

Star Gate 531

Chapter 531: Stillness (II)

“Everyone should focus on improving themselves over the next three days. Comprehending the aura is a hurdle, a massive hurdle! Only after sensing the aura can you all walk further. If it continuously remains out of reach for you...” Li Hao looked silently at the crowd for a moment. “Then it is only a matter of time before you are eliminated! Remaining at Sunderer is too weak. You can walk many more paths after you grasp the aura and break the limits of the body. There is Southern Fist, Golden Spear, and my master to use as reference. There are many ways to proceed.”

They would be forever stuck at this cultivation level if they did not comprehend the aura. The strongest they would be was a Sunderer, and facing off against Sunflare enemies would be their limit if they did not break the confines of their body.

Given the state of the world, unless Sunderers were equipped with black armor, they wouldn't even be able to participate in a battle against pirates.

A strong sense of urgency rose in the crowd's hearts. Would there be a place in this team for them in the future if they continued to fail to reach half step Dominator? There were only fifty people in the Demon Hunters, so Li Hao could be as generous as he wished and share any attribute of energy with them, dao comprehension weapons, mysterious power stones, black armor...

This led to a fast pace of improvement. But once they were eliminated... The consequences were impossible to imagine!

A strong sense of pressure brought the group back to reality after yesterday's revelry.

“Leader, will it affect our future if we grasp the aura from the dao comprehension weapons?” Although hesitant, someone spoke up with their concern in the end. “Will our potential be less than other people?”

“Not necessarily!” Li Hao responded after some thought. “Comprehending the aura is the stepping stone to success. It doesn't mean that you can't grow stronger in the future or that you're locked

into a certain development. The sword aura I command comes from... a kind of dao comprehension weapon as well.

“But what you glean from the dao comprehension weapons may not be the best match for you.”

“Leader, if a defensive type like me grasps an offensive aura, will that cripple me?” asked the honest Chen Jian.

“Says who?” Li Hao laughed. “The aura lives in one’s imagination and is the manifestation of the heart and soul. Take an earth attribute comprehending a mountain, for example. Would you say the mountain is offensive or defensive?”

“That’s hard to say.” Chen Jian shook his head.

“That’s right, it’s hard to say,” Li Hao continued. “Even if it’s the strongest sword aura, who says it must be used to attack? Are there no defensive sword techniques? Both possibilities exist at the same time, so don’t seek to pigeonhole your aura with a meaning from the beginning. I understood the earth aura first and my thoughts then were that earth is suited for defense. But later on, I turned it into an earth sword aura for attack. It’s all in how you use it.”

The crowd nodded with some understanding. Though they didn’t fully register the meaning behind their leader’s words, they more or less understood him. No matter what, they were to comprehend the aura first and smash through this barrier to knock on the door to Dominator. As for everything else, that could wait. There might not even be a future if one did not cross the threshold first.

In that case, there would be no need to consider questions of potential.

“You’ve progressed well,” Li Hao continued. “When our ten late Sunderers utilize the Ten Rings Mountain Seal Formation and our formidable armor, they can put up a fight against an initial Solar. I don’t think they’ll be less than a Dominator, but that still isn’t enough!

“It’s not enough to just fight a Solar and not kill them. You cannot do so yet because you are not strong enough and cannot intimidate a Solar!”

Heads nodded; they were aware of this as well. Even if they were to work together and reach higher peaks when melding their force together, they lacked the methods that guaranteed the death of an initial Solar. The Demon Hunters could at most delay an initial Solar at the moment, they could not kill such a supernatural.

This rate of improvement was already very fast! But the people also knew that this had to do with their formation and armor. Without those two factors, it would be decent enough if the ten late Sunderers could fight a mid or late Sunflare.

That was their true battle strength. Granted, their formation and equipment was also part of their strength as others didn't have the same.

“So long as everyone understands where I'm coming from. Let everything proceed naturally and don't be overly worried that utilizing the aura within the dao comprehension weapon will limit your potential...” Li Hao paused, but ultimately chose to finish his words. “When it comes to affecting the potential, the biggest challenge will be surpassing the ancients who left the aura behind. If you utilize the dao comprehension weapon, to be honest... your chances of surpassing the former owner are negligible!”

And that was the blatant truth! The young man was well aware of the drawbacks stemming from the auras remaining in the dao comprehension weapons. The Demon Hunters might become like Golden Spear—enshrouded by another's aura and unable to break or surpass it.

To put it more plainly, there were so many ultimate powerhouses in the ancient civilization that it went without saying how strong their auras must have been to survive to present day. Even Li Hao didn't fancy himself strong enough to reach that step, the step of his forefather.

So what came after the young man comprehended his ancestor's aura? That could wait until he truly reached that step! He was an incredible distance away from the other, what was the point of considering right now that he might not be able to break his forefather's shackles after grasping the aura? That he might become the next Golden Spear...

What a joke!

Golden Spear had the strength of a Nova and outstripped most in the martial world. Only those who'd seen vaster reaches felt that he was restricted. For those in front of him to surpass the ancients... Li Hao felt that it was too hard for them.

Hong Yitang had said to not think that present day was inferior to the ancient times, but those were his aspirations and not reality. Reality was that even when it came to someone like Li Hao, he leaned heavily on his bloodline. Someone like He Yong started only at the Black Armor level.

The crowd turned silent after Li Hao's words before sighs of relief could be heard.

"So that's the case... we just won't be able to surpass the ancients? That's fine!"

That was terrifying! We thought we wouldn't be able to improve beyond Dominator if we made use of a dao comprehension weapon. So this is the case!

"Yeah, you were scaring us, leader! We thought we would be stuck at half step Dominator or have no hope of improvement beyond Dominator. The ancients were marvelous! They could destroy stars with one move!" chattered the crowd. Everyone was quite wordless at the picture of doom Li Hao had been painting. They'd somewhat rejected this greatest Guard benefit due to his earlier words that dao comprehension weapons might result in certain restrictions or influences on their development. They would rather they slowly carve out their own path than apply for that comprehension chance.

It wasn't until now that they understood the full ramifications. So that was it? You were scaring people because of this?

