. Most were here for treasure, but quite a few were here for Hou Xiaochen.

More people gathered the more time went on. Some renowned personnel made themselves known as well.

“Xu Feng’s here!” Someone recognized Xu Feng in the distance. The entrant on the Divine Masters Ranking landed on a cliff face instead of jostling with the crowd.

“The Liu family of Skystar City is here!”

“Those are people from Near River province’s government, right?” Some within the assembly recognized those from Silver Moon’s neighboring province.

Near River’s hierarchy of power slightly differed from Silver Moon’s. The four institutions were on even footing in Silver Moon. Near River was similar, but its director general enjoyed high status and exercised great authority. He occupied absolute advantage and spoke for the rest of the province. He’d combined the various institutions into one—the Near River Director General Office. He was the first of Near River in both deed and name. Those from his office were here.

The canyon bustled with activity as more powerhouses arrived. A loud laugh cut through the assembly. “Everyone’s here early!”

An unkempt, unshaved man walked through the air. He shattered a few rocks when he landed with a rumble. Some recognized him as well.

“Southern Fist is here!”

“That guy? This isn’t a place for him to throw his weight around. People show face to the royal family outside the ruins, but who will care about a royal instructor once they’re inside? He’s just a martial master and though he’s said to be strong because he changed his blood a few times, putting him on par with Solars... That’s nothing on this venture.”

Southern Fist’s arrival raised a flurry of discussion, but not that many people cared. Even those from Skystar City swept a quick glance over the man and moved on to other topics.

.....

On the cliff face.

Xu Feng of the white accents in his hair chuckled when he looked at He Yong. “Southern Fist... I hear he’s changed his blood three times and possesses the battle strength of a Solar?”

The old man next to him cast a complicated look at He Yong and nodded. “That is indeed what they say.”

“Mmhhh.” Xu Feng looked into the distance with a frown. “Qi Gang’s here as well.”

That was his true opponent. As a fellow peer on the Divine Masters Ranking, Qi Gang came from the Ministry of Administration and was ranked much higher than him. They were both mid Novas, but Qi Gang was stronger.

Xu Feng was aware of numerous people in attendance who were also listed on the Divine Masters Ranking. There was Blue Moon of the Red Moon organization, Qi Gang of the Ministry of Administration, and a famous elder from Celestial called the Umbra Swordsman. The swordsman had once assassinated a Nova.

Just as Xu Feng observed the premises, so were those around him doing the same. Many heavyweights had responded to the lure of these ruins.

.....

Li Hao was also present in the crowd. Instead of his suit of black armor, he was wearing a mask. It was one of a ferocious tiger instead of the Red Moon ghost face. The mask would be conspicuous in normal times, but quite normal as of the moment.

There were numerous other masks around him as wandering cultivators were also worried of harm befalling them. If someone learned of their identity after they secured some treasure, they'd be hunted in the outside world after leaving the ruins. Thus, concealment from the very beginning was necessary.

Li Hao ignored them. He looked around, identifying quite a few people thanks to the information he'd obtained a few days ago. Mid Nova Xu Feng was one of the more famous. The mid Nova rushing in from a distance was Qi Gang from outside government authorities. The young man also knew initial Nova Hu Qingfeng.

Many had come from Red Moon—Li Hao saw a few balls of light belonging to Novas with a quick scan. One of them was even stronger than Qi Gang. That was probably Green Peacock, also known as the Green Moon.

Apart from the two Novas of Green and Blue Moon, Red Moon possessed another two Novas. One was initial Nova and the other was... late Nova! Their ball of light wasn't that obvious and they were listed in what he'd obtained. It looked like they were obscuring their identity.

It was the oldest trick in the book! These people loved pulling these ruses, but none of it fooled Li Hao.

His eyes abruptly settled on a young man on the Red Moon side. The latter was also looking around, a strange look in his eyes. Li Hao followed the young man's focus, a strange look entering his

eyes as he did so.

The Red Moon youngster was looking at all the people who Li Hao had identified as concealing their identities! He was pinpointing all the powerful ones, including some martial masters!

.....

At the same time, on the Red Moon side.

"There are a couple Solars in the crowd," transmitted the young man as he glanced around. "I can't tell if there's any Novas yet, but the Solars can't conceal their broken supernatural locks. I can tell that four of their locks have broken..."

"There are also some formidable martial masters present with aura around them."

The youngster's eyes were slightly different—he had more whites in his eyes. However, that was only discernible through close examination.

Green Moon didn't mind. "Look at Hou Xiaochen!" she transmitted.

Hou Xiaochen had arrived in the distance.

Blood flooded the young man's eyes. He grunted before responding, "I can't see anything... just a spear that threatens to split the void. I can't keep looking at him. If I do, my eyes will be crippled!"

Green Moon greeted these words solemnly. That strong? The youngster in front of her was one of the Heaven's Eyes.

It was very difficult to train one. Although the organization didn't have many of them, they'd gone to the trouble of bringing a veteran Heaven's Eye to Rift Canyon so they could better observe the various factions and the dangers within the ruins. Who would've thought that they'd come up short against Hou Xiaochen?

.....

In the distance.

Hou Xiaochen looked at the Red Moon delegation and smiled at the youngster. He murmured to the person next to him, "A Heaven's Eye... how nice to have one's heavenly eye opened. They can see things that others cannot. It's rumored that Li Hao also has his open. What do you guys think?"

No one replied.

Kong Jie was also looking around and asked after a while, "Ole Hou, do you think Li Hao's here?"

"I don't know."

“You’re too humble!” Kong Jie laughed. “He should be. Forget it, he must have his own thoughts. Ole Hou, there are a lot of powerhouses here this time. Are you confident?”

“I’ll need the inspector general to look after me.”

“Hah, nah, I can’t do it!” Kong Jie chuckled.

“Earthturner Sword is here again?” Hou Xiaochen suddenly frowned at a person far away.

“.....” The group followed his gaze and saw Hong Yitang burrowing into the crowd like he was an ordinary person. Hou Xiaochen remained quietly frowning, while Golden Spear raised an eyebrow.

“Earthturner Sword... is growing ever more dispirited these days.”

How was that how the second sword of the Seven Swords should comport himself?

Manager Yu and Berserk also looked over without a word.

Chapter 436: The Ruins Open Again (III)

In the distance.

