

## Star Gate 441

### Chapter 441: Picking Up Money From The Streets (II)

“Goals and conviction... Who do they fight for, why do they fight, and what is their ultimate goal?” Hong Yitang intoned. “When armies fight now, it is always an internal dispute! This dynasty is still one whole, so everyone is a soldier of the dynasty. Unless we fight the three great organizations, declaring war on anyone means civil discord!”

“Does fighting our own inspire passion and conviction?” Hong Yitang shook his head. “It doesn’t! Therefore, everyone focuses on the powerhouses and overlooks the army. To be honest, if Silver Moon really declared independence, set itself a lofty goal, underwent significant reforms, and someone appeared to lead the people on a new path and out of deterioration... That might be when the three military divisions of Silver Moon shine again.”

He looked outside the city, at the powerhouses soaring through the air. “Independence is not a precursor to vying for supremacy! The time has not yet arrived, Silver Moon can still hold on. Once the situation is truly difficult, it might awaken the people’s beliefs if someone is willing to step forward and raise a hand in leadership!”

“We are not that far off from those times,” he murmured in a low voice. “The fires of war burn unceasingly and many problems have appeared in the central provinces due to the chaos of war. It’s just that many haven’t noticed the issues yet. Several places in the central region have collected no harvest for the past couple of years!”

“The various officials of the central provinces are poised for action. They move in the shadows and secretly purchase grain. The price of food in the marketplace has tripled, and this is just the beginning! As war engulfs more regions, the daily amount consumed by the hundreds of millions in the dynasty is a staggering figure!”

“Some fertile regions and wheat belts used to be rich areas that produced plenty of grain. They are now lying fallow and deserted. People no longer dare till fields far away as they receive nothing for their efforts after a battle!”

Hong Yitang sighed. “The effects of prolonged war are not yet noticeable due to the dynasty’s wealth, vast territory, and rich resources. But the ensuing problems will soon be apparent in an explosive manner!

“Many people are watching and waiting for that kind of situation to develop. When such chaotic times are upon us, that is their chance. From chaos comes heroes as well as those with great ambitions!” Hong Yitang laughed. “Silver Moon is better off as its provincial government carries out its responsibilities to a certain degree. It’s been promoting wide-scale planting over the years, pushing new discoveries, experiences, and technologies... But even so, the province won’t remain quiet if everywhere around it is engulfed in chaos.”

Li Hao listened with a deep frown. He Yong raised a brow and looked at his counterpart.

In the modern domains of martial masters and the supernatural, everyone pursued strength. Very few people considered these matters. Those would-be ambitious heroes might see things clearly, but they were also facilitating the worsening of the situation!

They even voluntarily stopped planting their lands to add to the lack of harvests.

Mundanes were weak, but once they were hungry to a certain limit, the strength that they collectively erupted with would topple the dynasty, raising the curtain on yet more wars and revolutions.

The people didn’t ask for much, but they couldn’t let go hungry! When people experienced the extremity of hunger, they would do anything. Supernaturals were the minority, after all. They could suppress ten thousand, a hundred thousand, even one million. But what of ten million, one hundred million, and hundreds of millions?

Li Hao turned slightly pale as he considered the information. The churning tides of change seemed to be roiling right in front of him. He looked at Hong Yitang. Although the young man was a civilian, Silver City denizens were well enough, so it was hard to imagine that scenes from history would play out before his eyes!

From his viewpoint, famine should not occur in a time erupting with sophisticated technology and polarizing of ancient skill. But with Hong Yitang's description... he seemed to see it happen. Rearing momentum churning through the land, skeletons sparkling beneath the sunlight, the heaven and earth shattering!

The people's will could not be denied!

"That's a bit much, isn't it, Ole Hong?" He Yong couldn't help himself.

"You think I'm exaggerating?" Hong Yitang chuckled. "I'm not, I speak only the truth. Some people pretend to not see it, others really don't see it. Some are purposefully putting this scene on the stage, and the rest... really are idiots!"

"Therefore, when Li Hao asked why the soldiers of this era are not the same as the ancient era's, I gave him the answer that it is not yet time! When this era falls into utter mayhem and when these people feel that their home may be destroyed, they'll erupt with such scintillating brilliance that we can barely imagine!"

Hong Yitang pointed at those outside. "Some of them may understand and others may not. But when it comes to those times, some of them will become saints, others turn into devils. Some will be tyrants and others butchers!"

He looked at Li Hao. "And you?"

The young man looked blankly back at him. What about me?

"You're the same as them, aren't you?" Hong Yitang grinned. "You see it and even sense it, but don't you also feel that it has nothing to do with you? The situation is as far removed from you as possible! Does the fate of this era have anything to do with you? Your parents are dead, your friend is dead, you only have a teacher who counts as your family. Therefore, do you truly care about Silver City?"

“Liu Long’s faith is to safeguard Silver City, and you? You’re thinking that you’ll just listen when you’re weak, but are you really listening?”

“You redeployed Liu Long to White Moon—the man is thinking that he’ll return to guard his home when he grows strong enough. And you? You’ll kill everyone in Red Moon when you’re strong enough, but have you given any thought to Silver City?”

Hong Yitang shook his head with a soft chuckle. “Everyone lives for themselves in this era. The human heart is selfish and human nature is egocentric. To be honest, whether it is the modern day martial world or supernatural domain, how many truly think for the people?”

Li Hao was dazed, lost in thought. I... Hong Yitang was right, the young man had never considered this matter. Liu Long’s rallying cry of “to uphold justice” was just a slogan in Li Hao’s mouth. He simply felt that it would place him more on the side of good. But what really was justice?

He didn’t know!

The young man looked blankly at Hong Yitang, but the man didn’t say anything. There was nothing else to say as this wasn’t a concept that could be explained by one or two sentences. Either one didn’t understand, or one did!

Only when Li Hao felt heartache, pity, self recrimination, and regret at seeing bodies filling the wilderness and suffering throughout the land would he truly understand. If he felt that just a bunch of ants had died... then there was nothing further to discuss. And even if he felt emotional on behalf of those who died, he needed to match his feelings with actions. If not, it was just momentary pity for the people!

“Hong Yitang, you’ve said so much, but what about yourself?” Changes flickered through He Yong’s expression. And what have you done?

“Me, what can I do?” Hong Yitang smiled self-deprecatingly. “I cannot do anything. The only thing I can do is to make the Sword Sect a safer, more peaceful place in which no one goes wanting for

food or clothing. I support the sect and the families of my disciples. They are also working hard to live and grow richer through the sweat of their efforts. Not needing to worry about the necessities of life and being isolated from the madness outside is what I can do.

“I am only a regular person, I am no saint,” Hong Yitang sighed. “I did not see any of this before, nor did I understand. As one of the martial masters that journeyed through the world in earlier times, we ate and drank with gusto wherever we went. To be honest, what did civilians have to do with us?”

“I happened upon a group of orphans one day. Some of their parents had died from hunger, others from war. Some died due to confusion in the martial world, others were left behind when their parents became powerhouses and traveled elsewhere. It was then that I had the tiniest bit of comprehension!”

Just a little bit!

He never presented himself as a saint because he truly wasn't! There were just a few more orphans to be found in the Sword Sect than most. Perhaps such was a rare demonstration of pity from a powerhouse to be found in this day and age.

That was why he could speak of these matters to Li Hao today. Otherwise, he would simply say that modern day soldiers were less than the ancients because they were weaker!

But were they weaker?

Not at all!

The two thousand supernaturals outside were very strong and would easily defeat the three thousand if they worked together. But... what of it? Did they have conviction? They only knew to grow stronger and seize treasure. What kind of conviction was that?

And yet, the same applied to the three on the roof. People of this age were cold-blooded.

Li Hao looked blearily at the torrent of Black Armors still charging. They were as if sharp blades scything into their opponents. This army fought on endless years later!

Why did they fight? The young man shook his head and looked at Hong Yitang. This person... was terrifying!

Indeed, terrifying. It'd taken only a few moments for Li Hao to be caught up in his spell. He was lost and his faith wavering.

Moments later, the young man took a deep breath and walked off of the building. He didn't want to watch anymore. He just wanted to find some treasure, grow stronger, walk out, and then... exact revenge from Red Moon.

Mmhmm!

He was the selfish and self-centered type that Hong Yitang had spoken of, but why couldn't the young man do as he wished? Does it have to do with me that the world is stupid and about to fall into chaos?

Nothing at all!

I am one of them and also a victim, but no one's coming to save me. Well, there was his teacher, Liu Long, Hou Xiaochen... All of these people had saved him once. But why did that compel him to save others?

That doesn't make any sense at all!

Li Hao felt that Hong Yitang was thinking too much. The people he talked about were neither his friends nor family. Why should he worry himself with him? So what if the world suddenly ended?

.....

Behind Li Hao.

He Yong frowned ferociously and transmitted, "Hong Yitang, what have you been comprehending these years? Why have you become rather concerned with the state of affairs and the people?"

That was not what was meant to be a martial master!

#### Chapter 442: Picking Up Money From The Streets (III)

"I've been pondering the path of martial masters and the purpose for our existence!" Hong Yitang chuckled when he looked at He Yong. "I once read an ancient book that spoke of heroes acting bravely for the sake of righteousness, that they championed the cause of justice and redressed wrongdoings for people and nation. I treated it as a joke and felt that was quite an exaggeration. How can martial artists be heroes?"

"What are heroes? They punish evil, support the weak, redress wrongdoings, act boldly for a just cause, and are concerned about the people and nation. Those are heroes! What heroes are there in the modern martial world? We're just a bunch of martial blockheads obsessed with increasing their own strength at any cost!"

"You are, I am, Yuan Shuo is, and so is everyone else!"

"I paged through the ancient book again these years and came to some different thoughts. Perhaps these thoughts are immature or idealized, but I've been thinking about what the purpose of growing stronger is. Is it to gain eternal life? Be at peace with the world? Hold oneself as invincible throughout the world? And then?"

Hong Yitang chuckled. “And then... we turn into skeletons in the ground! No one will remember us after a certain number of years. Would even those of Silver Moon remember someone as strong as Yuan Shuo if he died in Silver City? Has he brought any changes to the province? Has he improved the lives of thousands of families? Has his strength brought a single bit of help to the hundreds of millions of souls in the world?”

He Yong’s throat bobbed up and down. Had Yuan Shuo? Of course not! It was impossible for any of that to have taken place as martial masters were a headstrong, competitive bunch that rampaged through the four corners of the world. Their actions were all in pursuit of growing stronger, finding the right path, and reaching enlightenment...

What came after enlightenment?

Nothing!

What else was there?

Southern Fist suddenly looked at Hong Yitang with fear. This guy was terrifying!

“Hong Yitang... What... are you thinking of?”