Li Hao was just as wordless as them. Prior to setting foot into Battle Heaven, he'd felt that only the ancient legendary heroes were strong, that their ordinary cultivators were weak. Of course he would surpass their ordinary cultivators... But after joining the Battle Heaven Army, he found that even a Silver Armor could kill him after countless eons... he knew that he'd overestimated himself.

There were one thousand people to a troop in the Battle Heaven Army and one thousand troop leaders. In other words, the Silver Armors that had been dead for endless years could still beat him senseless. There was no point in mentioning surpassing the ancients.

First came imitation, then catching up, and finally surpassing. That was the path of modern people.

Liu Long wanted to laugh when he saw how awkward Li Hao was. Everyone started off with the same thoughts—that they were much stronger than the ancients. They didn't want to bother with the aura left by the ancients and wanted to directly outstrip them...

It wasn't until they were mercilessly beaten down by society did they understand that they were just babes learning how to walk. How could they ignore that and want to imitate an adult by jumping ahead? That was sheer nonsense!

Whispers flurried below as some decided to borrow a dao comprehension weapon upon their return. Forty-nine martial masters had all made it to late Sunderer. One time each with the weapons made for forty-nine attempts. The strongest weapon that Li Hao had was a broken sword that Golden Spear left him. There were ten attempts in it. The others were even weaker ones from Golden Spear that could be utilized three to five times.

There may not be enough for all forty-nine members.

However, the young man felt that those who could comprehend the aura on their own might not need the weapons. That would leave enough tries for everyone.

"C'mon, onto the ship and let's go! Hong Qing and the others will go directly to White Moon City, we don't need to wait for them!"

The crowd swiftly filed on board. The ship rapidly expanded and shot out like a loosed arrow, quickly vanishing into the horizon.

Someone watched them from the shore, silently observing their departure. The two Sunflares from the Southern Ford Night Watcher branch were also watching. One was older, one was younger. The older one sighed, “We all felt so unsettled when Director Hou left. Although Director Hao is a Solar, he doesn’t offer us much security with the growing number of powerhouses in the world...”

“This one has displayed immense strength prior to the director’s full departure and killed enemies with resolution. I trust that the Silver Moon Night Watchers will be quiet for a while and no longer see unrest.”

That was what everyone had been worried about before, but Li Hao appeared with swiftness and killed two Nova powerhouses, as well as five hundred supernaturals. It gave everyone a boost of confidence that the Silver Moon Night Watchers were still very strong.

This was extremely important at this point in time, and was something that Hao Lianchuan could not supply. A mid Solar director... somehow did not merit much respect anymore.

“Isn’t that right!” chuckled the middle-aged man next to him. “One has to say, Director Hou has a good eye for talent. He had this one promoted to deputy director before he left. I say, why don’t we let him...”

“Ahem!” coughed the old man. “Director Hao is not bad, he’s just a bit weaker. He’s a very nice guy, though.”

“That’s right!” The middle-aged man rapidly bobbed his head up and down. That was true, it was very fine that Hao Lianchuan was the director. He was a good man and it was a fine arrangement. However, that deputy director needed to step forward as well, to give everyone reassurance.

Chapter 532: Stillness (III)

At the same time, White Moon City. The Night Watcher encampment.

“Stop it with the questions!” Hao Lianchuan raged. “Stop the bullshit! How do I know when Li Hao will be back? What are all of you doing? I’m still here, why are you asking me this shit? There’s nothing going on right now, what’s the deal with these constant questions??”

He completely lost his cool in front of the visiting Sunflares, they were so infuriating! These people came several times a day to ask when Deputy Director Li would be back. When he asked them what they wanted, one said that there might be a base of the three great organizations somewhere that required Li Hao’s help. The other asked if the Silver Moon Guard were still recruiting, they wanted to introduce a friend. A third complained that Director Li couldn’t always stay in the Guards, that he was a deputy director of the Night Watchers, after all. He needed to come and get to know everyone.

Hao Lianchuan was nearly beside himself with fury! Do all of you take me for dead?

Next to him, the metal attribute Deputy Director Zhou was a Solar and smiled placatingly at seeing Hao Lianchuan’s anger. “Director Hao, everyone’s thinking of the Night Watchers. To be honest, we’re all a bit uneasy after Director Hou’s departure. This is a good development, we’re much more at ease after Director Li has slayed some Novas.

“With a powerhouse that can fight Novas present, it feels much the same as when Director Hou was present. We’re much more confident. Otherwise, we wouldn’t even really dare eliminate the remnants of the three great organizations...”

That was the truth, the unfortunate, blatant truth!

“Am I not a mid Solar?!” Hao Lianchuan grumped. “Can I not handle some stragglers? Who are you looking down on?”

“.....” No one said a word. Don’t ask us anything so we don’t need to say anything. If you insist... we really do look down on you a little bit.

“Get out of here, all of you!” Hao Lianchuan cursed. “I’ll let you know when he comes back. Get out of my sight and don’t bother me!”

“.....” The group of people left sheepishly.

Hao Lianchuan sagged against his chair when they left, his face full of resignation. Bah, screw you Li Hao! You were so polite when you came and called me Uncle Hao. Now look at you, your head’s gotten too big after your strength grew! You said you’d take me along when you did something big, but you ran off without anyone knowing!

Demon Sword Li Hao was now known throughout the lands, and poor Hao Lianchuan was almost a backdrop. No, he was a side character. Nah, he wasn’t even a side character.

Wasn’t that aggravating??

As he cursed incessantly to himself, his eyes flicked toward the door and he suddenly beamed with joy. “Li Hao’s come back! Good, come, sit! Let’s chat! Are you tired? Are you hungry? Let’s get some food, my treat...”

“.....” Li Hao looked blearily at the man. What was going on for him to be so welcoming? He’d come straight here after settling in the others. He was a nominal deputy director, after all. Hao Lianchuan had offered to join in his operations, but he’d left the man behind.

Li Hao had wanted to bring him along, but felt that they wouldn’t necessarily encounter pirates. The young man thought that Hao Lianchuan might be livid and looking to vent his anger, but the situation looked alright!

“Director Hao...”

“Call me brother!”