Hong Yitang was alone for this month’s expedition. He squeezed his way through the crowd and accidentally stepped on someone’s foot. He stood on tiptoe to look around, befuddled as to where Li Hao was hiding.

The man continued to push forward like he was in a market, raising cries of complaint wherever he went. If it wasn’t for the powerhouses of various factions intermingled in the crowd, someone would’ve already hit him.

“Martial Uncle Hong is here too?” someone transmitted to him as he pushed through another knot of people.

“.....” Hong Yitang looked around with confusion, scanning a martial master with a tiger mask not too far from him. “How are you concealing your aura?”

The aura was very difficult to hide. Supernaturals might not detect it, but it was nearly impossible to hoodwink a fellow martial heavyweight.

“Just a small trick!” Li Hao answered excitedly. “I’m at ease now that martial uncle is here!”

Hong Yitang rolled his eyes. What are you at ease for? What is there to be at ease about?

“Do you have any targets in mind, martial uncle?”

“Nope, I just want some blood pearls for my weak heart. Or do you have some you can give me?”

“I don’t have any either.”

“Then what are we talking for?” Hong Yitang truly didn’t have many goals this time, he just wanted some blood pearls. As for Li Hao... forget it, he didn’t want to ask for help from the treacherous young man.

“Martial uncle, shall we head in together later?”

“No, you walk your own path!” Hong Yitang declined.

Li Hao didn't respond; a martial master wearing a tiger mask appeared behind Hong Yitang after a moment. He was sticking to the man from now on! Hong Yitang was already here and they'd made contact, what was this tough act for? I'm with you!

The young man didn't believe that Hong Yitang was entering the ruins just for blood pearls. Granted, he didn't think it a complete lie either. Hong Yitang had an unorthodox and curious style. No one knew what he was thinking. He didn't establish a powerful sect or take a high position like Hou Xiaochen and the others. Instead, he resembled a wandering cultivator, but rarely poked his head out. He kept a much lower profile than the Sky Sword and others.

No matter what, though, Li Hao knew how strong he was. This was a great thigh to latch onto!

Up in front, Hong Yitang was quite resigned. This kid is sticking to me?? Forget it, that was fine. It didn't matter.

“Those who have registered and paid can go inside!” Hao Lianchuan's voice rang in the air. “Those who haven't registered and are determined to conceal their strength will pay a Nova price! Martial masters will pay a Solar price!

“You can demonstrate your strength if you don't want to pay such a high price. Supernaturals must accept being scanned by a supernatural probe. It's fine if you wish to conceal your strength, just pay the Nova price!”

“.....” Muttered curses rose and fell in the assembly. Damn, they were something! No one was willing to have their full strength exposed, so who would ever submit to a probe?

The Nova price was ten mysterious power stones—how many people could afford that?! Martial masters being assessed at the Solar price was also harrowing!

“How many martial masters are of the Solar level?” called out a martial master. “According to our current power system, Summoner of Spirit maps to Solar. Martial master strength is difficult to determine and Dominator is pretty much the apex. Being priced at Solar is too expensive!”

A large table stood in front of Hao Lianchuan as he replied calmly, “Then don’t go inside. Dominators are on par with Sunflares, so you’d just be going to your deaths if you did. What, are all of you martial masters supposed to fight each other just because your strength is hard to determine? Pay up, one mysterious power stone each. We’re being nice enough to not levy the Solar price on you. Don’t go inside if you don’t want to!”

“.....” The crowd started cursing again. This was too expensive!

Li Hao also growled, but Hong Yitang transmitted to him, “Pay for me in a bit. I gave you all my mysterious power stones last time and am out of money.”

“.....” The young man was shocked senseless. This is... nuts!

He quickly followed the flow of the crowd to the table. When it was his turn, Hao Lianchuan asked without even raising his head, “Martial master or supernatural?”

“Martial master.”

“How many?”

“Two.”

“Two mysterious power stones or two thousand cubes of mysterious power!”

“.....” This was how real money was made! Li Hao was completely overcome. The price alone might disqualify many as it was too expensive. He took out two full energy rings.

Hao Lianchuan briefly scanned them, then tossed two empty energy rings back. He also gave them two medallions with the “martial” character on them. They were just crudely hewn items made of iron.

“You and your companion shall each hold one when the ruins open. Ah, do you want to buy a couple more? Those without medallions will not be permitted entry.”

“No!” Li Hao looked wordlessly at the deputy director. How was he making a business out of this? The Night Watchers were going to earn quite a bit from this expedition.

Hao Lianchuan bent his head without another word, ready to process the next person. Energy rings covered the table in front of him before long. He waved them all into a storage ring, catching certain people’s eyes. The Night Watchers had gathered tens of thousands of cubes in a short while and more than a dozen mysterious power stones!

And this was just from the people signing up before the entrance opened. There were plenty more from people who’d registered beforehand. Silver Moon was making out like a bandit from the ruins opening this month!

Li Hao took a look; even he wanted to rob Hao Lianchuan! But forget it, he wouldn’t make a move against one of his own. Not to mention, there were a lot of powerhouses watching. However, he’d have to make sure to demand the return of his funds after the expedition. Since he didn’t need to pay for entrance, this was a complete waste.

As a growing number of people obtained medallions, those who lacked sufficient funds could only watch opportunity slip through their fingers. They were dejected and morose, but Li Hao felt that if one was so poor that they couldn’t even gain admittance, it was better not to gamble with their lives!

The most likely outcome was to return empty-handed or even die inside.

As the sun rose, Hou Xiaochen called out, “The ruins will now be opened. Enter in an orderly fashion, don’t cause disorder!”

Rays of energy hit the stone wall, water ripples undulated across the surface again. The ruins were open once more!

.....

At the same time, inside Battle Heaven.

The floating old turtle still resembled a sculpture, but a few more hints of sentience sparkled in its eyes. It looked into the distance. People had come again.

A black dog napped with boredom on the ground, shaking its tail when it heard something. So this place is open again? Can I leave now? I’m so hungry that I’m all skin and bones!

The Gold Armor still sat on a platform in the residence below, the Black Tortoise Seal in its hands. Everything was like before, as if the intrusion of last month was but a dream.

All was quiet inside the vast city. No sounds echoed.

.....

