

Star Gate 451

Chapter 451: The Twelfth Troop Takes the Field (II)

At the same time.

Over the city gates.

“Troop Leader Jiang,” Li Hao asked curiously. “Can we not utilize our defensive system? The aerial defense system is very strong, if we can use it...”

“It can only be used passively due to a lack of energy!” the seventh troop leader’s voice rang hollowly. “Battle Heaven needs energy, we are severely short at the moment. The death of so many is why we have awoken slightly. The more that die, the more energy that is absorbed, the faster our reawakening. Otherwise, we remain in a quiet state of inertness!”

So the ground absorbing energy is to hasten the city’s awakening! Li Hao took in the new information.

“Then those who’ve gone through the second passageway—the small house with the net—can they evade the aerial defenses?”

“Yes,” the troop leader responded emptily once more. “That is the Visitor Pavilion and all those who come through it are guests. These people however, do not wish to be guests. They desire to be bandits instead, but the Visitor Pavilion gave them certain privileges. Our authorization level is insufficient to revoke them. The city lord and commander-in-chief are not in the city. The Visitor Pavilion’s authority matches ours. No one can revoke the privileges unless the guardian awakens!”

The guardian? So the city lord isn’t in the city? Then who’s the Gold Armor?

Li Hao was very confused. That meant the Gold Armor in the city lord manor was likely not the city lord. Who was? And who was this guardian?

“Troop Leader Li, a moment of silence before battle!” commanded the seventh troop leader when Li Hao wanted to ask more questions. The newcomer talked too much, he could barely think through it all!

They were dead, after all. Recalling memories took a lot of effort. All they had now were some instincts and pitiful scraps of memory. Each question that Li Hao asked required them to expend mental strength to relive the past. As time went on, that would facilitate their complete awakening and premature return to their peak. That, in turn, would lead to a quick death.

Li Hao was morose, but he asked no further. It looked like these soldiers had awakened, yet didn’t have access to many memories. It was sufficient for them to answer some of his questions. He walked to one of the city walls. His two men were here—it was very obvious!

The young man had thought that he wouldn’t be able to identify them after they stood among the Black Armors. Reality once again proved how incredible the armor system was. When he scanned the rows of thousands of Black Armors, one of them glittered with some light.

Some information appeared when he focused his gaze on the sparkles.

“New receipt He Yong of the First Company of the Twelfth Troop!”

“.....” Li Hao was somehow amused. These Black Armors were easily identified by their officers, but this authorization extended only to his men. Scanning the other soldiers didn’t bring up any information.

“New recruit He Yong!” The line suddenly appeared in He Yong’s voice. Hidden in a mass of Black Armors, he quickly turned his head in Li Hao’s direction. As expected, the young man was staring at him from a few dozen meters out.

He Yong blinked. You can tell that I’m hiding here? Da hell? Why? Do you have full control over me just because I’m wearing armor? Damn my black armor is pitifully low level!

His only available function was to hail his company leader, and that was because he was granted more authorizations as the only soldier in his company. Otherwise, he might be limited to just his captain.

A resigned He Yong stepped out, quickly joined by Hong Yitang. The three congregated on the city walls.

“What are you calling us over for?” asked a dejected He Yong.

“I’m thinking that we may not be able to stand up to the people outside...” Li Hao frowned as he looked out. “To be honest, they’re very strong. They have a lot of Novas and Solars. You guys saw it too that we may not be able to hold them off if they bring their full strength to bear. These remaining units of the Battle Heaven Army might not be able to either.”

“Then let’s run...” He Yong suggested, but Li Hao shook his head.

“No, I want to protect this city!”

The man paused in his tracks, why? As fired up as he’d been in the barracks, he was back to normal once outside. It didn’t matter to him whether or not the city stood. In fact, it was just as well if it fell, there might be more loot he could swipe in that case. Safeguarding the city might not have much of an effect.

“Why do you want to protect the city?” Hong Yitang asked as well. You have no friends or family here, what’s the point of taking a stand for an empty city? Those guys outside are not people you want to provoke!

“I don’t want the three great organizations or anyone else to gain anything!” Li Hao responded calmly. “I’ve given it some thought... This city might belong to me!”

“.....” The two were at a loss for words. Why??

“It also belongs to you two! Isn’t it better for one person—no, three people to enjoy the benefits, as opposed to everyone? The soldiers here are dead and don’t further consume resources. They appear only when there’s fighting. How nice would it be to have them as our guards? Why should we let them die?”

“Think about the Pool of Life and all those treasures inside the city. I’d rather the three of us split them up than share them with so many.”

“Strictly speaking, this place belongs to no one because they are ruins. But as the city of the Wangs in the eight families, I have more of a right to lay claim to it than anyone else. Of course, that isn’t the point at the moment, but it’s obvious that sharing with just three people is much better than sharing with a couple of thousand.”

“But...” He Yong wanted to say that it was impossible to hold off everyone outside, even with the three Silver Armors awakening!

“This city won’t be so easily conquered!” Li Hao continued. “There’s another Gold Armor inside the barracks and that might not be the only one. There could be more apart from the one inside the city lord manor. They just don’t seem to be willing to awaken ahead of time as that will lead to their death.”

“We might be able to use the opportunity to accrue some military merits! Maybe we’ll receive additional rewards. The weaponry seems to be in good order. When I collected my equipment, a Silver Armor walked into the back to retrieve my allotment. I feel that there’s a lot of treasure in those depths...”

“So what’s your plan?” Hong Yitang asked plainly. “We stand almost no chance against them.”

“Why not? This is our home ground!” Li Hao smiled. “Don’t forget that I’m the troop leader! As a troop leader, I have a special combat identity and can enter the homes of residents. I can enter the closed homes in the outer city!”

“Not only do I have the privilege, but I can give you similar authorization. We can conduct guerrilla warfare in the outer city or even direct combat. If we hide in the houses, they can only wait outside to be ambushed by us. Remember how passive we were last time after the Bronze Armors took shelter in the houses?”

Bronze Armors had entered the ancient houses on the last expedition. Black Armors could as well, but they seemed to have lost their sentience and couldn't act voluntarily. The Bronze Armors seemed to retain a bit of their minds.

Both men blinked at the suggestion. Enter the ancient houses to ambush the powerhouses around them? That would be a position easy to advance and retreat from!

The ancient houses were one with the ancient city; one should not enter without an invitation. If a trespasser barged in, they were attacked by the city's entire defensive system. This was something that Li Hao had newly come to understand—the people who entered the ancient houses on the prior expedition had been killed by the city's defensive system!

Thieves were unequivocally sentenced to death by the city's rules, even if they'd passed through the Visitor Pavilion.

“Also, there are thirty Bronze Armors outside that also possess the same sentience,” Li Hao continued. “I'm going to try and borrow some of them, then hide in the ancient houses with you guys. We'll be like fish in water if we conceal our presences. If our ambushes are successful, killing some powerhouses will be an easy task!

“You two are so powerful that you'll kill with one strike. You can dash back to the ancient houses afterward, not even Novas will be able to do anything against you. We hold a complete advantage, there's no need for direct combat!

“The three remaining army units have their duties and obligations to fulfill. They remain so long as the city stands. We are a mobile unit and just need to help their efforts, but they must safeguard the

city. Not to mention they're not as intelligent as they were when alive, so they only know to dig in their heels. We're different!"

He Yong stroked his beard—there was no beard to stroke anymore, more was the pity. "Is this a good idea? Li Hao, we're on the same side as those outside... Do we kill even the Silver Moon authorities?"

"....." Li Hao cut off mid word. The fuck dude? This is what you're really thinking, isn't it?

Hong Yitang roared with laughter and also transmitted, "It's feasible, I'm just worried of drawing suspicion! The Battle Heaven Army is an army of dead souls in people's eyes. If we start ambushing..."

"It happened last time too. The Bronze Armors started ambushing us toward the end, remember?" Li Hao reminded. They wouldn't be setting a precedent, and so what if they drew suspicion?

"Not to mention, you two only have the strength of Solars outside the city. Who will think that much? No one will know if the people you attack die and it wouldn't amount to much if they did!"

"Then what about the official authorities?" Hong Yitang grinned.

"What does Martial Uncle Hong think?"

"What do I think? Does what I think matter? You're the troop leader."

Li Hao looked at the man wordlessly. So now you say that?

"Forget it, we don't attack them. If the official authorities are weakened, that might cause some trouble for the province..."

“Do you care whether or not trouble finds Silver Moon?”

“I’m not a sociopath,” Li Hao transmitted with a laugh. “Even if I don’t, I don’t want unrest to rock the province. The stronger the authorities are, the more stable Silver Moon is. Martial Uncle Hong, I may not be a saint and wish to save the world, but I’m not in the habit of creating unnecessary disturbance. Are you thinking a bit too much?”

“I kill the three great organizations because they are evil and we share a grudge. It’s not like I go around killing everyone.”

Was the man truly considering him a demon? Even if I don’t help the official authorities, I have no need to kill them.

Hong Yitang was startled into laughter. That was true! His thoughts had gone off on a tangent!

Chapter 452: The Twelfth Troop Takes the Field (III)

“Then we’ll listen to you, you’re our troop leader!”

Enough of that. You listen to me when there’s loot to be had, but toss me to the side when the loot’s been had!

Li Hao concluded the conversation and walked up to the three Silver Armors, transmitting through his armor, “Troop Leaders, I would like to lead some of the centurions in guerrilla tactics against these guys! I will destroy the enemy outside the city walls. They will not set a single foot through our gates!

“The three troop leaders need to stand guard here and my Twelfth Troop possesses insufficient personnel. We need some reinforcements...”

The words of destroying the enemy and outside the city seemed to strike a chord. Agitated ripples emanated from the three Silver Armors. Eliminating the enemy outside the city walls was a military tradition. Sadly, the Ninth Division of the Reserve Defenders had lost face for the overall army and could only hold down the fort inside the city.

Li Hao's other words apart from borrowing the Bronze Armors were just hot air. He didn't know that some of them would strike such a deep chord that it would start to recover some faded memories for the Silver Armors.

"Approved!" came the Seventh troop leader's voice. "The three troops can offer support of ten centurions, no more. If more are allotted, the army will start to lose some of its basic functionality. Our Black Armor brothers have already lost their sentience. They must be led by a centurion to revert to some use..."

Just ten!

Li Hao thought for a moment. That was good enough, that would do! "My thanks!"

"As we should. Be careful, Troop Leader Li!"

Clang! Li Hao thumped his chest with his fist. He was familiar with this gesture now. The other three troop leaders returned the gesture, seemingly impressed by their new comrade.

Ten Bronze Armors stood in front of Li Hao before long. His Silver Armor listed some information about them.

"Hu Xinwu, leader of the third company of the Seventh Troop, reports to Troop Leader Li!"

"Wu Kaifu, leader of the ninth company of the Eighth Troop..."

“.....” A series of ripples traveled to Li Hao. The soldiers were slightly rigid, as if they only knew how to obey orders. They possessed some basic instincts, but weren’t as nimble as the three Silver Armors.

“Alright, you will follow my orders from now on!”

“Understood!” came affirmative yells. There was more emotion in them this time.

Li Hao discovered that their authorizations were now connected to his armor. He was ever more admiring of this equipment infrastructure. It must have been a fantastically convenient and unified process for the army to mobilize in concert back in the day.