The hell?! Li Hao's mind blanked. "Erm... I... should still call you Director Hao... Or director, or Uncle Hao at the very least?"

"Whatever you wish!" Hao Lianchuan beamed. "Were you hurt?"

"No, I'm alright."

"Then that's good. Did you just come back?"

"Yes, just came back."

"Then..."

"Director Hao, you don't have to be enthusiastic, I'm not used to this kind of treatment." Resigned, Li Hao raised a hand to cut the man off. "We've known each other for a while and you're the first Solar I met..."

"Nonsense, Brokensky was!"

"....." Li Hao coughed and couldn't help but laugh. That was... true. He didn't want to argue with Hao Lianchuan over this. "I'm here to explain why I didn't invite you to come along..."

"I understand!" Hao Lianchuan plastered on an understanding smile. "I'm a supernatural and easily exposed. You were out for a regular sail and didn't expect to engage with the pirates on your first excursion, right?"

"....." You've said everything I want to say, so what can I say?

Hao Lianchuan didn't mind and continued with a chuckle, "Li Hao, the director said before he left that he was leaving the Night Watchers in your hands. That makes sense to me too. I don't sit that comfortably in my position as director, even as an acting one, because I'm too weak."

"I understand!" Li Hao interrupted. "This is why I've come to the director. Supernaturals find it easier to improve compared to martial masters. There are too few supernatural powerhouses in the Night Watchers, so I want to invite Director Hao to the Guards barracks. I'm going to cultivate over the next couple of days, so the director may be able to make use of the opportunity to find your fifth supernatural lock."

"Really?" Hao Lianchuan was overjoyed. Was that possible?

Li Hao nodded. Supernatural locks would not manifest if they were too weak. That wasn't a major issue—they could simply be strengthened if they were too weak. Blood pearls and elemental power would do, but mysterious power would not!

It had to be elemental energy. Perhaps mysterious power stones could be a stand-in if they were available in sufficient numbers as their energy was much more pure. However, Hao Lianchuan didn't seem to have that many stones.

Li Hao was prepared to increase his organs and physical body to ten thousand cubes each. There was no need for the other martial masters to absorb energy because they'd reached the limits of their current state. More energy wouldn't have much of an effect unless they comprehended the aura. This time, his focus was to fortify the supernaturals under his command.

It was easy for supernaturals to progress—there wouldn't be so many powerhouses in just twenty years otherwise. This factored in the time they needed to search for the next stage, or else those fellows in the central region would've set foot into Nova in just a few short years.

Hao Lianchuan could dance with joy. There was hope yet! He was almost despairing because he continued to fail to locate his fifth lock. He burned with passion now that there was hope.

“Li Hao, Director Hou’s gone and I can’t be bothered to go up to the sixth floor to his office. You can have it and conduct your affairs from there in the future.”

“.....” Li Hao blinked with astonishment. “No, I don’t want it!”

“It’s an entire floor! Don’t look down on it for an outwardly small size. There’s another house inside that the director lived in. There’s a massive balcony and tons of space...”

“Director Hao, do you think that Director Hou isn’t coming back?” Li Hao stared at him for a bit.

“.....” Hao Lianchuan instantly quieted down. He laughed awkwardly. “Of course not!”

“So how come you’re giving his office to me?” Li Hao rolled his eyes. Hou Xiaochen will kill us both if he comes back and finds his home of a few decades with another occupant in it!

“Hahaha... we... we can talk about that later!” Hao Lianchuan continued laughing drily. Ole Hou’s gone, what does he care what we do with his office! It’s his fault for leaving like that!

“Then we’re decided. I’m going back first and Director Hao can come find me when you wrap up things here. I’ll be cultivating over the next three days. It’ll be the best if the director can manifest your fifth lock during this time.”

Hao Lianchuan hastily nodded, both expectant and impatient. His fifth lock! Not seeing it meant that he stood no chance of becoming a Nova. Only when he did was there hope. He wanted to leave with Li Hao on the spot! But there were matters to take care of in advance if he was to leave for a few days.

“Alright then,” he said with reluctance. “You go back first and I’ll be right there when I’m done.”

Hao Lianchuan was such a warm host that he insisted on walking Li Hao out. The young man left amid the admiring gazes of many Night Watchers. Hao Lianchuan ended up directing his driver to take Li Hao back and also told his driver that when Li Hao was present, the man would service Li Hao.

The young man didn't know whether to laugh or cry. How come he hadn't realized before that Hao Lianchuan was so good at currying favor? He knew no shame and was just the same as Wang Ming. Were they long lost father and son?

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Back at the barracks, Li Hao put his matters in order. He didn't actually do much, just tossed the dao comprehension weapons to Liu Long and had him assign opportunities based on merit.

They still followed Silver Moon Guard regulations at the moment, but Li Hao was prepared to shift to the Battle Heaven Army system. It was easy to keep track of merits when everyone was outfitted with black armor. At the moment, that function seemed to be obscured—possibly due to their distance from the city.

Li Hao consulted his armor and found that troop leaders could set up a similar merit system if they lost contact with the city. He wasn't present when most of the fighting occurred, so he didn't know who put forth more effort or less. Everyone split the gains equally at the moment, but that wouldn't do once their numbers increased.

Was there a need to expand the Demon Hunters? He didn't think so before, but after witnessing the Battle Heaven Army and the scale of the pirates, some other thoughts brewed in his mind. He just didn't want to recruit right this very moment—training was a hassle!

It'd be nice if there were ready-made personnel, and he would've wanted to poach some from the other troops if the Guards were still here. What a pity that they'd all left.

With that in mind, he began closed door cultivation on the evening of October 6th. This time, he sought to elevate his body and organs to the ten-thousand-cube level.

The supernaturals sitting outside were all nervous and excited. Hao Lianchuan was the most excited as he knew some of the inside story, such as the sword of the Lis. He hadn't been at liberty to say anything before as Li Hao refused to admit he'd turned in a fake. Now that the young man summoned him here, the newly promoted director knew that the real one must be on the young man.

Li Hao constantly wore his sword in open sight on this day, possibly to show off, or just that he felt there was no need to conceal it anymore. Or perhaps it was bait for others. Who knew?

