

Star Gate 471

Chapter 471: After the Battle (III)

“How many merits do you guys have?” He Yong suddenly chuckled. “I have fifty-five!”

Hong Yitang flicked a noncommittal glance at him. “I have sixty.”

“What??” He Yong blinked. Nuh uh, you didn’t kill anyone, so how come you have more than me?

“Merits don’t just come from killing people. I stopped the enemy at the gates, so I received some credit!” Hong Yitang wasn’t surprised by his score. The infrastructure behind the military equipment was very complete, so this kind of outcome was normal.

Li Hao remained silent. He wasn’t about to tell them that his score was higher than theirs. He’d killed quite a few supernaturals on the battlefield, some Solars, and a mid Nova. His score stood at seventy-eight!

Even he was surprised at how his merits were suddenly so high, and he still had no idea what they could be used for. All the same, the high score felt nice.

“The battle to defend the city is at a temporary lull,” a mechanical voice suddenly sounded in their minds. “The supervisory troops have audited everyone’s military achievements. The newly designated Twelfth Troop undertook their first battle with an incomplete roster of personnel. Being brave and ferocious, their merits will be counted at double the rate!”

Li Hao sensed that his merits were immediately doubled! 156! Not only that, but the other two started as well. This was... quite some efficiency.

It meant that the military system was still operational. The supervisors were aware of the happenings. Were the Red Armors in charge of auditing whether merits were being awarded reasonably so that certain problems wouldn’t occur?

“The newly designated Twelfth Troop waged a brave and ferocious battle!” Another line appeared in Li Hao’s mind. “Their people rendered exemplary service to the Battle Heaven Army! Troop leader Li Hao is awarded an additional thirty merits for exceptional leadership! First company leader Hong Yitang is awarded an additional twenty merits for fending off formidable enemies! Soldier He Yong of the first company is awarded an additional ten merits!”

Li Hao’s merits suddenly stood at 186 points. Hong Yitang was first increased to 120 points, then awarded a bonus of twenty to make for 140 points. He Yong now possessed 120 points.

Li Hao scratched his head. So he received an additional reward because he was the troop leader? Not bad! The extra thirty points was the equivalent of killing thirty initial or mid Solars. That was a lot. Although none of them knew what the merits could be used for, surely they were nothing bad. The more the merrier.

Only now did Li Hao have a chance to look at the black dog next to him. Panther was so full that it was burping. Highly excited, it pounced on Li Hao and knocked the young man to the ground. Licking and snuffling his face in a frenzy, the dog left the newly unarmed Li Hao in a state of wordless shock.

Damn! Panth’s gotten so strong!

“Panth, stop!” Li Hao roared. Panther furiously wagged its tail, but stopped. The young man frowned slightly after assessing it. The dog was thinner, but felt much stronger. He couldn’t tell much more because the dog was different from the major monster spirits of Ash Mountain. It didn’t have a ball of light around it!

So... was it a thorough martial master dog? It didn’t have any mysterious power!

“Did you come in with the last expedition team?”

Panther quickly bobbed its head up and down.

“Can you talk? I’ve seen major monster spirits that can talk...”

“Arf arf arf!” Panther shook its head, surprising the young man.

“You’re... not strong enough?” The four monster spirits of Ash Mountain could communicate through thought ripples. Panther couldn’t, which meant that it didn’t count as strong. However, the strength it displayed when pouncing on the young man had been quite significant!

Panther shook its tail without responding, because it didn’t know either what was strong and what was weak. It just knew that when the fights broke out earlier, it would’ve been able to bite a few of those people to death. This Big Beard, for example. The dog felt that it would be able to bite him to death if he didn’t turn into that scary version of himself!

Big Beard was too scary after he transformed—Panther shook its tail. Too scary, it wouldn’t be able to fight the human.

What a pity that the dog couldn’t talk. Li Hao didn’t ask further, he just found it odd that Panther could remain in the ancient city for an entire month. That meant that the dog had gained the city’s acceptance—did it also have a key?

That didn’t seem likely! Then why could it stay here?

“This dog is quite strong,” Hong Yitang transmitted. “Although I don’t know the specifics, its presence is contained within itself to the point where I think it’s a martial master. That’s strange. Monster spirits these days absorb a certain amount of mysterious power, but this dog... has none. That’s so strange!”

He found it very strange, as did Li Hao. So the dog he’d seen in the inner city before really had been Panther. “Panth, did you see the huge battle outside just now?”

The dog quickly bobbed its head up and down.

“Do you think... you can beat me?”

Panther rapidly shook its head! It was a dog, but not a dumb dog. Of course it couldn't answer any other way. There would be no yummy sword energy for it otherwise! It was starving!

“Then... what about the Silver Armors before they reawaken?” Li Hao stroked his chin. That was peak Solar. He agreed with Hong Yitang that Panther seemed quite strong. Was the dog on par with a Solar?

After some thought, the dog inclined its head! Li Hao drew a sharp breath—that was quite strong indeed! So the dog was either a peak Solar or initial Nova! How had it done that?

“Did you get anything good from the city?”

Panther nodded and looked at the pagoda in the distance. Shivering, it whined as if to say—I'm not ever going back even if you beat me! That was too painful!

“Not bad!” Li Hao patted it on the head with surprise. “I put my life on the line fighting outside, but I wouldn't be a match for you if it wasn't for me melding four auras together. Damn, that's something!”

The dog was very lucky! Thanks to following him, it drank the first brew from Stellaris and then received benefits from the ruins. Why did it seem like it had better luck than he did? His luck was already decent enough, but the dog's put his to shame!

“Arf arf arf!” Panther barked and licked Li Hao's hand. Its tail wagged, as if saying that we're on the same team. Me growing stronger is you growing stronger.

The young man didn't say anything, it was nice that the dog was back. He'd thought that it died or ran away. So it was here all along. However... he still smacked it on the head. "I was fighting to the death outside, but you didn't come to help even though you were watching from the city walls!"

Panther responded with a look of innocence—it hadn't dared to join the battlefield. Hong Yitang had been rampaging through it. The dog might've been killed by mistake if it went down, it'd been terrifying!

"Let's set the dog aside for now." Hong Yitang stood up. "Li Hao, are you interested in paying the barracks a visit? I'm curious as to what the merits can be used for. 140 points is a lot."

He couldn't be bothered with the people outside. The Gold Armor seemed to be on the city walls in person to stabilize the situation and collect Black Armors. This was the first day of the ruins' opening, no one could leave for the moment. They had time to deal with those outside—it'd be nice if the merits could be traded for something nice.

Hong Yitang only had two big pieces of stone left; he couldn't bear to use them. It was all bastard He Yong's fault for wasting one of his! Granted, their organs had improved again, creating more power to be deployed in battle.

Li Hao was likewise curious and nodded in agreement. He, too, wanted to see what merits could be used for. Could they be used for a promotion? It might be nice to trade them for a set of gold armor.

Meanwhile, all He Yong was focused on were mysterious power stones. He was too poor at the moment! Hong Yitang would absolutely be the death of him if he didn't repay his debts. The word of a swordsman was not a joke and Hong Yitang likely just wanted an excuse to end him.

"So the old man earlier is Light Sword?" Li Hao asked curiously as they walked. "I heard that she's a woman! Also, what's the story behind the Xus? My information doesn't have many details on them, so I don't get why Xu Feng was so arrogant."

“It’s a bit complicated.” He Yong pursed his lips. “Light Sword is indeed a woman, but there are some issues with her cultivation method. It’s an ancient art of light and sun. Cultivators can change their gender at its peak. But with an abundance of yang and void of yin... she is neither a woman nor a man now! Her joining the Xus likely has something to do with their secrets. Maybe they can solve her problem.

“As for the Xus...” The man thought for a moment. “They’re really something. If it comes down to it, we need to start from when the dynasty was established. Skystar Dynasty received help from three great families when it was founded—the Xus were one of them.

“The patriarchs of the three families were later titled Founder Dukes of the Nation, a title that is hereditary. The Xus possess the Steadfast Duke title and are responsible for the eastern provinces. After the nine ministries forced the royal family to abdicate, the three founding clans also took their places behind the curtain. If not, the eastern provinces would answer to the Xus. The other two clans sit in the west and south. As for us in the north, we are too poor and chaotic thanks to activity from martial masters. A royal prince held down the fort here—the founder of the Skystar Troops!

“After the rise of the supernatural, the Steadfast Duke in the east received many benefits. They are very strong in the eastern region. Xu Feng had a place on the Divine Masters Ranking in the central region because he was always active there. The Xus have a branch in Skystar City and they are the royal family’s ardent supporters. In reality, however, they probably have their own ambitions for independence. The three dukes may not be of one heart with the royal family!”

He Yong reeled off these details like they were precious jewels in his care. “Also, they might be secretly supporting one of the three great organizations! There are many hands in the shadow behind the organization. Since the Xus are in the east, the royal family has wondered if the tyrannical Yama counts them as a backer.

“Therefore, whether it’s the three great organizations, nine ministries, or the royal family, they all show face to the Xus. It wouldn’t do to cause a ruckus in the absence of evidence.”

“I see!” Li Hao replied after a moment. “No wonder he was so cocky. But... I thought they were a family from the ancient civilization. So they’re just a founding family, what are they so arrogant for?”

“.....” He Yong found himself at a loss. You’re... pretty cocky yourself! Is being one of the three founding families of the nation not worthy of lofty pride?

Chapter 472: The Merit Exchange Manual (I)

The Gold Armor wanted Li Hao’s trio to visit the city lord manor. The three were in no hurry since the Gold Armor was busy on top of the city walls. They strolled toward the barracks.

The northern quadrant.

There were guards at the gate when the trio arrived. The barracks had been a bit quiet on their last visit—it seemed more alive now. Not only were there guards, but so were there Red Armors in the distance carrying out duties. The guardrail lifted automatically when the trio approached the guard post.

Thump!

The soldier on duty thumped his chest with his right hand, slightly agitated, like he was welcoming the triumphant return of victorious soldiers. Li Hao and the other two were used to the reaction—they saluted in return.

The trio entered the northern quadrant.

“Let’s go to the armory,” Li Hao proposed. “Perhaps we’ll find something there. There’s a Silver Armor there that seems stronger than the rest. He had a bit of an attitude last time I met him, I wonder if he’ll be better today.”

The northern quadrant was enormous and populated with numerous buildings. As new recruits, they didn’t dare wander around. However, the trio knew where the armory was.

Other soldiers they met along the way quickly saluted the three. Apart from the Red Armors, there seemed to be more Black Armors this time around. That quite startled Li Hao and the two men. There’d been no Black Armors walking around the barracks before, so why... were they here now?

Had they already been present before, or had more of the city unsealed with the battle and provided enough energy to awaken more soldiers?

Li Hao leaned towards the latter as there hadn't even been guards here before. It might be that all of the Black Armors apart from the four defending armies had fallen silent.

Battle Heaven's barracks were enormous. There might have been a million people living in the area when the army was encamped here. And perhaps the city was just one of the posts in which the defending army cycled through.

The three reached the armory after ten minutes. Li Hao had come here before, but the other two men hadn't. They'd been outright presented with their bronze and black armor in the recruitment hall. They weren't as important as a Silver Armor.