Everyone could hear as the commands were issued through the armor. A great deal of trouble was spared when only those with high clearance could speak to those with lower clearance.

The young man turned himself into a Black Armor, but it didn’t affect the soldiers. They could still recognize Li Hao.

“Ready yourselves, brothers. Troop leaders, I require your assistance to go about your daily patrols. Our fishing begins!”

“.....” The three Silver Armors didn’t quite understand, but they could grasp that their new comrade needed cover. Thus, squads of Black Armors quickly began patrolling the streets.

There were eight streets in the other city, they overlooked the first street. No trespasser dared linger in the first street. Ten teams of ten were assigned to each street. Eight hundred Black Armors were sent out to begin their daily patrols.

The army’s movement caught the eye of the supernaturals in the distance.

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“The Black Armors are on the move!”

“What are they doing?”

“They seem to be... patrolling... That’s weird, why are they patrolling at a time like this? They’ve definitely become puppets, alright. They don’t have much intelligence left. Coming out at a time like this is just delivering themselves on a silver platter.”

“They’re hard to take out when they’re clustered together, but as ten to a troop... We can take out eight hundred per street. That’s what the expedition team did last time and rolled in the riches!”

“.....” The supernaturals agitated with anticipation. The situation was developing as it had last month! The Silver Armor stayed staunchly by the city gate while the Black Armors patrolled the streets. The soldiers were caught off guard when the explorers struck back and many Black Armors eliminated in the surprise.

It was because of this that numerous suits of armor were collected. It’d been the expedition’s thoughts that this wouldn’t happen again, but here the patrols were! Although there were more soldiers than last time, the strength of supernaturals this time was also greater.

Hou Xiaochen and the others, however, frowned. Why was this happening? Those Silver Armors from earlier seemed perfectly sentient and even intelligent. Sending the Black Armors out now was a complete act of idiocy! It gave the enemy a chance to rout the defenders!

Three thousand Black Armors gathered together were difficult to eradicate, but streets of eight hundred each were feasible targets if the humans acted swiftly enough. In this regard... if the soldiers continued to be fools after they lost this first batch of eight hundred... could the expedition team slowly whittle them away?

Otherwise, they would have to pay a high price to terminate all three thousand Black Armors. At least five hundred of the remaining fifteen hundred explorers would die in the process. Considering the opportunity, the wandering cultivators rustled with activity.

“Let’s move about freely!” someone hooted. “We won’t keep the Black Armors if we get any. We’ll sell it to you guys! What are people willing to pay for them?”

“That’s right, we don’t have experience fighting as a group and won’t be able to coordinate well. It’s better to head off on our own in small teams.” The wandering cultivators lost their composure before the three great organizations or Silver Moon authorities said anything. They didn’t want to attack the ancient city as was previously proposed, that was too dangerous!

The perfect opportunity was at hand for them to split up in twos or threes. They could strike if they came across a good situation. Bringing down one team of soldiers meant ten Black Armors! If one set could be sold for five mysterious power stones, one operation meant fifty stones! That made the entrance fee more than worth it! Fifty thousand cubes of mysterious power was a crazy sum! They’d come out with bulging pockets even if ten people worked as a team!

Meanwhile, the three great organizations and Hou Xiaochen frowned. Wandering cultivators were an unruly bunch, so it was impossible to corral them into joint action.

“If anyone collects a set of armor and sells it to the Night Watchers, we will pay one mysterious power stone per set!” Hou Xiaochen called out.

“That’s too stingy!”

“This is a superhuman object, we know it can withstand Sunflare attacks! You guys are paying one stone for a treasure like this??”

“Uh huh! Too stingy!!”

“.....” Hou Xiaochen didn’t bother replying.

Green Moon smirked. “Red Moon will pay three stones per armor!” As for whether or not these wandering cultivators could actually obtain any armor... that was up to them! She could make empty promises as well as the rest of them. Who knew how many of these guys would make it out alive?

Green Moon was just listing a high price to stick it to the Night Watchers and to goad the wandering cultivators. It would be a good thing if they could actually eradicate all of the Black Armors. Without the basic soldiers, the Silver Armors would be easier to manage.

As for whether the city army had suddenly made such a foolish move due to a lack of intelligence or seeing up a trap... who cared? Wandering cultivators could die whenever!

Besides, some of them possessed real strength. They should be able to bring down some Black Armors with them even if they died. That was just as well.

A few noticed that a Silver Armor was missing—it might be hiding among the Black Armors! But that a peak Sunflare Silver Armor was moving on its own might afford opportunities for them.

“Celestial will also offer three stones per armor!”

“Yama follows suit!” called out the other two organizations.

Hou Xiaochen glanced at them and smiled, not saying a word. You guys are rich, we’re poor. I can’t even make empty promises like you, so I won’t say a thing.

The wandering cultivators were thoroughly riled up now. Stamping out one squad meant thirty mysterious power stones! Stones, not cubes! Many of them had never seen a single one before, they were all gonna be rich!

As for whether or not they'd leave the ruins alive with their treasures... that was up to individual ability.

"Will you pay on the spot?" someone asked urgently.

"Of course," Green Moon responded faintly. "Eliminating all of the Black Armors means only three thousand sets. With the joint coffers of the three great organizations, we can afford nine thousand stones!"

"Not to mention, you won't possibly take them all. Claiming half would be good enough. Forty-five hundred stones means that each of us will be paying fifteen hundred. Do you guys think that we noble organizations cannot afford that much?"

Fifteen hundred stones was a princely sum, but the three great organizations could indeed put together that many stones! They'd made many preparations for this excavation and had brought many powerhouses. They could scrounge up that amount. If not, there was mysterious power as well.

Not to mention... so what if they shortchanged the wandering cultivators?

"Ole Hou, do you think they've really brought that many stones with them?" Kong Jie transmitted. If this was true, then it was very tempting! Silver Moon was not that rich.

"Everyone be careful," Hou Xiaochen transmitted instead of responding. "Let's wait and see, I find something odd about this! The Silver Armors gave appropriate orders before and were in high morale. It doesn't make sense that they've suddenly lost their minds. Although there is this precedent, this situation is not right. Do not brashly enter the outer city!"

What in the blazes was going on? Even Hou Xiaochen, who'd thought everything was within his calculations, frowned with bafflement. He was well and truly confused!

He heaved a sigh of dismay to see supernaturals eagerly throw themselves into the outer city. This was not good! How many of them would die this time?

Some Solars had also snuck in. It looked like the mysterious power stones were sufficient to move their hearts. But that made sense, it wasn't hard for a Solar to eliminate ten Black Armors by themselves. If they had a storage ring, they only needed to make one trip for thirty stones.

Even Hou Xiaochen was tempted! What a rich reward for this mission! But was money really that easy to earn?

Some of the powerhouses from the three great organizations were also part of the crowd. It looked like they wanted to collect information or take the opportunity to claim a few Black Armors.

“Are we really not going to go?” Hu Qingfeng transmitted from the Silver Moon authorities. “Even if we don't, we should send some people in to assess the situation. Novas cannot easily make a move, but Solars can!”

While there weren't many here from the official authorities, there were quite a few Solars. Did they all just wait here?

Chapter 453: The Twelfth Troop Takes the Field (IV)

Hu Qingfeng didn't really want to enter the outer city as who knew if they'd run into the vanished Silver Armor? Although the soldier was just a peak Sunflare and could do nothing to him, he wasn't willing to take the risk.

“Director, I'll go!” Golden Spear volunteered. His battle strength was formidable, so he wouldn't fear anything, even if he met an unawakened Silver Armor. He was the more ideal choice as martial masters were masters of concealment.

Since Golden Spear had stepped forward, Mu Sen could no longer play dead. “Director, I'll head in with the boss!”

Hou Xiaochen considered the two—Mu Sen’s defenses were strong and Golden Spear’s offensive was domineering. They should be able to take care of themselves if they encountered danger.

“Go on, but be careful.” He gave his approval. “Don’t touch the Black Armors, just assess the situation. Watch and observe. There is something wrong about what’s happening!”

“Understood!” The two quickly walked into the outer city. Dark and gloomy, it appeared like a bloodthirsty mouth. It was a rather horrifying sight.

Hou Xiaochen remained frowning and looked at the inner city gates. He sighed softly, feeling quite helpless. Li Hao... are you guys behind this? Or are you just searching for treasure inside the city and aren’t involved?

He sank deep in thought while holding a key in his hand. As a guest with a key, could he avoid certain dangers if he refrained from raising a hand against the army? After a while, he slipped Manager Yu the key while he patted her shoulder.

“Hold on to it and don’t throw it away. You just need to remember to keep it in your hand!” The woman nodded without saying a word.

A group of people watched the wandering cultivators and others entered the outer city. Black Armor footsteps rang through the outer city. All was as if the last expedition. The street patrols continued.

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Inside a teahouse.

Li Hao ducked inside. There was nothing in the establishment apart from some chairs and stools. He did see a couple mysterious power stones, but was not at liberty to touch them. How would a Silver Armor troop leader be tempted by this kind of meager gain? Not to mention, military regulations denoted that soldiers could not touch a single item of civilian belongings.

I, Li Hao, am a person who follows the rules!

The young man peered intently through the door slats and wanted to laugh at what he saw outside. A ball of light was right in front of him. This was fun! He could hide in the ancient houses and accurately determine the enemy's location with his eyes. He was invincible!

I can see you guys!

In everyone's understanding, the ancient houses were not to be entered. Thus, Li Hao cracked open the door, reached toward an unsuspecting Sunflare, dragged him in and broke his neck!

There was no hesitation whatsoever and no need to investigate the other's identity. The official authorities hadn't brought Sunflares on this expedition. Their weakest was Sunflare, so there was no need for the young man to observe further. Whether it was the wandering cultivators or the three great organizations, only the provincial delegation was off limits. Everyone else was fair game.

The Sunflare died as soon as he was hauled inside. He probably hadn't thought that he would die as soon as he entered the outer city.

"New recruit He Yong, there's a Solar outside your house. Strike and drag them in!" A voice sounded in He Yong's mind as he observed from a house in the distance. He blinked and looked around him. Was Li Hao nearby? How did he know? That was strange!

He Yong didn't have a clear read on the Solar as the target had gone through the second passageway. After supernaturals were concealed, they were difficult to detect even for Silver Armors. But now, Li Hao was accurately identifying him from a distance.

Since the young man had spoken, He Yong would act! He opened the front door, grabbed the first supernatural he saw, and blasted out with a punch!

The Solar died; He Yong vanished with the body and entered another house. When others came to investigate, there was nothing to be seen. They looked at each other, mystified. Where did the loud sound come from?

In between bouts of his own activity, Li Hao continued to observe the surroundings. He could at least see the neighboring streets and knew where his people were. If a target of appropriate strength approached, he quickly gave an order.

The ten Bronze Armors were on par with peak Sunflare. Added to that two soldiers that were secretly powerhouses and the peak Sunflare that was Li Hao... the outer city abruptly became the killing fields!

Sunflare after Sunflare disappeared. Li Hao found it more difficult to defeat Solars, but the other two had an extremely easy time. Six Solars disappeared in short order with none the wiser.

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In the plaza.

Hou Xiaochen's brows knitted tightly together. "Ole Kong, go inside and... find Golden Spear and Mu Sen," he transmitted. "Tell them to get out!"