Chapter 533: Stillness (IV)

The Silver Moon Guards barracks quieted down once more. Martial masters spent time with dao comprehension weapons or perceived the aura by themselves. A few supernaturals encircled Li Hao, absorbing the energy that he exuded, whether it was elemental energy, unattributed energy, or sometimes sword energy.

Panther sprawled next to the young man as usual, at times opening its mouth to eat its fill. It was very comfortable here, it didn't want to leave at all. Although the ancient city could help it grow stronger, life was too awful there. It didn't want to recall the terrible days inside the city. The only memory it recalled vividly was that the big turtle had extracted its blood for the beautiful purpose of activating its bloodline.

The dog never wanted to undergo another such experience. It'd almost died of pain. This current state was the kind of life that it pursued. Feasting at will and occasionally helping its human kill people, keeping its claws sharp. This was the kind of life it wanted.

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Time passed as Li Hao stilled once more.

The central region.

Yuan Shuo had disappeared, but the central region did not quiet down. It rather felt like the calm before the storm when Hou Xiaochen entered the area with his Silver Moon Guards.

On the plains of the central region.

A train quickly navigated through the terrain. The Guards had taken over an entire train to escort Hou Xiaochen to his post. Manager Yu and the others were frowning at the moment; they looked up through the metal ceiling overhead. Someone was above them in full view!

Hou Xiaochen remained calm as could be, eating his breakfast as he admired the view out of the window and completely ignoring the people outside. He knew who they were. Manager Yu twitched to erupt in fury, but kept herself in check when she saw that the director didn't say a word.

Three people hovered overhead—two young men and one young woman. They were very young!

One of them had a long blade on his back and looked down merrily. "Ole Hou keeps a low profile. We've been flying over them for a while, but he doesn't pay any attention to us. Truth be told, I'm rather curious how strong he is and if he can fight Ole Huang."

The other young man wielded a spear that emanated fire energy. His long hair blew in the wind and an aloof look filled his eyes. "He can ignore us if he wants. I can feel Golden Spear's spear intent, however. I wonder how much strength this number one spear of the past still commands. I'd love to exchange a few moves!"

The cute, diminutive young woman widened her large, round eyes and giggled, "Why don't... you go down for a try, Ole Spear?"

The latter flicked a glance at her and ignored her.

"What, don't you dare?" she giggled.

“Shut up!” he snapped. Who was she making fun of!

None of the three were weak and they were just here to watch the show. They weren’t interested in causing trouble if the other side didn’t come out.

“Big Eyes, why don’t you go down and take Yu Luochoa through her paces?” The young man with the blade grinned widely. “I hear she’s really strong and ranks in the top of the Silver Moon martial masters. Go get her!”

“.....” Big Eyes ignored him. I’m not falling for that! She looked down with regret. “Forget it, we won’t fight since you two are scaredy-cats! I’m just curious if Hou Xiaochen will pick a fight with Ole Huang. Ole Huang’s pretty strong. Will the three of us beat him if we work together?”

“More or less!” Long Blade stroked his chin. “There’s a hope, at least! Ole Huang’s in metamorphosis and we’re all late Nova. Although there’s a peak Nova cultivation level separating us... he might not be able to take on the three of us together!”

“How about we try ambushing him?” Big Eyes blinked. “We’ll say Hou Xiaochen told us to do it and that we work for him now...”

“.....” The two looked speechlessly at her. Are you even listening to yourself?

“Forget it, forget it,” Big Eyes giggled. “They’re too strong. I’ve heard of something, that the disciple of the Five Styles Demon King, Li Hao, is really flexing his muscles in Silver Moon. He killed a late Nova with one sword stroke and apparently no one is his match. Do we want to go have some fun with him?”

“Nah, Silver Moon’s not a good place. We can’t go at the moment!” Long Blade quickly shook his head. “It’s boring to watch Ole Hou and them fight each other. Why don’t we find something exciting for them?”

“Something exciting?” The two looked eagerly at Long Blade. What kind of exciting?

“Apparently, out of Ying Hongyue’s harem group, only Indigo Moon is left in the central region. If we find a chance to kill her, do you guys think Ying Hongyue will lose his mind and declare war on the Night Watchers?”

“.....” The two stared open-mouthed at him.

“What are you guys looking at me this way for?” Long Blade grumbled. “What are you afraid of? Nothing happened when the little priest killed Yama’s grandson. Celestial’s too damned mysterious, while I know a thing or two about Red Moon. We should imitate Li Hao and hang Indigo Moon by the Night Watcher headquarters. Ying Hongyue won’t be able to look at himself in the mirror if he doesn’t lose his mind for revenge. That’s when things will get interesting. When Red Moon wages war on the Night Watchers... we might be able to completely take out the organization!”

The two sucked in sharp breaths. You’re... a little too bold there! You’re crazy!

“C’mon, let’s go round up some people!” Big Eyes nodded after some thought.

“.....” Spear couldn’t help himself. “Let’s not, we’ve offended too many people already. We won’t have any place to go if the Night Watchers give up on us...”

“What are you afraid of!” Long Blade was completely nonchalant. “We’ll join another banner if the Night Watchers abandon us. If not, we’ll go to some of the local tyrants. And if that doesn’t work, we’ll just start our own thing and conquer the world. And if that still doesn’t work, then... let’s just run. Will we not be able to outrun them if we can’t outfight them?”

“.....” Spear was rather resigned by the response. These two... Bah, forget it. They were friends, after all. “Fine, but that Indigo Moon might not appear.”

“Isn’t there still an Orange Moon?”

“She seems to have gone to the north...”

“Then forget it. We can also wait by the North Sea, she’ll be back sooner or later. We’ll hack her or jab her to death with one move when she shows up and hang her by the headquarter doors...” The three blustered loudly before they left. They still had their dignity to consider. Since Hou Xiaochen continued to ignore them, they would ignore him too! Hmph!

.....

Inside the train compartment.

Hou Xiaochen raised his eyes for a look when he finished his last piece of dessert and smiled with a shake of his head. “Youngsters are so interesting!”

“If it wasn’t for the director’s instructions... I would teach them a lesson!” Yu Luocha snorted. How dare they fly overhead for such a long time! It was blatant provocation!