In the outside world, the ruins were officially open. Armed with experience from the last excavation, the crowd wasn’t in a hurry to enter. There was nothing in the outer city and the inner city doors weren’t open. They might as well go through the second passageway. Since supernaturals couldn’t fly in Battle Heaven, they didn’t need to worry about intruders. And with the Gold Armor, they were even less concerned about being beaten to the treasure.

The same custom from last time applied. Wandering cultivators were the first ones in, each of them in a great hurry to snatch up treasure. They would be the first ones to die; all of them died in the last expedition!

Li Hao and Hong Yitang were now wandering cultivators. They'd paid their way in. A Solar's price was the same as a martial master's. No one said anything when they saw the medallion in Hong Yitang's hand. Since the Sword Sect had joined the Silver Moon Guards, it might've been fine if he refused to pay.

Hou Xiaochen and the others looked at Hong Yitang, then at the person in a tiger mask closely following the man. Was that... Li Hao?

It was hard to tell. Li Hao didn't seem that familiar with Hong Yitang, but would the latter have sent large numbers of Sword Sect martial masters to the Demon Hunters if they weren't close?

A figure flashed across the scene as the Night Watchers pondered. He Yong shot forward, roaring with laughter. "Then I'll go inside and take first crack at all the goodies!"

The powerhouses outside looked coldly at him. What was he in a rush for? To die? Did Southern Fist think this was still the martial world of yesteryear? The Northern and Southern Fists had long become a relic of the past. Old Demon Five Styles could find no shelter from the endless hunts baying for his blood.

And yet, He Yong didn't care. He jumped up and threw himself into the rippling stone wall. Li Hao and Hong Yitang stirred to action as well, entering the cliff face. Meanwhile, Liu Long was concealed among the crowd of wandering cultivators. Li Hao didn't pay any attention to him. It might be safer for the man if he wasn't with the young man.

.....

When the scene brightened in front of Li Hao again, a large platform could be seen in front of him. Hong Yitang was very familiar with it, he'd come here last time. It was currently crowded with the wandering cultivators that'd entered earlier. He Yong was present as well.

He merrily ran over when he saw Hong Yitang and took a look at Li Hao. "It's my first time here, so will you guys show me the ropes?" he transmitted. Both of these people had visited before, so it was a better idea to follow them than to barge around on his own.

While he was strong, great dangers might exist in an ancient ruin like Battle Heaven. It would be normal for stronger existences to lose their lives in a ruin, to say nothing of him.

Someone among the wandering cultivators seemed aware of the situation and shouted, "We should move together! The three great organizations and Silver Moon authorities are very powerful. If we strike out on our own, we might become their scouts! Also, there's a passageway ahead. We need to follow it and not deviate. Anyone who walks out of it won't be returning!"

Chapter 437: Fine Wine For Fine Guests (I)

He Yong looked at Li Hao; the young man rolled his eyes. Don't look at me, I was transported to the outer city last time. I don't know why I wasn't this time. Am I too strong for the transportation system now? Have I gotten heavier?

But he'd walked through the passageway when he returned, so he transmitted, "There's a pitch black tunnel ahead that leads to the outer city. It's not that dangerous, but don't leave it. Although I don't know what will happen, it's best to stay put inside. There seems to be something outside the tunnel!"

"Better be careful, the tunnel might be a tree hole," Hong Yitang transmitted as well. "Enormous danger could lurk outside it. It's possible that the tree envelops the entire outer city and is connected to Rift Canyon on the outside. It could also be the key as to why Battle Heaven hasn't been buried by the passage of time."

Li Hao blinked. A tree? A tree hole?

“Be careful when you’re inside and watch yourself in the tunnel,” Hong Yitang cautioned. “The situation can be much more dangerous than we think. I sensed last time that there are occasional attacks from tree breaches. They’re somewhat alive, but not too strong. Solars can easily dispose of them, but it’s best to be careful!”

He Yong raised his eyebrows. Since Li Hao and Hong Yitang had both shared information, he didn’t hold back either. “It looks like Battle Heaven really is dangerous. There’s some mention of it in ancient records. The royal family told me that it once welcomed a supreme heavyweight who left some ultimate treasures in the city. Those raised the city to a transcendent level of existence that represented his will. My information isn’t detailed, but it does suggest that there is particular meaning to this city.”

Li Hao was reminded of the scene he saw before—a supreme heavyweight? The one called His Imperial Majesty? When he decreed the “Battle Heaven” characters, it sent the city into a furor of agitation, excitement, and fanaticism. There seemed to be incredible meaning behind the characters. The elderly city lord had been so overcome that he nearly fainted.

It looked like the royal family grasped many things indeed, to know even this. Of course, there truly should be records from the ancient civilization. As momentous a happening as this one would leave traces behind somewhere. That personage had seemed extremely powerful and important.

“Also, there might be certain things of that person left in the city,” He Yong continued. “Even his will and intent! If that’s the case... then that would be incredibly valuable! Someone that the ancient powerhouses hailed as a supreme heavyweight might be stronger than we can imagine. Finding those treasures would be the real wealth!”

Something like those two characters? Li Hao didn’t transmit this to the others. Some things could be spoken of, some things could remain unsaid.

“Do we move with the wandering cultivators or by ourselves?” He Yong asked.

“Who says I’m traveling with you?” Hong Yitang snorted. I don’t want to!

“Who else, if not me?” He Yong chuckled. “The two of us can look out for each other, and with Li Hao as well, we’ll sweep the enemies in the city. No one will stand before us—we’ll have Hou Xiaochen crying for his daddy if he comes!”

Hong Yitang had absolutely nothing to say.

“Then we’ll head to the second passageway.” Li Hao didn’t care. “I didn’t take it last time, but Martial Uncle Hong did. Are there any benefits or effects to be had from it?”

“The effects are mediocre,” Hong Yitang transmitted as he walked. “They might be better for supernaturals. For martial masters... they’re insignificant. However, it does seem to somewhat assimilate visitors and change our presence so that it matches the city more. We will be able to evade some dangers this way.

“As for supernaturals that die inside it... it’s probably because they struck back or their energy ripples were too strong. That was interpreted as provocation and resistance against management. We’ll just walk through naturally in a moment.”

Li Hao understood. The trio ignored the rest of the explorers and headed inside. A dark tunnel appeared in front of them. It came alive with rustles as soon as they set foot inside, like there was something crawling on the ground. However, none of the three saw anything.