Kong Jie started. Me? Are you sure? There was no need for him to go inside unless abnormal danger was on the horizon. Golden Spear wasn't weak as he was a Nova. No one would easily eliminate him.

"Ole Hou..."

"Go in!" Urgency made Hou Xiaochen's tone snap. The situation had grown out of hand. Something was wrong! He could vaguely sense that some Solars had suddenly disappeared!

This wasn't information from his supernatural senses as Solars who'd taken the second passageway had their presences mostly obscured. That was a good development, but also a drawback. If in prior instances, everyone would sense the disappearance of a Solar in the outer city. But now, to vanish from sight was to vanish from their senses. Everyone could conceal their presences, so no one knew if someone disappeared.

In that case, no one on the outside would be aware if a powerhouse died inside.

Hou Xiaochen looked at the young man from Red Moon—the one with the heavenly eye. That Heaven's Eye seemed to have sensed something as he was looking at the outer city, but he was also frowning with resignation as he couldn't see anything.

Kong Jie had no choice but to quickly enter the city. What is going on that requires my personal presence? After running into the gloom, his face twitched with shock when he saw a door open and a Black Armor drag a supernatural inside an ancient house. Both of them vanished before he had a chance to react!

"Retreat!" Li Hao's voice rang in He Yong's mind. "Get out of there! There seems to be a... powerhouse near you. It's either Hou Xiaochen or Kong Jie, retreat!"

He Yong jerked with shock. Da fuck? You know even that? How was the kid making these discoveries? Was it further functionality of a silver armor? How he envied that level of armor! He hadn't discovered Kong Jie at all—he wouldn't have made a move if he had.

He Yong yanked the door open, it wasn't good to be blocked in here. He quickly threaded through the streets and vanished in front of Kong Jie's openmouthed gaze. Cold sweat beaded the latter's forehead.

Nova! That was absolutely Nova level strength! Fucking hell, Black Armors were Novas?? What?! And they could conduct ambushes from ancient houses; the expedition team was done for! Most of the guys who'd entered the outer city this time would probably die.

Kong Jie didn't have time to dwell on the strange Black Armor. He quickly went to find Golden Spear and Mu Sen so that they wouldn't lose their lives here.

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As Kong Jie departed, He Yong, Hong Yitang, Li Hao, and ten Bronze Armors struck swift and true.

"There's Bronze Armors in the houses!" someone shrieked. That rather set those outside at ease.

Man, and here I was getting scared. There were Bronze Armors last time, so it looks like these soldiers are up to their old tricks. The Bronze Armors are strong, but that's all there is to them. They don't pose much of a threat to Solars!

Hearts that had been in throats could settle back down. Meanwhile, the outer city grew quiet. Some disturbances sounded every now and then when supernaturals fought Black Armors. Wandering cultivators ran out in great excitement, dragging suits of armor. The expedition team was still successful at times.

Smiles graced some of the powerhouses' faces when they saw the sight. It looked like these wandering cultivators were still useful and the soldiers in the outer city would be eliminated in due course.

Therefore, those powerhouses stirred with desire. Some of the Solars and even Novas of the three great organizations looked at their leaders. Shall we go in too? Golden Spear, Mu Sen, and Kong Jie on the Night Watcher side had entered. They couldn't be allowed to claim more treasure!

Green Moon looked at her counterparts; moments later, some Solars set out from the three great organizations. Obtaining more Black Armor was good for them too.

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Li Hao and his men were scything their way through the enemy. They grabbed people, dragged them into the ancient houses, and quickly executed them! Being able to see the balls of light was of greatest help to the young man unless he faced a martial master. However, there weren't many martial masters that were stronger than him in the expedition team.

A row of data appeared on Li Hao's visor after he killed another Sunflare.

"Troop Leader Li Hao of the newly designated Twelfth Troop: 11 merits!"

"Company Leader Hong Yitang of the First Company in the newly designated Twelfth Troop: 14 merits!"

"Soldier He Yong of the First Company in the newly designated Twelfth Troop: 17 merits!"

These numbers had appeared several times—sometimes flashing after they killed one person, sometimes manifesting after they killed several. What did eleven merits mean?

Li Hao wasn't sure, yet he could tell that He Yong was an excellent soldier. He had more merits than Hong Yitang!

The young man made some swift calculations. Three Sunflares might amount to one merit, one Solar might be one. He'd killed more than twenty Sunflare and three initial Solars, but he'd only collected eleven merits.

It looked like He Yong had killed quite a few, and some not through his directions. The guy would strike on his own after observing the situation. While he protested that this wasn't the best course of action, he was more brutal than anyone in action!

Hong Yitang had also killed more than Li Hao. All of these people said one thing but meant another. As the young man thought, martial masters were nothing good. They were all horrible people!

I wonder what the elven merits are good for? A promotion? Or rewards? The armor infrastructure is really incredible, alright! Even deeds of merit are clearly calculated. They didn't even need examination officers in the ancient civilization. Who designed this?? Damn they're good!

Chapter 454: Majestic (I)

Outer city.

Increasing numbers of people disappeared after they were dragged into ancient houses. The more that died, the uneasier that those in the plaza grew. It was one thing if not that many died, but the three fiends slaughtering through the outer city were inexorable and ruthless. As the number of dead mounted to one hundred, the fewer that wandering cultivators returned.

A couple brought back some Black Armors in the beginning, but those that returned later did so empty-handed. Explosions could be heard from the city, but armored footsteps also grew heavier. It seemed that the soldiers were patrolling with a firmer tread.

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In the plaza.

Some powerhouses frowned and looked at the other city.

"Is the fourth Silver Armor scything through the people from the shadows? Why does it feel like the supernaturals are becoming less active?"

Some still itched for action, others looked at the inner city. Three Silver Armors hovered in the air and looked down in their direction, as if waiting for something. A few of the Novas in the crowd grew impatient and fidgeted restlessly.

“Let’s just go on the offensive!” someone snapped. The gloomy outer city felt incredibly inauspicious. No one responded to him—the wandering cultivators were in a disarray!

There was no one to withstand the Black Armors if the wandering cultivators lost their organization. The Silver Armors were still manageable, but three thousand Black Armors might overcome Novas if there was no concerted response against them.

Great wealth was a source of great temptation. Not even Sir Xu could control the wandering cultivators. He was a representative when they needed him for something, but absolutely nothing when they did not.

.....

Hearts shook with trepidation in the plaza while Li Hao’s trio killed at will with the Bronze Armors in the outer city! Li Hao’s armor recorded increasing merits. He Yong was as brutal as before—he was far in the lead. Although Li Hao and Hong Yitang’s numbers kept increasing, he was always out in front. He’d gone from seventeen points to twenty-seven in less than twenty minutes, a sign of how many more powerhouses he’d killed!

“There’s powerhouses...” A shrill cry pierced the air.

Bam!

The shout was followed by a loud collision. The one who shrieked swiftly died—a mid Solar powerhouse. As strong as he was, he died quickly all the same!

Inside an ancient house, He Yong smacked himself on the forehead. He’d miscalculated! With his strength, there shouldn’t be a chance for his target to cry out when he ambushed someone an entire level lower than him. But that little bastard Kong Jie had been nearby when he’d taken action. He’d been distracted by his surprise.

“Kong... is quite strong!” A violent light danced in his eyes as he grumbled. Li Hao had said not to attack the Silver Moon authorities and he followed those orders. Kong Jie, however, seemed to be following him. He Yong had run into him a few times.

He sent out a thought ripple from his armor. The nearby Hong Yitang received his message.

“Ole Hong, do you want to put Kong Jie through his paces?”

Hong Yitang was wiping off his longsword inside an ancient house and looking at it with appreciation. The sword of a Bronze Armor was quite strong. In fact, the entire set of equipment was quite strong. The Bronze Armors in the field now weren't bringing their full strength to bear.

It might have to do with the fact that they didn't have much strength left to them.

Put Kong Jie through his paces? Hong Yitang laughed. He'd thought that He Yong had mellowed out some, but it would seem that the man was just as ruthless as ever. The Northern and Southern Fists had been quite brutal back in the day. The current He Yong only appeared easier to talk to than before and even a little foolishly honest.

He was hardly what he seemed to be.

“Not interested! You can go for it if you want. You have mysterious power stones too and strengthened your supernatural locks in the pool. You can probe his strength by yourself.”

“Then forget it!” He Yong responded. “I'm no match for him by myself. Kong Jie was a powerhouse in the Inspectorate a long time ago and suppressed the martial master unrest by himself before the Skystar Guards made it to Silver Moon. He won't be any weaker than you or I after all these years.”

Kong Jie's background was very clean. He had been an Inspectorate heavyweight early on and spearheaded the Inspectorate's operations to suppress martial disturbances before the Skystar

Guards were founded. After the Guards arrived, they took over the duty to the point where martial experts forgot about Kong Jie.

But would those such as He Yong and others forget? They'd all fought him in the early days—Kong Jie was very strong. His reputation was just overshadowed as time went on.

“Ole Hong, I’ve got twenty-eight merits. Not bad, right?” He Yong transmitted again when Hong Yitang fell silent. “How many do you have?”

As a Black Armor, he could see his own and no one else’s. Hong Yitang could see He Yong’s since he was a Bronze Armor, but he could not see Li Hao’s. The man checked his score—twenty-five. He was a few points less than He Yong, but he didn’t mind.

Hong Yitang peered through the door frame. He wasn’t as bored as He Yong and looked to kill for the sake of killing. He’d mostly targeted Red Moon members so he could collect some more scarlet shadows.

While he hadn’t been able to see the shadows before, he could sense them. They were visible in a hazy sense after he put on the armor. Hong Yitang also marveled at the equipment’s designer. Even the lowest level black armor was a valuable treasure. It was worth far more than a few mysterious power stones!

The sets of armor held by the Silver Moon Guards and three great organizations were far from being fully utilized. They were dormant and only deploying their innate defensive capabilities. They could not display their total capabilities.

The Black Armors in the city were a group of dead obsessions without the slightest hint of a spirit. Even so, they could stand against Sunflares. Their strength would surely increase many times over if a powerhouse could fully manipulate them. If Li Hao’s Demon Hunters wore fully active armor, their strength would reach new heights.

A variety of thoughts ran through Hong Yitang's mind. He wasn't in the mood to chat with He Yong. There was a Red Moon powerhouse in his sights!

Red Moon had sent quite a few experts on this expedition. Blue Moon and Green Moon were Novas out in the open, there were two more under the surface—an initial and a late Nova. The presence of two late Novas was proof enough just how much Red Moon valued the ruins.

Hong Yitang had been tracking his target for a while, but hadn't dared to make a move. After long consideration, he messaged He Yong. "I have a big mark to take down, do you want in?"

"What is it?"

"It might be Yellow Moon! Late Nova, if my senses are true. She should be the divine girl of Sky Mountain back in the day—her move of Scattered Plum Blossoms knew no compare. Although she wasn't part of the thirty-six, she's definitely strong. She's not an ordinary late Nova, she's possibly even peak Nova!"

He Yong was quiet for a very long time before responding, "Are you even human? She counts as an old friend. I wondered why there was no movement from your side—you have your eyes set on her!"

"Red Moon's people are not easy to kill, especially those guys. Ying Hongyue might go crazy if you kill them. He loves all of the ladies, but also likes to pretend that he loves deeply. He's extremely hypocritical and might come in person for revenge if you kill Yellow Moon!"