“They’re an interesting bunch, the Heaven Favored are fascinating,” Hou Xiaochen chuckled. “I’ve always wanted to study if those with naturally broken supernatural locks are trash or geniuses. I still haven’t figured it out.

“Is it that their potential doesn’t need to be restrained or is it that their potential is limited, and this is all they’ll ever amount to?

“This is all worthy of further study, but Silver Moon’s Heaven Favored were too arrogant at an early stage and completely wiped out after a few years. People like Yuan Shuo... were complete spendthrifts! They wasted the province’s potential!”

He shook his head with some pity. There were almost no Heaven Favored in Silver Moon now—whichever ones still existed were very weak. Some were born with only one lock broken. Did a connate Starlight even count as Heaven Favored?

The ones overhead had had at least three or even four broken at birth. They were natural Sunflares and Solars—true Heaven Favored.

Yu Luochoa said nothing further, while Golden Spear spoke in a muffled voice. “I feel that they seem to have something like an aura within them. Director, what...”

“They probably learned some ancient arts,” Hou Xiaochen responded after some thought. “They don’t follow the path of the Silver Moon martial masters, it’s not that of ancient martial dao. It’s the ancient path of energy. Supernaturals aren’t really trash—don’t underestimate them. They just have a different system from us. The ancient path of energy was still very strong, and the records say that they almost overturned the entire ancient civilization when the two sides fought!

“It wasn’t until the rise of the ancient Human King that they were brought under control. That is evidence enough of how strong they were. It’s just that modern day supernaturals...” Hou Xiaochen thought for a bit. “They possess many deficiencies and are different from the path of energy.

“The path of energy springs from the body, but mysterious power cannot be fully integrated into the body to be used by the wielder. I’ve been curious about this problem and want to see if it’s been resolved after all these years...

“If it hasn’t, then the supernatural will never amount to anything. But if it has, that means existences above Nova have appeared!”

If mysterious power could be fully integrated into the body, that gave rise to the hope of breaking the next supernatural lock. Hou Xiaochen had come to the central region also to gain insights on how far this domain had developed. He knew where the martial masters stood, but there were too few supernaturals in Silver Moon as well as supernaturals. Perhaps there would be some results here.

“Above Nova?” Manager Yu thought for a bit. “We need to break two locks of the organs to reach beyond Nova. There should be those who’ve done so and operate under a state similar to sealed martial masters. But what the director means is thoroughly smashing them and diverting the energy inside for personal use, correct? The kind of existence above Nova that will not suffer from backlash in battle?”

“Mmhm!” Hou Xiaochen nodded. “Also, the unique systems among the supernatural such as the wind, flight, and thunder attributes—their people are Novas if they break the four locks of the limbs. What if they move on to one of the five organs? Therefore, I’d like to see what true battle strength beyond Nova looks like.”

Golden Spear and Hao Lianchuan frowned. If there really were such existences, they would be a thorny problem. People like Hou Xiaochen had such strength if they unsealed themselves. If they didn’t, they were of the metamorphosis level.

Supernaturals did not have to worry about their organs exploding if they fully released their battle strength. Tempering the supernatural locks was actually what they sought. If this was the case, then even Hou Xiaochen might find himself in dire straits.

Hou Xiaochen said nothing more, instead thinking of those that’d been flying overhead. They were true geniuses of the central region. Were there equivalents for martial dao? He would certainly broaden his horizons this time. They were almost at Skystar City.

Chapter 534: Light Sword (I)

The Silver Moon Guards barracks.

Three days passed swiftly. When Li Hao said he would be in seclusion for three days, he really meant three days. He stopped his motions when time was up and halted cultivating. As for the insatiable Hao Lianchuan and others, he didn’t bother looking at them.

The young man had consumed a large sum of energy over the past three days—more than thirty thousand cubes. He absorbed half of the sum and the dog consumed at least five thousand of the other half. The rest went to Hao Lianchuan and the supernaturals. It was only because Panther wasn’t much interested in the five elements lately that the supernaturals were able to absorb so much.

He'd consumed approximately one hundred pieces of mysterious power stones. That no longer meant much to Li Hao. After killing two Novas, the stones in their rings alone were more than eight hundred pieces. Pirates were rich, alright!

His cache of stones was increasing instead of decreasing. Added to that seizures from other sources, that meant he had almost three thousand stones in hand. That was more than when he left the ruins.

"Don't stop, Li Hao!" Hao Lianchuan called out urgently with desire. "My supernatural lock hasn't appeared yet and my strength hasn't increased..."

"Is that so?" Li Hao flicked him a glance.

"Yeah! Almost there..."

"Really?"

"Of course!" Hao Lianchuan almost thumped his chest in promise.

"Late Solar is good enough," Li Hao said wearily. "Would you have ascended if your lock hadn't appeared? Director Hao, try a better lie next time."

Hao Lianchuan blinked and stared wordlessly at the young man. A tragic expression crept over his face. The kid's eyes are too keen! I thought no one noticed!

Li Hao couldn't be bothered with him. He looked at the others, finding himself to almost envy supernaturals. Wang Ming was peak Sunflare and might ascend at any time. Hu Hao and Yun Yao were both Sunflares. While they were initial Sunflare, this rate of improvement was astonishing!

As for Li Meng... she was unfortunately still dawdling in Darkmoon. At least she was a Plenilune now and would be a Sunflare if she took another step forward.

The latter three hadn't absorbed too much energy as Hao Lianchuan had consumed half of the ten thousand cubes, Wang Ming half of the remainder, leaving the other half to the trio. And yet, they still easily set foot into Sunflare.

In comparison, it was so hard for martial masters to set foot into Dominator from Sunderer. Li Hao had sent the Demon Hunters quite a sum of elemental energy, but if juxtaposed with the supernaturals, he should've seen half of his martial masters reach Dominator. And yet, not a single one was yet!

The aura was an obstacle in everyone's path.

Li Hao looked at Li Meng, thinking that the girl would be depressed. It turned out he was thinking too much. She wasn't down at all and bounced around happily. It didn't seem like an act as she really was very happy.

While everyone had improved, she'd improved the least. However, Li Meng was very excited. "I'm almost a Sunflare, I'm so impressive!"