Something broke through the air before long; Li Hao punched it reflexively. Though it vanished just as quickly, the young man seemed to see something that flashed by. He thought of what Hong Yitang had said before—it did seem to be branches that whipped in and out of sight. They weren’t too strong, just Sunflare at most. He hadn’t had a chance to take a close look on the last expedition and didn’t experience them for himself since a Solar led the way.

A branch shook violently when Hong Yitang grabbed it for closer inspection; the entire tunnel began trembling. He quickly let go.

“Don’t do anything to these branches, just shoo them away. Bigger trouble might arise if we break them or cut them off! The weaker one is in a place like this, the safer! You wouldn’t be able to break a branch if you’re too weak. Powerhouses might die ghastly deaths if they’re too arrogant!”

Sometimes, it was those who knew how to swim that drowned. Those who didn’t how to knew fear. When they learned how to swim, they lost that fear. In the same vein, it would be quite normal for someone to be surprised if they fancied themselves familiar with the ruins and strong enough for them. Not even Hong Yitang dared be careless here.

The tunnel wasn’t that long. A sharp cry sounded behind them when the trio reached halfway, followed by a shriek. Some of the weaklings couldn’t even handle the branches. They were either Darkmoons or weak Sunflares who couldn’t react in time and were run through by the branches.

The three ignored the disturbances. Entering the ruins meant accepting the possibility of death. No one had forced them inside to seek fortune from the land of danger. Danger was upon them; dying here meant that one was too unlucky and too weak.

Cries of surprise repeatedly sounded behind them. A lot of people had entered this time. There were almost a thousand wandering cultivators alone, a number that far eclipsed the last expedition.

.....

Li Hao and the others walked forward. Branches harassed them; they beat them back without issue. After a while, a faint light appeared ahead. Li Hao knew that it signified the perimeter of the outer city. The plaza would come next, a place where quite a few had died last time.

The young man’s footsteps paused briefly when they were about to emerge. Hong Yitang’s did as well. Their pace faltered briefly in unison, drawing a curious look from He Yong. Surprise and shock were clear in Li Hao’s eyes.

The same went for Hong Yitang. He looked past the plaza, at where several black shadows flashed across their line of vision. He gaped at Li Hao. Black Armors!

Indeed, they couldn't be mistaken. That had been Black Armors in motion at the other end of the plaza.

"What is it?" He Yong asked curiously.

"Black Armors!" Li Hao transmitted. "We defeated the army of one thousand last time and took the armor with us. But just now... I saw Black Armors!"

"It's either leftovers from last time or... there's more than one troop of Black Armors," Hong Yitang transmitted after observing for a while. "There may be many more that didn't appear on the last expedition, or that they guard another direction. We can only enter through this direction this time. Are there city gates in the other directions? That could represent that there are four sets of gates and four troops of one thousand. We only eliminated one of them."

There was another possibility in that Black Armors also resided inside the city and had been deployed to the outer city. Regardless of what the truth was, it meant that the level of danger had risen. The brash He Yong abruptly quieted down as well.

"What do we do now?"

"Screw it, we head forward! We'll go to the second passageway before the others have arrived and enter the outer city, then head to the inner city. We'll avoid the Gold Armor and locate some mysterious power stones for self defense!" Hong Yitang's response raised He Yong's approval.

That's right! They needed sufficient stones to ensure that they wouldn't become supernatural when their seals were undone.

The three quickly walked forward. Some of the wandering cultivators behind them seemed to know that the Black Armors had died last time. They felt that there was no threat in the outer city, which meant they boldly set foot into the outer city. They moved swiftly, as if deathly afraid of running into competition. It wasn't long before agonized wails rang out!

These Black Armors were hard pressed to take down Solars, but Sunflares were easy. While the soldiers moved soundlessly, their footsteps were apparent. However, the intruders were charging so quickly that they didn't care about footsteps. They thought it was competition catching up to them and died grisly deaths for it!

The ground started absorbing the blood and bodies again.

.....

Just as Li Hao's trio started through the second passageway, powerhouses entered the ruins. Faces twitched when they heard the screams from the city. They looked at Hou Xiaochen's group.

"We exterminated the Black Armors last time, it looks like more have appeared!" The director frowned slightly. "Brashly entering the city is a dead end. We have to be strong enough or these Black Armors will be enough to give us a very hard time!"

"We eliminated them all last time, why are there more?" Violet Moon called out.

Hou Xiaochen couldn't be bothered to respond. Figure it out yourself! He looked in the direction of the second passageway. Hong Yitang and the others had come in earlier with Li Hao. Were they at the ancient house, or were they in the city already?

There were people everywhere; a loud cacophony erased the quietness of the city. A pronounced din rose over the city to the point where someone decided to fly into the outer city.

They exploded with a loud detonation.

Hou Xiaochen could barely suppress an eye roll. Did they know nothing? To be honest, anyone who asked around a bit would know some of the dangers. So this meant that there were people who came without making any preparations and then just... died?

Did these supernaturals think they were the greatest beneath the heavens and not fear anything? As Hou Xiaochen and his colleagues thought, strength that was rashly gained was not treasured. No one knew the meaning of prudence. They were a bunch of idiots!

“Are you fools?!” someone yelled in the crowd. “You can’t fly, you have to take the second passageway first! There’s an air restriction in place that can kill even Solars!”

Only then did general understanding percolate ×

Chapter 438: Fine Wine For Fine Guests (II)

Not everyone had failed to do their homework, it was just some lone wolves that hadn’t put much thought into things. They heard there were treasures for the taking and benefits to be found everywhere, so they’d come.

Quite a few were dead in the blink of an eye. Some stronger wandering cultivators had wanted to form cliques outside the entrance, but their efforts were in vain. It wasn’t until the tunnel that the crowd realized the ruins weren’t safe! People quickly clustered together and looked to collaborate with the stronger wandering cultivators.

Violet Moon stepped forward and called out, “Don’t brashly enter the city! There are Black Armors inside with strong defenses. Any supernatural that gives off energy ripples or exudes energy will attract their offensive!

“There is a restriction in the air that is the doom of anyone below Nova, even peak Solar if they lack the protection of a premier origin weapon. If you are willing to wait for a moment, you can enter with the Red Moon delegation!”

They had to look for cannon fodder! The Red Moon group was suddenly very worried. Did this mean that the Silver Armor from the last expedition might appear again? That would be devastating!