Additional Black Armors could be seen here as well; they saluted upon seeing the trio. Li Hao assessed them with an increasingly odd look. This meant that there were numerous Black Armors that'd awakened in the barracks. Was this good or bad?

Li Hao saw the Silver Armor in the distance after they entered the armory. He saw Li Hao too—a familiar ripple sounded by his ears before the trio reached him.

"Well done, kid who came in through connections!" The Silver Armor seemed to know what had taken place outside. "The eight families are the eight families alright. The guardian clans are quite powerful. As weak as you are, you'll do!"

Li Hao suppressed an eye roll! This guy must've been a chatterbox when he was alive and someone just begging to be beaten up. But there was a certain point of interest to his words. His intelligence seemed high. In fact, he seemed sharper than the three Silver Armors outside.

"What does the senior go by?" Li Hao offered a pleasantry as he stepped forward, despite feeling like this guy was asking for a fist to the face.

“I am Zhang Liang, deputy commissioner of Military Supplies in the Ninth Division of the Reserve Defenders!” the Silver Armor reported proudly.

Did a deputy commissioner of Military Supplies outrank a troop leader? Both of them were in silver armor. Li Hao felt that this soldier’s sentence seemed to be in good shape—at least he spoke smoothly and seemed more enthusiastic than before. He dropped the pleasantries and asked, “Commissioner Zhang...”

“Deputy Commissioner!”

“.....” Do you really have to be so serious? “Deputy Commissioner Zhang, we’ve earned some merits and don’t know how to use them. Will you give us a few pointers?”

“Merits... they are such good things!” Zhang Liang beamed. “Battle Heaven values merits and all of the human race values merits! The merit system is exceedingly important and was even a mainstream system for the race during war.

“There are many uses to military merits. You’re new, but you would know their importance if you had participated in the rookie training! I’ll go over a few simple uses. First, you can exchange them for cultivation treasures. Second, you can exchange them for currency. Third, you can accumulate them for promotions. Fourth, you can exchange them for chances to comprehend dao—powerhouses will teach you martial dao. Fifth... I forgot!”

Zhang Liang was an interesting fellow who saw nothing wrong with admitting that he’d forgotten something. “My memory is damaged and I only recall certain inherent knowledge. But I remember that merits can be used elsewhere. Perhaps I’ll remember in the future.”

Li Hao and the other two nodded as they listened to the explanation. This was similar to their previous speculation.

“Can we exchange them here?” Li Hao quickly asked.

“You can!” Zhang Liang proclaimed. “They’re not usually exchanged here, but at the Hall of Merit Exchange further in. That part’s been cordoned off for now. According to the rules of wartime, Military Supplies takes over some responsibilities when systems begin faltering. Therefore, you can temporarily exchange your merits here with me.”

A Hall of Merit Exchange? The trio looked at each other with surprise. There were even agencies specifically related to military merits. It would seem that Battle Heaven Army’s system was quite complete, and that there were many wartime provisions to ensure that operations would not be paralyzed.

“But I must remind you that many things are out of stock!” Zhang Liang commented. “They are unavailable for exchange since they have not been replenished. Also, I am only a deputy commissioner. Certain things require the commissioner’s signature for approval.”

“Where is the commissioner?”

“He is... dead,” Zhang Liang responded calmly. “He and I held down the fort together here, but he grew antsy and weary of loneliness in his old age. He desired to leave the city, so he did, and... died. Although I can fill in for part of his duties, I was not promoted, after all. The city is asleep, or I would’ve been promoted a long time ago!”

Alright then! Li Hao could say nothing to that. “What can I trade for?”

“How many merits do you have?” Zhang Liang swept him a glance.

“One hundred some...”

“Not bad!” boomed the Silver Armor. “Even if your merits were counted at double the rate, it’s a job well done to accumulate so many from your first battle!” He tossed out a booklet. “Take a look yourself! These are all the items that can be traded for below one thousand points. There are several exchange manuals, but there’s no point to you reading the higher leveled ones. You can come to me for exchange when you’re done! But remember, not all of them are in stock.”

“I understand, my thanks!”

Zhang Liang sat down instead of responding, finally appearing like one of the quiet soldiers. It was in his unmoving moments that Li Hao could sense that these people were truly dead. This was a city of the dead with no one alive.

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The trio found a seat nearby. They were all curious, but He Yong found his hands tied. He scratched his head with regret, “I should’ve learned some ancient languages. I can’t read a thing!”

It was a damned shame! Both Li Hao and Hong Yitang wanted to laugh, but Hong Yitang was barely better off. He knew some ancient characters, but couldn’t read a book when it was written entirely in the ancient language.

It was a heartbreaking prospect!

Meanwhile, Li Hao could read almost the entire manual because he’d learned at Yuan Shuo’s side for two years. His only task during those two years was to learn this type of knowledge; it was an adequate span of time for him to grasp a language. There were also some links between the ancient language and modern text.

“It’s not that hard, both of you can learn it with some time.”

He Yong ignored the young man. Stop showing off!

Li Hao opened the booklet—the Merit Exchange Manual. This version went up to one thousand points and perhaps started with the highest value item, so the first to greet the reader was a treasure valued at one thousand points.

“One thousand merits for a company leader to advance to troop leader!” Li Hao recited for the other two since they couldn’t read the text.

“.....” Hong Yitang blinked with astonishment. “One thousand points? A Nova gives you ten points, so you need to kill one hundred to be promoted? You’re joking!”

“One Nova is worth ten points, a Solar worth one point,” Li Hao said after some thought. “Existences above Nova might be one hundred, so you only need to kill ten of those. I think that when the troop leaders were alive, they were possibly all stronger than Nova! Therefore, for those who want to be promoted, killing ten peers seems reasonable. We have to keep in mind that the Ninth Division only has twelve troops even now. This... seems normal.”

That did indeed appear to be the case after some thought. True enough! So this meant that Li Hao had benefited from one thousand points for no reason at all! Hong Yitang had wanted to obtain a set of silver armor himself before—it looked like that was out of the question.

“The Goldensky Lotus is valued at one thousand merits per flower,” Li Hao continued. “Each flower has eight petals with the extraordinary ability of nurturing mental strength.”

“The Goldensky Lotus?” Hong Yitang repeated.

“Yes!”

“I’ve seen what we obtained from Ash Mountain recorded in ancient tomes. That’s the Goldensky Lotus!”

“.....” Li Hao blinked. He still had one petal and seed in his storage ring. That’s the Goldensky Lotus?

The item that the four great monster spirits were guarding was listed in the Merit Exchange at a high price! But one thousand points for eight petals... meant each petal was worth 125 points. So his furious slaughter of so many resulted in only one petal?

“The blade system of Blood Eruption, Emperor Slayer, and Divine Annihilator are three methods of the system. They are worth one thousand merits total.” Li Hao didn’t think anything of what he read, but Hong Yitang registered the names with surprise.

“If... I recall correctly... Berserk Blade practices the Blood Eruption method, doesn’t he?” There was a blade method system to be had here!

A system meant that one could start with the first book, graduate to the second book, and then move on to the third book. Each book represented a different stage.

“Berserk Blade only knows the first method, but he’s a peak Solar that’s close to Nova.” A light danced in Hong Yitang’s eyes. “I can tell, however, that he doesn’t have much strength to carry on. If he could lay hands on this blade system... things will be very interesting then. He might swiftly complete the second method and attempt the third...”

Chapter 473: The Merit Exchange Manual (II)

Ancient methods were on the exchange roster! Of course, this was to be expected since they were in a ruin of the ancient civilization.

“Help me take a look to see if there are any tomes regarding sword methods,” Hong Yitang quickly asked.

Li Hao carefully perused the page and paged through the manual before saying, “There aren’t many sword methods, but there’s a Mind Sword Fusion Method. It’s probably related to the sword, but you need five hundred merits to trade for it.”

Hong Yitang fell silent, whereas He Yong took over. “How about boxing methods?”

Ancient boxing methods were great points of reference, some could be outright cultivated. Of course, martial masters walked their own paths. If they laid hands on one, it would be mostly used as a source of information instead of a guide.

“There are indeed boxing methods.” Li Hao quickly flipped the pages. “The Fists of the Bloody Lion King. Eight hundred points!”

“.....” Both men fell silent. Damn, that’s expensive!

But expensive meant that it was good. Otherwise, a promotion to troop leader was just one thousand points. These secret arts required several hundred or a thousand at a drop. It was mind-boggling!

While there were secret arts listed in the exchange manual, there weren’t that many. It would seem that the military was a more centralized body, to prevent obstacles in concerted action if everyone wielded different methods. It was mostly resources listed as available for exchange. Li Hao’s eyes fell on a certain treasure that wasn’t expensive.

“The Mind Fruit nurtures mental strength and costs ten points per fruit.”

Mental strength was what the ancients called mind intent. There were certain differences between the two, but they were very similar. A treasure that nurtured mind intent only cost ten points! Li Hao was quite tempted when he took a look. I wonder if there’s any left!

“There are energy stones on here, I wonder if it’s mysterious power stones. Energy stones for cultivation cost ten points per portion. I wonder how much a portion is?”

“Are there others?” Hong Yitang asked after some thought. “Methods to nurture the five organs, perhaps?”

“I can’t tell.” Li Hao scratched his head. “There are more secret methods, but they all have... pretty crazy names. Look at this one called Divine Annihilator. If it wasn’t for the words ‘blade method’ associated with it, I would have no idea what it’s used for.”

There were many secret arts listed in the manual, but each of them bore ludicrous names. It was difficult to tell from a glance what their purpose was. The key thing was, all of them cost a lot of merits.

“Forget it, let’s go ask the commissioner of Military Supplies...” Hong Yitang breathed out.

Li Hao nodded and walked toward Zhang Liang. “Deputy Commissioner Zhang, there are some parts of the manual that I don’t understand. Are there any methods that teach one how to nurture the five organs?”

“Nurture the five organs?” Zhang Liang was rather surprised. “Why do you need that? I can see that you’ve manifested your mental strength and have long surpassed the stage of training the five organs...”

Li Hao blinked. What did the soldier mean?

“The manifestation of mental strength, and at a strong level at that, means that the five organs should already be pretty strong. What do you want something like that for?”

“Ah...” Li Hao found the response strange. “So Deputy Commissioner Zhang means to say that the ancients train the organs first, then mind intent—mental strength, is that so?”

“Is that not the case in your era?”

“No!”

Alright then, Zhang Liang wasn’t too surprised. “The cultivation systems of each time period may differ—yours should have differences from ours. Regular methods for training the organs may not work in your situation, but there isn’t a complete void of similarity when it comes to martial dao!”

The deputy commissioner seemed to be recalling something. “Strengthening the five organs may not be of any use to you. My memory is damaged, so I cannot determine your exact condition. There is a method that will be useful, however. It’s not that effective when it comes to strengthening the organs, but it can connect them as one. Strengthening one organ is to strengthen all five.”

Li Hao’s heart stirred with desire. Strengthening one organ equals strengthening all five? That was great!

“Commissioner Zhang...”

“Deputy Commissioner!”

“Ah, yes. Deputy Commissioner Zhang, can we trade for this method?”