"....." The group stared strangely at her. We... are all Sunflare? What are you so impressive about?

Li Meng looked at the group proudly and wanted to say something, but suddenly shut her mouth and thought better of it. That piqued Li Hao's curiosity. Had the girl gained something special? Was there a change to her eye or something else?

He didn't consider asking as Li Meng couldn't keep a secret to save her life. She had a bigger mouth than Wang Ming. It hadn't been apparent before because she didn't know much. If she did, she would run her mouth more than Wang Ming. It wouldn't be more than a few days for everyone to know what she wasn't speaking about today.

Li Hao walked out without further word. In his current state, increases to strength focused on the physical body. There weren't any big differences to his auras. His body and five organs were much more formidable than before. The stronger his vitality was, the harder it was for enemies to kill him.

However, his offensive ability didn't increase in proportion to the improvements of his body. He might be a little stronger than when he faced Sea Shark—at the very least, he wouldn't continue to be caught on the back foot and turn the tables only at the very last. He could be able to match the pirate now.

.....

Li Hao walked out of the training quarters. Some martial masters were already awake and active, demonstrating the effects of what they'd absorbed over the past three days. While the young man couldn't see anything definitive as he looked over the Demon Hunters, he could sense that some auras were starting to flourish.

This meant that some had progressed to half step Dominator over the past three days.

Liu Long swiftly walked over upon seeing Li Hao and the supernaturals approach. He'd focused his efforts on expounding on theory to the rest over the past couple of days. The man hadn't cultivated much, instead overseeing the distribution of the dao comprehension weapons.

Li Hao always absolved himself of these kinds of responsibilities. Since he wouldn't carry out his duties, Liu Long had to do it. He'd done it for the Demon Hunters before. While there were more people now, he could still rise to the occasion since he'd been captain of the law enforcement team for many years.

“Leader!” Liu Long seemed to heave a sigh of relief. “There are still some sitting with the dao comprehension weapons. Almost everyone had a chance to, but a lot of the weapons have shattered. Only the sword is left...”

Li Hao looked in a certain direction, finding that someone seemed to have grasped the aura. “Who’s in there now?”

“Hong Hao!”

“Him?” Li Hao raised a surprised eyebrow. “He was on the cusp of success himself, what’s he studying a dao comprehension weapon for?”

Hong Hao had almost grasped the aura and was Hong Yitang’s third disciple. Based on what Li Hao knew, the young man wouldn’t take someone else’s opportunity and would give up his instead.

“The Sword Sect disciples refused to accept their chances,” Liu Long explained. “They said that Hong Hao and the others accomplished more than them and should go first. Even though he was about to comprehend it himself, they said that it was still useful to know more. Hong Hao had no other choice but to agree...”

Li Hao didn’t say anything. The Sword Sect disciples were a united group. They probably didn’t want to take his chance from him before he reached half step Dominator.

“What’s the situation now?”

“Liu Yan, Hong Qing, Li Heng, Hong Chou, and a few others have comprehended the aura on their own...”

Hong Chou was the one whose family had been killed by pirates, so Li Hao wasn’t surprised by his name on the list. When he gave the order to hang up the pirates, a flicker of aura had answered from the guy. It might’ve been due to happiness, or it might’ve been because killing the pirates cleared his mind. He’d come from behind and now surpassed many.

“There are sixteen people who’ve grasped the aura.”

“That many?” Li Hao was taken aback. Ten would’ve been decent in his estimation.

“Mmhhh, there were quite a few.” Liu Long grinned. “The vacation day that you ordered might have straightened out their thoughts. Who knew that it’d be a good thing?”

There hadn’t been a single half step Dominator in the troop of forty-nine, now there were suddenly sixteen. If they counted the mediating Hong Hao, that would make seventeen. It was more than one third of the Demon Hunters! This was a high ratio.

Li Hao quickly processed his surprise. Whether it was the Sword Sect or Inspectorate, they’d sent martial masters with good foundations. They all had strong potential for martial dao—it would’ve been difficult for them to continue down their path in this impoverished place otherwise. After the rise of the supernatural, those unsuited for the martial path quickly crossed over.

“That’s good!” Li Hao checked the skies—they were dark. It was the night of the 8th and it would be the 9th soon. Based on their speed, Hou Xiaochen and the others should almost be at Skystar City since they’d left on the 4th.

The young man was in no hurry since Hong Hao was still busy, he chatted with those standing around. Hong Qing and Hong Hao had returned in the afternoon two days ago and hadn’t had a chance to make their report. Hong Qing walked over to them.

“Leader, my dad says to not send people to him in the future...”

“Why not?” Was Hong Yitang so small-minded? It was just a few people and they were in such a pitiable state! Why can’t you save them?

“My dad says that this is just setting a precedent and will form the beginning of a habit. He says that you don’t know how hard it is to deal with the aftermath of a situation. If you send him one hundred people today, you might send an entire city next time. So next time... if you still want to do this... he’ll take them after you have custody of them for a month.”

Li Hao scratched his head awkwardly. I got it! Old Hong thinks I have no idea how hard it is to take care of people rescued from these situations. He wants me to have a taste, but I'm not an idiot! I know! Don't think I don't know, it's because I know that I don't want to do it. Hello, I'm seriously not an idiot.

"Ahem!" Li Hao changed the topic. "Let's talk about the ruins!"

The crowd perked up.

"The ruins are within Silver Moon borders and not too far from White Moon City. Previous ranking officer Golden Spear explored them a few times and returned halfway..." Li Hao recounted in a somewhat solemn tone. "There are great dangers within. The ranking officer may have been fine, but that doesn't mean we will be.

"The ruins don't look too big from the outside. The senior guesses that it might've been the personal city of a clan in the ancient civilization, or one from a small sect. There may be other possibilities as well, but that is the most of it.

"The difficulty lies in the fact that ambushes happen on the street leading to the main door. Since I've been to Battle Heaven, my guess is that it may be a tree spirit! It's tough to say if it's one from the ancient civilization or one born later."

"From those times?" Hong Qing asked curiously. "It should be dead after so many years."