While the Silver Armor was just a Solar, that was when it hadn't awoken. Once it did, it possessed the strength of a Nova and was very troublesome.

Taking the second passageway was incredibly dangerous, but everyone knew that they didn't have another choice this time. The troubles they would run into without the protection of the second passageway were even more thorny. They wouldn't be able to enter the inner city at all if not.

And so, all factions headed toward the ancient house.

.....

At the same time.

Li Hao's trio set foot in the house with the second passageway.

It was pitch black. The young man felt like he walked into complete darkness when he entered the house. There was no sound around him; it was as if Hong Yitang and He Yong had vanished. His eyes adjusted after a while and could make out a few things.

He seemed to be in a small, square house with a door in front of him. That was the exit; there was no one else around. A net descended from above, one incredibly dim net that lowered mechanically.

It was a surprising sight. The sensation of being sealed away that people spoke of should be this net. Did it contain mysterious power so supernaturals could walk around inside the city?

Li Hao stared at the net, uncertain if there were any drawbacks to letting it touch him. It didn't seem avoidable, but where were the other two?

Was there more than one house and everyone entered a different one? Were they free to leave after the net stamped the visitors?

Is this a mechanism? But why can I see it? Does it have to do with my eyes?

Li Hao ignored the slowly descending net since he couldn't avoid it. He looked around him; the door was shut. The square walls were roughly six meters on each side, making for a modestly sized house.

He approached one of the walls and pressed on it. It felt like pressing down on cotton. Soft and pliable, his hand sunk in.

“What is this?” Li Hao found the material strange. It was very durable and very soft. Though he pinched it fiercely, he wasn't able to break it. And how did those who entered die? That was another question.

Did it have to do with the net? Did the net kill them? Liu Long said there was treasure inside this house that he wasn't able to take. But after the young man took a look around, he saw nothing. What treasure? It was empty, the house was it.

He looked around once more and still found nothing. Li Hao sighed. What bullshit treasure? The chief wanted treasure so much that he was seeing it everywhere.

The big net fully descended at this time. Li Hao wanted to try and stop it, but found that it was formless and intangible. It didn't exist in reality, making it more like the scarlet shadow. When it landed on Li Hao's body, it suddenly disappeared!

Just as the young man was mystified at almost feeling nothing, a key appeared in the air. Yes, a key! It looked like the ancient keys he'd read about in books. Li Hao blinked, then swiped it out of the air. It hovered only for a brief moment and seemed that it would vanish if he didn't take it.

He easily plucked it out of the air. Li Hao brought it close for a look, but light abruptly spilled in when the closed door suddenly opened. It seemed to indicate that he could walk out.

Li Hao was very confused. What was going on? He scanned the key as he walked out. There were words on it—he knew the script of the ancient civilization.

“Room 302, third floor, Equal Fortune. Seventh street of the southern quadrant.” The young man started again. Why... did it sound like the key to a hotel room?

Countless notions floated into Li Hao’s mind. Everyone entered the house to be stamped by a permit of approval. They were then allotted a room in a hotel, representing that the visitor had a right of residency. Was this how this worked?

The young man’s eyes darted around. What did it mean to be a resident? What was in it for him? Why hadn’t anyone else taken a key? What did it mean if they didn’t have one?

This place seemed open to multiple re-entry. Could it be that one received a key every time they entered? What good would that do?

It was weird! ...no, the houses in the city were off limits. They weren’t available to a random visitors, but did this mean that anyone with a key could enter?

Various questions appeared in Li Hao’s mind. He followed the light after a brief pause and walked out onto the first street. He Yong and Hong Yitang were already waiting.

“Something seemed to cover me and seal me away,” He Yong transmitted with a frown. “Was that the flight permit that you guys spoke of? Also, I seemed to see something else flash by. It happened so quickly and I was in a hurry to leave. Did you see it?”

Hong Yitang didn't make a sound. There was a key in his hand—the item he'd felt on his last attempt. He hadn't been able to grab it then as it was so dark he could barely see anything. He didn't dare put a toe out of place then.

He succeeded this time and had thought it was treasure, but it was more like a key. There were words on it—he knew how to read some, but couldn't make it all out. It was difficult to recognize all of them if one wasn't a student of ancient languages. He was, however, able to decipher some. For instance, he recognized the character for south.

Confusion swirled in his heart and Hong Yitang looked at Li Hao, recalling that the lad studied the ancient civilization with Yuan Shuo.

“Li Hao, you recognize the writings of the ancient civilization, right?” he asked after a moment.

“Yes.”

“What is this?” Hong Yitang drew a character in the air. Li Hao looked at him with surprise.

“It's the character for garden. What are you looking for, martial uncle? Yihong Garden?” [1]

“.....” Hong Yitang looked wordlessly at the young man. The hell are you talking about?? A garden? South something garden...

Li Hao was beginning to wonder if Hong Yitang had also received a key. Why would he ask about this otherwise?

Meanwhile, the man hesitated over whether or not to show the key to the kid. Perhaps he would know what it was since he specialized in this field of study. Hong Yitang was truly unfamiliar with it as he wasn't the fanatic grave robber that Yuan Shuo was.

There seemed to be people heading their way, so Hong Yitang walked off. “Let’s go inside first!”

Black Armors approached from the front. The trio ignored them and walked straight past them. The soldiers didn’t respond.

One, they were martial masters. Two, the soldiers didn’t seem to pay attention to anyone who’d taken the second passageway unless they were attacked by mysterious power.

After a while, a hesitant Hong Yitang took out the key and handed it to Li Hao. “Take a look at what this is. I previously found it when I explored another ruin. Is it useful here?”

Li Hao had no words to say. Aw fuck outta here! None of these people spoke a single word of truth. This key was similar to what he’d just received. On it was written Fragrant Cloud Pavilion of Hibiscus Garden. Fifth street of the southern quadrant.

Was it another hotel?

Li Hao renewed his theories. Every person seemed to receive a key when they entered the city. It denoted their assigned living quarters. But why were companions traveling together scattered across accommodations rather than put into one?

And they were to the south.. where was the southern quadrant? It was completely dark all around, no one could tell which direction was which. The fifth and seventh streets were easier to understand.