“What’s with that look on your face?” Hong Yitang broke out laughing. “I’m just pondering over my life. People always say that martial masters and supernaturals exist to kill. I find nothing wrong with that, but is the purpose of killing just to kill? We kill because we can? That’s such a narrow-minded perspective!

“Killing is but a process, not a goal! Don’t confuse the two concepts. Li Hao is of the same mindset—I grow stronger to kill others. And then what? What comes next after exterminating your enemies?”

Cold prickled at He Yong’s scalp and he looked at Hong Yitang, wanting to move as far away as possible! This person was impossible to read sometimes.

“Stop looking at me like that, I’m not a saint. I’m just thinking. Do I have to be constrained in even my thoughts? The ancient books say one’s thoughts cannot be constrained. One’s body can, but the thoughts run ever freely. I am alive so long as my mind is alive. I am truly dead when even my thinking is curtailed.

“Skystar Dynasty is rotten to the core!” Hong Yitang said as they walked. “The dynasty restrains the people’s thoughts! The tenets of education are not developed and the people’s minds do not advance. Everything must be derived from ancient civilizations. We do not build or study anything on our own.

“Our education systems are incomplete! Take Silver City for example. How many out of one million are cultured and knowledgeable? Their Veteris Institute is their crown jewel, but there’s less than two thousand students in attendance. Is this number of cultured people among one million a proper ratio?

“The vast Silver Moon boasts of one hundred million in population. While my observations and compilations have not produced a total number of schools, there are only thirty-seven institutions of higher learning. There are roughly two hundred thousand in attendance and approximately fifty thousand graduate every four years.

“If the average working lifespan is forty years, then two million graduates from schools of higher learning within these forty years are the entirety of our society’s elites and upper class. Two million out of one hundred million? Do you think that’s a lot or too little?

“That puts the percentage of advanced students at two percent, with mid to low students ten times that at the very, very most. Twenty percent is definitely a high estimate! Our literacy rate is twenty-two percent of the population. What do you think about this proportion?”

“Is that low?” He Yong asked. He didn’t think it was! “That’s a very high rate at more than twenty percent, right? I remember it wasn’t this high before. This means that one person out of five can read and write. Only one or two out of a hundred could read a few decades ago. Is there a problem here?”

He really didn't think so. This was great!

"You really are..." Hong Yitang shook his head with a laugh. "Forget it, I can't be bothered speaking to you! Read some more books, especially the ancient books, and think on why the ancient civilization was so powerful! What would you think if I told you that the literacy rate in the ancient civilization was ninety-nine percent? Indeed, everyone could read and write apart from a very few!

"Literacy was the basis for the rise of a nation and people! Don't expect knowledge out of a bunch of people who can't read or write, much less change your life or strengthen your path. Could Yuan Shuo have created his own dao if he wasn't literate?"

Hong Yitang suddenly felt that he was playing the lute to a cow in talking to He Yong. Forget it, what am I telling him all this for!

"And another thing, there is no ministry out of the nine that is in charge of education. The places of higher learning were established by local authorities in a haphazard manner. Additionally, the ancients knew to encourage and support farmers. Our age is so advanced that we have planes and missiles, but we don't have a specific agriculture department to help people reclaim wasteland and cultivate new seeds... We just know to live off the sky, mountain, or whatever's nearby.

"The dynasty's reforms are a joke! The royal family retreated behind the scenes only because their strength was less than others. Everyone only cares about strength, no one cares about anything else.

"Silver Moon's provincial government is well enough. Zhao and Zhou have done a decent job over the years, but they cannot see the wood for the trees!"

He Yong stared dumbly at his counterpart, suddenly feeling like he didn't know Hong Yitang! Was this the Earthturner Sword that he knew!

"You are a martial master..."

“Correct, which is why I say that I cannot be one of those who hold the nation and people in their hearts. I am a martial master, not a hero!”

Much less a knight errant of old!

Hong Yitang chuckled without a care in the world. He wasn't worthy of being hailed a hero—no one was in this era. They were all just martial masters. Perhaps heroes of that caliber would one day be seen in their time? He looked at Li Hao in front of him and shook his head. Not him!

Li Hao was just a martial master as well, the same as the rest of them. It was good enough that he didn't kill innocents. He was destined to be unable to become a hero as well.

The key point was that no one seemed to nurse such concepts. That martial masters should work to further the lives of regular people? This was not a notion found since the ancient times.

“No... Liu Long...” Hong Yitang suddenly thought of someone a little strange. Here was an interesting fellow. His strength wasn't that impressive, but it was very unique to possess a heart of wanting to protect the people in this day and age. Of course, he was only concerned about Silver City, so perhaps he might be hailed as the hero of Silver City.

That was enough, it placed him above many martial masters! To the rest, their homeland was just a place to rest. If it was destroyed, they would simply move on to a different place.

.....

The sounds of fighting continued outside the city, but Li Hao was lost in a daze. The big turtle above looked silently at a person—not Li Hao, but Hong Yitang. The turtle was also in a daze. It seemed to have heard and felt something.

A hero...

Who among this world and four directions could call themselves a hero? This person might not be able to, but he reminded the turtle of another—an extremely valiant existence, a king of humans in a peculiar age, one who often spoke of “education above all. As poor as we might be, we cannot stint on education.”

This was a very long time ago, and this person on the streets below wasn’t very much like that lofty existence. He was so, so much worse! That person had been the light of his era and the personal mentor of the later Human King. There had been many characters like him in that age.

They knew what they were fighting for and what was the future. They also knew that standing on their own two feet and every person rising like a dragon was the foundation of a strong era. Thus, they created that unique period of time, the one that was hard to repeat afterward. Living in that period was the pride of all its denizens!

No matter how tiring or dangerous it was, one command saw thousands of people charge and battle to the last drop of blood in their veins! No one regretted it as, when they turned back, they saw that they dispelled the darkness and welcomed the light.

And now, perhaps... they had all sunk into the darkness.

Who would light the flares of Battle Heaven in the modern world? Who could lead the city in severing the firmament?

Likely no one!

The old turtle closed its eyes once more. No one... There was no spark of hope in this age. At least, it didn’t see or feel it. That person might’ve been the last spark, but he didn’t seem to amount to much. The turtle’s thoughts shifted...

Hong Yitang paused between steps and looked down at where a storage ring had appeared. He blinked and picked it up, freezing when he looked inside.

Li Hao and He Yong looked at him when they sensed the disturbance. A storage ring? Hong Yitang had found it?

The man blinked fiercely, thinking he was dreaming. He suddenly kicked He Yong, sending the man into a rage.

“What are you doing?!”

“He Yong... I just found riches on the ground. Do you think the heavens have taken pity on me because they think I’m too poor?”

“.....”

“What did you pick up, Martial Uncle Hong?” Li Hao was incredibly curious. “Is there anything inside?”

Hong Yitang nodded woodenly and summoned the contents. Li Hao and He Yong’s jaws dropped and their eyes widened. It was... a mysterious power stone bigger than their heads!

Chapter 443: Picking Up Money From The Streets (IV)

Holy shit?!

Not only was the mysterious power stone bigger than their heads, light danced inside it. It was clear and translucent throughout—a far cry from the dim murkiness of usual stones. One might even suspect that it wasn’t a mysterious power stone!

But after the trio probed it with their senses... they found that it did seem to just be a mysterious power stone!

Hong Yitang took a sharp breath. Hot damn! What did I do? I just randomly walked around and somehow picked up a storage ring with the huge stones inside it. No, huge treasures!

He could barely process the development as there were three stones such as this one inside the storage ring. Three of them!

Not only that, but there was also a small sealed flask of liquid. It seemed quite precious; he didn't know what it was and wasn't inclined to open it yet. A baffled state of mind was all he could manage at the moment.

Hong Yitang peered around him and suddenly raised a cupped fist salute. "What a paradise of treasure! Battle Heaven is my second home and perhaps my ancestors were once part of this place. Li Hao and He Yong, pay your respects to the city! This place is incredible!"

He Yong was still gaping at the stone. He swallowed hard and finally forced out, "This... is an ultimate mysterious power stone... It should make for three thousand pieces if it's cut, should it not?"

One piece from this rock was possibly the equivalent of three typical stones that they were familiar with in this day and age, so Hong Yitang held ten thousand stones in his hands! He Yong was truly shocked out of his wits.

Li Hao was also inert with stupefaction. He couldn't help but look at the turtle in the distance. To be honest... did Old Hong finding wealth on the ground have anything to do with the sentient creatures inside the city? Why had this happened? There was nothing in Battle Heaven; its streets were clean and the ground absorbed whatever was on it. How could a storage ring still be here after it was dropped endless millennia ago?

What the heck??

This was possible if there were conscious beings still inside the city, but why give something to Ole Hong?

Li Hao scratched his head, finally wondering if it had something to do with the man's words. Was that speech of his worth cities? Had it resonated with a being in the city? The young man sank into deep thought. He didn't mind the massive hunk of mysterious power stone. To each their own fortunes. There was no rule that Hong Yitang could not have his fair share.

Li Hao simply considered the notion that if existences within the city found these words valuable, then perhaps those were his greatest gain on this expedition. He looked at Hong Yitang again, suddenly finding the indolent and raggedy man rather mysterious.

A wide beam split Hong Yitang's face as he put away his newfound riches. What kind of good day was this? He was so happy! The city was wonderful!

"Come, let's go to my lodgings. Since we're here already, let's rest and walk around..." Hong Yitang chuckled and looked at the buildings around them. "There are so many schools for such a small city. I think I've seen at least five on our way here. Did the ancient city sense my proposition of building more schools and rewarded me for my thoughts?"

It was so very strange!

Li Hao looked around as well when he heard this, seeing another school in front of them. There did appear to be numerous similar structures along the way. The young man raised an eyebrow—why were there so many schools? This street held a capacity of one million at most, no? They weren't at the end of the street yet, were there more than one hundred schools in the city?

If that was the case, these ancients really had a lot of money! Not only that, but vigor as well. If Li Hao recalled correctly, there were a dozen schools in Silver City, and that was already a good sum.

In this day and age, it was far more preferable to start working and earn money as soon as possible. Studying was a waste of time. Li Hao only pursued his studies because his grades were good. If they'd been poor, he would've given up his education a long time ago.

The trio continued without speaking, soundlessly observing their premises. The tiny Battle Heaven imparted a different perspective to them. He Yong looked around as well. The city was very small and far less prosperous than Skystar City, but their buildings spoke of how happy and content the place had been back in the day.

The people lived in peace and enjoyed their work, satisfied in their well-being. Such a city was worthy of protection from the soldiers in the outer city, was it not? In contrast, how many would be willing to step forward for Skystar City if it fell into disarray?

As the three walked down the street, the hubbub outside the city was a stark contrast to the serenity inside the city. I protect you on the outside, you enjoy your day to day on the inside. Let us create a beautiful and harmonious life together.