"It might, it could also be a shoot from the old tree. I haven't been, so I'm not sure. But from some clues left by Senior Golden Spear, I think this might be the case!

"If that is..." Li Hao's eyes darted around. "Then we might have significant treasure to loot. A place like that may not have as many valuables as Battle Heaven, but with a tree spirit present, we might be able to obtain the legendary Water of Life..."

He only had one drop of that that he'd kept in reserve. Hou Xiaochen had wanted to trade for it, but Li Hao rejected him. It was an item that would create an enormous debt of gratitude as it was more effective than sword energy. It could regrow severed limbs!

Sword energy could not accomplish that—Li Hao vaguely knew what its core essence was now. It was a type of pure mental strength! Whether it was mysterious power, mysterious power stones, or origin weapon souls, they were devoured by the sword, purified, refined, and giving rise to sword energy.

Therefore, sword energy was a strength for cultivation. Water of Life, on the other hand, was a truly unique energy.

Chapter 535: Light Sword (I)

The crowd shifted restlessly when they heard Li Hao's words, but Liu Long frowned. "Will we be a hindrance if we go?"

"It's fine, we can retreat if there's real danger," Li Hao responded indifferently. "We don't have to gain anything for our time. Not to mention, Panther and I will be going..."

"And me!" Ignored off to the side, Hao Lianchuan quickly piped up. He was also excited by what he heard.

"Do you have nothing else better to do, Director Hao?" Li Hao asked with resignation. "There's no one else in charge of the Night Watchers now and you're a late Solar. Your fifth supernatural lock has appeared, so you should go back to cultivate more and ascend as Nova as soon as possible."

"That can wait a few days!"

Wang Ming started growing frantic. Fatty Hao, you're stealing my lines! I haven't had a chance to volunteer yet! Unfortunately for the handsome supernatural, the director was stronger than him. Wang Ming couldn't outbid him when it came to this expedition opportunity.

“Fine then, it’s just a small ruin.” Li Hao didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. “There may not be anything good inside as it’s different from Battle Heaven. Battle Heaven is a city, this place can only count as a village.”

He wouldn’t be interested in visiting if not for the possible tree monster spirit. Just a few more mysterious power stones wasn’t temptation enough.

.....

They waited for Hong Hao to complete his cultivation—as expected, he comprehended the aura as well. The three days of cultivation for the Demon Hunters were at a close. Li Hao wanted to immediately set out to try his luck.

He was used to traveling at night and the troop had just rested for three days. Li Hao brought out the Divine Kun Ship—it was an origin weapon after his own heart. Not only could it swim through the water, but it could also fly through the sky. Right now, he wanted to experience flying through the sky.

There were more on this trip than before; Hao Lianchuan made for fifty-six. The Demon Hunters traveled over land last time. This time, he directed the ship in a swift climb into the air. He didn’t want to be monitored—there were several factions in Silver Moon that were possibly keeping an eye on him. While they might not have malicious intent, he wanted his movements to remain more of a secret.

In the ship, the young man surveyed the surroundings for supernaturals. He also gave Li Meng the mission of detecting whether there were martial masters traveling through the air or anything that was monitoring them. Li Hao could only see things that belonged to the system of energy, whereas the girl’s third eye could see more.

A third eye appeared on Li Meng’s forehead, but she didn’t use it to follow Li Hao’s orders and observe anything. It shone with a certain luster; the young man looked strangely at her when he detected something. She seemed to be laboring under some effort, but was still very excited. Rays of splendor flowed past the crowd and enveloped the ship.

“We want to prevent people from peeping in on us, right?” she panted. “Watch me, leader! This is an illusory space! All monitoring methods are useless if I wrap us up in this! No one will see us unless they’re powerhouses looking for us!”

Li Hao raised an eyebrow. In other words, they were invisible to certain people.

“Is this an invisibility art?”

“Pretty much... But invisibility is different. I’m just twisting some things to create a visual inaccuracy. Invisibility... I’m not sure how invisibility does it.”

A visual inaccuracy! Li Hao inclined his head. This seemed like a useful ability. However, it consumed a large amount of energy. Li Meng started swaying on her feet after maintaining it for a short while. Li Hao had no other choice but to direct some sword energy into her body. Darkmoons... were seriously weak. It’d only been how long before she couldn’t hold on?

He looked around in the sky and avoided some patrolling supernaturals. The Night Watchers sent supernaturals out on patrols, but the ones inside the city primarily came from the Inspectorate. The Inspectorate possessed both supernaturals and martial masters.

The young man directed the flying ship away from the patrols and vanished inside White Moon City. Meanwhile, the Inspectorate that’d just been elevated to the duty of patrolling didn’t detect anything.

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The Inspectorate provincial headquarters.

Kong Jie frowned and scanned the air. He thought about it, walked to a window, and took one step out of it for a look all around. Something was off. After further thought, he took out a set of black armor and sent mind ripples into it.

“Li Hao, where are you?”

“The base. Is everything alright, Inspector General Kong?”

“The base? Then that’s fine. Martial masters seemed to have invaded White Moon. I’m going to grab Huang Yu and kill them.”

“.....” Li Hao stared blankly, midway through crossing the capital. Did he really mean that?
“There’s no need!”

“Er.” Kong Jie stopped speaking and switched from alarm to annoyance. “Stop running off in the middle of the night, we’ll easily mistake you for an enemy. I thought something had gone wrong with our defenses! Tell us next time before you go out!”

He really thought that enemies were invading, but upon further consideration, felt that it was more likely to be Li Hao. As expected, it really was the kid. He was a true Night Watcher alright, he always made his moves at night!

Where was he off to now?

Of course, Kong Jie wasn’t at liberty to say too much. He could only curse a few rounds and pray that the kid didn’t cause further trouble for them. The current state of the world wasn’t too safe for Li Hao.

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A resigned Li Hao breathed out heavily. It looked like White Moon City's defenses were stronger than he anticipated. They wouldn't have been discovered so quickly otherwise. But this was also good, it meant that the city was safer. Those in the capital all had a few tricks up their sleeves and were not to be underestimated.

Li Meng couldn't withstand her technique after they left White Moon City. Li Hao had her rest and commanded the ship to fly higher, using his internal force to support the ship's consumption of resources. It took more energy to fly through the air.