“I think so, I can’t remember. Look for the Building Five Bridges method. It breaks the bulwark between the five organs and creates five bridges to share energy. In this regard, a circulation cycle between the five results in strengthening all five when one is strengthened!”

Hong Yitang and He Yong stepped forward with agitation. They’d never heard of the Building Five Bridges method before—so the five organs could be connected to each other?? They were deeply nervous and deathly afraid that they didn’t possess enough merits.

Li Hao quickly paged through the manual, finding the secret art’s name and discovering that... it wasn’t expensive!

“Just thirty points?” the young man identified with surprise. He’d thought that it would require hundreds or a thousand! No wonder he hadn’t seen it earlier. It was placed in the back since it wasn’t expensive.

“It’s not expensive to begin with!” Zhang Liang explained. “It’s just a regular cultivation method that some of the academies made available for free back in the day. Not everyone in the army attends the academies, so we charge a small amount for it out of respect for the academies’ copyright. Anyone who serves for three years can obtain it for free. You guys can also have it for free after three years!”

“.....” Silence answered him. Forget it, we don’t want to come back in three years.

“Is it hard to practice?” Li Hao quickly asked.

“I don’t know. It wasn’t hard in our times, but our cultivation system is different from yours. You three should have strong organs because your mental strength is already on display, but yours are somehow weak. It even looks like they are not in balance for you. I don’t understand your system.” There was indeed a disconnect here as, although everyone practiced the ancient methods, there were certain revisions made. Some ancient methods weren’t meant for modern use—problems would arise if they were employed as is.

Based on Zhang Liang’s words, the trio should be very strong after the manifestation of mental strength. They shouldn’t have to worry about their organs, but that was the greatest worry of modern martial masters!

“The Building Five Bridges method is a neutral and mild cultivation method that does not require exact steps. It might be very suited for you guys. Having to focus on only one organ might save a lot of time.”

The trio bobbed their heads rapidly. Indeed! That was right!

Li Hao was quite excited. If he could give this to his teacher, then his teacher might be able to create a new method very quickly! Building Five Bridges seemed to be great reference material.

“Ah... can we teach this method to others?”

“.....” Zhang Liang seemed to be regarding Li Hao with an assessing look. “It could not be taught privately before and there was no need to. All of the martial universities possessed it, as did the military. We charge a fee out of respect for the creator! They need some encouragement after creating the method—some inspiration and respect. But the times no longer belong to us. You can teach it to others on a small scale so long as that isn’t done haphazardly.”

“Then the three of us...”

“The three of you cannot teach each other!”

“.....” The trio paused.

“You are of the military and cannot teach each other in private. All three of you must trade for the method, and if the people you teach later join the army, they need to pay the fee as well. There is no problem if they do not join.”

What, so this means we need to pay extra? All three of us have to make individual exchanges? And it’s teaching outsiders that’s no problem since the army’s hand doesn’t stretch that far? But it stretches to us!

“Will this method break the supernatural locks?” Hong Yitang asked urgently.

“What?”

“The supernatural locks!”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Zhang Liang replied. “The times are different, perhaps there are differences even in the physical body. I am not familiar with some of your terms. But like I’ve said, the Building Five Bridges method is a neutral and placid method. You can give it a try or use it as reference. You should not trade for the other methods because they might be completely useless!”

The soldier was unaware of supernatural locks! Li Hao was surprised—were there no such things in the ancients?

The trio put the method down for exchange on all of their lists. “The energy stones for cultivation that cost ten points—how many are in a portion?” asked the young man.

“The ten that you received before is a portion!”

Li Hao blinked and was then overcome with joy! Are you kidding me? Such a pure mysterious power stone is only worth one point? Hot damn! That’s so cheap! Granted, it wasn’t that cheap since killing a Solar rendered only one point. But compared to the prices earlier, it was cheap.

“This type!” Li Hao quickly took out a stone. “One stone is worth one point. One of these is worth ten of ours!”

He Yong’s eyes darted to it. He looked at Li Hao, then at Zhang Liang as he furiously ran calculations through his mind. One point for ten stones. He had 120 points, minus the thirty needed for the Building Five Bridges method... that meant he could trade for nine hundred stones. Nine hundred was what these stones mapped to in their terms. He had an outstanding debt of three thousand!

Zhang Liang looked at He Yong. “Does this one not wish to save trade for a higher position? The authorization for a black armor soldier is very low. You’ll have some more benefits if you become a company leader. It only takes one hundred points!”

“One hundred points for company leader?” He Yong grimaced. “I...” only have 120 points and I want to trade for that method! I won’t have anything left if I go for a promotion!

“What’s so good about being a company leader? I don’t see the point...”

It only seemed to come with a stronger suit of armor. In that case, he really didn't care about that.

Chapter 474: The Merit Exchange Manual (III)

"Do you not feel it?" Zhang Liang asked. "It goes without saying that your armor will be stronger, but you'll also be able to lead a hundred troops as a company leader. Their accomplishments will bring you some additional merits since you are their leader. That is one aspect. The second is that your wages will increase. As a soldier, you receive one such cultivation stone a month. Company leaders receive three, troop leaders receive ten. You can collect them at the end of every month..."

He Yong was still uninterested. It'd be faster for me to just trade for the stones. One hundred points means one hundred stones. If I took wages of two a month, it'll take me four years to gain the same amount.

"As company leader," continued Zhang Liang, "You have the right to use one hundred sets of black armor. You can activate one hundred of them, but those who are to use them must pass the military's background inspection. You can freely make use of them if they pass muster!"

"....." He Yong blinked, as did Li Hao. "So Deputy Commissioner Zhang means that I can recruit my own men if I'm a company leader?"

"Yes!" Zhang Liang nodded. "But they'll need to be vetted by Supervisory first."

"Deputy Commissioner Zhang..." Li Hao asked. "I actually have one hundred sets of armor, but I er... when the eastern defenders fell previously..."

"I understand!" the deputy commissioner responded calmly. "But those that leave the city or are captured have their access revoked. They become ordinary armor that is not connected to the military system. As a troop leader, you can activate one thousand sets. However, those who utilize the armor must fulfill our requirements!"

What requirements?

“Are the requirements difficult?” Li Hao asked with agitation.

“Not that difficult. First, there is a temporary moratorium on accepting practitioners of energy. There is another military unit for them, we are not of the same system. Second, they must be strong of body and mind. We do not accept the feeble! Third, they must pass through the inspection from the Visitor Pavilion to prevent infiltration by unstable factors. Fourth, they must participate in the rookie training.

“You guys are temporarily reprieved from training as it is currently at a standstill and needs time to reactivate. You must wait for the system to be operational again before you can recruit new soldiers. Li Hao, you entered through a different channel and the other two received guest authorization. If any of your people also obtain that authorization, they can skip training as well.”

“Do you mean that key?” Li Hao asked.

“Yes!” responded Deputy Commissioner Zhang. “The key does not appear for just anyone! One must be of upright morals! Those without cannot obtain the key—they will see it without being able to touch it...”

He Yong blinked. Are you talking about me? My morals are just fine!

Li Hao and Hong Yitang also looked at him. Does this one... have a suspect character? He Yong could find nothing to defend himself with!

“Upright morals simply means a lack of enmity toward Battle Heaven.” Zhang Liang looked at him with empty eyes. “The Visitor Pavilion possesses such a verification system.”

“It can manifest my thoughts?” Li Hao couldn’t help himself. “Not to mention... to be honest, we’re here for treasure. How did Hong Yitang receive his, then?”

The young man made direct reference to Hong Yitang’s name. The man flashed a half smile back at him. You guess!

“Seeking treasures does not mean enmity,” Zhang Liang continued. “It is normal to be curious about ancient ruins. It is perfectly expected to want to harvest some gains. But those who bear certain greed and desire toward the city at the core of their being will not be accepted!”

Li Hao still didn’t understand, but he caught a keyword—desire! Control of desire! Hong Yitang seemed to have controlled his well, so he received a key. Meanwhile, He Yong’s was too strong for him to be offered one!

The young man turned his thoughts to considering his proposed exchange instead. “I want the Building Five Bridges method and another ten Mind Fruits...”

That was 130 points. He had 186 merits total and wanted to use the remainder for energy stones. That would give him the equivalent of approximately five hundred mysterious power stones.

“There is supposed to be an energy shortage inside the city,” Li Hao couldn’t help himself. “Why does Military Supplies still have mysterious power stones available for exchange?”

“The energy we need is not of this kind! Let me put it in a better way, it is the energy of life! The greater the powerhouse, the more they carry. This was not necessary at first and killing others to reawaken the city is not what we wish. We had protective plant spirits around us and didn’t need to do so. But General Pagoda has fallen silent and the stones you speak of are what we have in abundance. We ourselves are already dead and do not have sufficient life energy to activate certain formations or systems...”

Li Hao only seemed to half understand. It wasn’t this kind of energy that Battle Heaven lacked, but another kind. General Pagoda? Did he mean the pagoda tree outside the spirit? A plant spirit? The passageway they’d taken to reach the city was the inside of a tree!

“Then I’ll trade the rest of my merits for energy stones!”

“I want a copy of Building Five Bridges and eleven Mind Fruit!” Hong Yitang declared crisply. He had 140 points and no need for mysterious power stones.

He Yong looked on with a conflicted expression. He wanted a promotion as that seemed useful, but... he also wanted treasure!

“Can merits be transferred?” Li Hao suddenly asked.

“Yes!” Zhang Liang responded. “Ordinary soldiers cannot do so, but company leaders can reward soldiers with some merits through setting missions. Troop leaders can do the same, but the results need to be verified by the Supervisory Guard so that under-the-table dealings do not occur. That would be an insult to the merits. If discovered, all merits will be confiscated and some punishment might be in order!”

Li Hao looked at He Yong to see that the man was still hesitant. “That soldier protected me before, can I award him ten points?”

“You can try issuing that mission through the silver armor. You can if the Supervisory Guard approves. If not... then probably not.”

“Will my merits be withdrawn?”

“If it’s your first time doing so and you’re a rookie, probably not.”

Alright then, Li Hao looked at He Yong. “Martial Uncle He, I’ll try rewarding you with ten points. Being a Black Armor is too low level. It’s best if you secure a promotion and the Building Five Bridges.”

He Yong grinned widely and quickly nodded. Li Hao studied his army for a bit and attempted to issue the mission. He began waiting for the Supervisory Guard’s answer.

“If I want to become a general... one of the Gold Armors, how many merits do I need?”

“Not many, just ten thousand!”

“.....” Li Hao wanted to cry. He’d lost ten thousand merits for no good reason at all—no, nine thousand!

As one of the eight families, he was eligible to be directly made a general. But he’d been so weak that the Gold Armor demoted him straight off the bat!

“Can we exchange for Water of Life?” asked Hong Yitang.

“You could before!” Zhang Liang shook his head. “Not anymore. General Pagoda has fallen silent and can no longer supply us with any. There are traces left in some places around the city. The Hibiscus Garden that you guys stayed at before holds some dregs!”

Hong Yitang found this regretful, then thought of the storage ring he’d picked up. Apart from the three big pieces of mysterious power stones, there was also a small flask of liquid. He strongly suspected that it was Water of Life. So that was the last of it! Then... why had he picked up some? It wasn’t as if there was no one inside the city. Although they were all dead, could they not see even a storage ring?