Perhaps such was the ancient civilization!

Li Hao suddenly thought of Liu Long. The Night Watchers had received some baskets of flowers, fruits, and local delicacies one day. No one knew who sent them and no one cared. Only Liu Long broke out in a wide grin when he bit into an apple.

If the army outside the city was victorious and returned triumphant, they would be greeted with flowers, applause, good food and drink if there were still people inside the city, wouldn't they?

What an... intoxicating feeling! The thought crossed the young man's mind. It seemed like a very interesting notion. Who knew? I've never experienced or entertained these ideas.

He Yong was also thinking back to an incident from a long time ago. He'd killed a ferocious tiger plaguing the people not long after he became a martial master. He didn't think much of it, but the villagers plied him with food and drink. The man had drunk his fill and what had they called him?

A warrior? A hero? Or... a knight errant?

He couldn't remember, it was all too long ago. He only remembered how delicious that wine had been! But where did such wonderful wine come from in a small country village?

Thoughts of flowers and wine passed by briefly in their minds, just as Hong Yitang's words faded away after lingering for only a little while. Perhaps they would be aroused again one day, but for the moment, it only caused Li Hao and He Yong to think a little bit more. It didn't really change anything.

Neither did Hong Yitang bear those lofty notions. He was simply caught in the moment and thinking of his own path. It wasn't his intention to advise or change anyone. He just couldn't help but think, ponder, and reflect if he had been right or wrong to dominate the martial world for all those decades?

The Earthturner Sword was renowned throughout the world, but later fell behind when he cloistered himself. That had also been part of his thinking process. No one could understand him and neither did he need to be understood. He was doing what he wanted to do. It was sufficient to exude a sliver of the strong pitying the weak during the undertaking.

All of it was a pale shadow to the shock that the storage ring brought to him. He was rich! Therefore, Hong Yitang was wreathed in smiles. His bleak melancholy of moments ago was gone, replaced by joy and excitement. He'd ever seen so much money in his life. How blissful he was!

He Yong was quite jealous. Li Hao smiled as well, a crafty curve to his lips. Would Earthturner Sword look to him for help? If he did and was so rich... should the young man demand two thirds?

Ahem, alright, one third. Two thirds was too much. One third would be a tip for the little sword. It was Stellaris, after all! Was it right not to exact any payment if it was put to work?

The three reached the southern streets as they chatted. Fragrant Cloud Pavilion of Hibiscus Garden. Fifth street of the southern quadrant.

The southern quadrant was the commercial district. There were some tall buildings here, but not that tall compared to the outside world. The streets were broad here and storefronts were found everywhere. Tea, Wine, Meals, Clothes... Flags fluttered in the wind as large sign boards enabled patrons to clearly identify where they wished to go. The stores were almost all shut, so Li Hao looked to and fro at the banners.

He led them in a certain direction moments later. He Yong was completely lost as he didn't know anything. Hong Yitang could recognize a few ancient words, so he could barely keep track of where they were.

The massacre continued in the outer city. All was particularly peaceful on the quiet streets in the inner city. A manor of ancient flair loomed in front of them after a while. Hong Yitang quickly took out his key, matching the words on it to the ones on the signboard.

"Hibiscus Garden?" He looked at Li Hao. The young man nodded and looked around them. All was very quiet. The garden occupied a large plot of land and some rooftop eaves could be seen over the walls.

The enormous doors were closed. Could they be opened? Fragrant Cloud Pavilion might be just one of the houses in the garden and not the entire complex.

"Martial Uncle Hong, take a look inside," said Li Hao.

Hong Yitang shoved the key at He Yong. "Ole He, you go."

He Yong brooded! This key might only access the Fragrant Cloud Pavilion! The garden's gates are closed! Will I die if I open the doors?

"It should be fine," Li Hao speculated. "Hibiscus Garden should be a welcome center for guests. We're entering a public area and not private property. Nothing should happen to us according to Battle Heaven rules. Martial Uncle He, try pushing on the door."

He Yong looked at Li Hao and then at Hong Yitang. Why... aren't you guys trying? If it's fine, why are you sending me?

Both Hong Yitang and Li Hao looked silently at him. Of course you're going! Li Hao is too weak and Hong Yitang can stay back as a contingency. You fall in the middle, so who else if not you? Not to mention, we got you safely into the inner city. It's time for you to take some risks or you'll share none of the treasure we find later.

He Yong had nothing to say in his defense. Although no one said a word, he understood their meaning. He took a deep breath, cursed inwardly, and screwed up his courage to push open the door.

It gently creaked open, seeming to have just been slightly closed as opposed to fully shut. The doors opened as He Yong pushed on them.

#### Chapter 444: What One Sees and Hears in an Ancient City (I)

The trio peered into the garden moments later. A small path of blue stones led to a winding dry riverbed. Pavilions and gazebos lined the path while manmade mountains could be glimpsed behind them. This was a beautiful hotel in an exquisite environment.

What a pity that the flowers and grass were withered and the waters dry. Only a few traces of the charm of yesteryear remained. But it was very clean, just a bit sparse of greenery since it'd all wilted.

"Hoo!" He Yong breathed out. Thank goodness, everything was fine. He was fine.

That had been terrifying!

Li Hao had already crossed the threshold and set foot inside. "Let's close the door," he said when the other two followed him. "So that no one who comes later will see that it's open."

Normal people wouldn't dare push open a door since a shut door meant danger. He Yong quickly shut the front door without another word. Li Hao walked toward another signpost, one imprinted with several location names and indication arrows.

"Cloudwater Pavilion."

"Fragrance Pavilion."

"Water Harmony Pavilion."

So on and so forth, until Li Hao finally saw Fragrant Cloud Pavilion with an arrow pointing to the inner depths of the garden.

"Let's head inside!" Li Hao strode forward, leading an uncomfortable He Yong in his wake.

"Is there a point to us locating this place?" He Yong transmitted as they walked. "This is probably a place to rest, can there possibly be treasure here? Would you leave treasure in a hotel?"

He felt it a better use of time to look for residences that were accessible.

"Idiot," a disapproving Hong Yitang rebuked in transmission. "This place is so opulent! Just think of the luxury hotels in our times, are they devoid of nice things? Will a regular residence have more valuable items than the ones inside a hotel?"

"....." Alright then, He Yong felt that this made sense. What could be found inside a hotel would indeed be precious.

"It's not just treasure, but that we should try to gain more clarity into the situation and rules," Li Hao explained. "This is a room that Battle Heaven has assigned to us, there may be explanations of the local rules inside. When we check-in to a hotel, for example, we often find introductions of the local sites and sounds, as well as descriptions of specialties or distinguishing characteristics.

“Battle Heaven welcomes guests from all around. They can’t possibly explain to every single guest the do’s and don’ts of the city. In that case, there might be a guide in the room.”

Hong Yitang and He Yong nodded. These words were logical and heightened their anticipation for the room. Perhaps a further understanding of the rules would help them have an easier time in the city and obtain first mover advantage. Those without keys would not be so lucky.

They saw a few other rooms along the way, but everyone left them alone. These lodgings were standalone properties, making for an opulent hotel indeed. Based on current terminology, this would be a villa resort.

They wandered through the garden until Li Hao finally saw a detached property with a yard outside. A signboard hung over the front door—Fragrant Cloud Pavilion. They’d found it!

The trio rushed forward, the garden wasn’t locked by a separate padlock, but there was a lock hole on the gate that matched the key. Li Hao and Hong Yitang looked at He Yong again; the man cursed loudly to himself!

The royal family never treats me like this! He was quite the authority figure as he was the martial instructor for the royal children. Unfortunately, that identity wasn’t much use here. Hong Yitang was stronger than him, Li Hao was more useful than him. He had no choice but to be the advance guard.

He Yong took a deep breath and shoved the key into the keyhole; his hand shook. If the room here was closed, barging in meant their deaths. Almost no one made it out alive from entering a room with a closed door—not almost, but no one entirely!

Click!

It was the slightest sound, but extraordinarily attention grabbing in such a quiet environment. The three waited nervously, but thankfully a small crack appeared in the yard's door with the click. Some light leaked out of it and joy brightened the trio's eyes. The room door was open!

He Yong took a deep breath and pushed the yard door open. An ancient building two stories tall came into view. Illumination glowed from the ground—ground lamps. Ground lamps eons old were lighting up with the opening of the yard door!

They were plainly powered by mysterious power stones or connected to the rest of the city, drawing upon the energy source below the ground for light.

“Go in!” Li Hao looked at Hong Yitang. He should be first since he was the guest assigned to this residence.

Hong Yitang walked in without a word; the other two carefully followed behind him since they were not the occupant. It should be fine for the master of the residence to entertain two guests, right?

The yard was modestly sized. There were no flowers, but the remaining flowerbeds bore witness to the beauty present in its heyday. A few steps into the yard saw the building's door open automatically. There was no need for the key this time.

Hong Yitang led the way, followed by the other two. It was dark at first, but lights automatically flared to life when there was movement over the threshold. It was everyone's first time seeing such brilliant radiance in Battle Heaven.

The city was normally wrapped in dark gloom with some feeble light. Yet here, the entire house was illuminated. The first floor fell into everyone's line of sight.

Antique sofas stood in a massive living room with a conference table off to the side. A fur carpet of unknown animal pelt lined the floor and a massive pane of glass offered access to the views outside.

Rooms could be found to the left and right. Li Hao scanned the area, his eyes falling on a beautiful advertisement pamphlet. This was what he'd come here for! He rushed forward, already scanning the words on the ancient text.

"A Travel Guide to Battle Heaven City!" Li Hao beamed. Just as he thought, something like this did exist in the hotel.

"Look! What is that?!" Next to him, He Yong suddenly shouted with excitement.

Li Hao looked at the man and followed his finger out the window. The heavily bearded man was hollering with so much excitement that he seemed crazy. There was a hot spring outside the window—the young man identified it as such because there seemed to be water bubbling in the large pool, even today. Hot mist was rising from it!

The pool seemed to have been activated for use again with the arrival of a guest.

Li Hao didn't think much of it at first, but his eyes narrowed in thought when he took a closer look and he set the pamphlet aside. He plastered his face to the window like He Yong and observed it in detail.

"This is... a hot spring for guests to bathe in, right?" Hong Yitang raised an eyebrow. "Is there something off about the water though?"

All three looked intently at the water—there seemed to be some other colors swirling within it. It shimmered with luster, giving one the feeling that it was treasure. Was the water something precious?

"Hurry and find out if we can go there, Li Hao," He Yong spoke urgently. "It seems to be in our backyard, can we go?"

The young man quickly paged through the travel guide. He quickly located the page that spoke of Hibiscus Garden and ran his finger down the text. “This pool is called the Pool of Life. According to the description, an ancient tree of life once grew here and infused the hot springs with the Water of Life. They have the effect of nourishing the body, healing wounds, and complementing cultivation. Each detached residence has a side spring for guests to use.