"There are many reasons for killing her," Hong Yitang continued, ignoring He Yong's concerns. "Number one, it will result in many merits. Number two, while she doesn't have a scarlet shadow on her, the titular third-in-charge of Red Moon will surely carry many treasures. Number three, we might find some blood pearls instead. After all, Ying Hongyue will surely look out for the women he took with him back in the day..."

"What's the point of all of these little scuffles? Li Hao doesn't dare do anything because he's weak, but are we to imitate him?" All Hong Yitang wanted to do at the moment was to accomplish

something grand. There was no point in killing Solars—he was even depressed to keep killing them. As a strong martial master, there was meaning only in fighting those stronger than him.

Of course, Yellow Moon was probably weaker than him. But wouldn't killing someone of her level be more satisfying than those weaklings?

“Wait a bit longer!” He Yong thought for a bit. “The disturbance will be too great if we kill her. We should get some more merits first with the other guys. If my guess holds true, we'll be able to trade these merits for a lot of treasures. The ancient civilization put a lot of emphasis on military merits!”

“Then I'll wait for you!” Hong Yitang shook his head, returning to watching the supernatural on the street. They were clearly here for the Silver Armor. A late Nova that'd crossed over from being a martial master wouldn't think much of those Black Armors.

.....

The slaughter continued in the outer city. While all sides had realized something amiss, it had nothing to do with them since those who died were mostly wandering cultivators. Thus, they chose to stay silent. Even a Solar yelling that there were powerhouses present didn't cause much of a ripple.

At the same time, over the city walls.

Three Silver Armors stood side by side. They couldn't see much or even where Li Hao was since the Twelfth Troop did not fall under them. However, they knew that the new recruit should've killed a lot of enemies. The ten company leaders that they'd sent with him were still accumulating military merits. The guerrilla tactics were having a significant effect.

Dead quiet reigned on the city walls.

“Leader of the Seventh Troop, what do you think of this age’s cultivators?” The ripple came from the leader of the Eighth Troop.

"In what regard?"

“All aspects.”

The Seventh Troop leader thought briefly. “I don’t know, I just know that they look to live quite good lives.”

Quite good lives!

The three Silver Armors fell silent again. Indeed, that looked to be the case. The situation would not be thus beneath them otherwise. It looked like humanity was still the ruler of the land. That meant the world was safe after their death. Those noble personages on high might have won. If they didn’t, at least they hadn’t lost.

Chapter 455: Majestic (II)

“Where is the leader of the Twelfth Troop?”

“Him?” The leader of the Seventh Troop thought briefly. “I don’t know, I’ve just met him. But from the looks of things so far, he doesn’t seem particularly impressive. He is far less than the soul-stirring powerhouses of yesteryear whose charisma reached the heavens!”

The two troop leaders fell silent without further question. This was the first time that the army had gained new recruits after so many years, so it drew some interest. But just some. It looked like that one wasn’t as magnificently superb as they thought he might be. Perhaps the Battle Heaven Army would continue to be quiet...

.....

Li Hao didn't know that his comrades were discussing him. He was feeling uncomfortable with the situation as he didn't dare attack those who were too strong, but those who were too weak were useless. He focused on Sunflares and initial Solars, not daring to target mid Solars. That might cause too great of a disturbance.

It was good to be able to easily advance or retreat, but that also gave rise to bottled frustration. The adrenaline rush he'd felt when battling six Solars at once was far more preferable to his current situation.

He also seemed unable to manifest the aura of the Nine Forged Force because of these limitations. While the young man could just barely manage nine layers, the spontaneous ease that'd come from enlightenment when Liu Long deployed the Nine Forged Force was out of reach.

Li Hao breathed out slowly, this was probably the essence of martial dao... It was unfeasible from even a mental perspective to grow stronger from constantly killing the weak.

I am almost invincible in the Solar level and perhaps I rival the Revolution King with an origin weapon. But at this rate, I still won't be able to match Novas!

He saw a mid Solar pass by, but let them go. He'd heard Hong Yitang and He Yong's conversation because he was a Silver Armor. Patently, Hong Yitang was also growing impatient. The strong were fierce and stubborn. If it wasn't for the military merits, they would've long lost their tolerance for killing Solars and Sunflares.

Li Hao turned his gaze to a nearby street. A peak Solar had lurked there for a period of time. He hadn't considered such a target before, but now he was tempted. Slaughter wasn't their goal—killing the enemy was good, but there wasn't much meaning to whittling away their weak. Killing their strong to intimidate the weak would lead to even better results.

“Peak Solar...” Li Hao was yet to kill a true peak Solar. There had been a peak Solar among the six he battled, but he'd ambushed that one and killed him instantly, preventing him from showcasing his strength.

While the water aura of the Nine Forged Force was yet to materialize, the young man understood the crux of the problem. The method was ferocious and valiant beyond compare. How could hobbled fights bring its aura into reality?

“Martial Uncle Hong!” Li Hao’s transmission raised both men’s attention. “We’ve cleared out most of the Solars, so there’s no point in continuing our operation. People will sense our movement sooner or later as well, that will scare off some people from entering the city. We should take advantage of this opportunity to strike together and cut down a few powerhouses. After that, we’ll retreat!”

“That’s what I’ve wanted to say for a while!” Hong Yitang responded. “I have a target in sight. If He Yong doesn’t want to act with me, he can find one himself. What about you?”

“I’ve got one too, a peak Solar! I’ll test myself against him first. If the effects are good... I’ll go straight to a Nova next time!” Li Hao was also itching for action. The difficulties in manifesting his water aura and being stuck between Solar and Nova created a very uncomfortable state.

“That’s good, you can give it a try,” Hong Yitang laughed. “As a martial master, it’s a fantastic feeling to challenge our limits! It’s not easy for us to find opponents, but yours can be had everywhere. The younger you are, the more fire and spirit you should have. That falls away in old age.

“They say that a strong fist is afraid of the young and that the old fight timidly. A youngster’s style is more murderous as they are unafraid of injury or enemies. It doesn’t matter if your identity is revealed. It’s both surprising, yet not, that the heir of the eight families has become a Silver Armor.”

He knew that many concerns ran through Li Hao’s mind, especially after receiving some identities to conceal. The young man was deathly afraid of revealing himself!

However, those fears would also impact his actions and make it difficult for him to give himself over to the fight. That wasn’t a good development once time dragged on. One could walk in the shadows when appropriate, but still had to act at the right times.

Hong Yitang was one who usually kept a low profile, but threw caution to the wind in times of need. He'd acted in Ash Mountain and also once killed a large group of supernaturals in the central region. He'd been content to await retaliation from a Nova then. Sometimes, one had to set aside considerations of one's identity being exposed.

"Await my commands," Li Hao said after a while. "It's fine if we cause a greater disturbance in our next fights. A lot of people in the outer city have sensed danger and a large sum of powerhouses has already retreated..."

.....

Li Hao walked out of the ancient house after a round of instructions. Moments later, he melded naturally into a troop of Black Armors that came marching by. The group of ten was now eleven. He gave an order within his armor and sent the troop down the next street.

On a rooftop of the next street over.

A strong man crouched silently on the roof, scanning the surroundings with a particularly calm gaze. He was a peak Solar from Yama and was in the outer city with one mission—determine where the Silver Armor was hiding.

The three great organizations had discovered that a Silver Armor was missing from the city walls. It was very possibly in the outer city and responsible for the high death toll that was still climbing. But being from Yama, he was not afraid. He'd even fought a Silver Armor in a regular state before. It was not weak, but so long as it didn't reawaken, the soldier wasn't stronger than him.

All he needed to do was engage it for a while so he could notify those outside. Reinforcements would soon come along to eliminate the enemy with him.

Up until now, not a single expedition had killed the Silver Armor. The one who died before had died of its own accord.

Could a Silver Armor's equipment be removed? That would be incredible if it could—it would bestow Nova strength on a Solar. By now, everyone had obtained numerous sets of black armor, but no one had any bronze or silver armor.

The Yama expert slowly inched forward while observing the patrolling Black Armors. He was aware that Silver Armors could hide themselves as Black Armors, but he could sometimes sense if the soldier was strong or not.

He'd already discovered some things from his vantage point on the roof. The number of dead increased, but there was no sign of their bodies. Perhaps the soldiers were hidden in the ancient houses.

A troop of Black Armors approached from a distance. The Yama expert Xie Gang didn't notice it at first, but took a few more glances when something seemed off. Was there... too many Black Armors in that troop?

He counted them. There were indeed too many. There were eleven!

Had a soldier from another troop joined them, or was it the Silver Armor? It was perplexing as Silver Armors possessed some intelligence since they could hide themselves, but they wouldn't do so in such a blatant fashion, would they?

Such an obvious deviation made Xie Gang hesitate instead.

.....

Li Hao had also seen the person on the roof and confirmed his identity after careful observation. This Yama expert was in the information that Deputy Zhou had given him. Xie Gang, peak Solar, a mutated earth supernatural. Rather than the conventional earth attribute, he was skilled in rock techniques. Strictly speaking, he would be a rock supernatural if such a category existed.

Others utilized earthen walls and awls in their techniques, but he summoned boulders and meteorites. He was known throughout the peak Solars and came from another large province in the north—Heavy Earth province. He was one of those that Yama had gathered for the expedition.

Xie Gang was in charge of the Yama branch in Heavy Earth, making him a similar figure to the Revolution King. He wielded an origin weapon, but it could be seen that his position was less than the Revolution King's from his weapon's caliber. As a fellow leader of a provincial branch armed with an origin weapon, his weapon's strength came up short compared to the Revolution King's wind chime. However, a peak Solar with an origin weapon still made for a difficult opponent.

So it's him! Li Hao realized with some relief. Good, this was very good. While Xie Gang was less than the Revolution King, he shouldn't be that much weaker. It was a worthwhile endeavor to fight this guy before they withdrew. Would he inspire Li Hao to manifest the water aura of the Nine Forged Force?

If not... he might have to really pick a fight with a Nova if he wanted to bring forth the water aura in a short period of time.

Li Hao flashed upward without deliberation when he approached the roof. He appeared in front of the supernatural.

Xie Gang jerked with shock. So he'd really run into the Silver Armor? Was the soldier's mind truly gone to appear in front of him like this? Bronze and Black Armors could not fly as they lost the support of the city if they left the ground. Only Silver Armors could fly.

The man looked around him, but didn't see anyone. The plaza wasn't too far away. Powerhouses would make fast time to his location, so should he call for help? After all, Silver Armors were difficult to handle.

The one in front of him suddenly commenced action that made Xie Gang's jaw drop. A storage ring appeared over an armored hand; resplendent mysterious power stones floated out of it! Their luster was so bright that it was startling!

Li Hao picked up all of the mysterious power stones and shoved them into his mouth—into his armor. He wouldn't use them, but Xie Gang would think that he was refueling through eating the stones.

As expected, the man jerked with shock. So Silver Armors needed to eat mysterious power stones to maintain operations! This one had eaten so many at once and their sheen was frightfully brilliant. How many mysterious power stones were in that storage ring??

Chapter 456: Majestic (III)

Li Hao then opened a crack in his armor with a swipe of his hand, one that looked like a pocket, and stuffed in the storage ring that he'd just manifested. Xie Gang's eyes nearly fell out of his head!