Zhang Liang spoke no further. After a while, Li Hao received a message that the mission was accepted and approved. A delighted He Yong looked at his increased merits. He wanted to use them for mysterious power stones, but decided to go for a promotion first. There were more enemies outside the walls!

There was still a chance to earn money. Obtaining that promotion first would be convenient. At least he’d be able to directly talk to Li Hao and not have to rely on Hong Yitang each time instead.

.....

Zhang Liang walked into the back, coming back out after a while with a bundle of items for each of them. “The Mind Fruits are kept in the storage ring. They will certainly still have an effect, but perhaps a weaker one since so many years have passed. It won’t be much use for you, but there should be something there.

“Don’t be in a hurry to utilize the Building Five Bridges method. Read it first, understand its meaning, then try.” He turned to Li Hao and Hong Yitang. “Work hard! Although Military Supplies isn’t the designated exchange agency, we have a sword method that is very suited to you too! The Voidbreak Incantation was created early on by a supreme personage...”

Hong Yitang’s eyes lit up when he heard the sword method’s name.

“You... look like you’ve heard of it?” Zhang Liang turned empty eyes toward the man.

“Yes.” Hong Yitang nodded frankly. “But I was unable to obtain a copy of the secret art. It is said that its creator was an invincible existence in the ancient civilization.”

“Of course!” Zhang Liang nodded, his ripples carrying respect and admiration. “That was indeed an invincible personage. Although this is just his early work, it will be an immense benefit for any of you sword cultivators. The Sword Sovereign from the Li family once received pointers from him...

“The Sword Sovereign is also an invincible entity.” Zhang Liang turned to Li Hao. “But he received quite a bit of tutelage in the beginning and later on from the owner of the Voidbreak Incantation. If you can obtain it, that will be of enormous help to you!”

Li Hao grew lost in thought. His ancestor had received help from the master of this sword method? What kind of personage could he be?

“Was... was my ancestor very strong, back in the day?” he couldn’t help but ask.

“Of course!”

“How about compared to the one who named Battle Heaven?”

“I don’t know.” Zhang Liang shook his head after momentary silence. “The two didn’t spar later on. It would certainly be the Sword Sovereign in the beginning. He left for a period of time and continued to develop then, but it is too far for us to consider!”

Li Hao didn’t ask further since it was apparent there were no answers to be had.

“Let us speak to here!” Zhang Liang grew impatient when Li Hao wanted to ask other questions.

“Wait, how much for that sword method?”

“It’s not expensive, just ten thousand points!”

“.....”

Go fuck yourself! Li Hao nearly cursed. What was the point of saying all that? You might as well leave it since it’s that expensive. I have to kill ten thousand Solars for that, who are you kidding??

Chapter 475: Enormous Gains (I)

Li Hao walked out of Military Supplies with an additional book—Building Five Bridges—and a flask with ten fruits. It had to remain sealed until he wanted to use it; the fruit inside might expire as soon as he opened the flask. They might’ve rotted away and decayed long ago if they were held inside a storage ring.

He also had forty-six small stones that were very translucent. Their caliber was far beyond what ordinary mysterious power stones measured up to.

He Yong and Hong Yitang also had the book in their possession. Hong Yitang had traded the rest of his merits for Mind Fruits and He Yong headed to the Recruitment Hall to be promoted to a Bronze Armor. That was something not distributed at Military Supplies.

The three paged through the book. After a while, He Yong sighed, "I need to learn how to read!"

He didn't know ancient text! It felt so awful to have a secret art in his hands and be unable to decipher it. Damned awful. Indeed, He Yong wasn't able to make any sense of what he read after flipping through the book. Meanwhile, Hong Yitang gleaned a bit of meaning and sank into deep thought.

Li Hao paged through the entire book and discovered it to be an interesting theory. One could categorize it as a cultivation method, but it wouldn't enhance one's strength. It was a very unique method in the young man's eyes.

Five bridges...

The five bridges of heaven and earth were to be built between the five organs, creating a massive circulation cycle that connected them. Just that theory alone was thought provoking, not to mention the book indicated that this was a rudimentary cultivation method back in the day. This meant that everyone cultivated in this manner during the ancient civilization.

But what of the supernatural locks? The book says that the five bridges are a communication of energy. Are the bridges the supernatural locks?

There were five locks, each corresponding to one of the five organs. The young man didn't have inspiration at present as to how to build the bridges, but perhaps the supernatural locks could become a key link between them.

“Martial Uncle Hong, do you think we can use the supernatural locks as metal suspension bridges to connect the organs?”

“I don’t know.” Hong Yitang shook his head. “The ancient civilization’s cultivation system is some parts different from ours. The modern system has independently developed to present day, sketched out by generations of martial masters. It might not measure up to ancient knowledge, but it has its own unique characteristics.

“Take our mind intent, for example. To be a Dominator is to possess it—it’s a middle of the pack accomplishment. But in the ancient civilization, mind intent is hard to manifest, much less cultivating five at a time like your teacher.”

Li Hao understood some of the differences between the modern and ancient systems. “There’s great value in using ancient knowledge as a mirror, but it might not actually be useful.” He nodded. “We can give it a try. It will be a great thing if it succeeds!”

Hong Yitang nodded, whereas He Yong asked restlessly, “Um... can you translate this for me? It was pretty expensive and a complete waste if I can’t read it.”

The book would be a paperweight for him then.

“Let’s wait until I have time.” Li Hao smiled. “There isn’t much text, but mistakes might crop up with an impromptu translation. They use different terms in the ancient civilization, so I need to corroborate with other ancient texts to make a proper translation. If I just go at it, some of what I say won’t make sense.”

Fine then! He Yong could only wait. This further reinforced his desire to learn how to read. Just look at his current straits!

He headed to the Recruitment Hall to trade-in his equipment when they passed by. A satisfied He Yong reemerged moments later, equipped with a Bronze Armor. Li Hao noticed some new data in his armor—soldier He Yong had become the leader of the Second Company!

“I’m finally an officer!” He Yong exulted. Being a company leader was the equivalent of a centurion. He would start getting depressed if he didn’t receive a promotion for long. Being a soldier was no fun.

He held no resentment over spending one hundred merits for the upgrade. A bronze armor’s defensive ability and comfort were much stronger than a black armor. Black armor could not withstand attacks from Solars or Novas; it was even easily ripped apart by Novas. And while Novas could send their energy into bronze armor, it was much more difficult to rip that equipment apart.

Bronze Armors had died over the course of holding off Xu Feng, but that’d come through self detonation. Xu Feng hadn’t been able to punch through them in one blow, and that was under the circumstances of those soldiers being long dead. For someone like He Yong wearing bronze armor, a Nova didn’t have much hope of breaking his equipment.

The trio walked outside after they were newly equipped. Metallic clanging sounded before long—a Red Armor presented itself. Its color was more vivid compared to the ones they’d seen before.

Unique ripples traveled out of its armor when it caught up to the three. “Troop Leader Li, are you headed out of the barracks?”

“Yes.” Li Hao nodded.

“According to wartime regulations, you are not to leave the barracks without an urgent mission as you are new recruits who have yet to complete your training!”

“.....” The three pause, what did this mean? We can’t leave?

“Um... will I explode if I exit the city?” Li Hao thought something.

“Yes!”

“.....”

“Not only you, but the armor of a company leader will also explode!”

“.....” He Yong was no longer happy. Dazed, he cursed himself for obtaining that promotion!

But since the Red Armor had caught up to them, it did so for other reasons. “The commander has issued orders that you three are not martial cultivators of our time or ordinary rookies. As the city is nearly asleep, you may not be able to complete your training if you remain here.

“Thus, the commander wishes for me to convey to Troop Leader Li that you should go to the Mission Hall if you wish to leave Battle Heaven. Accepting an outside mission will permit you to leave the city. Although these missions have long expired, they can still be accepted. In fact, it’s better that they have expired. You can remain outside indefinitely. But you cannot directly leave Battle Heaven—you’ll be marked as traitors and be in a lot of trouble then!”

Commander? Li Hao thought of the Gold Armor, the one who’d demoted him! Otherwise, the two of them might be the same level. Then he was the commander of the Ninth Division.

If the commander wore gold armor and the one in the city lord manor wore gold armor, then what of the commander-in-chief of the Reserve Defenders? Was there another color of armor beyond gold?

One could leave the city only with a mission in hand. Thank goodness the army had sent someone with a reminder. The trio would be in such trouble if they left outright!

“I see, where is the Mission Hall?” Li Hao asked.

“Do you wish to go right now? I can lead you there.”

“Let’s go take a look!”

The Red Armor headed off without another word; the trio made use of this opportunity to take a close look around. A parade ground, dorms, buildings...

It was all very simple, but a very large complex. A unique stone formed the ground—the same material as the one outside, but one that looked even more durable.

“Is this the headquarters of the Battle Heaven Army?” Li Hao couldn’t help but ask after they walked for a while.

“No, this is the Ninth Division. Headquarters is located further in. The city houses only the Reserve Defenders. The other divisions are encamped elsewhere and frontlines only returns in between battles...”

Further in... The trio looked in the relevant direction, but didn’t see anything other than pitch black. So this meant that there was a commander-in-chief in residence in the city?

“Is the commander-in-chief of the Reserve Defenders present?”

“I don’t know, we are not aware of his movements. We have not seen him in many years. Perhaps he has left, perhaps he has fallen silent.”

“Have you never been tempted to leave after the others did?” He Yong couldn’t help his curiosity.

“No, our mission is to protect the city and the people within.”

“Then...” He Yong hesitated before his next question. “Are the people... dead?”

“Yes, some died of old age, some left of their own volition.”

“Are there other cities nearby?”

“.....” The Red Armor seemed to be rifling through its memories and also considering whether or not it could reveal this information. “Yes! The eight guardian clans built eight cities throughout Silver Moon to safeguard the Star Gate!”

“.....Star Gate?” the trio quickly followed up.

“My memory is lost, I have forgotten what the Star Gate is!”

Had it truly forgotten, or was it unwilling to say? Li Hao thought of the stone doorway in Silver City. Was that the Star Gate?

These ancients knew a lot. Battle Heaven’s greatest wealth was in these dead people, not resources. The information they knew and the cultivation system of the ancient civilization was all worthy of reference.

The eight guardian clans built eight cities to safeguard the Star Gate. So that meant there were seven other cities in Silver Moon? And this place had been called Silver Moon since the ancient times?

Li Hao was rather confused. Silver Moon came from the names of Silver City and White Moon City. Why did this one hail this place as Silver Moon?

“Has this locale always been known as Silver Moon?” asked Hong Yitang.

“This is the land of the silver moon, so of course it is Silver Moon! This part of the cosmos is all hailed as Silver Moon because its moon is the most beautiful color of silver!”

Silver? The trio blinked. But... it wasn't! The moon in the sky was marked with some red. What silver was there?

Li Hao looked around dazedly. This entire part of the cosmos was called Silver Moon... not just this locale.

The Red Armor led them to another hall.

“There were eleven troops in the Ninth Division, making for eleven thousand people,” Li Hao suddenly said. “With one thousand dead, there should be another ten thousand. If there are three thousand outside the city, that means there are seven thousand here?”