“However, we need to pay a price to use it. It’s not available for free.”

“What’s the price?” He Yong quickly followed up. “Pool of Life... I think I’ve heard about it before.”

“How luxurious!” Hong Yitang breathed out gently. “I know about this. Some formidable monster spirits in the ancient civilization—the plant type—cultivated to a certain level and planted their roots on enormous mines of mysterious power stones. It’s said that they could extract some of the legendary Water of Life that way. The effects are stunning! Li Hao, I suspect that the energy you used on us before is similar to this legendary water. Healing wounds, repairing internal damage, strengthening the body...

“Who would’ve thought that a simple hotel would offer this kind of service! It’s hard to imagine just how the residents of Battle Heaven lived in the lap of luxury during their times.”

“That’s not necessarily the case!” Li Hao shook his head. “This is for guests, and important guests. Martial Uncle Hong probably received a better key than me. It might be assigned according to level of strength. The regular residents of Battle Heaven might not have the right to enjoy this treatment.

“And we also need to pay a price before we can start using the pool.”

“So what’s the price??” He Yong demanded. “This is a great treasure and of vital importance to us if it contains even a little bit of the Water of Life!”

“Energy stones... meaning mysterious power stones,” Li Hao identified softly as he looked at the pamphlet. “We need to toss mysterious power stones into the pool before we can use it. The payment is used to ensure the operations of the pool, and we need to offer high purity payment!”

“The energy stones that the ancients speak of may be different to what we have in mind,” he said after another close look. “They also specify purity degree.”

Hong Yitang fell silent and looked at He Yong. The latter stared innocently back at him. What you looking at me for? I don’t have money!

“How much?” Hong Yitang looked at the young man instead.

“I don’t know, it doesn’t say, just to toss in a piece. I don’t know how big a piece was in the ancient civilization, if it’s our piece or the one that martial uncle just found!”

Hong Yitang gaped, are you joking?! That piece is worth a stunning fortune, I’m not giving that up!

Chapter 445: What One Sees and Hears in an Ancient City (II)

A high degree of purity... so regular ones wouldn’t do?

“Give it a try, Ole Hong,” He Yong urged. “Something like this is hard to buy with all the money in the world. We’re finally in, so let’s just give it a try!”

“Are you paying?”

“.....” He Yong immediately fell silent with resignation. I don’t have any stones.

“You have no mysterious power stones? I hardly believe that!” Hong Yitang snorted. “You’ve been part of the royal family for so long. Who are you fooling with the idea that you haven’t gained anything for your time?”

There was nothing Hong Yitang could say to that. “I do have some,” he harrumphed after a while. “But their degree of purity may not be enough.”

“Give it a try!” Hong Yitang commanded. “This is my room, Li Hao led us into the city, which leaves you the only one without a single contribution yet. Come, let us go to the backyard!”

The three weren’t in a hurry to see anything else. They could try this curiosity first. It was a great find in a great place!

They swiftly made their way through the building and entered the backyard through the back door. There was a similar lack of grass and flowers here, but the spring still flowed with water. There seemed to be a layer of glass over it. The trio found themselves unable to approach the spring when they drew close.

There was a tiny basin next to the pool; some words were etched on it. Li Hao stooped down for a look and said, “Right here. It says that we will be able to use the hot spring if we input sufficient energy.” The young man took out a piece of stone. “I have some left, let’s try with a piece.”

There was absolutely no response from the basin after he dropped his stone in. Not only was there no response, but there was no change at all. It plopped into the water like it was a regular stone and didn’t elicit anything.

He Yong grit his teeth when he saw the situation and pulled out a larger piece of mysterious power stone from his storage ring. Its shine was brighter than the one Li Hao paid. The basin reacted slightly when the second stone was dropped in.

The water surged slightly and crushed the stone with a brush, but while the energy disappeared and the stone crumbled away, the shield over the basin remained.

“That was the equivalent of twenty times the energy of a regular stone!” He Yong said with a pained expression. “One of those is worth twenty of yours! How is that not enough?”

“There was a reaction!” Li Hao quickly said. “That’s better than how mine did. It probably wasn’t enough. Put some more in, Martial Uncle He.”

Fuck you! He Yong griped. This is so expensive! How much will it take for the pool to open? And the key thing is, what if we just can’t open it? What if the effects are mediocre? Although the waters are still flowing, it’s been countless years since it was established. What if the thing that inputs the Water of Life has died?

Then it would be a waste of their stones!

But He Yong was also quite tempted and placed another piece in with a determined clench of his jaw. The stone immediately crumbled away like before and the energy instantly absorbed.

There was still no reaction.

He Yong sweated profusely from the anguish of spending so much. But since he’d offered two pieces, here came a third... A fourth, a fifth...

He couldn’t bear it after the fifth piece was consumed and moaned, “I have no more. I did accumulate some wealth from my time with the royal family, but I’ve had to cultivate these years as well. That was my life’s savings, I put it all in there!

“That was worth one hundred mysterious power stones!” He Yong wailed. “According to market prices, one piece is worth one thousand cubes. That was ten thousand cubes of mysterious power! I can’t do it anymore if that still isn’t enough!”

It was too expensive! Li Hao also looked on with a pained expression—this spring was frightfully expensive. “Has it been too long and some of the mechanisms have degraded...?”

“So you mean we can’t access the spring at all?” He Yong gasped.

Who knew? It'd been countless years, who could say for sure?

Hong Yitang frowned at seeing He Yong ready to lose his mind. "Shut up, what are you putting this act on for? One hundred mysterious power stones is a lot, but I don't believe that this is your entire fortune! Would you have been willing to pay it all if it was, you bastard? We consumed eight hundred pieces at Ash Mountain and you didn't even bat an eye."

"No, but those..."

Were spoils from battle! It didn't hurt to spend something that wasn't theirs!

Hong Yitang couldn't be bothered to respond and thought for a moment. Although it hurt to do so, he took out the massive piece of mysterious power stone that he'd just picked up. He carefully scraped off a piece—a very tiny piece!

The water churned when he put it in the basin—it still wasn't enough. Hong Yitang took a breath and scraped off some more, and some more. The water frothed with action, as did the pool beside the basin. The barrier flickered in and out of sight, but didn't fully vanish.

Hong Yitang scraped ever smaller shavings so as to not waste any. After a dozen times, the barrier disappeared with a pop. Humid air wafted over their faces—the pool was open for business!

Delighted, He Yong tensed to charge over, but Hong Yitang grabbed him by the shoulder. The man addressed Li Hao without even looking at He Yong.

"Go get some water and see if there's any benefits to it."

Li Hao smiled and walked up to the pool. There wasn't that much water, but it kept flowing into the pool. There was some color and luster to the water, making for a pretty sight.

The young man reached out tentatively and grabbed a handful of water. He could sense a unique energy rippling through it as soon as he touched it. The energy sank into his arm, a similar sensation to sword energy, but not entirely the same.

The energy didn't seem as dense as sword energy upon further consideration, but Li Hao could sense that his body was indeed being enhanced as it flowed further in.

Some dead skin suddenly appeared on his arm. Li Hao regarded it with curiosity. This energy was very unique, it imparted the feeling of returning to one's youth. It reminded him of a dead tree that his teacher once spoke of finding. The tree trunk had suddenly split open and a drop of water evaporated. Yuan Shuo had only absorbed a little, but it gave him the feeling of returning to a younger state.

Of course, that description was different from what was taking place now. Li Hao looked carefully at the water and absorbed some more energy. Perhaps... this was the diluted form of that water droplet?

"Don't take it all for yourself, Li Hao!" He Yong called out. "How does it feel?"

"Decent!" Li Hao smiled and withdrew his hand. "It improves the constitution in a gentle manner and should have good effects for both of you. The mysterious power stones were not wasted as it should fortify the entire body. The effects are actually quite decent and will help heal some old injuries."

It bore similar effects to sword energy, but it was hard to determine the specifics and if it could extract energy of the five elements. The energy had seeped into the water and was thus hard to extract again for use.

Hong Yitang released He Yong—the man's first instinct wasn't to jump into the water, but bend by the edge and open his mouth. He sucked in a mouthful of water and swallowed it!

“.....” Li Hao and Hong Yitang stared at him. This is bathing water!

But Li Hao had done something similar before. He'd even wanted to drink water that a dog already had tasted, much less bathwater.

He Yong silently observed his body after swallowing a large mouthful. “This is great!” He brightened. “But it doesn't seem as wondrous as the ancient books make it out to be. They say that one drop of the Water of Life can even regrow limbs. Why don't I feel the same way?”

“It's been diluted!” Li Hao explained. “Are they really going to give you an entire pool of that treasure? It's good enough that these waters contain a little bit of it, and it may just be left over from all those years ago.”

Very well then! He Yong was slightly disappointed.

Hong Yitang couldn't be bothered to engage in conversation. He took off his clothes, leaving only his undergarment. The waters frothed when he jumped in, drawing a muttered curse from He Yong.

Oh come on! Just drink it, what are you really bathing in it for??

Li Hao laughed and also jumped in. The pool was modestly sized and could fit three. But if He Yong wanted to drink it, then he could drink it.

“What are you guys doing?” He Yong cursed. “This is such a waste, just drink it all...”

“Since they want us to soak in it, then we'll follow the rules!” Hong Yitang replied indifferently. “Maybe they added something that makes it unsuitable for drinking. Drink it yourself if you want to.”

He began operating a breathing method, as did Li Hao with the Breathing Method of the Five Styles. Sword energy was excellent, but this energy was slightly different. Sword energy could heal and enhance, yet it lacked other abilities. When this energy rushed into the body, Li Hao discovered that some of his surface injuries were disappearing.

As he thought, this energy was very special. After a while, he found that his skin was turning paler. He was tanned from the sun before and injuries were inevitable throughout the course of training. Sword energy could heal injuries and hasten their closure, but it didn't erase scars.

There were many scars on his body—they were all turning fainter now. And of course, this wasn't important.

What was important was that the five organs felt like they were being tempered anew as energy rushed in. It wasn't the tempering from a single element—that required absorbing exact amounts of energy to maintain a balance between the five organs.

The five organs seemed ensconced in the energy; it contained a unique complete balance, but the effects were slightly less than elemental energy. It seemed similar to blood energy, but blood energy wasn't this gentle.

He Yong quickly jumped in. The three furiously operated their breathing methods to absorb the energy within the spring.

Li Hao opened the pamphlet again at the same time to glean more information.

#### Chapter 446: What One Sees and Hears in an Ancient City (III)

“Battle Heaven City—Black Tortoise Pagoda!” In the pamphlet, Li Hao noted the description of a very important spot. According to the information, the city's Black Tortoise Pagoda was its landmark building. It was also a great weapon.