He'd just seen more than a dozen storage rings in that pocket-like slit. There was also a large number of energy rings stuffed inside. How incredible! How was the Silver Armor this rich? Where did it all come from?? Was it from people it'd killed before or from earlier?

Xie Gang's heart quailed; he was suddenly unwilling to summon others for help. He could handle an unawakened Silver Armor by himself and would have plenty of time to call for help if it awakened right before death.

Not to mention, he didn't have to kill the Silver Armor. There wasn't much point to that. The slit in its armor had appeared with a quick swipe. Could he break the armor or simply inflict a crack? Would all of those rings be his then?

Most important were those incomparably pure mysterious power stones. Xie Gang possessed a high status with his cultivation level, but he'd never seen stones with such clarity before...

This hesitation was precisely what Li Hao wanted. The young man understood martial masters all too well. Or rather, all humans were thus—greedy, avid, grasping...

Few were those who could control those impulses; not even Li Hao was an exception. He found it hard to restrain himself as well. His self-control had grown only after he saw more of the world. If before, he would've taken any risk if someone was willing to pay him one hundred cubes.

Why should Xie Gang seek help for treasure that he could claim by himself? Would there be any left for him if powerhouses were on the scene? Such were modern day supernatural and martial masters. Only a small portion of martial masters could check themselves; most supernaturals completely gave over to their inner desires. Their rapidly increasing strength only served to enhance their greed.

C'mon, show me a thing or two... You want to fight me, don't you? A smile creased Li Hao's eyes. "We can begin!" he messaged through the armor system. He flung himself at the supernatural with a longsword!

Xie Gang was still lost in thought and debating whether to notify his organization. He automatically responded with a punch, smashing into the armor like a boulder and even leaving a tiny dent on it...

The man blinked, then beamed! So these Silver Armors could be damaged? Why should he call for anyone then? This soldier didn't seem that strong.

Xie Gang punched again like a meteor descending, creating a sonic wave with his blow. Li Hao tumbled off the roof and crashed to the ground. Xie Gang was overjoyed at the sight. This Silver Armor wasn't all that!

He quickly caught up to the soldier, commencing a ferocious battle in the streets. Collisions sounded again and again. Instead of attempting to meld the three auras together, Li Hao utilized only the Nine Forged Force, the armor's innate durability, and his highly fortified organs to clash with the other again and again!

The young man was noticeably less than Xie Gang without the supplement of the three auras. However, Li Hao didn't care. This was the kind of battle he wanted. He employed the Nine Forged Force with impunity and even put away his longsword. He called upon the bear style of the Five Styles to smash his fist into his opponent again and again.

Boom!

Fists landed with eruptions of the Nine Forged Force. Surges of power followed one after another.

The more Xie Gang fought, the more astonished he was. The soldier wasn't that strong, but it was very agile and didn't seem like a dead puppet. It rather appeared that it possessed its own sentience.

Their fight drew some attention, but that attention was quickly captured elsewhere. Even more fierce fighting broke out on the next street—thunderous collisions rang nonstop!

“Damn it!” a woman shrilled—a Red Moon powerhouse. Li Hao knew who she was. Hong Yitang had mentioned that she was Red Moon's Yellow Moon. She'd apparently been chasing down Yuan Shuo, but now she was here and had caught Hong Yitang and He Yong's eye.

Xie Gang was momentarily distracted. What was that? The fight next door seemed more vicious than his own. Was... the one in front of him not a Silver Armor? Had another entered the outer city?

As lost as he was, Li Hao continued to pummel him. The young man deployed his fists at a faster speed and began accumulating his strength. He settled in a comfortable rhythm. Xie Gang's was very strong and his defense sufficient to the point where it reminded Li Hao of the sea. The waves had crashed upon each other in succession and were greater than the one before as they broke over the boulders.

.....

At the same time, in the plaza.

Powerhouses were startled by the disruption and looked at the dim outer city. Some looked sharply, others frowned tightly. What was going on? Had people encountered the Silver Armor? But there seemed to be more than one battle raging... and the ripples indicated a fight beyond Solar.

Hou Xiaochen was also deeply perplexed. He could sense some sword intent and boxing intent from one of the fights. Southern Fist? Earthturner Sword? These were the two that came to mind. But...

He glanced at the solemn Green Moon. “Green Peacock, who is it that’s entered the city?” he rumbled. “They shouldn’t be a regular member as they are very strong. Tell us so we can be prepared!”

Green Moon frowned, ignoring him. She was both shocked and astonished at the moment. She knew who was inside—Yellow Moon. Also a late Nova, Yellow Moon was slightly stronger than her and could fight a fully awakened Silver Armor. Her safety should have been assured, but the situation seemed to be going awry.

From the ripples traveling back and some indistinct shouts, Yellow Moon might be on the losing side. But how was that possible??

Not even a fully awakened Silver Armor would find it easy to swiftly suppress Yellow Moon. She didn’t have a moment to cry out for help, an indication of how much trouble she was in. She couldn’t take a breath from fighting, lest it throw her off balance and create an opening for the enemy!

Next to Green Moon, Blue Moon also sensed the danger. “Something seems to have gone wrong,” he transmitted. “We need to immediately go to her aid...”

Yellow Moon ranked number three of the Seven Moons. There would be grave trouble if anything happened to her here!

“Let’s go! We enter the outer city!” Green Moon hesitated no longer.

“Kong Jie, bring everyone out!” Hou Xiaochen snapped in response, sending his voice into the city to quickly withdraw his men. He didn’t want to be involved in this. The outer city had become a strange place—possibly due to Southern Fist and Earthturner Sword. He didn’t want to be caught in a conflict with them, especially if they were the ones attacking Yellow Moon. It meant that they were stronger than he anticipated.

Just as Hou Xiaochen commanded for his people to be brought out, the Yama and Celestial powerhouses darted in with sharp glints in their eyes. Some of the wandering cultivators also seemed to sniff the scent of something and entered the city!

Who was it that was embroiled in a fight inside the city? One of Red Moon's powerhouses? One of the Seven Moons? There might be a show to watch and loot to pick up!

.....

At the same time.

Hong Yitang and He Yong had indeed engaged Yellow Moon. The shocked woman watched as He Yong brought punch after indomitable punch to bear, ones infinitely stronger than Li Hao on the next street over!

Boom!

They left her no room to breathe or even the ability to cry for help. She didn't dare because the momentary relaxation would bring about her death. Yellow Moon could barely recover from her shock—she recognized the one who was punching her! Southern Fist He Yong! It must be him! Who else's fists would be so domineering and penetrating?

Of the two Fists, Northern Fist was more audacious than Southern Fist, but Northern Fist did not fight like this. His fists were boundless and majestic, descending with the inexorable finality of judgment and causing his opponents to be ashamed of themselves.

Southern Fist was the epitome of ruthless domination, a completely different style.

Yellow Moon couldn't make sense of it, why was Southern Fist wearing a suit of black armor? Had he killed one and was impersonating a soldier?

That was possible, but what about the Bronze Armor next to him? No one had been able to obtain a set so far, was that another imposter inside? That person didn't need to do much but inflict a single stroke to leave a deep bloody gash on her. It was a swordsman, and an incomparably powerful one. She couldn't even immediately tell who it was.

One of the Seven Swords?

Sky Sword?

But this didn't seem to be Sky Sword's sword intent. His was all-conquering. This person's was impartial and mild; it lacked the sense of the height of keenness. But the more it was thus, the more terrifying that was.

Sky Sword was like Southern Fist—domineering and penetrating. This person's sword was more like Northern Fist, a restrained majesty. Yellow Moon couldn't begin to think where these two had come from. How were they here?

Bam!

Her thoughts in disarray, she suffered one of He Yong's blows and backed up a few meters. Blood frothed at her mouth, but she didn't dare further retreat. The swordsman had locked onto her from behind.

He Yong took a moment to catch his breath and smiled. "Someone else is coming, we need to end this!" His presence flared to one more berserk and imperious than before. He was abruptly thirty percent stronger.

BOOM!

There were only his fists between heaven and earth. Hong Yitang swung his sword on the outside and raised a chorus of screams. Some powerhouses that'd snuck in were instantly executed! Only Kong Jie in the distance was left standing. He looked on sternly as he grabbed Mu Sen in a fierce retreat. Golden Spear, however, looked back again and again. He withdrew only with Kong Jie's repeated reminders.

A somber Golden Spear left the outer city. He'd recognized the two with a mix of emotions! They were old acquaintances, how could they not know each other? It was Earthturner Sword and Southern Fist!

Chapter 457: Majestic (IV)

He Yong and Hong Yitang were so strong that it made Golden Spear shudder. At the same time, an unpleasant feeling of being left behind stole into his heart. He'd thought that he proceeded far down his path compared to his crowd of old acquaintances.

But today... today... it looked like... perhaps... His heart was heavy with suffering. Earthturner Sword and Southern Fist both seemed to have created their own dao. And myself?

Even Qimei Staff, someone weaker than Golden Spear, had left behind some of his staff intent in his final moments battling Yuan Shuo. That intent which remained as a solidified staff brought so much pain to Golden Spear that he nearly collapsed!

He'd broken free of Yuan Shuo's suppression thanks to Hou Xiaochen's help and advanced to a deeper level. He'd strengthened his body, blood qi, and mind intent these years. Everything that was him seemed to grow stronger and balancing out. These had also been pointers that Hou Xiaochen had given him.

But somewhere along the way, he seemed to have missed something and become mediocre. He seemed to have lost his soul. When he looked at the Bronze Armor across the way, he seemed to see wordless judgment emanating from an aloof gaze. Though he did not glimpse Earthturner Sword's eyes, the man seemed to be saying—is this what the first spear of Silver Moon has amounted to?

Golden Spear lost his focus. In his distraction, he suddenly tilted his head at another street. There was a Black Armor there erupting with strength. It punched again and again, as if He Yong reborn. And yet, that boxing style was not like He Yong. They came one harder than the other!

“Silver Spear...” Golden Spear murmured, thinking of Silver Spear Liu Hao. That kind of boxing intent reminded him of the spear expert who delivered blows with increasing ferocity. Kong Jie followed his gaze, surprised at what he found.

Li Hao punched unceasingly, immersing himself in the Nine Forged Force and the leaping waves of the sea. Each wave was stronger than the one before. His blood qi and internal force erupted with fury!

He’d started off being suppressed by Xie Gang, but could now return blows on an even footing and begin to overpower the man. Li Hao grew increasingly excited. This was what he wanted! While there were powerhouses casting their focus in his direction, he didn’t really want to stop. This feeling of breaking his shackles was what he sought!

Rumble!!

Violent collisions sounded on both sides. Sounds of people cutting through the air echoed through the city. An angry Li Hao wanted to snarl with fury. These people were so hateful to interrupt his process of comprehension!

A surge of blood qi bubbled up in him—he still wasn’t utilizing the three auras. Instead, he called upon the Incantation of the Blade of Blood and aroused his own mental strength and blood qi so that his fists would be ever more penetrating and berserk!

“A blade of blood...” Xie Gang started, finally sensing something wrong. Only the living possessed blood qi! This person knew the Incantation of the Blade of Blood! He’d heard of it before, that it was the secret art of the Five Styles and had been exceedingly famous in the ancient civilization.

Li Hao...