The Red Armor did not respond.

“Can you not speak of that?” Li Hao couldn't help but ask.

“Not... the one thousand dead you speak of is wrong! We are all dead,” the soldier replied calmly. “The Tenth Troop was just the first to fall, we are all dead! There are more than eleven thousand in the Ninth Division as we need to take into account the officers, Military Supplies, Supervisory Guard, Education, and Training... There are fifteen thousand people in the Ninth Division.”

One division possessed fifteen thousand members!

Chapter 476: Enormous Gains (II)

“How many divisions are there in the Reserve Defenders?”

“Ten total, they are all full!”

That made for approximately one hundred fifty thousand people in one reserve troop, that was terrifying! Li Hao, Hong Yitang, and He Yong were currently just seeing the Ninth Division.

“That means there are more than one million in the Battle Heaven Army, but the city isn’t big enough for those numbers!” He Yong suggested. Battle Heaven was just the size of Silver City.

“This is the city in miniature,” Red Armor replied matter-of-factly. “There is a current lack of energy to power operations, so Battle Heaven has shrunk by a lot to improve defense.

“We spanned a large area before, what you see now is the city after it’s been folded upon itself. At its peak, the city contained fifty million people and one million soldiers. General Pagoda sat in residence within the city and twelve plant spirits were in charge of supplying energy. The city could take to the skies at any time to conduct battle from the air...”

The soldier pointed ahead. “Let’s set that aside, this is all in the past. Current day Battle Heaven is only so big! The Mission Hall is here, go and receive your missions. There should be someone here as some of the dead soldiers revived today...”

The trio was still reeling from what they’d just heard! An enormous city that could hold fifty million, one that could fly though the sky! Was... that still a city?? And it could shrink? It could fold upon itself? The more they knew, the more insignificant they felt! This city was a wondrous weapon!

Dazed, they wandered into the Mission Hall. It was a place populated by many service windows, but some were empty and others staffed by Red Armors lying on the ground, as if entirely dead. Only a few sparkled with light to indicate that they were still operating. A quick glance showed that four were operational out of at least one hundred.

It would seem that this city was indeed only partially awake. Some additional sections had opened today due to the number of people that'd died in the earlier battle. The trio walked toward a window sparkling with light.

When the Red Armor inside saw Li Hao, it rose with a salute. "Troop Leader!" It sat back down without waiting for a response, light dancing in its eyes. "Is the troop leader here to secure a mission?"

"Yes." Li Hao nodded, despite the discomfort he felt at such treatment. "I would like to claim a mission that takes me out of the city, one with an indefinite time period. Do those still exist?"

"Yes, some missions have been active for a very long time without being canceled. They might've been forgotten or just continued to operate..." came the mechanical response. The soldier quickly brought out something that looked like a screen. "Troop Leader Li, there are three missions on here that meet your needs. You can choose one of them!"

Li Hao focused on his look.

"Mission one: Battle Heaven lacks sufficient life energy and the skies have overturned. The eight cities have lost contact with each other. One is to head to the other seven cities and reopen the life transmission system to restore communication between the eight cities and the flow of life energy. Reward: One hundred thousand merits!

"Mission two: the Forbidden Sea is flowing backward into Ash Mountain. Find the point of backflow and seal off the passageway. Reward: Ten thousand merits.

"Mission three: contact has been lost with Skystar Fortress of Skystar Island. The island is suspected to have been lost to the enemy. Travel to the island with due haste to ascertain the situation and restore communication. The energy mine of the fortress is not to fall into enemy hands. Reward: Ten thousand merits."

Li Hao blinked rapidly when he read the missions. Skystar Island? Ash Mountain? Hot damn, that's a lot of familiar names. Skystar Dynasty... Our Ash Mountain... Are they related to these ancient records?

“Where is Skystar Island?” he couldn’t help but ask.

“In the depths of the sea!” answered the Red Armor handing out missions. “Skystar Island is an important energy base as there is an enormous energy mine there, overseen by the fortress! It is in charge of supplying energy stones to Battle Heaven and some of the other major cities. We lost contact with it in the initial days of celestial unrest. The men we sent to investigate never reported back. Perhaps they were ambushed by the enemy!”

He Yong hadn’t understood the missions—he paused at this moment. “Skystar Island... Skystar Fortress... Is this island... big?”

“Very big!” responded the Red Armor. “It sits over the enormous mine and is supplied with ample energy. It bears the duty of pacifying the seas with a garrison of one hundred thousand. It is a military town. If you accept this mission... It doesn’t matter anymore, but if you can find some clues... As useless as they might be, you should be rewarded with the relevant merits when you return.”

Hong Yitang didn’t care about this. “I recall that the ancient records state that the Goldensky Lotus grows in the Forbidden Sea. Is that true?”

“Correct!”

The trio lit up at the response. The valley of the severed mountain! They’d discovered a Goldensky Lotus there. Li Hao hadn’t understood the second mission at first; he regarded it anew. Was that valley the point of backflow? So the lake was actually seawater?

“What is the Forbidden Sea?” the young man quickly asked.

“The sea!”

No shit! Li Hao looked on wordlessly.

“It was formed in the primordial past when a powerhouse perished and their blood dripped into the sea. It corrodes everything within it, but was pacified when the Human King conquered the world. However, parts of the corrosive properties still remain...

“Which mission does Troop Leader Li wish to take?”

“Can we take all three?”

“.....” The Red Armor checked its records. “You can!”

Li Hao held a bit of hope. What if he could complete the missions? It didn't cost anything to accept them, so accept them he would. Three missions soon appeared in his visor. There were no time limits and the personnel selected were the trio. Every member of the Twelfth Company was to muster out!

The three wanted to ask more questions after they accepted the missions, but the soldier closed the window. Li Hao regarded it with resignation. Had it specifically opened for business just for them?

.....

“This city likely hasn't awakened properly because of a lack of energy.” Hong Yitang turned back for a look when they walked out of the hall. “Skystar Island... I wonder if Skystar Dynasty obtained some heritage from the island? Their Black Armaturas might be the soldiers left behind at the Skystar Fortress. If that's the case... is the central region... an island?”

“It might be!” He Yong exclaimed. “Skystar Island... Skystar Dynasty... Is such a coincidence possible? An energy mine... what a pity that it probably doesn't exist anymore even if it was there!

“But if the ruins of Skystar Fortress are still there... overseeing a massive mine... What the ancients termed enormous must be huge. How else could it support a big city like Battle Heaven? It must’ve had many reserves. I feel that the royal family has many mysterious power stones, but it hasn’t explored the ruins much. Can it be that they have the city instead?”

“If that’s the case, then they’ll have many mysterious power stones and their strength will be much more fearsome than I anticipate!”

Skystar Fortress had been in charge of the entire island and housed the garrison that supplied energy stones. How much in reserves would a city like that contain? Not much energy would’ve been lost to time if they’d been stored in storage rings. Just the very thought was frightening.

“And there’s another seven cities out there... Li Hao, you’re rich, kid!”

“How am I rich?” Li Hao rolled his eyes at He Yong.

“Your family might have a city too—no, it must have one. You’re rich once you find it! You’re an outsider here, but you’re the young lord in your own city!”

Li Hao rolled his eyes again. That’s nonsense! Without sufficient strength, he would probably end up in the same straits if there were also armored soldiers present. He’d be sent flying with a punch and deemed too lowly for anything!

The trio felt that their worldviews had been broadened, and that everything they’d seen before was far too insignificant. A city that could house fifty million, that could fly and fight, and was staffed with one million soldiers was just one of eight! The weakest of their soldiers still possessed the equivalent of a modern Dominator. Then their Sunderers back in the day were likely a Dominator at minimum, correct?

There were one million such soldiers in the city and eight of them back in the day! Added to that a few small towns... It boggled the mind to consider how strong they would’ve all been. The ancients

counted mysterious power stones in terms of mines, not stones. One mine here, one mine there... Just look at that, that was true wealth!

“If it’s possible, I would love to witness the glories of the ancient civilization!” He Yong sighed with appreciation. “With my strength, I would be a Silver Armor if there was more flexibility to the system in the ancient past, right?”

“.....are you sure?” Hong Yitang asked meaningfully. “Those Silver Armor troop leaders are peak Nova or beyond when they awaken. That’s without a physical body too. How strong do you think they were back in the day?”

Alright then! He Yong thought. “I may not be weaker than them when I unseal my supernatural locks!”

I hope so, at least!

“Enough, there’s no point discussing this. Let’s go. There’s another commander in residence at the barracks. We should keep our distance in case we irritate them and they punch us to death with one blow!”

The three headed outside of the barracks.

.....

Panther was waiting at the doors. It hadn’t gone in earlier because the guards didn’t permit it. It looked like the dog wasn’t part of the military system. Perhaps someone else had given it benefits before.

Outside of the barracks.

“Where to now?” Li Hao looked at the two. “To the city lord manor? I wonder if that Gold Armor has returned yet... Does it want me there to give me something or another punch?”

He still had lingering fear from their last meeting. These fellows were very strong, even when dead. They probably really could’ve killed him with one punch when they were alive.

Chapter 477: Enormous Gains (III)

“Let’s go take a look!” Hong Yitang looked at the pagoda in the distance. “We collected some treasures on our last trip—everyone did. We all took some ancient books and baubles from the city lord manor. It wasn’t until we tried to take the Black Tortoise Seal that we infuriated the golden one, which led it to killing the guy from Celestial.”

The group of powerhouses had infiltrated the city lord manor last time. This time, he wanted to openly walk in for a look. As one of the eight families, Li Hao could visit the city lord manor as well. The guidebook said that he’d be treated with courtesy.

After some thought, the young man decided to go for a look. There were many places in this city that he’d yet to explore. The city lord manor was one place that he was very curious about.

Three humans and a dog headed in the appropriate direction. Panther was a bit uncomfortable and not the most willing. It didn’t want to go there, that place was terrifying!

However, Li Hao wanted to go, so the dog had no choice but to follow.

.....

The city lord manor.

Battle Heaven’s city lord manor stood next to the Tortoise Pagoda. It occupied a large expanse of land and the front doors were open. When Li Hao and the rest passed by, he couldn’t help but look at the pagoda next to it. A massive turtle was carved on it—light sparkled off its shell. It was the source of the illumination in the ancient city.

The three were met by three Silver Armors when they arrived.

“Troop Leader Li!” The one in front hailed Li Hao, more emotion in his voice compared to before. It seemed to hint at mirth. “We’re going to the eastern gate to resume defense duties. Come join us for a chat when you’re done!”

Li Hao blinked, then beamed widely. “Troop Leader Jiang, you guys are alright?”

“Of course!”

The three troop leaders were the ones that’d safeguarded the eastern gate. Li Hao had thought they would disappear upon the wind after their reawakening, much like the last Silver Armor. But here they were, alive and well. Well, alright, perhaps alive was the wrong word to use. These three were fine, however. It was quite a surprise.

The note of joy in the Seventh Troop leader’s voice was a marked difference from before. “Then we’re off, you guys go in. Director General Wang from Security is waiting for you inside.”

“Director general...?” Li Hao repeated with surprise.