Li Hao blinked. The pagoda was a great weapon? Then... what about the Black Tortoise Seal? The young man quickly paged through the guide, but didn't find any introduction of the seal. The young

man was left rather confused. Hou Xiaochen and the others wanted the seal at all costs, but the pamphlet spoke of the pagoda instead of the seal.

At the same time, it was just a guidebook, so it might not touch upon all of the city's secrets.

"The southern quadrant is the commercial district, the eastern is the residential.. Curfew is at midnight every night. Those who venture outside must carry their residence tokens at all times or they will be expelled from the city. The defense system will activate and kill trespassers who refuse to follow orders and be expelled." Li Hao scanned the points to pay attention to, a new thought striking him.

These rules meant that visitors needed to return to their lodgings before midnight everyday. One could linger outside, but needed to carry their key on them to prove that they were the city's guest.

These were very humane rules! Lacking a key only meant that one would be expelled at first opportunity and not killed. Only those who resisted the authorities would be killed.

They give people this many chances? The overseers of the city didn't seem the bloodthirsty sort. They were understanding and reasonable, even flexible, and offered many chances. Trespassers were only thrown out and no further trouble made for them.

Granted, Li Hao didn't know what manner of banishment took place. Regular people might resist if they didn't understand. All would be over for them then.

So we are safe only with the key on us?

Li Hao continued flipping through the pamphlet. It also denoted some other conditions such as guests being forbidden to enter residences and storefronts. That was private property and as such, sacred and inviolable.

There were exceptions, however. The army could open doors and carry out legitimate inspection duties. A final point could be found on this page—how to join the Battle Heaven Army.

The northern quadrant belonged to the military and the recruitment center was also located there. Visitors could visit the northern quadrant to join. There were numerous benefits to joining the army; a high compensation package went without saying, one would also receive support from the city's fortifications.

The entire city was an enormous weapon that supplied massive quantities of energy to the army. All were welcome to be a part of it. One could become a proud member of the glorious Battle Heaven Army if they were approved and passed the test. The army possessed one important mission—to protect all of humanity and safeguard the city...

There weren't that many rules, but one point in particular was emphasized. Deserting the field of battle meant death without mercy! The soldiers needed to be bold and lion-hearted.

Li Hao was briefly tempted when he read the description, but resignation quickly set in. There was no army anymore, just suits of armor with lingering obsessions. They probably weren't recruiting, were they?

Well.... that was difficult to say! Perhaps they could try?

The training facilities in the army seemed superior and more sophisticated than the ones in the hotels. It was the army that enjoyed the best treatment in the city.

Li Hao continued to flip through the pamphlet, finding more rules that stated visitors were not to set foot on military property, that they should refrain from entering important bases, and that some free facilities could be found throughout the city for no charge.

The biggest library, for instance, was available to guests with keys and residents with IDs. Those lacking such items were forbidden from entering. One should not destroy public property without cause. Compensation would be demanded in those instances and consequences would be levied if it was not paid!

And so on and so forth. There were numerous related rules.

In addition, the pagoda tree tunnel outside the city was also a point of interest. The special tunnel formed by a pagoda tree ten thousand years ago should not be defaced by carvings, graffiti, or other uncivilized actions. One could not gather the tree's vitality without permission, but could toss some mysterious power stones in a certain area. If the tree was willing, it might trade some vitality in return.

Li Hao's eyes widened. So the long tunnel outside the city really is a tree? A tree spirit? He flipped to another point in the pamphlet—visitors were strictly forbidden from entering the city lord manor. The manor was a stronghold of authority and off-limits to tourists. But those with business or a member of the eight families could head to the city lord manor for an audience...

Li Hao blinked. This was his first time seeing the eight families clearly denoted in an ancient text. It spoke of not the eight families, but the eight guardian clans.

Guardians... Director General Zhao had once said the same time.

Li Hao quickly paged through the pamphlet, not minding that the pool's energy was dwindling. Both He Yong and Hong Yitang seemed much younger. Their hair was black, as was He Yong's beard. Their newfound youth was an obvious sign that the benefits they'd gained from the pool were far greater than the stones they'd paid.

He Yong was elated and wanted nothing more than to soak himself in the pool a few more times!

Li Hao finished looking through the pamphlet. It was just a guide and not an encyclopedia. Some things were mentioned only in passing, as opposed to a detailed description. But that was enough!

The young man raised his head with joy, but quickly glanced at He Yong. "Martial Uncle He... You should probably go out now and take the second passageway again. It's best if you can get a key. If you can't, you should try the ancient house again and again until you do. Otherwise, you'll have a tough time surviving here!"

“.....” He Yong blinked and stared at the young man. “Um... must I? Aren’t I just fine right now?”

“Then you’ll have to stay here and not leave. This is fine for the day, but not at night.”

Is there even day and night here?

“Why?” mumbled a baffled He Yong.

“The city expels all unauthorized visitors at midnight. It’s expulsion the first time and execution if resistance is shown! Do you think you can withstand the attacks from the city, martial uncle?”

“.....”

Of course not.

“Must I really get a key?” He Yong asked with distress. That was the crux of the problem.

“You’ll face no restrictions in the outer city,” Li Hao responded. “We stayed there three days last time without being thrown out or killed. Martial uncle can stay there too.”

He Yong looked on with resignation.

“There’s another method we can try—join the army!” Li Hao offered after some thought.

“Huh?”

“Become a soldier and part of the Battle Heaven Army!” Li Hao laughed as he glanced outside. “The army is recruiting. We’ll have a legitimate identity once we join them.”

“But they’re all gone...” He Yong said blankly.

“So what’s fighting outside then?”

That was true!

The trio looked at each other. After a moment, Hong Yitang said, “Then let us try. Perhaps joining the army will bring us more benefits. We can also experience for ourselves how strong this Battle Heaven Army is.”

“However, joining now might mean that we’re deployed to the frontlines,” Li Hao interjected. “Which means the eastern city gates and fighting with the city defenders!”

He Yong and Hong Yitang started; both looked at the young man.

“Repelling enemies is the duty of the Battle Heaven Army!” Li Hao declared staunchly. “It is up to you two whether we go or not. If we do, we might have to fight the supernaturals outside.”

“Let’s do it!” He Yong licked his lips and snorted. “What are we afraid of? Not to mention, it’s a fight either way. Those guys outside will be easier than these armored soldiers!”

Li Hao said nothing more. The three quickly climbed out of the dry pool, steamed their clothes dry, then headed for the northern quadrant. Let’s see if they could join the army first.

The sounds of fighting outside began dying down as the supernaturals retreated for the moment. The army called for a withdrawal and clustered inside the city gates.

Li Hao ignored the development. Now was their chance before everyone entered the inner city. They moved swiftly toward the northern quadrant. Thanks to the travel guide, they were extremely familiar with the situation inside the city. They didn't stop despite seeing numerous houses with open front doors.

There was no hurry to explore that for now. They would have all the time in the world if they could hold the city.

People could not spend a month in Battle Heaven because they could not survive for so long inside. Regular patrols and cleaning house by the soldiers would eventually be the death of anyone who stayed in the city. One also couldn't linger too long in the outer city as it would eventually be swept by the army as well.

This was why no one from previous expeditions was ever seen after the ruins were sealed off after three days. But if they obtained legitimate identities, they would be able to stay here indefinitely.

.....

The three ran at top speed. Battle Heaven wasn't too large—they entered the northern quadrant before long. It seemed to be an enormous military barracks.

The trio was blocked at an entrance before they could enter the barracks proper. It seemed to have been a guard post in the past, but there was no one here now. Only a long guardrail blocked their way. Barging into military territory was cause for death and there was also a sign hanging in front written "Military: Restricted Area".

The three came to a halt. Li Hao looked around them, there was no one. There was a guard office by the guardrail, but it was empty and devoid of people. The guardrail was down and it wasn't too high.

“We can flip over it...” He Yong transmitted.

Li Hao immediately shook his head. That would be inappropriate! The city was awake, flipping over the rail might lead to irredeemable consequences.

The young man walked up for a look. The office was empty, but the door was open. There was a system in the office, but Li Hao wasn't familiar with it. He saw several buttons, one of which was a call button.

He paused, should he press it? Would anyone come if he pressed it? Or would trouble appear instead?

Chapter 447: The New Twelfth Troop (I)

“There's a call button here, do I press it?” Li Hao looked at the two behind him.

Hong Yitang thought for a bit. “Press it! Entering without invitation is the act of thieves. There is no one here upon our arrival and if there is no response after we hail them... then we are not thieves.”

He was treating this city as a living city as well. Otherwise, there was no need to be so cautious. Li Hao thought it over, nodded, and pressed the button.

There was no movement, but they still waited. Perhaps there would be something different forthcoming.

It took less than a minute before the look in Li Hao's eyes shifted and Hong Yitang went on the alert. Two figures appeared behind the guardrail. There was someone there! The city was still operational! It was not Black, Bronze, or Silver Armors that came to welcome them, but two soldiers in red armor.

Red Armors!

Li Hao blinked and looked closely at the two soldiers. There was small text on their arm—supervisor. This was a different military branch!

He Yong's expression changed rapidly—there was another type of soldier they didn't know about in Battle Heaven! This was a special troop as the two armored soldiers in front of them seemed to belong to another system. Their exact strength was currently unknown.

“Supervisor!” Li Hao transmitted. “Their armor says supervisor. It's possibly the army's internal corps or supervisory office, the type that looks after internal affairs.”

The two men nodded, but were also at a loss. How should they communicate with the soldiers? Was that even possible? Although the soldiers inside the city could still fight, they seemed to have lost the ability to communicate. That was possible only when they revived, but it also meant that complete death was soon to arrive.

Li Hao thought rapidly when the soldiers quick-marched their way. He quickly took out the “Travel Guide to Battle Heaven City” and flipped it to the recruitment page. When the soldiers approached him, he raised the pamphlet high to indicate that he wanted to join the army!

As for whether or not this method would work... who knew!

The two soldiers stopped in front of the guardrail. There seemed to be empty air inside the Red Armors, or perhaps of lingering sentence or obsession that compelled them to carry out their missions in life.

Recruitment!

Whether it was seeing the pamphlet or knowing that any visitors that visited at this time would want to join, one of the Red Armors waved their hands and opened the iron guardrail with a sparkle of light.

Can we? The thought flashed through the trio's minds.

The other Red Armor pointed at Li Hao and Hong Yitang, gesturing for them to enter. Li Hao found it odd, but walked inside. So did Hong Yitang do the same. But when He Yong tried to enter...

Bam!

The Red Armor drew its blade and slashed it downward. The weapon crashed on the ground in front of He Yong instead of on the man, blocking his way. A beam of red light shot out of the Red Armor's visor in warning!