Li Hao lived at Equal Fortune whereas Hong Yitang was at Hibiscus Garden. It appeared that the young man only had a small room, whereas Ole Hong had an entire pavilion to himself. It would be more luxurious, wouldn’t it?

Li Hao looked back with a frown. Could the others obtain keys too?

It might be very difficult on the first try, but could be much easier after that experience.

“Do you recognize it?” Hong Yitang transmitted again when Li Hao remained quiet.

“Yes. Fragrant Cloud Pavilion of Hibiscus Garden. Fifth street of the southern quadrant.”

Hong Yitang blinked. This was the Battle Heaven of their dreams? How odd!

He Yong looked skeptically at Hong Yitang. Where did you get this from?

Li Hao tossed the key back to Hong Yitang without a word. They were almost at the city gates.

“As I thought,” Hong Yitang declared in an ominous tone. “The Silver Armor is here again!”

There was a flash of white on the city wall, one that faded in and out of sight. A Silver Armor!

“Martial Uncle, do you recall what level strength it was at when it awakened ?

“At least later Nova or peak Nova. That final streak rivaled the four major monster spirits. It was a little stronger than even the big snake!”

Li Hao sucked in a sharp breath. That strong??

Chapter 439: Fine Wine For Fine Guests (III)

Hong Yitang was still frowning.

“Do we have to eliminate the soldiers in order to enter the city?” Li Hao thought it over. “We’ve gone through the second passageway, they might view us as guests. Can’t we get in the regular way?”

“I don’t know.” Hong Yitang had never tried it before, so he had no idea. But that had been on his mind after obtaining the key. This was how guests were treated, so were they able to enter through the city gates now?

Li Hao recalled how the city gates opened when he approached them last time. It didn’t matter if he had a key or not, did it?

He couldn’t enter the first time because he didn’t utilize his blood. He dripped his blood on the two characters the second time. Perhaps he could enter directly now?

Li Hao wanted to make haste before the rest arrived. He quickly walked toward the city gates. Black Armors patrolled beside it, but it was like they didn’t see the trio.

The three humans soon presented themselves in front of the doors. Li Hao hesitated, looked at the Silver Armor overhead, thought for a bit, then walked forward. The characters over the gates twinkled before the long-sealed gates swung open without a sound!

Hong Yitang paused, stunned, and stared at Li Hao. The young man didn’t say a word as he headed inside! A shocked Hong Yitang quickly followed. How was this possible??

The Silver Armor silently drifted down and looked at Li Hao. Balled in a fist, his right hand thumped his chest in what seemed to be a salute. Strange beyond compare, Li Hao swallowed hard. This was very different from last time!

He didn’t dare show disrespect and quickly thumped his chest with his right hand as well, by way of return. The Silver Armor was no weakling!

The Black and Bronze Armors around them all thumped their chests with their right hand, eliciting ringing clangs!

Li Hao's scalp crawled with numbness, but he was much stronger this expedition than before. He tamped down the shock roiling through his heart and strode in. Hong Yitang followed him without issues. A baffled He Yong made to do so the same, but the Silver Armor extended his sword and blocked the man's path. The empty eyes turned to He Yong, as if waiting for something.

He Yong's scalp likewise crawled with numbness! Hong Yitang had mentioned the soldier's strength, but why was this happening? Li Hao could enter, Hong Yitang could enter, why was he the only one being stopped?

Li Hao frowned in thought for a bit, then took out the key in his storage ring with some resignation. He tossed it at He Yong. The man caught it reflexively, unable to piece together the pieces.

And then... the Silver Armor withdrew his longsword. He Yong stared blankly before he quickly darted into the city.

The three hastily left the vicinity of the city gates once they were all inside. The gates silently swung shut again. He Yong finally had the chance to ask, "Don't they say it's really hard to enter?"

We're inside! Right into the inner city! What the heck? And the key...

Li Hao took the key from his hand while his thoughts ran wild and shoved it back into his storage ring.

"So we can only enter if we have a key, right?" Hong Yitang mused with a strange look in his eyes. "Anyone with a key doesn't need to clash with the city defenders. They won't stop us. Battle Heaven... seems to be a very hospitable host."

They didn't attack guests with keys at all. Those without keys outside trying to force their way in were the city defenders' targets. The plaza in the outer city was a loophole, or perhaps there hadn't been a tunnel there at first. Only the second passageway existed—so that meant everyone who entered through the plaza was a trespasser?

“Seriously, what the heck is going on??” He Yong couldn’t contain himself anymore. “Why can we just waltz into the inner city? Where did those keys come from? You and Hong Yitang both have them, but I don’t! And that Silver Armor seemed to perform an ancient military salute to Li Hao, why?? I know a bit of what happened on the last expedition, why is everything different?!”

The hell?!

Li Hao ignored him and scanned the premises. This was his first time in the inner city. He looked at a fixed map on a plinth off to the side; it seemed to be a directory of the city’s quadrants. The young man deciphered meaning from the ancient characters that still remained.

The southern quadrant...

He quickly located it and headed straight in that direction. There was very little disturbance from their movement; houses lined the side of the street. Most of them were closed. Only one or two were open on a given street. They looked to be ordinary houses.

Li Hao eventually found the courage to duck into one of the open ones. It held simple furnishings that looked no different from those of a regular residential neighborhood. However, he saw a piece of mysterious power stone in a corner. It was attached to what looked to be a wall lamp, the stone was embedded in the lamp. It seemed to be depleted.

Li Hao frowned, what did this indicate? That residents of the ancient civilization used mysterious power stones as energy sources for their lighting? How opulent!

The young man quickly withdrew. When Hong Yitang saw him continue to head south, he asked, “Are you... going to the southern quadrant?”

The true treasure was in the center. The Gold Armor and Black Tortoise Seal was there.

“Let’s go to what’s written on the key.” Li Hao glanced at the empty streets. “Let’s take a look since they’ve given us rooms. Perhaps we’ll have unexpected gains.”

“That works.” Hong Yitang nodded thoughtfully. “We can also investigate the open rooms along the way. People obtained many mysterious power stones from the houses last time, but the ones close by might have already been emptied out. Let’s head further in for a look.”

He Yong was completely baffled and couldn’t begin to make sense of anything. He still didn’t understand why they’d gained direct admittance to the inner city... But those two weren’t bothering to explain the situation. He had no choice but to follow them.