“Mmhmm, that office is in charge of the city’s day-to-day safety. He’s the one you guys saw before. The military doesn’t normally oversee this, that falls under his jurisdiction. He’s also in charge of securing the city lord manor. He’s been in charge of managing this area since the city lord left...”

Li Hao finally understood! The Gold Armor in residence here wasn’t the city lord, but someone akin to the inspector general of the Inspectorate. This analogy delivered clear understanding. Then the commander of the Ninth Division was likely someone of Huang Yun’s role, or perhaps lower like Hu Dingfang? The one sitting inside was the equivalent of Kong Jie. As for which Gold Armor held a higher status, that was difficult for Li Hao to determine.

The three thought for a bit and were about to walk inside when a voice ripple traveled out. “Only Li Hao need enter!”

He Yong rolled his eyes. Hong Yitang laughed and didn’t insist on anything. He stood by the side of the door and didn’t enter. Li Hao walked in with some apprehension, passing through the square that came into view first.

An open hall loomed moments later. A Gold Armor sat inside with a massive seal on the table in front of him. Out of the corner of his eye, Li Hao saw that it resembled a turtle. Was this the Black Tortoise Seal?

Light glittered in the Gold Armor’s eyes—one couldn’t tell if he truly had eyes or not, so it was rather frightening.

“Time is merciless. The Li family of the day and descendants of the Sword Sovereign have declined to these depths...”

A wordless Li Hao didn’t know what to say.

“Battle Heaven had gone completely quiet,” the Gold Armor changed the topic. “It would’ve disappeared into history in a few more years! But someone seemed to break some sort of seal a few years ago and suffused the barren soil of Silver Moon with energy. We recovered some of our consciousness and revitalized the city.”

The rise of the supernatural!

Li Hao understood what the Gold Armor was referring to and why Silver Moon had become such impoverished territory. The ancient cities had absorbed the energy and caused there to be a shortage of mysterious power.

“We wouldn’t have thought anything else if we’d fully fallen asleep. But since we’ve reawakened, we would like to accomplish some things.” The director general of Security seemed to be looking at Li Hao. “As part of the bloodline of the eight guardian clans and wielder of Stellaris, I do not wish to speak to you of responsibilities or obligations. The times have changed, so none of that matters anymore. Each generation has their own purpose. We have ours, you have yours! Restoring our glory and battling the firmament once more is no longer your responsibility or obligation!

“But since we share enough of a destiny to meet at Battle Heaven, I would like to ask you for a favor. Of course, I will compensate you accordingly.”

“Please go ahead, general!” Li Hao finally responded.

“I am not a general... but it’s fine, you can call me whatever you wish. The eight guardian clans have eight heritage weapons! These ancient weapons must still exist as they are indestructible! Your Stellaris is one of them. One of the other seven is in Battle Heaven. The other six are lost. I do not know if they’re in the other cities or if the descendants of the eight families took them away...

“If possible, I would like you to collect these weapons.”

“What use is there apart from them possessing formidable might?” Li Hao asked curiously.

“They are keys... Of course, it doesn’t have much to do with you.”

Oi, you talk like I don’t hold Stellaris. Of course it has much to do with me!

“Does the general mean to say that I should collect these weapons and give them to you?”

“No,” the director general responded ponderously. “Just lend them to me for a bit, I will return them to you after! There’s no rush as countless eons have passed. It’s just a lingering wish of mine.”

Li Hao blinked, then suddenly asked, “Does the general know about a diagram of the eight trigrams and a stone door...”

The director general was deathly still before finally responding, “Have you... seen that place?”

“Yes!”

“Ai!” he sighed. “It looks like... they truly didn’t come back! Let’s set the diagram aside—there’s more than one stone door. There’s eight, but I’m not sure what lies behind the doors. The city lord might know. I think that there might be some heritage left behind by the powerhouses of the eight clans behind the doors. In our age, promising talents from the families were transported through them to receive some benefits.

“Of course, it’s hard to say now since it’s been too long! Your Stellaris is still sealed. That’s good, as you wouldn’t be able to use it if it’s unsealed. The stone door... Don’t be in a rush to go through the door of the Lis if you see it. You’re so weak that unexpected danger might occur after you cross it!

“As for the eight diagrams... you should not explore that yet. It’s too dangerous for you—you’ll easily lose your life!” The director general added, “And don’t try to unseal it either...”

“That’s a seal?” Li Hao blinked. “But someone has destroyed the legacy of the eight families. Everyone else is dead apart from me. I see seven lines out of the eight in the diagram being held by one person!”

The director general quieted again. “Is that so? Then the person manipulating the lines should be a descendant of the eight. Outsiders cannot control them. It looks like traitors have appeared in the eight guardian clans after so much time has passed... That makes sense, their calling is too far removed! It is normal to forget their ancestors’ glories. There is no need to demand too much from them.”

It would seem that the director general kept a very open mind and was magnanimous about things. However, he still said after some thought, “You must be careful if this is the case! That person is certain to be strong! He will come for you if you don’t go for him. He’ll attempt to take your life since he knows certain things!”

“He’s tried to kill me multiple times.” Li Hao nodded. “He did so from the shadows at first and didn’t mean to kill me in the beginning. He wanted to use a bloody shadow to devour my bloodline...”

“He just wants to unseal Stellaris.” The director general knew quite a lot. “Stellaris is the heart of the eight ancient weapons. If Stellaris is strong enough, it might be able to replace the other seven if they’re lost.

“It looks like this person understands quite a lot. Otherwise, it would be too foolish to make his attempts while lacking the Black Tortoise Seal of the Wangs.”

Li Hao was confused by the conversation because he knew too little. Ying Hongyue knew more, and it looked like he might be one of the eight!

Well, maybe not! What if there was someone else behind him? Who knew?

“Be careful.” The director general said nothing else or offered advice on how to withstand Ying Hongyue. “I’ve seen the bloody shadows you speak of, it’s those things outside the city, yes? Those are blood puppets and nothing good. Be careful of backlash if you keep a blood puppet around! They come from devouring the blood qi of others. Prolonged nurturing comes at the cost of one’s own health. Of course, there are scoundrels who borrow the vitality of others to raise their blood puppets. The people outside might be the subordinates of the one you speak of, or their enemy.”

“They’re all from Red Moon. The leader of Red Moon is the scoundrel that I speak of!”

“It would seem that these people have laid hands on the legacy of a deviated path. They do not walk the true path,” concluded the director general. “Kill them if you can. If not... there’s no need to do

anything. They'll be caught in their own trap soon enough as they'll be the death of themselves! Avoid them, they're quite strong. I saw that some of the blood puppets outside are fine specimens. Although it hurts others, it benefits the master."

Chapter 478: Enormous Gains (IV)

Li Hao nodded. There was no doubt that Ying Hongyue was very strong. His organs were likely formidable beyond belief as well. How could they not be with a daily diet of blood pearls?

But judging from the Gold Armor's tone, this wasn't a good thing. The supernaturals that nurtured the scarlet shadows might all suffer some sort of backlash, they just weren't aware of it yet.

"You may go, I have no further business with you!"

"....." Li Hao regarded the director general wordlessly. Isn't there anything you want to give me? You called me here just to have me collect ancient weapons? You're... a bit stingy!

The director general of Security seemed to read Li Hao's mood. "Stop looking at me," he said calmly. "I have nothing for you! Nothing is given for free in this world, you must pay a price to receive anything. Everything is traded for equal value! Conflict is inevitable in martial dao, fight for it yourself!

"Everything that martial masters are are a result of their own efforts, not even the eight families are an exception. When the Human King came into his own, he could kill countless others for a piece of energy stone, to say nothing of the eight families. He gained his power from stepping on the bodies of innumerable others. It is an advantage conferred by your bloodline that you've joined the Battle Heaven Army. The rest... you should trade and fight for it yourself. Battle Heaven is just a platform for you!

"Your ancestors have wrested certain advantages for you, do not think of anything else!"

Alright then! Li Hao nodded after some thought. It made sense. Victories were sweeter when they were a result of his own hands.

“Then... thank you, general. I take my leave!” Li Hao turned and left. He didn’t have too many regrets. Although he hadn’t received anything, he’d learned some knowledge. At least he knew that the bastard Ying Hongyue was very strong and might be an heir to one of the eight families. That was enough.

The director general seemed to think of something when he was about to leave. “I cannot give you benefits, but I can give you a clue. The eight families established a martial university back in the day to train their descendants. It’s named the Silver Moon Martial University. You might happen upon some surprises if you can find this place. It was built for the eight families!

“Some of the eight families’ battle techniques, methods, and specific training methods can be found within. However, with the changing of the times, I am no longer sure where the university is. It was in the center of the eight cities and shouldn’t be far from the diagram of the eight trigrams that you speak of!”

Li Hao turned back. “Thank you, general!”

“It’s just a clue, the rest is up to your own fortunes. Perhaps it’s long fallen apart!”

“Mmhmm, I understand!” The young man left.

“...Guardian, can we really not give him a pointer or two?” Gold Armor asked after momentary silence.

“Our time is not what they are now. Body constitutions and paths of strength are all different. We cannot interpose the past onto the present. He may not be able to practice the formidable methods we give him and it may impede his path instead. These people train in a vastly different way. Look at how strong his mental strength is, it far exceeds the physical body. Most people outside the city are thus. Would this have been the case in our time?

“There is no talk of good or bad to be had here. Perhaps this is the method most suited to them. He will lose himself in strong methods and possibly be completely crippled in the end.”

“I understand!” The director general said nothing more. He’d want to give Li Hao additional benefits, but the guardian had stopped him. That could not take place! It might harm the young man instead.

Supplemental methods such as Building Five Bridges could be used as reference. If they gave him a complete cultivation system, that would just turn Li Hao into a typical ancient cultivator. If one practiced ancient methods in this day and age... the most likely outcome was that the cultivator would embark on a path not as strong as their own could be.

After sending Li Hao off, the director general once more sank into quiet.

.....

Three humans and one dog left the city lord manor. Li Hao looked up at the large turtle in the sky when they departed the premises. The sculpture was so lifelike that it was as if a real turtle.

It was massive!

Battle Heaven was said to have shrunk many times over. Had the pagoda been even bigger before?

The group soundlessly walked outside. Halfway out of the city, Li Hao looked at Hong Yitang with slight confusion. “Martial Uncle Hong, if an existence as strong as the ancient civilization perished, does that mean there is no need for martial dao to persist?”

“.....” Hong Yitang served him with an odd look. “What are you suddenly thinking about this for?”

“No reason.” Li Hao shook his head with a sigh. “I just suddenly thought of a saying—the people suffer in times of prosperity, the people suffer in times of demise. A bunch of supernaturals and martial masters cause suffering day in and day out, turning a good student like me into a killing machine! It’s bullshit, is what it is!

“And now look at the bunch of pitiful souls left behind after the ancient civilization toppled...” He looked behind them, then at the eastern gates. “I just feel that they must be constantly suffering.”

Perhaps they themselves didn’t think so, but Li Hao felt so. The soldiers were quiet for countless eons and had to endure tremendous torment upon awakening. They had to continue to defend their homes.