The name flashed through his mind, but he immediately thought of Yuan Shuo instead. Yuan Shuo was skilled with the Five Styles and boxing, whereas Li Hao was skilled with sword auras. The person in front of him wasn’t using the sword. Was it Yuan Shuo fighting him??

Startled, Xie Gang roared and smashed a punch forward that exploded like a meteorite. Not only that, but a suit of armor manifested over his body. The yellowish-brown protection was his origin weapon. His defenses were much more formidable with an origin weapon at hand!

Li Hao continued undaunted, swiftly drawing close to his opponent. Seeing as he was clad in silver armor, he didn't find himself any less equipped than with an origin weapon.

The two met with their fists!

One punch, two punches, three punches...

The Nine Forged Force erupted with indescribable might as Li Hao punched in a demented frenzy. He shook his opponent's armor with his blows, pummeling Xie Gang's organs to pieces. Xie Gang also hit the silver armor and shook Li Hao's internals.

Both of them were only attacking without defending. They both knew that whoever fled or retreated first would suffer misfortune.

BAM!

Li Hao saw balls of light swiftly approaching them. Enraged beyond belief, he was the maniacal sea that just wanted to destroy everything in front of him. The Nine Forged Force was the method that he'd identified the earliest as one that he could comprehend an aura from, but now that he'd already grasped the metal, earth, and fire auras, he was growing frantic that the Nine Forged Force was the only method that he hadn't produced an aura from yet!

Novas were almost on the scene—he roared and layered all of his internal force. One layer, two, three... Nine layers overlapping one another erupted at the same time!

BOOM!

Another loud collision sent Xie Gang flying. He spat out blood and pieces of his internal organs, but also laughed. He sensed Novas on their way!

The guy in front of him looked to be Yuan Shuo, no wonder he was so strong! What a pity for him that he'd failed to kill his opponent. So this was all Yuan Shuo was good for, huh!

A violent light glinted in Li Hao's eyes as he snorted coldly. And even stronger force exploded from him. This time, not only did the Nine Forged Force erupt, but so did the metal sword aura spontaneously collect and detonate!

Explosion!

Li Hao appeared like a sword in front of Xie Gang and smashed down his fists, each of them the unsheathing of a sword!

Bam!

Another earth-shattering explosion marked the fracturing of Xie Gang's armor defenses amid his baffled eyes. His organs exploded into smithereens!

Li Hao furrowed his brows and collected the body with a wave of his hand. He looked at the powerhouses rushing to the scene—one of them seemed to be that Xu Feng...

The young man snorted to himself. He'd been so close to coalescing his aura from the Nine Forged Force! Although he'd grasped some of the sensation, his process had been halted halfway. Who knew when he'd be successful?

That damned bastard!

Li Hao refrained from lingering and swiftly jumped into the next street. Here, He Yong roared before sending Yellow Moon flying with another punch. Meanwhile, Hong Yitang seemed to have been waiting for Li Hao. He laughed to see the young man hop over and projected his voice by Li Hao's ear. "You wanted to see my sword, didn't you? I'll let you have a look today!"

Li Hao tensed with surprise and quickly looked over. He didn't think much of Hong Yitang's move at first, just that it was majestic and vast. It carried some hints of peace and didn't seem that sharp.

However, his expression abruptly shifted drastically!

The majestic sword encompassed all like the great earth. As Yellow Moon struggled, she suddenly felt like the earth and sky had been inverted. It was like her entire being was suppressed—fear shone through her eyes!

Earthturner Sword!

This was Hong Yitang's Earthturner Sword!

The vast sword of earth didn't appear all that fast, but all Yellow Moon could do was to be dumbly rooted to the spot and simply watch as it landed on her head!

Boom!

A loud collision ripped through tremendous defenses! The heavy sword without an edge smashed down like the skies were falling. It was what the scene reminded Li Hao of. Yellow Moon was pulverized to pieces from the stroke, incomprehension and shock flooding her eyes as she died. Wasn't Earthturner Sword long crippled? Why was he so strong?

“Let’s go! I waited a long while to show you this stroke!” Hong Yitang’s laughter rang in Li Hao’s ear. He reached forward to grab a storage ring. “The others will be here before long if we stay here!”

The three bounded through the streets and vanished on the spot; Li Hao still marveled over what he saw. Was that the true Earthturner Sword? His own earth sword aura seemed so weak in comparison!

Hong Yitang seemed to have waited a long time to be able to demonstrate his move to Li Hao. The young man thought back to what he once said, that he would teach the Earthturner Sword to Li Hao if there was time. Today’s display... had been a lesson.

The young man’s bottled resentment at not forming the water aura evaporated. The majestic stroke had given him different inspiration.

.....

A group of people arrived moments after the trio fled. They were already very fast, but everything had disappeared by the time they arrived.

Green Moon’s eyes darted around, not seeing Yellow Moon in the vicinity. However, she suddenly focused on a pile of mangled flesh and blood in the distance. It was swiftly being devoured by the ground!

She rushed forward to examine it, horror overwriting her expression.

“Retreat!” She roared and promptly led her people out. Fear warred with shock in her heart! Something had gone drastically wrong! This city was much more than it appeared to be. Yellow Moon was dead, and dead very quickly! Who’d killed her?

.....

In the plaza.

Hou Xiaochen looked ahead and sighed softly after a while. “I’ve overlooked this person... His heavy sword is without an edge and heavy weights are nothing to him. He is indeed the greatest swordsman beneath the heavens!”

Manager Yu looked at him with widened eyes.

“Earthturner Sword,” Hong Yitang said softly. Manager Yu’s eyes widened further—remarkable! How was this assessment possible?

“I know who the person that stopped me that year is!” Hou Xiaochen laughed.

“You mean... twenty years ago?” gasped the manager.

“Yes!”

“Impossible...” she murmured subconsciously...

“it’s him alright,” Hou Xiaochen’s laugh deepened. “I didn’t think of it then. It looks like he’d already broken through then, so no wonder he turned down Yuan Shuo’s challenges. What a frightening fellow!”

Manager Yu fell silent, trying to come to terms with what she’d just heard. So Earthturner Sword had already been a Dominator then? My goodness!

Hou Xiaochen was recalling an incident in which he'd wanted to eliminate some people, but someone had stopped him. They'd said nothing other than stand in his way. The two parted ways after a quick fight, and it now looked like that mysterious person was Hong Yitang!

How interesting!

Chapter 458: Metamorphosis (I)

Fear and unease.

All of the Red Moon powerhouses who knew the inside scoop looked around in abject fear. It'd taken just a short while for Yellow Moon to turn into a puddle of flesh and blood! She was a late Nova and hadn't even had time to cry out. That was an indication of how strong her attacker was—how domineeringly powerful that she hadn't had the chance to resist.

At the very least, she would call out for reinforcements or identify who the enemy was. But none of that had happened. How could they not be afraid?

.....

Li Hao's trio swiftly darted toward the city gates. Instead of returning to the city walls, they convened at a tavern on the second street and hid inside.

Inside the tavern.

Hong Yitang's bronze armor faded away to reveal the man underneath. He brought out a jug of wine and raised an eyebrow at Li Hao. "Let's have a drink?"

"....." Li Hao breathed out and took off his armor as well. The silver armor transformed into a round ball the size of a button and hung around his neck. This was one of the greatest attributes of the armor. Through it, Li Hao learned that gold armor could be stored entirely within the body, manifesting only in times of need.

The silver armor was a slightly lower grade, so it couldn't be fully stored within his body. Silver armor was interchangeable, while gold armor was customized for the generals. Silver armor needed to be returned when promoted or demoted, gold armor did not. That was one's personal equipment.

He Yong was the worst off. He had to take off the black armor through a series of slightly complicated maneuvers and place it in a storage ring. Black armor was cabbage by the side of the street; not much care needed to go into its craftsmanship since there was so much of it. Black Armors had to find ways to store their own equipment.

The three sat down in the tavern and ignored the frantic crowds outside. Hong Yitang poured them wine. He Yong threw his back as soon as he received his cup. Li Hao hadn't drank wine before—alright, well, he'd snuck a few sips at times, but he'd never found pleasure in alcohol.

The young man picked up the cup and forced himself to take a small sip, finding something different in this tasting. A dense fragrance exploded on the tip of his tongue! It was slightly peppery and acrid, but also flavored with hints of mellowness. It was different from what he'd drunk before.

Hong Yitang smiled at his expression and raised his cup to his lips. "I sensed your fight next door just now. Li Hao, you think too much!"

"What?"

"Your dao is not pure because you think too much!" Hong Yitang grinned. "Take He Yong, he fights when he wants and plays dumb when he wants, but he never lets himself come away worse from an exchange or build resentment. You, however, think and consider too much. You sometimes punch and strike decisively, but oftentimes a bit of hesitation and restraint marks your straightforwardness."

He Yong wanted to erupt with outrage at his characterization, but decided not to bother after some thought. "That's right. Li Hao, you're a little less compared to your master! Of course, this is very normal since you're young. But... you are a bit lacking in the fearless drive to go forward without looking back. For me, I dare step into battle even if my enemies number in the thousands!"

“Your martial dao potential is very strong—more than just regular genius, you are truly gifted. I can see that from your comprehension of the aura. But when you fight... you’re ferocious... you’re just not...” He Yong groped for the right word. “You’re just not brutish enough!”

“What?” Li Hao looked at him, confused.

“This is a common problem with the educated. You like to think in a comprehensive manner, but keep in mind that you can’t be thorough on the battlefield! You prefer to make plans beforehand, perfect your preparations, make sure all eventualities are taken care of, and fight those who are either weaker or on par with you.

“Dare you fight those stronger than you? You probably never have, huh? That’s not a good thing. You knew that Ole Hong and I were on the next street over holding down the fort, but you still fought in a cowering manner. That’s not to our taste.”

“But I have,” Li Hao replied seriously after some thought. “I killed a Sunderer when I was a Slayer!”

Really!

He Yong rolled his eyes and Hong Yitang laughed. “Alright then, you must’ve felt very accomplished and exulted in the thrill of battle, right?”

Li Hao thought back for a bit and nodded. He did!

“And now? Did you find pleasure in beating a peak Solar?”

Li Hao shook his head and took a sip of wine. “But I’m no match for Novas...”

“Why do you think that?” Hong Yitang frowned. “You have three auras, right? You know the Incantation of the Blade of Blood and don’t suffer major aftereffects if you use it, right? Your organs are strong, your body is strong, you have the silver armor and that indestructible sword. Why are you afraid to fight a Nova under such circumstances? Must your cultivation be higher or domination a certainty before you dare attempt a battle?”

Li Hao scratched his head, unable to come up with an answer.

“You can already kill peak Solars without utilizing your auras.” He Yong massively rolled his eyes. “Apparently you can meld them together like Yuan Shuo, so you can obviously try fighting Novas. Do you think your master fought Dominators when he was a Sunderer?”

Li Hao shook his head, he didn’t know the answer.

“He did!” Hong Yitang answered for him. “When Yuan Shuo fought those veteran martial masters, many of them were Dominators. They were rare in Silver Moon, but a few could be found in the central region. Do you think Yuan Shuo was only famous in Silver Moon? He also claimed impressive battle achievements in the central region and killed more than one Dominator…”

“Of course, that was when he perfected his five auras! In actuality, many Silver Moon martial masters also had stirring accomplishments and issued challenges above their stations to fight Dominators. The province’s martial masters are the strongest, so there have indeed been cases of people battling those stronger than them.