This must have been a very prosperous metropolis back in the day. The streets were wide and level, the houses still durable after the ravages of so many years. There were no cracks or degradation anywhere.

This area might have been a residential neighborhood. There were no storefronts on either side of the street, just standalone houses. It took a long period of walking before the first tiny storefront came into view. Its door was closed, indicating danger.

One could not enter a structure with a closed door, death awaited! Those who entered without welcome were thieves. Battle Heaven did not take kindly to thieves.

Li Hao closely observed the houses on either side to see if any had open front doors. The last expedition had reaped a large sum of mysterious power stones—more than one hundred in total. There were also a few people who hadn’t made it out of the inner city in time. Were they all dead?

He was discovering that the city was a stickler for the rules. A very strong stickler. So long as one followed their rules, danger would never be close. But if one broke the rules, death was nonnegotiable. Who knew how many of the supernaturals to come would die this time!

If they awakened the Silver Armor, who wouldn’t it kill with its final strike other than a select few like Hou Xiaochen, Kong Jie, and others?

Li Hao suddenly looked at the center of the city after prolonged walking. There was a tall pagoda there with light exuding faintly from it. Despite the feebleness of the radiance, it illuminated the entire city. Some other areas could be seen through it. There seemed to have been a line of vision originating from it earlier.

Was someone watching him? Li Hao frowned, moving about more prudently. Obeying the rules was number one here! He couldn't barge around, that would be too dangerous!

.....

At the same time.

A dog beneath the pagoda sniffed the air, its nose twitching when it caught wind of a familiar scent. Its tail wagged as it wanted to run in that direction. Raising its head for a look at the floating turtle, Panther swiftly jumped down the platform when it saw that the turtle hadn't seemed to notice anything. It streaked through the streets and ran for the southern quadrant of the city.

The big turtle was silent and still, as if it was just a sculpture. Its gaze turned in a southerly direction as various thoughts began to form in its mind.

Destiny was a marvelous thing. The descendent of the monster spirit emissary followed the heir of the Lis. Had it forgotten that the Li ancestor had nearly hacked its ancestor into two with one sword stroke?

The turtle grew lost again when it thought of the Li forefather. Did those people still exist in this world? Were the domineering Human King and others truly dead? Was the turtle itself dead or alive?

It looked outside the city. A lot of people were gathered there. Did they think the city was dead? For fine guests there was fine wine, for enemies there were... coffins!

The light in the turtle's eyes dimmed and the Gold Armor in the city lord manor suddenly stood up. It seemed to sense something as the seal in its hand floated into the air.

Moments later, troops of intermixed Black and Bronze Armors from the west and south followed a Silver Armor's lead and trotted through the city, heading for the eastern city gates. Enemies had come!

There were four armies to guard the four directions of the city. The eastern army had fallen, so those of the other directions convened in the east.

The Black Tortoise Seal exuded a faint light. The city seemed to be awakening.

.....

Powerhouses that'd passed the second passageway swiftly gathered near the city gates. Some champed impatiently at the bit and jumped up to fly over. Those who'd taken the second passageway last time could fly. The only danger was the Gold Armor.

But a loud bam echoed as soon as someone flew over the city walls! Spears and swords bristled. A troop of Black Armors struck swiftly and riddled a wandering peak Sunflare with holes!

There were defenders on the city gates! A Silver Armor hovering in position caused others to look on with alarm. Violet Moon and the others had previously witnessed the other's ferocity.

"Don't make any moves," she transmitted. "The Silver Armor is very strong and might awaken to full sentience. Once it does, it wields the strength of a Nova—and not just a regular Nova. Be careful!"

A frowning assembly looked at the city gates. Soldiers had appeared again! So they had to repeat the events of the last expedition and pass this difficulty level again?

Hou Xiaochen also looked around with a strange look; he failed to see Li Hao and the others. That was very odd. Had they already gone inside? If so, that would be very interesting!

Chapter 440: Picking Up Money From The Streets (I)

Were they supposed to pass this difficulty level one more time?

No!

This wasn't a level in a game! This was a city, the city of Battle Heaven! The enemy was at the city gates and flouted the rules. They challenged the city defenders again and again. It was blasphemy against the greats!

Above the city.

Three Silver Armors convened. They commanded thirty bronze centurions and three thousand defenders. The city and army of Battle Heaven!

Light glinted out of the Silver Armors' eyes as they considered the supernaturals milling around below. This went beyond the pale! The defenders only protected Battle Heaven, but today, the enemy was bullying them on their doorstep!

"Kill!" A word spoken with ancient flair rasped out of one of the Silver Armor's mouths. It rang with a dense mechanical sensation.

Boom!

A black torrent descended! Charge! Slay enemies! The Battle Heaven Army could still take the field after countless eons!

.....

Outside the city.

Supernaturals were still squawking over why there were Black Armors again. Some were proclaiming, “This is great! The armor is valuable. Look at the Silver Moon Guards—one suit of armor is more valuable than a piece of mysterious power stone. We’ll be rich if we get our hands on several...”

BAM!

Countless Black Armors jumped down from the walls and began a furious slaughter. Spears, swords, blades... An army formation assembled as thirty Bronze Armors formed an assault formation and advanced in the array of a blade.

Rumble!!

“AHH!!” Ghastly shrieks rose and fell, startling those deep in discussion. Even the powerhouses jerked out of their conversations.

“Hurry and kill the enemy!” roared the heavyweights.

“Damn it, aren’t we supposed to be safe after taking the second passageway??” shrilled those in front.

“Why is this happening?!”

“Why are there so many soldiers? Weren’t they all eliminated??” Shouts, yells, and general pandemonium reigned.

This particular expedition was comprised of many different organizations and factions. Too many were present this time. More than two thousand were already inside and more trying to enter. Some walked through the plaza, some traveled the second passageway.

A handful of supernaturals panicked when the army descended upon them and shot into the air. Those who hadn’t taken the second passageway were blown out of the sky. Those who had were almost no better off because three Silver Armors soared through the air and engaged them in battle!

“Exterminate!” called out the mechanical voice. These soldiers were enraged that someone dared challenge Battle Heaven!

Rumble!

Fierce fighting erupted as Black Armors rivaled Sunflares when they operated within the city. Three thousand of them working in tandem meant that they could scythe through Solars just as easily. Some Novas looked on with unpleasant expressions, they were losing the first encounter! It was unfathomable that such a mishap had occurred as soon as they reached the city gates.