He Yong looked on with an unpleasant expression, both morose and depressed. Damn it! Was this what happened to someone without a key? He didn't even have the chance to be a soldier! Motherfucker!

Li Hao was also startled. Would this not work? So would it be very difficult for He Yong to obtain a legal identity?

The young man rapidly considered their options, then tossed the key in his hand to He Yong. He took out Stellaris; the sword emanated a faint hue under the watchful gaze of the Red Armors.

The two soldiers abruptly imitated the earlier Silver Armor and balled up their right hands to thump their chests. Li Hao hastily returned the gesture—the exchange suddenly felt rather sacred. These ceremonies were quite manly. The young man's thoughts wandered and a random question popped into his mind—it was fine for men to perform the gesture, but would it be painful for women?

The Red Armors seemed different from the Silver Armor; they hadn't recognized his identity at first. Some perception dawned only after Stellaris was drawn. Did this mean that they were lower level than the Silver Armors?

Silver Armors were ranking officers. The Black Armors hadn't sensed Li Hao at first either, they performed the salute only after the Silver Armor did. Meanwhile, the Red Armors had to see the weapon before saluting.

Key in hand, He Yong wasn't attacked when he tried to cross the guardrail again. Perhaps it was also due to Li Hao's identity, but the two Red Armors didn't move. The man smiled ruefully. Thank goodness for Li Hao! He would have such a difficult time of it even though he was in the inner city.

The Red Armors didn't move after their salute. They waited for a while, as if soundlessly imparting something. Moments later, they waved the guardrail shut again. They took point and led the way, the trio followed with trepidation.

The group moved through the massive barracks complex, a stern wave of desolation washing over them. And so they moved forward...

A large hall appeared in front of them after five minutes. Li Hao brightened at the sight.

"The Recruitment Hall!" he transmitted. "This is where they recruit people, these two Red Armors do know what we want to do! Do you think they're conscious?"

The soldiers really had brought them to the recruitment point!

Hong Yitang and He Yong found it odd. Were these soldiers really just moving mechanically, or did some consciousness still exist in them and they were just unable to speak?

The hall doors were open and Li Hao seemed to see some armored warriors inside when he swept a glance at it. There were still soldiers posted at their stations even when battle raged outside.

The Red Armors stopped in front of the doors. A Bronze Armor walked out after a while. Its empty gaze ran over the three newcomers before turning to wave them into the hall.

Li Hao quickly walked forward, as did the other two. But upon the young man's first step, he suddenly felt a drag on his clothes. Jerking with surprise, he turned to see a Red Armor had reached out with its armored arm to pull him back.

The soldier pointed in another direction as Li Hao stared blankly at him, while the other Red Armor made an inviting gesture to walk in another direction. The young man gaped, what did this mean?

He Yong and Hong Yitang also stopped, but a Red Armor unsheathed its sword and smacked He Yong like it was shooing a fly. The rough and tumble man forced himself not to react.

"We should go," Hong Yitang said wryly. "These two want us to follow the bronze centurion, while Li Hao may be going elsewhere. I get it, a young master joins the army at a different place than us!"

He Yong rolled his eyes and couldn't restrain himself anymore. "The fuck man? It's been countless years, but the ancient civilization still practices preferential treatment? Someone from the eight families gets different treatment when they join the army?"

He finally understood now. There was another place ready to host Li Hao. The two of them were to follow normal recruitment procedures; they were completely different.

Hong Yitang didn't know whether to laugh or cry either. Who knew? Perhaps it was very normal for the eight families to receive preferential treatment in the ancient civilization. What could they say?

Nothing at all!

Seeing that the Bronze Armor in front of them was about to vanish from sight, the two quickly caught up to the soldier.

"Go on," Hong Yitang transmitted to Li Hao. "Perhaps being different from us is good!"

.....

Li Hao scratched his head. To be honest, he hadn't experienced special treatment anywhere on account of his eight families bloodline. Who would've thought that it would happen in Battle Heaven? He was well and truly feeling the uniqueness of his bloodline. It was nice being a young master!

He walked forward with the Red Armors; they stopped after roughly ten minutes. The Red Armors remained put. One of them knocked on the door of the small building that they stood in front of. The door opened amid Li Hao's astonished gaze and another Red Armor walked out.

Contrary to the two leading the way, this one did not wear a supervisor medal. The three Red Armors held a brief exchange before the newest one cast its empty gaze at Li Hao. It looked on the shortsword in his hand, as if it recognized the weapon and what it represented!

It mechanically reached out and waved at Li Hao. The young man quickly stepped forward! The Red Armor stepped back into the building, whereupon the other two saluted and left.

Li Hao quickly returned the gesture, not daring to view these soldiers as mere puppets anymore. They were possibly still alive—not in the physical sense, but in the spiritual sense.

The Red Armor led Li Hao into the building. It appeared modest on the outside, but was quite spacious after one entered it. There was more than one Red Armor inside—there were many bustling to and fro in their duties. This building was still operational.

Li Hao of the special treatment felt something different here. Red Armors consistently saluted him and he continuously returned the salute. It truly felt like he was in a massive barracks—the feeling was much more apparent than when he was in the Silver Moon Guards. This atmosphere wasn't really present there.

They walked down a long hallway and reached an office at the end. It opened automatically when the Red Armor knocked. The soldier entered, returned after a moment, and indicated for Li Hao to go inside. Its mission was complete.

An apprehensive Li Hao hesitated for a second before quickly walking in. He was stunned as soon as he did so. The office was set up very similarly to modern offices, but... there... was... a Gold Armor sitting inside!

Li Hao nearly swallowed his tongue! How were there more Gold Armors?! How was this possible??

If Silver Armors were ranking officers, then that meant Gold Armors were likely the commanders. But one had already appeared in the city lord manor, which meant it was most likely the city lord. There shouldn't be any others!

So how was there another one here? What was the one in the city lord manor? The city lord? But it looked the same as this one—first rank gold?

A myriad of thoughts ran through Li Hao's mind as he quickly saluted. He absolutely treated this one as a living person.

The Gold Armor rose to its feet, saluted, and sat down again. Its assessing gaze fell on the shortsword, as if that was the heart of the matter.

Dead silence reigned for a while before a fist suddenly appeared in front of Li Hao's baffled eyes.

BAM!

It connected before the young man could react and sent Li Hao flying. He smashed into the wall and slowly slid off like he was boneless.

Chapter 448: The New Twelfth Troop (II)

Li Hao's mind rang with shock! He swiftly sprang onto his feet and prepared to strike back, but saw that the Gold Armor had already sat back down like it hadn't moved. It was as if the young man had dreamed the entire incident.

While Li Hao reeled from confusion, the Gold Armor lowered its head and considered a piece of paper in front of it, pondering something. After a while, it picked up a brush and began writing something!

Li Hao blinked and paused, looking silently at the soldier. It finished the missive after a minute. A knock on the table summoned the Red Armor that'd led the way. It entered to receive the piece of paper. Li Hao rose on tiptoe to take a peek at the contents, managing to read some of the filled sheet.

"The bloodline of the Lis and heir of Stellaris is too weak and fragile to be trained. The core of the eight families should be conferred a position of general when joining the Battle Heaven Army, but due to his substandard strength, he is to be given the position of a field grade officer..."

Li Hao's jaw dropped. Weak and fragile? Those words cut deep! So that had been a test of his strength? The Gold Armor found him too weak because he hadn't been able to withstand even one punch, so his entry rank was demoted as a result?

The core disciples of the eight families seemed to start as generals when they joined Battle Heaven, that was incredible! What a pity he seemed to have lost face for his family and been heavily demoted!

The Red Armor finished reading the text and looked at Li Hao, indicating for the young man to come with it. Li Hao looked at the Gold Armor with resignation, but realized that the soldier was now ignoring him! His assessment was over before he knew it was beginning.

A rueful grin crossing his face, Li Hao followed the Red Armor out. They walked straight out of the building and entered another structure. It might be the weaponry as it was a Silver Armor on duty here. After taking the piece of paper, it gathered some items and placed them before the mystified young man.

One medallion, one set of armor, one pamphlet, one storage ring, and a piece of paper that seemed to require Li Hao's signature. The armor was silver. Li Hao goggled at it—he was going to be a Silver Armor! So they were the field grade officers? Would that make the Gold Armors the generals?

One had to know that while sets of black armor could be taken out of the city, the higher ranked bronze and silver armor could not. They would detonate if moved out of the city's confines!

Will I be able to leave the city after I put on the silver armor? Will it blow me up too if I exit the city's perimeter?

But the Red Armor was staring at the young man and there was another Silver Armor in front of him... Li Hao clenched his teeth. The situation had progressed thus and there was a Gold Armor nearby... If he refused the equipment, would he be executed on the spot as a deserter?

That wasn't out of the question! This city was very much one of logic and principles. Deserters were sure to be executed.

Li Hao clumsily fumbled for the armor, but didn't know how to use it. He knew how to utilize black armor, but it was his first time seeing this iteration of armor.

A sense of wordlessness exuded out of the Red Armor who'd led him here. It reached out, took Li Hao's hand, and pricked the young man's fingertip with a spike that formed on the red armor. A droplet of blood beaded on Li Hao's fingertip; the Red Armor moved Li Hao's hand over and dripped the blood onto a protrusion on the silver armor.

A new sensation flooded into the young man. The armor in front of him seemed to be part of his body now. It easily fit over him with a single thought. Not only that, but new information filled his mind. There seemed to be someone telling him how to utilize his new equipment.

Li Hao was now a Silver Armor. A longsword appeared in his hand with a thought, shifted into a long blade, then a spear... His eyes widened with astonishment. This equipment was incredible! It came with its own weapon that could transform into various forms!

Knock knock knock! The Silver Armor of the Weaponry knocked on the table. "Newcomer, sign the document!" Stilted words appeared in Li Hao's mind.

The young man gaped with shock and jerked his head toward the Silver Armor! The soldier was very impatient and knocked on the table again.

"Getting in through connections, huh? You have to sign even if you're a member of the eight guardian clans. Are you going to make me pay for a missing set of equipment?"

"You're alive?!" Li Hao goggled. Although he spoke aloud, his words didn't seem to have an effect. The other either didn't hear him or didn't understand. Li Hao thought back to the armor's instructions that'd just filled his mind and awkwardly fumbled through the manipulations with his consciousness.

He finally grasped what he wanted to do just as the Silver Armor seemed ready to beat him.

"You can talk?" A surge of mind intent flowed out. It was received as an impatient voice echoed back in his mind.

"Stow your blathering, newbie, or I'll kick you dead! Cut the nonsense, hurry up, sign, and get out of here!"

"....." Li Hao could barely breathe in his shock! But sensing the other's impatience, he docilely signed his name on the paper.

The irate Silver Armor ripped up the paper as soon as he finished and pulled out another sheet. "I'll execute you for the crime of obstruction if you doodle again!"