It wasn’t anything specific that Li Hao could voice. Perhaps he was too young to know the kind of fervor that etched itself in one’s bones. All he was doing was complaining, nothing else. He suddenly felt a bit lost when it came to the future and his life. But upon circling back to the idea that there were many tasks waiting for him to accomplish, he quickly flung everything to the back of his mind.

The enemy was not yet dead, what was the point of thinking so much? He wasn’t brainstorming any magnificent goals or ambitious plans to retrace the footsteps of the ancient civilization. It was just musings over what he’d seen and heard on this trip to the ancient city. He shoved these thoughts into the depths of his heart and didn’t display any of it.

Hong Yitang flicked a glance at Li Hao. The young man might be a bit lost, but what should be said had been said. It was up to him to walk his path. Everyone had their pursuits—old fart Yuan Shuo was probably chasing his quite hard at the moment. He’d found his life’s purpose and might have established himself in the central region.

What about himself? Hong Yitang’s thoughts traveled to himself. He was strong enough, but also weak compared to those of the ancient civilization. He wanted to reach the levels seen in those days and held certain thoughts when it came to martial dao. But wasn’t he equally as lost as the young man? Was there anything he could change? Or should he live as heartlessly as He Yong and focus only on martial breakthroughs?

This era... seemed very boring. It lacked something.

Hong Yitang subconsciously knew what it lacked, but he couldn't achieve such a goal. He lacked the determination to do so. It would require a saint to accomplish, not a mere human. He was no saint.

Therefore, he could only speak of lofty goals. He lacked the confidence and courage to actually seek them.

Hong Yitang became quiet when he saw that Li Hao no longer said anything. He Yong sensed his change in mood and transmitted, "What are you thinking, Ole Hong?"

"Nothing."

"Tell me, what are you afraid of? We're old friends. Are you worried I'll laugh at you?"

"Piss off!"

He Yong grinned. "I sense something off after circling through the ancient city. Ole Hong, don't you think the current dynasty is a pool of dead water? The people lack creativity and dig up whatever they need. Everything can be found in the ancient civilization. The war between supernaturals and martial masters also seems pointless. What are we fighting for? We rampage through the land just to crown ourselves sovereign of a territory..."

"We lack the unity, fiery spirit, and faith of this ancient city, don't we?"

"And you know about this?" Hong Yitang laughed.

"No shit, I'm not a fool! What do you think, did Hou Xiaochen and the others kill the General of Northern Pacification?"

“What makes you say that?”

“If it was them, then the unrest in the three northern provinces will embroil the entire northern territory. Severe chaos is at hand—Hou Xiaochen and his gang have quite the ambitions. None of them are kind souls! He talks about heading to the central region, but leaves behind a mess in the north. I say he’ll have to come back sooner or later, and heads will roll when he does...”

“Were you just thinking of why no one in our era considers being a regular person?”

“What’s the point of being a regular person?” Hong Yitang broke out into laughter. “Only a fool would do so, what’s the purpose of considering them? There’s no difference if more mundanes die. We lack innovation and labor—most of our technologies have been excavated from the ancient civilization. Everything from smelting iron to planes and bombs. Even our architecture style bears ancient influences.

“Our time period is built on the carcass of the old. We made it to our current heights through absorbing the essence of the ancient civilization. Our journey has become abnormal!”

Theirs was a deformed era! The world possessed planes and bombs, even city annihilation missiles. There were supernaturals and martial masters, but the people had to depend on the weather when it came to their crops. The heavens dictated how much harvest was. The climate had been kind to them in recent years and produced bountiful harvests.

Everything was about to be destroyed upon the rise of the supernatural and the ensuing war. Humanity would face extinction sooner or later!

Granted, superhumans would be fine. They would take whatever they lacked and never go hungry. Food, clothing, housing, and transportation were the pillars of survival. Transportation was inconvenient these days and food barely sufficient. Housing was nothing worthy of particular notice...

Development continued, but the people seemed to be stuck in the same place despite how everything developed. They were numb to the humdrum reality of their lives.

Chapter 479: Judgment (I)

“What kinda pissed off crap are you saying!” He Yong laughed. “Ole Hong, do you have a grudge against Hong Yitang to suddenly target him in the last battle? Do you think he killed the General of Northern Pacification and is sitting by to watch the northern territory descend into chaos? Did you slap his face because you feel that he’s the reason why the people can’t live in peace?”

“I don’t, and you’re the one who punched him!”

“I don’t care,” He Yong laughed. “He’s ugly when he smiles and I only punched him gently. You’ve always kept yourself removed and indifferent about the situation. It’s quite something for you to go all out and pit yourself against him!”

“What are you trying to say?” Hong Yitang didn’t want to waste further time talking to the man.

“Not much,” He Yong responded. “I just want to pay back my debt. Don’t I owe you three thousand mysterious power stones? I won’t be able to pay them back quickly, so why don’t we cut a deal? I’ll have the royal family bequeath you a minor title and a small fiefdom. You can be your own boss and won’t have to answer to anyone. You can take in anyone you want to. I’ll get you a bunch of provisions and some orphans from the war...”

As crude as the man typically acted, he was no fool. He’d seen something in Hong Yitang. “You can do whatever you want behind closed doors. I don’t think you’re in the mood to go for general conquest, you’re different from Hou Xiaochen and the rest. They might be thinking further and seek to do more. I feel that you’re more down-to-earth, Ole Hong. What do you say?”

“Go screw yourself,” Hong Yitang transmitted. “This is how you want to pay back three thousand stones?”

“Do you want it or not!” He Yong responded in kind. “I’ll choose a good place for you. There are plenty of good fields close to your Sword Sect, but they all belong to others. No one’s been tilling

them for a while and much of Silver Moon has fallen to the wilderness these years. Since you don't have high ambitions, you might as well be the king of your own little place. Isn't that just as well?"

"Get outta here. Not to mention, this isn't up to the royal family."

"It's fine, the royal family just needs to legitimize you. It'll be a better circumstance than claiming your own plot of land—that would be rebellion. If anyone makes trouble for you after the royal family gives you a title, then they're the traitors. You won't need to be afraid of them. All you need is that title."

Hong Yitang sank into deep thought.

"I wouldn't say this to just anyone, but you have a taste of the ancients about you, Ole Hong. Although it's very little... I can help you! Your Sword Sect is only so big, but you've taken in several hundred orphans. I know that you're used to keeping a low profile, yet you built up the Sword Sect reputation to intimidate the nearby supernaturals, did you not? You might do better if you have a greater expanse of territory. The world is about to fall to unrest!

"The three northern provinces are a mess, the central region is a mess, the whole world is about to become a mess! That's also good as that will facilitate the new. As opposed to spending our days in a foggy haze, it might be better to have the people wake up from chaos. You have some thoughts in your brain, I saw how you looked at those schools. You mentioned the general literacy rate—more evidence that you have some plans in mind! Then you should materialize those plans..."

Hong Yitang walked in silence for a bit, then shook his head. "I can't, I can't do it!"

I'm just talking about it. I have neither the courage nor the charisma.

"Don't be like that. Why are you afraid when you're so strong? Do whatever you want. Are you still a martial master if you're afraid of hard times? Can anything be harder than you crouching at home the three times that Yuan Shuo came for you?"

“.....” The hell?! Hong Yitang cursed to himself. What bullcrap was this?? Were they even the same concepts?

“Don’t you find that you’re very calm inside the city? And you feel at ease. There are Black Armors on duty outside, so you can live at peace. If you could, I’d say you probably want to bring your wife and daughter here. Just think about it, have the children of the Sword Sect shared similar thoughts? They are reassured when you’re there, but are they the same when you’re gone?”

“Those aren’t the same concepts, stop trying to misdirect me. You’re saying all this just because you don’t want to pay off your debt, aren’t you?”

“That’s right!” He Yong cackled in direct admission. “If you want me to pay you back... I really don’t have that much money! I won’t be able to pay it off even with the help of military merits. When it comes to ordinary items, however, I think I can get them for you!”

“Let’s table that until we leave the ruins!” Hong Yitang didn’t say anything else, he didn’t want to say anything else.

He Yong grinned proudly, knowing that he’d tempted his counterpart. Paying off his debt suddenly looked so much easier.

Mysterious power stones were difficult to come by, but basic resources were easy for him given his status, strength, and identity. Everyone cared more about the resources available for supernatural training. As for those employed by mundanes, that wasn’t even a topic of discussion.

He Yong had heard what Hong Yitang murmured when the old man entered the ancient city. Li Hao just happened to wax eloquent in a sudden outpouring of emotion. He Yong could guess at what Hong Yitang was thinking by the look of lost hesitation in the man’s eyes.

Indeed, Earthturner Sword didn’t turn down his proposal too emphatically. There was hope in sight for He Yong to pay off his debts! But I wonder if it’s wrong to goad Ole Hong into doing this. Is it

right to make him the leader of an orphanage? Would that cause his martial dao to become stronger or completely decline?

Who knew?

Would the guy not do anything just because He Yong didn't mention anything? All he needed to consider was that he'd be able to pay off his debts after voicing this possibility!

.....

Up in front, Li Hao didn't think that much. They approached the eastern gate. The young man flew into the air—there weren't that many Black Armors below. They were all on the gates defending. One could see supernaturals in the distance outside the city.

There were fewer supernaturals compared to before—at the very least, there wasn't a teeming mass of them. Approximately six hundred were left.

Li Hao's sharp gaze caught Light Moon, who continued to look at the city. This old man.... old woman... er, martial master who was difficult to determine a gender for... seemed to be in a very strange mood after Li Hao killed Xu Feng.

It wasn't the fury or grief of losing a family member, but Light Sword had lost someone important all the same. Her emotions were so complex that Li Hao couldn't begin to make sense of them. He didn't sense the unbridled hatred of someone who would want revenge. If she didn't want revenge... then why did she keep staring in Li Hao's direction and at where Xu Feng had died? It was so weird.

Li Hao ignored her and turned to the two sides that were clearly delineated. There were those who wanted to leave, but couldn't, and those who wanted to enter, but didn't dare. It would seem that they were in a much more painful condition compared to him.

.....

Those outside saw Li Hao when he appeared on the city wall.

“Director!” Manager Yu transmitted. “Li Hao has come out.”

Hou Xiaochen had been staring off into space and jerked away. He saw Li Hao when he looked over as well. The little guy was no longer hiding anything and took off his helmet, revealing his face. The young man did so because ventilation was poor inside the armor; it was stifling.

“He’s certainly a bold one,” Hou Xiaochen chuckled. “It looks like he feels much more confident after killing Xu Feng.”

“What do we do now, director? Three Silver Armors have appeared on Battle Heaven’s side, along with that Gold Armor. Now that they’re reinforced with Li Hao and a few others, their battle strength is incredible. It won’t be easy to enter the inner city to take the Black Tortoise Seal!”

Much less than not easy, it would be hell!

Hou Xiaochen didn’t seem to mind. He transmitted, “Pay it no heed, we’ll leave it alone if we can’t take it. Right now, you should focus on how to exterminate the three great organizations!”

“Oh?”

“The three great organizations are gathered here and continue to draw more attention to Silver Moon. Whether it’s frightening them off or inflicting heavy casualties, we will not permit them to live! We can... let Battle Heaven stand as is.