“Thus, we only talk about how many Silver Moon martial masters that Yuan Shuo has defeated. We rarely mention the central region ones because Silver Moon’s martial world is proud. We find that Dominators elsewhere are less than the half step Sunderers of Silver Moon.

“You can test yourself against a Nova at this stage. As long as you don’t pick someone who crossed over from martial dao or already comprehended the aura, your victory is guaranteed without a doubt!”

Li Hao looked uncertainly at him.

“I alone am invincible!” Hong Yitang sighed. “Didn’t you read about that in the ancient books? Whether or not it is true, you must firmly believe that you can win! Li Hao, you cannot blindly follow what you read in books. You’ve spent too little time learning from Yuan Shuo. Not to mention that he was at a low point in life—it means there is much you haven’t learned from him. You lack certain things. If he was here, he would teach you now!”

“Therefore, we stand in his stead to teach you some basic knowledge.”

“That’s right!” He Yong nodded. “Yuan Shuo does teach these things, but the rules require you to travel through the martial world and visit each faction to issue challenges and spar with them. He would’ve taught you bit by bit through this process on how to be a satisfactory Silver Moon martial master.

“This is how each of us grew in Silver Moon. Of course, that was a long time ago. Silver Moon martial masters now are a far cry from what they were before. They’re not necessarily stronger than those in the rest of the world.”

The two men exchanged meaningful glances with each other. “Back in the day, we had to fight our way up if we wanted to be up there,” Hong Yitang waxed eloquent. “We needed to make our reputation on the back of our battles! We weren’t invincible just because we sat at home and cultivated our way to Dominator. That would be a joke. You needed to create your reputation with your bare hands so that everyone in the world knew you!”

“When we heard that you killed six Solars in northern Silver Moon, we all felt that we finally had a successor. Southern Fist followed you partially to look out for you...” It was a rare occurrence that Hong Yitang didn’t mock He Yong. “I believe that Sky Sword and Tyrant Blade in the central region will also think that the Silver Moon martial masters have a successor when they hear of this news.

“Yuan Shuo’s final disciple does indeed hold himself with the bearing that we once did! They will also look at you in a different light and wish to come and give you a hand. Whether it’s Yu Luochoa or the other old martial masters, they’ll think you have a bright future as well.”

Dazed, Li Hao suddenly realized why he'd bumped into these two at Ash Mountain. So... they'd followed him just for him. Not because he was the heir to the eight families or anything else, but because he'd demonstrated the flair of Silver Moon's martial world with that fight and brought their future into existence. The old guard felt that he showed promise!

I see!

"We have our grudges and feuds, but seeing someone strong finally emerge from the younger generation... is wonderful," He Yong murmured. "Silver Moon's martial world has declined and the younger generation is not up to the task. We'd like to see if you can walk further down your path. We don't mean to force you to fight to your death, but that you don't need to be concerned with so much at certain times. Trust us when we say that even if your identity is revealed, Golden Spear and Berserk Blade will come save you even if Hou Xiaochen stops them!"

"They will save you because you are you, Li Hao, nothing else. You are the pride and joy of this generation's martial world. Why do you think your master is fine after killing so many back in the day? When he killed Dominators in the central region, many Silver Moon veterans stood forward to support and even fight for him so he could withdraw unscathed!"

"Martial masters are selfish, ruthless, coldhearted bastards, but they also know one principle in that an era needs a leader!"

"Why is our generation strong? Because we had many powerhouses! Any who could break your master's shackles is a heavyweight. Your master was the guide of our time. Those who threw off his influence could walk further. Every generation of martial masters could walk further because they had someone like that to look up to, the shining example of the times. And you, Li Hao, do you not wish to become the barometer of yours?"

He Yong didn't mince words and claimed that his generation of martial masters was the strongest. Seventy percent of that credit went to Yuan Shuo. Without Yuan Shuo and the pressure he levied, not even Dominators would possess their present day accomplishments.

Li Hao looked at Hong Yitang. You're quite strong yourself to have never lost to my teacher!

Chapter 459: Metamorphosis (II)

"What are you looking at me for?" Hong Yitang smiled. "Your teacher is very strong. To be honest, I wasn't certain of my chances when he challenged me. Thus, I stepped back. It wouldn't be a glorious victory and it would've been an even more humiliating defeat. He forced me to grow stronger so I wouldn't be in the position of losing face! My teacher hailed me as the greatest genius of my time, I was a Dominator a long time ago. I'm not sure if I was faster or Hou Xiaochen, but we both made it to that level very quickly.

"Therefore, I felt certain pressure in rejecting your teacher's challenge. It forced me to continue moving forward. Otherwise, would I have the face to show myself in the martial world if I, a Dominator, was defeated by Yuan Shuo?"

Li Hao was surprised at first, then quickly let the point go. So Hong Yitang had been a Dominator long ago! The greatest genius... And Hou Xiaochen had broken through a long time ago as well. All of these people had; they were thus stronger than his teacher. But these Dominators felt incredible pressure from a Sunderer. It was plain to see just how arrogant and brazen the Five Styles Beast King had been then!

Yuan Shuo with his auras melded together was indeed terrifying. These two powerful martial masters were now teaching his student for him. It was Yuan Shuo's duty to undertake and he would've carried it out had he not left. What a pity he hadn't enough time to impart these notions and experience!

Both martial masters were sharing their personal experience to give Li Hao pointers and prevent him from taking a wrong turn. At the same time, the young man was forming a personal reflection of the old guard of Silver Moon martial masters.

"The two martial uncles mean to say that sometimes I am... too calm?" he asked after some consideration.

"That's right!" He Yong laughed. "Martial masters should be hot-blooded! Look at those Battle Heaven soldiers. They're dead now, but their blood probably ran hot when they were alive. They had faith and aspiration! They never considered what their path of retreat looked like when they

threw themselves into battle. And you, Li Hao, are not afraid of death, but you're afraid of this and that. Just what are you afraid of?

"So what if you make an enemy out of the entire world? Your sword presses forward without pause, but your person... that remains to be determined!"

"It is a good thing to consider gain and loss as well as to know retreat and advance." Hong Yitang inclined his head. "It's not that this is bad as your master also knew to be afraid and run when he met a strong enemy. No one is that fearless or dumb enough to go to their deaths. But if we're thirty percent sure of things, we can give it a try. A fifty percent chance is an equal chance of victory, yet you seek out eighty or ninety percent. That's being a perfectionist!"

Li Hao quaffed his wine and sank into deep thought. Was that so? To be honest, he'd never thought about this before, but at the moment, this did sound like the case. It probably had to do with his experience, or lack thereof.

It hadn't been long since he set foot on the path of martial dao and he'd always had a habit of keeping something back in front of others. He didn't like revealing all of his secrets. This was part of the vigilance that he'd developed over the past year, which was why he always appeared somewhat reserved in front of others. He always held back thirty percent of his strength when he fought as he worried about being completely seen through by people.

He'd fought to his heart's content and full abilities when he killed the six Solars because he knew that there would be no problems resulting from his fight once he killed them all. But this time, he knew that there were powerhouses nearby that he could not kill. Therefore, he chose to withhold some of his strength and refrain from exposing too much of himself.

Thus, it hadn't been nearly as enjoyable to kill Xie Gang as it'd been to kill the six Solars. It fell below the satisfaction he'd received when killing Yu Xiao and Huang Jie. He'd felt hobbled at every turn.

Li Hao hadn't thought much of it at first, but now that the two seniors spoke to him about it and their opinions percolated through his mind...

“Don’t pause to consider your responses every time we have a conversation!” He Yong complained with a brewing headache. “Be more natural and direct. It’s fine if you get things wrong, no one will blame you! You’re in your twenties, but act like you’re in your sixties or seventies. Yuan Shuo really hasn’t done much for your tutelage!”

Li Hao felt incredibly awkward.

“Anyway, it’s good that you know now. Ole Hong and I are here, so just view everyone else as already dead. Think of it as they’ll be unable to make it out alive. Do whatever the hell you want and if anyone does exit the city alive, we’ll deal with it then!”

“You mean that I should pretend none of them will be leaving the ruins alive, so it doesn’t matter how much of myself I expose? That the dead keep their secrets, right?” That had been Li Hao’s mindset when he fought the Solars.

“Yes!” Hong Yitang smiled. “It may be hard to quickly turn your mindset around, so just think of it this way! You’ll punch or strike with your sword much more smoothly. It won’t be like earlier—I felt so uncomfortable watching you use the Nine Forged Force!”

It’d been as maddening as being unable to finish the act of procreation—so unbearable that Hong Yitang wanted nothing more than to take Li Hao’s place!

“Why can’t your Nine Forged Force coalesce its aura? It’s not just because your opponents aren’t strong enough or caught you off guard, it has to do with your mentality. Find an initial Nova next time and fight them without consideration of anything else. You don’t necessarily have to use the Nine Forged Force, you’ll still come to certain reflections even without employing it. I feel that comprehending the aura is only a matter of time in that case!

“Do you know why I showed you that stroke in the final moments of the last fight?” Hong Yitang asked in conclusion. “I wanted to tell you that you should adopt a more majestic demeanor in your style! If you really can’t, then be like He Yong and be more tyrannical or ruthless! Your potential is so good—be it the bloodline of the eight families or your comprehension of aura—that we can’t bear to see you cripple yourself on the path of martial dao...”

The current Li Hao was so incredibly strong, but Hong Yitang was mentioning the idea of being crippled and He Yong looked to be quite in agreement! Plainly, both of them didn't approve of some of Li Hao's current methods.

With the young man's personality, he rejected whatever he didn't accept, but he was an amateur when it came to martial dao. If there was someone willing to teach him, he was willing to learn with a humble heart. This was a field he wasn't adept in, so he would listen to the experiences of his elders.

The two exchanged a look and relaxed with relief. The kid really had a wondrous potential. They couldn't bear to watch him proceed down the same path, which was why they'd waited until he came to deploy that move. Otherwise, Green Moon and the others wouldn't have seen anything at all. Battle would've been over a long time ago.

It looked like that sword stroke had not been in vain.

"Killing Yellow Moon increased my merits by a lot." Hong Yitang changed the topic with a chuckle. "I now have thirty-five points, a full ten points more than before! Ole He, you have less than me now, don't you?"

He Yong snorted and didn't reply. He did indeed have fewer points at thirty-one. He'd been at twenty-eight before. While he didn't receive credit for killing Yellow Moon, aiding in the efforts had won him a sizable three points! This was their first sign that one did not have to kill the enemy to accumulate merits.

Li Hao verified his numbers. Although he'd taken off his armor, its functions were not affected since it was still on him. He stood at... twenty-one points. This was less than the other two, much less.

He Yong was at thirty-one, Hong Yitang was at thirty-five. The gap was suddenly enormous between them and Li Hao. Killing Xie Gang had granted him only two points and initial or mid Solar only seemed to be worth one point. Late or peak Solar were worth two points.

Li Hao wasn't fully knowledgeable of the grading rubric, he would just watch as points flashed across his visor.

"The outer city is probably a bit of a mess now," he said instead of continuing the topic of merits. "The Red Moon delegation is probably panicking now that Yellow Moon is dead. There are also quite a few other casualties as well—we killed roughly thirty Solars and one hundred Sunflares... Everyone's withdrawn and can soon count heads to know how many are dead. Ambushes will be harder to carry out next.