“.....” Li Hao was completely lost, but then quickly realized something. He tried again with ancient characters—Li Hao!

It was ripped up again!

“Are you challenging me, newbie?!” raged the Silver Armor. “Use a mental brand to write your name! Do you not understand or are you toying with me?!”

Li Hao paused, mystified. His thoughts swirled through the silver armor to communicate with the other. “I don’t understand...”

“Trash!”

“.....” He’d been lectured! Li Hao was troubled and vexed. Mental brand... mental brand... Did the soldier mean mind intent?

He tried again with his mind and imprinted the large characters of Li Hao. The paper was swiftly tucked away by a finally satisfied Silver Armor. Meanwhile, the Red Armor that’d led the way gestured for Li Hao to put the other items away.

The young man tried sending a message to it, but found his efforts futile. Just how did this work? Could he communicate only with fellow Silver Armors? Could he not communicate with any soldiers of another system? Or did he lack the proper authorization?

Scratching his head, Li Hao picked up the medallion, pamphlet, and storage ring. He quickly scanned the storage ring and took a sharp breath. Hot damn! There was nothing special inside, just ten mysterious power stones. Compared to his, however, these ones sparkled with luster. It was apparent from a quick glance that his were trash and these were the real treasure!

Were these... military rations?

Apart from the stones, there were also sets of undergarments and two sets of outerwear. They were regular casual wear instead of armor, seemingly meant for day-to-day use. They were military uniforms and looked quite striking.

There was nothing else in the ring other than a key that turned up with careful perusal. Room 109 of the Field Grade Officer Dorms. This seemed to be his dormitory.

He then examined his medallion—there was a line of text on it that said the Ninth Division of the Ninth Troop Reserve Defenders of the Battle Heaven Army. Li Hao scratched his head again. So they were... the reserves? He wasn't part of the frontlines?

He quickly paged through the pamphlet. Various regulations, military rules, points of consideration, and special notes were denoted in it. Their first duty was to obey orders!

Li Hao was beginning to feel the weight of his station. There were so many strict regulations! It looked like he would lose his head at the slightest misstep. Was this a good course of action? Was it a good idea to join the city's army?

The young man turned his attention to his armor and slowly sensed something different about it. His explorations abruptly caused faint light to bloom from the armor; energy from the ground surged in! Not only could he absorb this energy, but it also enhanced the armor's defensive capabilities. It also seemed to impart other uses, such as the ability to fly!

He couldn't fly in terms of the conventional definition, but he could connect to the entire city's defensive system when clad in his armor. It would take a while longer for him to be familiar with the details.

A technical voice sounded in Li Hao's mind at this time. "Welcome to the Battle Heaven Army! The Ninth Division is full and training of new recruits has ceased. Troop Leader Li Hao of the Twelfth Troop in the Ninth Division, recruitment has become difficult. The Recruitment Hall has newly

accepted two rookies who have yet to undergo the army's training regime. Their battle capabilities are weak. Are you willing to accept them in your troop?"

Li Hao blinked, then suppressed the urge to laugh. Two new rookies with weak battle capabilities... wasn't that Hong Yitang and He Yong? So I'm a troop leader now? But I'm just a nominal officer, probably like one of those ranking officers. There's no available troops to assign to me, so the two new guys are being given to me, the figurehead?

Li Hao didn't know whether to laugh or cry, but he quickly followed the operation instructions to accept the men. Information appeared in his consciousness—the two rookies were indeed Hong Yitang and He Yong.

They didn't use false names? That's surprising. Or maybe it doesn't matter.

Hong Yitang was a lieutenant—a Bronze Armor the equivalent of a centurion. He Yong was... a regular soldier!

Li Hao raised an eyebrow. How did this work? How had they been assessed and assigned? He Yong was mid Nova even when he didn't call upon his full strength, but he was just a regular soldier? Did they not assign ranks according to strength?

Possibly.

Had an exception been made for Hong Yitang because he was so strong?

#### Chapter 449: The New Twelfth Troop (III)

Li Hao had many questions, but no one was giving him answers. The Silver Armor that'd spoken to him impatiently ignored his questions. Thus, the young man left with the Red Armor.

Moments later, another Red Armor led a Bronze Armor and Black Armor in from the distance.

“Li Hao, I’ve received word that we’ve been added to the Twelfth Troop of the Ninth Division,” came He Yong’s voice. “Ole Hong is my superior as the leader of the first company in the Twelfth Troop and I’m just a damn Black Armor!”

“Cut the bullcrap,” said an equally resigned Hong Yitang. “I’ve received word too that I have a superior officer—Troop Leader Li Hao! I’m to report to the troop leader!”

Although Li Hao was wearing a suit of silver armor, both of the men knew that it was the young man. As their superior in the army, a warning flashed across their visors even though they were far away.

Alert! The troop leader is in the vicinity!

Hong Yitang was quite at a loss. Were the eight families that big of a deal? Pfft! Li Hao was a Silver Armor troop leader as soon as he joined, and a powerhouse such as him was just a Bronze Armor! In the same vein, he could take some comfort in the fact that He Yong was the truly pitiful soul. The man was a soldier under his command, hah!

“I’ve figured out some things,” Hong Yitang continued. “Li Hao, this armor is incredible! Its defensive capabilities are very strong. I feel undeniable powerful even as just a Bronze Armor. Perhaps we weren’t using them properly before, making the sets of black armor only on par with Sunflare. Ask Old He, his armor seems highly capable...”

“Yeah, I think this equipment is nuts!” He Yong immediately piped up. “Of course, it depends on your strength. The stronger one is, the greater the defense and the more energy extracted from the ground. But I can’t seem to leave the ground. Once I do, I’m reduced to the regular armor’s capabilities.”

There were certain limits to the sets of black armor; Li Hao convened with them.

“I’ve discovered some things as well,” the young man’s voice traveled out of the silver armor. “You guys seem to have become my direct subordinates and I can send messages to you through the internals of the armor...”

His mind intent rippled, but stayed within the armor. However, Li Hao's voice rang in the men's minds. "Isn't this fun?"

"....."

"I can do it too." Hong Yitang immediately tried. "But I can only do that to Ole He. If you grant me the authorization, though, I seem to be able to make reports to you..."

"This armor is incredible!"

"These soldiers must have been ridiculously strong in the ancient civilization, as were the armors' craftsmen! And this is just an internal communication system that facilitates efficient execution of orders." Both He Yong and Hong Yitang were full of appreciation and amazement. This was astounding, and it was just for a reserve army left to safeguard the city! The skill and resources required for constructing these suits of armor were out of reach for the current Skystar Dynasty.

A new communication rang in Li Hao's armor.

"Troop Leader Li Hao of the newly designated Twelfth Troop of the Ninth Division, the Ninth Division is under attack at the eastern gates. The enemy is strong—is the Twelfth Troop willing to reinforce the division? As a new troop with weak battle capabilities and insufficient personnel, you can refuse the request. You can wait until your personnel and training is complete..."

Li Hao raised an eyebrow. Where was this voice coming from? The Gold Armor inside the city, or was this also part of the armor? If the Silver Armor could speak through this system, then so could the Gold Armor.

He didn't want to stay here. According to the rules in his pamphlet, new recruits must undergo three months of training. If he didn't head into battle, he'd have to take his two rookies and endure three months of grueling work within the barracks!

Are you kidding me? No way I'm wasting three months on that.

Hence, Li Hao accepted the mission.

"The newly formed Twelfth Troop will immediately march to the battlefield and await further orders. Resist the enemy and fight for humanity and Battle Heaven!" Some emotion entered the vigorous voice as it rang in Li Hao's mind. A voice rang in Hong Yitang and He Yong's minds as well.

"Advance, newly formed Twelfth Troop! Kill!"

The two Red Armors behind them saluted, as if knowing that the trio had accepted the mission. They thumped their chests with loud clangs!

Not only that, but soldiers everywhere seemed to have heard the directive. Chest thumps abounded as they saluted another troop about to head to the battlefield. Soldiers seeing them off could be glimpsed everywhere the eye could see.

"It's an oddly... hot-blooded atmosphere," He Yong murmured. "It's like we'll disappoint everyone if we don't return in triumph..."

It was a strange feeling! They were going to march against modern humans, of which they were a part of. Had they become turncoats to their entire era? A bizarre feeling assailed the three. Had they become traitors of their time? They'd joined an ancient army and accepted orders to fight present-day humans...

The question briefly flashed through their minds. Who cared! It was the feeling of being saluted by everyone that lingered.

“No one sent me off like this when I set out from the Silver Moon Guards,” Li Hao muttered as they walked. “If they had, I might’ve been a bit worked up too!”

Such was the truth. At times, the most inconsequential of actions were the most unforgettable. Soldiers saluted them wherever they went and still saw them off even after the trio walked out of sight. It was like they were joyously sending heroes off on a grand mission. Just this alone was very satisfying to Li Hao.

The three reached the complex entrance before long. A new Red Armor was here. It swiftly raised the guardrail and thumped its chest with a loud smash. The trio felt that it might have shouted something if it could speak.

They walked out amid this odd atmosphere that also made their blood run with passion. He Yong exhaled slowly when they were out. “I feel like... if we spent a long time in there, we’d definitely be assimilated by them. What a terrifying feeling!”

It was a sensation of constantly being brainwashed and fed a certain line of thinking. It was more frightening than what Hong Yitang had said earlier.

“This is why these soldiers are so strong!” Hong Yitang sighed. “We have our own thoughts and aren’t even of this time. It’s only been a short while since we joined this army, but we already have a solemn sense of duty. We’d probably feel this more acutely after three months of training. This is a terrifying place!”

Li Hao didn’t say anything as he’d received another directive. “Let’s go. I don’t know if it’s coming from upstairs or what, but we need to get to the battlefield in one hour. We’ll be punished according to military regulations if we’re late!”

They weren’t too far from the eastern gate, so one hour was plenty of time. It would seem that upstairs was being lenient to the newly designated troop. Li Hao took to the air, exulting in the feeling of flight. He soared proudly through a sky without obstacles.

The two below looked at him while simply running toward the eastern gate. “Don’t be too conspicuous,” Hong Yitang transmitted. “Your strength is on par with an unawakened Silver Armor. You don’t measure up to an awakened one, so be careful of powerful Novas attacking you. As high level as Silver Armors are, that may not necessarily be a good thing!”

Cackling, Li Hao immediately turned his armor black. “As a Silver Armor troop leader, I have the special privilege of disguising myself. There’s nothing to be afraid of!” He’d witnessed this ability in action last time and now he was the one putting it to use.

“We’re going to have a great time,” Li Hao barked with laughter. “I’m going to kill as many of the three great organizations as I can later. They’re in for some pain!” He’d finally found a chance to face his enemy head-on!