“Find a chance to enter the city and speak to Li Hao...”

“Me?”

“Yes, go on, it’ll be fine. You haven’t done anything to their army, so take my key and approach the city gates. They’ll open for you. When you find Li Hao, ask him if he can convince the others to work with us and destroy these people together!”

Manager Yu blinked, but didn’t say anything. If the director said it was fine, then it was fine. No one dared enter the city as they were afraid of being surrounded by the army’s powerhouses. The manager was also worried, but if the director said she wouldn’t be targeted, then she believed him.

Thank goodness no one heard the transmission, or they might’ve mocked Yu Luocha for not thinking clearly!

“Ah, what about Hu Qingfeng and Qi Gang?” Manager Yu transmitted. “I say that they’re scared out of their minds. They’re not making a sound and their eyes dart around frantically. Perhaps they have some other thoughts in mind. Will they turn on us?”

There weren’t that many people on the expedition—just a few outsiders in the official delegation. They were Hu Qingfeng, his two men, and Qi Gang. The previous string of developments had scared them out of their wits. They probably wanted nothing more than to run.

“Don’t worry, I’ll take care of it,” Hou Xiaochen transmitted back.

Manager Yu dropped the topic.

“Gentlemen!” Hou Xiaochen started a new transmission channel.

“.....” Hu Qingfeng’s hair stood on end and his head snapped up with a look of terror. Qi Gang was slightly better, but he was also hard pressed to conceal his worry as he looked at the director.

“Special Agent Hu, you previously set up certain plans with Blue Moon and the others to kill me. Why did you give up on them?”

Terror flooded into Hu Qingfeng’s eyes! He only had one thought on his mind, run! Damn it! He knows!

“Don’t run, don’t be afraid. I don’t mean to kill you. If I did, I would’ve done so earlier and let you die to Earthturner Sword.”

Hu Qingfeng didn’t say a word as he went weak at the knees.

“You’re part of Yellow Dragon’s faction, aren’t you?”

Hu Qingfeng quelled his horror and shrank in on himself. “Yes!” he transmitted back.

Chapter 480: Judgment (II)

The Night Watchers naturally possessed their own web of internal cliques and factions. Some were pro-independence, others were war hawks, some were hotly ambitious. There were characters from all walks of life as not everyone was willing to work for the dynasty or nine ministries after coming into their own power.

If we’re so strong already, is there a need to risk our lives for others?

Yellow Dragon was a heavyweight in the Night Watchers, one of the deputy directors in headquarters. He was also a deputy director at the central Inspectorate. Meanwhile, the general director of the central Night Watchers was a deputy director at the central Inspectorate. That put the two on the same footing in terms of rank, but with one principal and one deputy, the general director’s ranking was still higher.

It was due to this bizarre concurrent post that caused the two to be at slight odds with each other. Yellow Dragon felt that his standing was no less than the general director's and nursed certain ambitions since he had mighty talents under his banner. The Nova Hu Qingfeng was one of his.

"How strong do you think Yellow Dragon is?"

Hu Qingfeng didn't dare not respond, but was also deeply afraid of irritating Hou Xiaochen if he didn't answer correctly. He hesitated before transmitting, "Very strong, I think... I think... he is as strong as Director Hou."

"Is that so? How about Earthturner Sword?"

"I'm... not sure about that. From the methods displayed... perhaps... a little weaker?"

"Earthturner Sword unsealed his strength. I am the same level as him, do you understand?"

"Yes!" Fear deepened in Hu Qingfeng's eyes. This he already knew as they'd discussed it before. These people were all terrifying to the extreme. They were already so strong, yet had not fully unsealed all of their strength. He could barely wonder if they'd all exceeded Nova. It was possible as the methods they employed didn't seem available to Novas.

"I'll most likely head to the central region after exiting the ruins. I'm considering whether I should accept the position of deputy director at central headquarters. Are you willing to follow my lead? I don't know many people there and am unfamiliar with the central region, so think about it."

"....." Hu Qingfeng's mouth dropped with shock. What the heck? You don't want to kill me? And... you want to win me over to your side?

"Dir... Director Hou. I don't understand..."

“There’s nothing to understand. I will be newly arrived and need some helpers since I don’t know anything. I can’t go around telling people I’m strong, can I? Everyone will treat me like a joke! Assistance from others is required in some aspects. As an initial Nova, you’re not weak and can pitch in a thing or two.”

A light danced in Hu Qingfeng’s eyes, but his blood ran cold when he saw the smile on Hou Xiaochen’s face. He didn’t dare entertain any other thoughts and transmitted, “Director Hou... my... position in headquarters... isn’t that high. Apart from the directors at headquarters, there are several who are much stronger than me, as well as the five commanders-in-chief... I am just small fry who runs errands compared to them...”

“That’s exactly who I want!” Hou Xiaochen laughed. “I’ve studied your file and you have many negatives. You like to exaggerate your accomplishments, bully the weak and fear the strong, you’re timid as a mouse, and your talents do not match your ambitions...”

Hu Qingfeng flushed with indignation at his words, but had to force down his fury when he thought of Hou Xiaochen’s strength. This was pure and simple humiliation!

“But I looked into things and found that you’re not that bad. You have your positives, such as complete obedience to those who are much stronger than you...”

Is that a positive? Hu Qingfeng wanted to vomit blood. I’m a Nova, alright? I’m a genius! I’m not that bad!

“And another thing, your people have done a lot of vile deeds. So not only are you dumb, but you can’t even control your people. This is a chance for you to live all over again. As for colluding with the three great organizations... I can’t even be bothered to speak on that. There are too many who conduct such things in the central region. If we’re to investigate them all, we would never conclude our investigations.”

Hu Qingfeng held his tears back. “Director Hou...” he transmitted again. “Do you want me to follow your orders?”

“Yes!”

“Are you afraid of Yellow Dragon? Don’t worry, there’s nothing to fear.” Hou Xiaochen beamed radiantly. “Yellow Dragon won’t kill you outright. You should be more concerned with whether or not you’ll be able to walk out of here alive, no?”

“.....” Hu Qingfeng promptly transmitted, “You’re right, director! I am your man from now on!”

Qi Gang’s scalp ran with numbness as he, too, found himself wordless at Hu Qingfeng’s lack of a spine and shame. Why did Hou Xiaochen want someone like that? And why is he letting me listen to all this?

“How about you, Qi Gang?”

“What...” Cold sweat beaded the man’s head.

Hou Xiaochen smiled at him. “Do you not understand? They all say you’re very smart, so how are you so dumb now?”

Qi Gang struggled fiercely with himself before transmitting, “Director Hou, I am of the provincial government...”

“So what?” Hou Xiaochen didn’t care at all. “It’s all the same and don’t go around thinking that the nine ministries are the be all and end all. No matter how the central region is, Silver Moon is much more complicated than you think! There are plenty of people like me, both in the central region and Silver Moon! Since you’ve discovered us by happy chance, come join us. If you don’t... surely someone as smart as you will understand the implications.”

“I do, but I’m more so worried that Director Hou is doing this just to placate me. We have seen so much and have no room to resist in a place like this. Is the director not worried about us spilling your secrets when we leave?”

“Why would I?” Hou Xiaochen smiled a very gentle smile and continued transmitting, “I said that you’re a smart person, so why would you possibly reveal our secrets? Is there any benefit in doing so? I mean for you to work for me here and there, not openly swear your allegiance. You can go back to the provincial government and do whatever you need to do. Rewards might not be forthcoming if you speak of what you know, but you can strike a friendship with me if you don’t. The number of one’s friends determines the number of roads available. Must you take yours to a dead end before you are satisfied?”

“I understand the director’s meaning, you speak truly!” Qi Gang heaved a long sigh.

“Mmhhh, it’s easy to communicate with another sharp person. Hu Qingfeng lacks brains, so I had to be blunt and clear.”

Hu Qingfeng remained quiet off to the side and didn’t say anything. He was wondering what might happen if he blew the whistle to Yellow Dragon after he left the ruins. Tragically, he came to the conclusion that Yellow Dragon might not be able to do anything to Hou Xiaochen. There were too many powerhouses in Silver Moon. The only certainty from that course of action was death, given these people’s personalities!

Thus, running his mouth after he left would just lead to his demise.

“If fighting breaks out later, you two don’t need to do much other than draw near the three great organizations. It’s even better if someone secretly recruits you, you can outright join them. We want to take care of these irritating fellows in an easy manner, do you understand?”

“Yes!”

“We do!” They quickly responded. They did, they were to become turncoats! This was a role they were familiar with.

“Right, your two men...” Hou Xiaochen transmitted to Hu Qingfeng. “Take care of them yourself!”

“Huh?”

“Huh what?” The director’s expression was calm. “They’ve done their fair share of evil deeds, just like Yu Xiao. After suddenly receiving power, they conduct themselves like they’re gods. You take care of them yourself, I can’t be bothered.”

A variety of expressions ran through Hu Qingfeng’s face before he ultimately transmitted, “Alright!”

“This will count as your official declaration of loyalty!” Hou Xiaochen grinned. “I’ll make a record of it and if you refuse my orders in the future, I’ll write you up for murdering your colleagues and collusion with the three great organizations, then execute you. Do you understand?”

“.....” Hu Qingfeng didn’t dare say a word as he cursed to himself, but he somehow felt more reassured. It was better when he was being threatened—it felt more safe somehow. Otherwise, the entire issue sat uneasily with him.

Hou Xiaochen ignored the two. It didn’t matter if they decided to lose their sense of reason and took some action. He looked into the distance, at Li Hao and the two men beside him. “I’m going to take a look to see if the ruins doors will open tonight.” He suddenly left. “There’s no need to stay here anymore!”

His abrupt departure alarmed Green Moon and the others. However, they were at ease upon seeing that he was really gone. Hou Xiaochen’s presence induced a lot of pressure. They wanted nothing more than for Kong Jie to leave as well—that one was also stressful!

“I’m going to see if there’s another path out.” Kong Jie smiled, as if hearing their inner thoughts. “Don’t try anything, everyone. We’ll be nearby and will come for you first if anything happens. We’ll all make it out of the ruins if we stay nice and quiet. That’s the best outcome.”

He vanished on the spot as well, leaving the rest to heave sighs of relief! It was good that he was gone, but they had to be careful of any schemes brewing in the background.

.....

At the same time.

Li Hao frowned to see Hou Xiaochen and Kong Jie disappear. What were those two doing? He was considering how to discuss future plans with them, or whether it was even possible to.

The young man glanced at the three Silver Armors—they couldn't leave the city. Meanwhile, the expedition team hid outside the city. Just the combination of himself, Hong Yitang, and He Yong likely wouldn't eradicate the enemy.

With everyone hiding outside the city, he would catch their eye if he approached. He might be mobbed by the group. With Light Sword also present, he didn't have a death wish. He Yong and Hong Yitang had expended a lot of resources last time. If they had to exert themselves again... it would be quite the outlay.

He Yong sidled over as Li Hao contemplated; he looked outside the city with a chuckle. "Sneaky bastard Hou Xiaochen probably has something up his sleeves again to run off like that. Is he setting a trap or what?"

He didn't seem to like Hou Xiaochen much—he'd been cursing the director's name the first time Li Hao met him.