"But they're still very strong despite so many dying... Martial uncles, do you have any ideas of what we can do?"

"Not really." Hong Yitang shook his head. "Just that we'll deal with whatever crops up! We fight if we can and to be honest, so what if the Battle Heaven army is truly defeated? Will these people be able to take the city just like that? Don't forget there are even more powerful existences inside the city, and that we haven't fully explored the barracks yet. Who knows if there aren't stronger entities inside? The Red Armors might not be weak either. As supervisors, they may just be the last ones in the field..."

"Then I won't think that much either." Li Hao nodded. "I'll do as the martial uncles say and find a chance to fight an initial Nova! It'll be a sweeping success if I can grasp the water aura, and I might be lucky enough to comprehend the wood aura too. The world's my oyster then..."

"What a pity that we don't know the Weeping Willow Sword!" He Yong sighed.

Li Hao blinked. What did he mean?

"You don't know what the Weeping Willow Sword is? That's a normal reaction, it's been lost. It's a sword technique that's suited for comprehending the wood aura. Or it might not be the wood aura since everyone's perception is different. It can give you some sort of insight into the wood aura, though."

“Um... I know it!” A thought stuck Li Hao.

“Hmm?”

“I know the Weeping Willow Sword. Martial Uncle He, will it really help with the wood aura?”

He Yong fell silent and looked meaningfully at Hong Yitang. Holy fuck, the look in his eyes seemed to say. This kid not only has good potential, but his luck is incredible too. Of course, he’s the heir to the eight families. His luck has to be first rate to survive to this point.

“Then that’s fine.” Hong Yitang rose without a word. “It’s good that you know. You should do as you see fit. We won’t participate in the particulars of how you cultivate. Yuan Shuo will say that we’ve taught you wrongly in that case. We’re just giving you advice, we’re not your masters.

“Let’s go back, there’s no point to ambushes now. You should fight with the army a few times next and gain different reflections. Martial masters liked to join the army back in the day and fight with them on the battlefield. It’s how Sunderers and Dominators rose to their level. Where else would they find so many enemies to kill? Keep at it, you have much to learn apart from improving your strength!”

Li Hao bobbed his head. “They say that having an elder at home is the most valuable treasure. You are truly kindhearted, martial uncles!”

“.....” The two ignored him and his words. Who you calling old! We’re martial masters, we’re not old!

Chapter 460: Metamorphosis (III)

“Martial Uncle Southern Fist said it first,” Li Hao continued. “That it’s fine if I act without thought sometimes. You don’t mind, right martial uncles?”

“.....” He Yong rolled his eyes; he couldn’t be bothered to respond. He hauled out the black armor while muttering, “Don’t be too cocky, kid! I’ve been a royal instructor for many years and know more than you. The royal family values martial dao a lot. Some of the royal descendants are very strong. They have the best teachers and prime resources. Their teachers are an entire team instead of one person. Some of them are downright terrifying! Even I wouldn’t say that I’d be guaranteed victory against them.

“The royal family keeps a very low profile and has waited patiently since their forced abdication. They’ve just been accumulating their strength this entire time.

“Also, don’t underestimate the nine ministries!” he laughed after putting the black armor back on. “Why do you think the nine ministries were able to force the royal family into stepping back? Was it through a position of moral superiority or public sentiment? That’s bullshit, it was through pure strength! They were already quite strong eighty years ago—what they display now is just the tip of the iceberg. Do you really think the ministries rule through logic and reason? After so many years of biding their time, do people like Hou Xiaochen really dare openly rebel?”

Li Hao manifested his silver armor as well. “So why do they hide themselves?” he asked curiously.

“Those old guys are mostly the same as us—in neither a state of advance nor retreat. It hurts to fight on the battlefield, so they have to pretend to be weak. That is one of the reasons. The other is that the nine ministries, three great organizations, and the royal family all know certain secrets. I know some as well, but I won’t tell you as there isn’t a point to that.”

Then don’t even mention secrets! Li Hao half rolled his eyes and didn’t ask further. Deputy Zhou put on a show like he had a lot of secrets and obviously wanted me to ask him. I couldn’t be bothered.

It was the same case now. Just talk about them if you want to!

Hong Yitang chuckled, not minding the conversation and walked out of the tavern. “Don’t listen to his blathering,” he said as they headed back to the inner city. “There’s another main reason, and it has to do with a struggle between some of the ministries and the royal family. The conflicts

involving some of the border provinces is actually a process of shuffling cards. A lot of people want to eliminate their opponents and even crown a new Human King!

“The people’s hearts are not one and morale is low. Some are purposefully creating war and hardship to inflict suffering on the people. They conceal themselves in the chaos and demonstrate weakness to their opponents, hoping to claim the final victory and become the dynasty’s only sovereign! The nine ministries, royal family, and provinces are the three major factions in play. The three great organizations are just borrowing the hands of some ambitious characters to eke out a comfortable survival. Or did you think it was that easy to find one’s footing in the early days of confusion?”

Human King?

“A Human King?” Li Hao burst out laughing.

“Yes.”

“Aren’t they thinking a bit much?” Liu Yan chortled. “I know there was one in the ancient civilization who was terrifying beyond belief. Can such an existence be born today?”

“Our times are not necessarily less than the ancient. Li Hao, don’t think so little of modern man just because you’re well acquainted with the might of the ancients. Everything is possible and unknown!” Hong Yitang emphasized. “If you think this way, then you can give up cultivation, breakthroughs, and your search for dao. If you already deem the ancients to be greater than you and unsurpassable, why cultivate when the ancient civilization has already fallen?

“People die. Dying now is death, dying later is death. Why bother seeking dao? Your teacher must be touched in the head to explore becoming a Summoner.

“The ancients are indeed strong, of that there is no doubt. We are just learning how to walk compared to them. But take the supernatural domain for example, even if we speak of nothing else. There might be existences above in Nova in just twenty years of development. We couldn’t surpass the ancients in twenty years, but how about thirty, forty... or even one hundred or two hundred?

“If the modern man’s goal is not to surpass the past, then there isn’t much value to our existence!”

Li Hao paused as he stared at Hong Yitang.

“Your teacher is not here, or he’d slap you across the face!” Hong Yitang continued walking. “Do you think that in Yuan Shuo’s heart, he believes he is better than the ancients and will exceed them sooner or later? Why else did he modify the Five Styles? Do you think the version he excavated wasn’t complete? It must have been, but he felt that he could create an even greater one! Referencing the ancients, extracting the essence to leave the dross, imitation, catching up, and then surpassing... That is the path of modern humanity!”

Li Hao nodded solemnly. Indeed, modern society was less than the ancient past in his heart. He’d witnessed stronger existences, his forefather’s move, the imperial majesty who wrote the characters for Battle Heaven, and someone who was possibly the Human King reign unrivaled in the battlefield...

He’d always found the modern man to be weak and fragile in comparison, but could later descendants truly not outstrip their forebears?

The young man thought of his teacher. Hong Yitang said that his teacher would slap him if he was present—would he?

Perhaps!

Li Hao thought of his teacher’s reaction to the streak of sword qi running through his palm. His memory was a bit hazy, but he could recall how his teacher was first afraid, startled, and then... excited!

He’d been excited!

It was the agitated confirmation of something he'd suspected—that there was a stronger existence and path out there. It was such an agitation that he hadn't been willing to let Li Hao heal his wounds. He'd maintained that bloody hole until it healed on its own.

In this moment, Li Hao found himself deeply inferior to his teacher. He perked up the next moment, finding himself lacking to a great many people. Hong Yitang, He Yong, Hou Xiaochen... all of these people were stronger, more tenacious, thoughtful, and knowledgeable than him.

But I am young! My path has only just begun! Strictly speaking, I've only been on it for less than three months!

I'll leave them in the dust one by one so long as I continue to improve. Li Hao's spirits brightened. Yes, I can do that. I'll surpass everyone first, then the ancients, then my ancestor, then the imperial majesty, then the Human King...

He'd gained so much on this trip to Battle Heaven—not only in terms of battle strength, but a metamorphosis in terms of mentality. He had a deeper understanding of martial dao and a new positioning of his life goals.

The young man continued to change. No one was born invincible or a flawless saint. He had too many failings, but he was improving bit by bit. Li Hao followed the two veteran martial masters with a humble attitude of learning. All of them possessed points of sparkle and wonder that were worthy of him to learn from.

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When the three Silver Armors saw him again, they felt something different about their newest brethren.

The Seventh Troop leader looked at the young man with confusion. "Well done, Troop Leader Li, but why... do you seem a little different?"

“Learning has helped me improve!” Li Hao sent humble thought ripples back. “Elder brothers, as a fellow member of the Battle Heaven army, what should I keep in mind in the great battle to come?”

“Charge!” The Seventh Troop leader answered mechanically. “Charge until the enemy no longer exists! Do not retreat, do not flee, and trust your comrades, your brothers-in-arm. Your enemies are simply those in front of you. You do not need to think of anything else so long as there are comrades around you. The Battle Heaven army is a unit worthy of trust. Perhaps the times change, but people are still people and your comrades are still your comrades. That does not change!”

Li Hao nodded, not sure if he’d gained anything from the response.

The Seventh Troop leader looked into the distance, at the supernaturals in the plaza. “If they work together, they are sure to breach our defenses. It will be quite a pity... and that victory goes to the side that is united! That has ever been the case since time immemorial. Such was the truth even in our times, when powerhouses such as the Human King rose to prominence. They were not born invincible, but made their way upward on the bodies of their enemies.

“If the Human King was one person, he might not have made it to the peak himself. The group of people he could trust was key. Victory is always guaranteed when hearts are united!” He suddenly raised the longsword in his hand and spoke with a bit more emotion. “Therefore, as a new recruit, you can observe first when battle breaks out later. I will teach you how to be a good soldier! A true soldier is invincible. He is defeated only in terms of strength, not heart!”

Li Hao nodded emphatically, reaffirming to himself that his greatest gains this trip was not from battle ability, but the thought patterns of the ancients. He’d walked out of his tiny hometown to observe the world at large. Rapidly transforming, he was changing some of his own thoughts.

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At the same time.

Large sums of wandering cultivators retreated back to the plaza. Fear percolated through the crowd when they registered that some powerful existences had gone missing. There were a lot fewer now!

On Red Moon's side, Green Moon's expression was incredibly unpleasant. While she normally kept her face unreadable, there was a time and place for that. With Yellow Moon dead, she was perfectly right to display noticeable shock and fury.

Blue Moon and Violet Moon remained quiet, prompting questions from others. What had happened for such a heavy atmosphere to drape over these three leaders?

"When I rushed over just now, I saw a Black Armor killing someone." Xu Feng came back at this time. "It was incredibly powerful and killing Yama's Xie Gang. It might've used a martial dao secret art!"

"I suspect that there are powerful martial masters who've put on the armor to conceal their tracks while they kill others!"

Hou Xiaochen flicked a glance at him and couldn't be bothered to respond. Idiot! What was the point of announcing this? Did he simply want to create more panic? You don't have to speak of it just because you know it. Voicing it aloud won't show how strong you are. It will only make people fearful and cause wandering cultivators to doubt those around them. These central region powerhouses are too green!

Indeed, the wandering cultivators rustled with unease after the young man's words. Martial masters were subject to sidelong glances all around.