The two below didn’t say anything as they dwelled in their own thoughts. Becoming part of the Battle Heaven Army ran outside of their expectations. They didn’t know how to conduct themselves from this point—they’d just take it one step at a time.

They were here to seize treasure, but now they were part of the city defenders!

Meanwhile, Li Hao didn’t think that much. There was another Gold Armor in the military barracks, making for two in the city. Even without the trio’s interference, the expedition team might not find success this time.

The young man suddenly looked into the distance after flying for a while and did a double take. Am I seeing things, or did I just see a black dog running through the streets?

That was weird! Was it Panther?

A black dog reminded him of Panther, but that was impossible. Panther had run off a long time ago. It wouldn’t be here even if it hadn’t. Li Hao put it out of his mind. He couldn’t see anything anymore, so he would head to the eastern gate first.

.....

At this moment, the eastern gate.

There was a great lull in the great battle. The supernaturals had retreated ] from the city gates and congregated in the distant plaza. A loud hubbub arose, many of the would-be plunderers sad and suffering. What the heck was this?? A fight had broken out as soon as they arrived and they didn't reap any rewards for their trouble.

Almost four hundred supernaturals were dead in a short while! This kind of battle was rare even in the central region!

As the crowd agitated with shock and dismay, the powerhouses of the three great organizations frowned. This excavation felt different from last time, the situation hadn't developed like this last month. The Black Armors seemed more difficult to manage and were acting in concert! They also seemed to be more intelligent—or was this because someone was directing them? The Gold Armor inside the city?

No one cared about the couple hundred dead—it wasn't their people and mostly wandering cultivators. So what if they were dead? The dead were from different factions and the three great organizations were taking some time observing the situation.

#### Chapter 450: The Twelfth Troop Takes the Field (I)

The newly formed Twelfth Troop made quick time and arrived at the eastern gates in less than an hour. A Silver Armor was waiting for them. He welcomed their arrival with a loud rumble upon seeing them. Solemn and dignified!

The Silver Armor thumped his chest with his right hand as a ripple appeared in Li Hao's mind, "I am Troop Leader Jiang Shixun, leading the Seventh Troop of the Ninth Division Reserve Defenders. We welcome our brothers' reinforcement!

"You are newly formed and do not have a full complement. Your equipment is incomplete, so you will assist the Seventh, Eighth, and Ninth Troops in ad hoc defense!

“Central command has issued standing orders that the chain of command shall pass down in order of seniority! If we all fall in battle, the Third Troop of the Ninth Division will answer to you! In the same vein, your men will fall under my command if you perish in the battlefield!” announced the Silver Armor as soon as Li Hao presented himself.

The soldier looked at the young man, solemn respect in its empty gaze. “We are to defend our homes and resist enemies! No retreat, no desertion! Our sacred land lies behind us, the people live if the city stands, the people die if the city falls! Our orders are to stalwartly defend the eastern gate! We are not to take a single step back without receiving such orders, do you understand?”

“I do!” Li Hao thumped his chest.

Some derision entered the Silver Armor’s empty gaze. That was wrong! But whatever, you guys are a newly formed unit and it looks like you haven’t undergone training. Then forget it, it’s rare enough that rookies are willing to reinforce the frontlines, what else can we ask for?

I just hope they don’t disturb the army formations! How long has it been since fresh blood joined the Ninth Division?

Endless eons! So long that the division had forgotten when the last batch of recruits was.

The army had lain quiet for countless years before revitalizing with bits and pieces of their memories. That was already rare enough for the Silver Armor. And with the arrival of new recruits, it put the leader of the Seventh Troop in great spirits.

“As a mobile unit, you will assist the three troops in defending the eastern gates. Your merits will be counted at double the rate after battle. This is an exception for new recruits, so treasure the opportunity well!”

“Merits?” Li Hao blinked. What merits?

The Silver Armor was used to idiotic questions from new recruits and didn't bother answering.

"The enemy has temporarily retreated, but they will soon attack anew. There are some powerhouses among them, it is a pity that our souls have been scattered to the four winds and our strength is less than ten percent of what it once was. Otherwise... But there is nothing to be done when a tiger that goes down to the plains is bullied by dogs. We are weak and fragile, so we must be cautious and prudent. We cannot take rash action!"

Less than ten percent of their strength...

Li Hao was flabbergasted by the statement. So in the past, these Silver Armors had been stronger than when they reawakened! How terrifying was that! And this was just a troop leader. There were division leaders, commanders, ranking officers, the commander-in-chief... He could fathom the hierarchy just from the medallion he'd received.

This was also just the reserve defenders of the Ninth Division! So that meant there were at least nine divisions with multiple troops to them, then they would roll up to a corp...

The scale of the army gave him heart palpitations! Did it number in the millions at its peak? Perhaps there were one hundred thousand in each of their corps! Just how glorious was the ancient civilization?? It boggled the mind!

This particular troop leader seemed quite busy. He quickly set Li Hao aside and dashed up the city walls, appearing over the ramparts. Li Hao followed him in a flash of light. There were two more Silver Armors on top to begin with, and now there were four total.

.....

At the same time.

Outside.

Someone in the plaza squinted at the city gates. “Look over there! Is there an additional Silver Armor on the gates?”

His words raised a disturbance through the crowd and many followed his gaze. Some people’s eyesight proved sharp enough, others could not. Those who could see the newcomer jumped with shock.

“Another Silver Armor means another one thousand Black Armors!”

“So we’ve got one thousand more enemies?”

“Oh my... heavens... we’re doomed!”

“Why is there another one? Didn’t they say there’s only four because of the four directions? Is it five now? Just how many Black Armors are there in the city??”

A hubbub of discussion arose as some fretted while others cursed. The hell was this! They were just here to earn money, not to die. Hundreds of them had died as soon as they entered, and now there was a new Silver Armor!

.....

Hou Xiaochen was also frowning. The new Silver Armor perplexed him and overthrew some of their previous theories. There might be more than defenders of the four directions in the city. There could be other army units.

Each unit rivaled the Silver Moon Guards and they were more powerful inside the city. Their terrifying might was awful to consider. Hou Xiaochen had only raised a thousand people over the

years, but an army several thousand strong had appeared in a short period of time. And this had just been an army left behind to stand guard in the ancient civilization!

The Parity King, Green Moon, Elder Crimson Light, and others walked over. They were also finding the situation difficult to manage.

“Director Hou, this was not within our expectations.” The Parity King frowned. “How many Black Armors are there inside the city? We won’t have much of an effect if we continue to devote our effort here—the enemy just grows more numerous!”

“We don’t have much time, only three days. If we don’t leave then, there doesn’t seem to be stories of anyone surviving a month yet. We won’t make it to the next opening!”

They would either have to abandon the inner city after three days or try to brute force their way! They needed to breach those defenses!

The major factions had observed the action thus far and waited for the right moment. It was time to settle on a plan. Do they go for a strong offensive or what?

If they chose to give up... Everyone had waited for a month and made ample preparations for this excavation. They’d finally entered the ruins, so what was this talk of giving up! They’d come with so many Novas that were yet to take the field!

It was just a few thousand Black Armors. They were nothing if the Silver Armors didn’t erupt with full strength. That made the latter peak Sunflare at most, a level that could be found all throughout the expedition.

The more the situation stood thus, the more that people felt there was a lot of treasure inside the city. Even if there wasn’t, a few thousand sets of black armor were a priceless treasure. One or two hundred wasn’t much, but thousands or ten thousand could create an elite military unit!

Ten thousand troops with Solar defensive capabilities charging together... That made for a terrifying scene! Even now, a few thousand Black Armors rushing together had still killed several hundred supernaturals, despite powerhouses in residence.

“What thoughts do you guys have?” Hou Xiaochen asked calmly.

“We work together!” The Parity King cut straight to the chase. “We’ll mow down the Black Armors and assign one of the four Silver Armors to the three great organizations and Silver Moon authorities. Each faction will take care of one Silver Armor. The rest can handle the Black Armors!”

“That should cover our bases. Even if the Silver Armor awakens, it will be late Nova at most. We should be able to contain one late Nova with all the strength we’ve brought, so we’re not afraid of that eventuality either!”

As strong as the Silver Armor was, each of the four factions was confident in their abilities to handle one late Nova. Green Moon herself was a late Nova, what was there to be afraid of?

As for the numerous Black Armors, so were there many supernaturals present. Black Armors were initial Sunflare at most; most in the expedition were Sunflares, with plenty of Solars present. There were a few wandering Novas as well, such as Xu Feng and some other formidable martial masters.

“Has anyone seen Southern Fist?” asked Elder Crimson Light from Celestial. “The guy’s gone missing, has he slipped into the city?”

He Yong was a loud and abrasive fellow. It was an unfamiliar sight that he hadn’t been present for the earlier battle.

“Did he die in the second passageway?”

“Who knows?”

“.....” No one knew where He Yong had gone, but some had indeed died in the second passageway. There were many casualties in the earlier melee as well. When all was added together, only fifteen hundred were left of the nearly two thousand expedition team.

A large portion was gone! Of course, it was survival of the fittest. Those who’d died were fools, idiots, or weaklings who hadn’t done any homework before entering the ruins. Who else should die, if not they? They only knew that mysterious power stones covered the ground here. It was a good thing they had died, it would make the rest of the group exercise their wits more.

Hou Xiaochen didn’t say anything. Southern Fist? He wasn’t the only one. Li Hao and Hong Yitang were also nowhere to be found!

“Alright!” He nodded after some consideration. “We’ll take care of one Silver Armor, but there are many Black Armors and the rest might not be able to unite as one...”

Someone representing the wandering cultivators approached them from a distance—Xu Feng!

The dapper gentleman strode in with dashing flair. “Seniors, it is my honor to receive everyone’s approval and represent the wandering cultivators to discuss how we might handle the trouble we find ourselves in...”

Hou Xiaochen smiled and didn’t respond. Green Moon flicked a disdainful glance at the young man. Celestial’s Elder Crimson Light didn’t make a sound. Only the Parity King’s stern face split with a slight smile.

“We happen to be discussing with Director Hou as well. We will take care of the Silver Armors while the wandering cultivators and some of our people eliminate the Black Armors. Without their superiors, the Black Armors are easy to manage. They lose their battle capabilities after one minute away from the ground!

“The Bronze Armors are harder to handle, but with a Nova like Sir Xu on the wandering cultivator side, you should be able to eliminate Sunflares like the Bronze Armors. Are you amenable to this division, Sir Xu?”

There were indeed a bit too many Black Armors, but they were weak. Strictly speaking, the reawakened Silver Armors were the most frightening.

“Of course!” Xu Feng smiled. “We look to the seniors to eliminate the hardest opponents. Leave the rest to us!”

This was absolutely fine and even better than they thought. They’d been worried that these guys would continue watching from the sidelines.