“Hou Xiaochen, this is a Night Watcher scheme, isn’t it?!” someone roared.

Off in the distance, Hou Xiaochen didn’t reply as he quickly withdrew with his people. Scheme your ass! This has nothing to do with me! He was indeed ready with certain plans, but they weren’t meant to commence here. Who knew that Battle Heaven would suddenly be reinforced with three thousand defenders? It went without saying that the troops of the four directions must have congregated on the eastern gate.

“We need to get rid of them,” shouted the Parity King of Yama. “These Black Armors are worth a fortune! We have many heavyweights among us and these Black Armors are just Darkmoons wearing armor. No matter how many there are, they are still ants!”

There were many Black Armors, but the Bronze Armors were the equivalent of peak Sunflare and the Silver Armor just Solar when they were not awakened. How many Solars and Novas were on this expedition? It was an easy task for them to join forces and eliminate all three thousand Black Armors.

However, the various organizations and heavyweights were quickly retreating. No one wanted to be the vanguard. The first retreat led to many more. Those who were originally holding up beneath the brunt of the wave swiftly backed away when others did so as well.

The Black Armors charged without a sound, their killing intent so dense that it was almost tangible. Large numbers of supernaturals were slain on the spot. Even those strong enough to put up a fight were soon defeated when faced with so much killing intent.

Grim wails rang loudly in the ear!

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To the rear.

Manager Yu looked at Hou Xiaochen. The director's face was calm, as if he didn't see anything.

“Who would've thought that there'd still be so many Black Armors?” Kong Jie crossed his arms with a smile. “Ole Hou, looks like your Silver Moon Guards will be fully outfitted after this expedition.”

Three thousand Black Armors!

Hou Xiaochen remained observing. “Why do you think the city’s army has suddenly attacked us? They wouldn’t provoke us before if we refrained from the same after taking the second passageway. But now... do you think these dead soldiers are more alive?”

“Do you mean to say that... someone’s directing them?” Kong Jie blinked.

“Yes.” Hou Xiaochen looked at the towering city gates. He seemed to peer through them, toward the back. suddenly rising into the air, he looked into the city. There... appeared to be some light somewhere.

Or it might be a reflection of golden armor. Had the Gold Armor awoken again?

Hou Xiaochen frowned, very startled by the change. Did it have something to do with Li Hao and the others? Were the eight families really so tightly interconnected countless many eons later?

It was all very strange!

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Inside the city.

Li Hao’s trio also heard the disturbance. The young man was climbing up the rooftop of an open house and peering out into the open. He could vaguely see outside the city as this was a tall building just a little shorter than the turtle pagoda.

As Li Hao stood on the roof, he watched with great amusement. He Yong and Hong Yitang followed him up.

“There... are so many Black Armors, why are they attacking the expedition? Don't they say that the soldiers won't attack after we go through the second passageway?”

“There are so many supernaturals down there, it's a complete mess,” Li Hao replied calmly. “Maybe someone's done something to provoke them. This is a group of soldiers that abide by logic and rules. Maybe someone's broken the rules and displayed a combative position. Maybe someone flipped over the city walls. Maybe someone attacked the gates. This will all elicit the army's enmity and be viewed as provocation!”

“You seem more relaxed than last time.” Hong Yitang glanced at Li Hao.

“I'm stronger than last time, so I'm naturally more at ease. Also... I've realized that Battle Heaven is an interesting place. It's a place that follows the rules. In that case, we won't run into any major danger if we follow their rules. There's no reason for them to attack guests.

“I treated last time as simple exploration and didn't have many reflections. I thought this was a ruined city and came to look for treasure!”

“And this time?”

“This time... I feel that this is a city with a soul,” Li Hao chuckled. “Compared to those outside, perhaps these dead soldiers are possibly more endearing. Although they're long dead and are just lingering obsessions, they give me the feeling that they're true flesh and blood! I'm thinking that these are the true martial masters and soldiers, not the ones of modern day that set up regimes by force of arms to dominate an area!”

“So you think that the current Ministry of Armed Forces is not to your liking?” Hong Yitang raised an eyebrow.

“That's not it.” Li Hao shook his head. “They're decrepit... and close-minded! Perhaps such are the drawbacks of an incomplete reformation. When the royal family abdicated and the nine ministries

took up the reins, the reforms weren't thorough enough. I find that whether it's the nine ministries or the official institutions of the various provinces, everyone's focused on themselves.

"They don't care whether war rages or if the people are dying. They don't care if transportation is inconvenient or if there's enough food to eat. They don't care if the cities are in disarray, they don't care about any of it!" The young man smirked. "They're consumed by their petty desires and little military cliques to raise their own powerhouses. All they want is to install themselves as lord of a territory.

"Up till now, the only military unit that I've met in the true meaning of the phrase is Demon Hunters of Silver City! They drove back the darkness under Captain Liu Long's leadership! They are very weak, but they focus on how to let the people of Silver City live at peace and enjoy their lives.

"Silver City may be a small place, but it is very safe. Apart from the problems created by Red Moon because they are too strong to be handled, no violent crime has occurred in this small place for the last twenty years.

"After entering White Moon City, I find that despite possessing the four institutions and countless powerhouses, the thirty million of this sprawling metropolis do not seem to lead better lives than Silver City denizens.

"Do White Moon's three military divisions act the same as these Black Armors when facing enemies? Do they charge out without concern of life or death just so they can land one stroke on their foes?"

Emotions suddenly gripped Li Hao as he watched the charging Black Armors, then at the empty city behind him.

"Look, they are still willing to unsheathe their swords to protect this city endless eons after they have perished. Martial Uncle Hong, where do you think their faith comes from? That pride, composure, willingness, and unceasing desire to fight. What kind of faith is it that lets them persevere to this step?"

It was incredible!

Hong Yitang thought silently for a long while before sighing. “Many reasons, I suppose. Strong enemies, a charismatic leader, a beautiful home, united conviction, same goals, confidence in their nation... All of this will fill one with fighting spirit!

“Warriors like these still exist, they’re just not that apparent anymore! You say that the three military divisions of the Silver Moon won’t act the same, but that may not be true. However, do you know why these soldiers don’t seem to have any faith or fighting spirit to speak of?”

“Please enlighten me, martial uncle!”