He steered the ship in Flare City's direction. The ruins were there, not too far away.

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At the same time, a pitch black night.

The east.

Lights blazed through the night in the distance. A building shaped like a palace appeared in front of one's eyes, magnificent in the gloom. This was the renowned estate of the Steadfast Duke.

An old man looked at it from a street less than three thousand meters away. He coughed gently and looked around him, sighing, "I'm back and have not lived up to my important duties. Sir Xu... is dead."

It'd taken her eight days to rush back. Traveling from the north to the east was closer than traveling to the central region, but she hadn't spent the eight days traveling. She'd rested for three days as He Yong's punch had deeply injured her.

Dead silence answered her.

“I may be old, but my senses still exist,” the old man coughed again. “Do not underestimate the senses of a martial master.”

A person walked out from the darkness. The street was still deathly quiet. This was a powerhouse wearing armor; he looked at the old man with his true face. “Steward Hu, the duke had us come meet you to prevent others from following you. It looks like you still retain your strength, so your injuries weren’t that severe, hmm?”

Light Sword looked around the premises with another sigh. “Come out, all of you!”

The bulky man who’d walked out looked at her without saying a word. Light Sword was Light Sword, after all. Her senses were incredibly acute. They felt that they hid themselves well, but were easily discovered nonetheless.

“Since the steward has spoken, everyone come out!”

Three more people walked out from the other four corners of the street. That made for four powerhouses.

“The Steadfast North, Steadfast South, Steadfast East, and Steadfast West general have all come. What an honor!” Light Sword looked at the four.

The Steadfast Duke oversaw the eastern territory and commanded a large army at eight hundred thousand people. This was an army that answered only to him. Eight generals oversaw it—North, South, East, West, Heaven, Earth, Black, and Yellow. [1]

There were two of the duke’s direct descendants commanding the generals—Xu Zhen, Xu Xing. Xu Zhen was Xu Feng’s father. The duke was above them as the commander-in-chief.

Four of the generals were gathered here today and their presences were strong. They seemed to have been concealed by something else before, but revealed their presences now. Formidable,

intimidating, and the scent of blood about them. They weren't naive little cultivators, but ones who'd killed people—and many.

First on the scene had been the Steadfast East General. “Steward Hu, we were once martial masters as well,” he said slowly. “The four of us grew up in the duke's household and closed over to the supernatural when we reached half step Dominator. We know the aura as well!”

“Why do you speak of this, general?” coughed Light Sword.

“No reason other than to tell the steward that the four of us are late Novas ascended from martial masters. We are beyond regular supernaturals and command the army. We have seen much killing in our duties,” the general continued slowly. “The steward is a Silver Moon martial master and incredibly valiant. You have broken the limits of Dominator and are a pioneer of martial dao. We revere you and show you due respect in our day to day. It is Sir Xu's destiny to die! The duke is magnanimous and does not seek to assign responsibility...”

Light Sword did not respond.

“But the steward did not send word on the way back, making us fear that the steward had chosen to leave out of concern that the duke would condemn you,” the general spoke on. “It is for the best that you have returned, despite it being the middle of the night. You must be tired after your travels and the duke is resting as well. Let us request an audience tomorrow—we also wish to inquire about some martial questions. Why don't you follow us to the barracks to rest for the remainder of the night?”

The barracks!

Light Sword smiled and looked at them, finally settling upon the duke's household in the distance as she took her measure of the surroundings. There seemed to be someone looking down at her.

“It looks like Silver Moon martial masters must have sent word ahead and said something?” she sighed.

“We do not know the steward’s meaning!” responded Steadfast East.

“Don’t you?” Light Sword shook her head with a smile. “It must be that asshole Ying Hongyue! What a pity that I wasn’t born pretty, he might take pity on me otherwise. Does he wish for me to die as soon as possible because I am ugly?”

“How would the duke have sent only the four of you, given how cautious he is? Four late Novas killing a peak Nova is so easily done. But I am a Silver Moon martial master, does the duke dare underestimate me?”

A Silver Moon martial master... was truly different.

Chapter 536: Light Sword (II)

The four generals looked on solemnly. A person walked over from a distance. Their footsteps were loud, but they looked young. They wore a red cloak visible through the darkness.

“And if I’m thrown into the mix, Light Sword?” The man was very young.

“They say that the Heaven, Earth, Black, and Yellow Generals are stronger than the North, South, East, and West Generals. But I thought it would be the Heaven General participating, not the mere Black General.”

“They have other duties to attend to. I alone am sufficient.” The young man abruptly flared his dominating presence. If Li Hao was here, he would sense that the newest addition to the group was stronger than the snake of Ash Mountain, but less than the other three major monster spirits.

The young general was peak Nova and just one step away from entering metamorphosis to ascend to the next stage. That made for four late Novas and one peak Nova. Five Novas surrounded Light Sword.

“You might not die so long as you come quietly with us!” the newly arrived Black General said coldly. “You should not have entertained other thoughts or possibilities! The Steadfast Duke treasures your martial expertise despite your failure to properly protect Sir Xu. It has been the duke who supported your cultivation these years. Light Sword, must you be someone who prepares their master?”

“Betrays their master?” Light Sword burst out laughing. “Where do those words come from? I came for the Windchaser Boots when I joined the Steadfast Duke back in the day. Old man Xu Qing promised to give me the boosts so long as I served the Xus for twenty years.

“When circumstances changed later on and prevented me from using the boots, his grandson Xu Feng could. The old man wanted me to... to marry his grandson and become one family. While I know that it is simply an arrangement of mutual profit, I have exerted myself to the utmost for the duke and his household over these years.

“Today marks twenty years!” she sighed. “Why do you think I came back only today? Time is up and the Windchaser Boots should be mine today according to our agreement. I bear some responsibility for Xu Feng’s death since I did not protect him well, but I devoted my energies to his protection that day. There was nothing I could do since I could not overcome my enemy. You can’t have me die as well, can you?”

She looked into the distance, her voice ringing like a bell. “Are you unwilling, Xu Qing? Are you going to turn your back on a promise made twenty years ago?”

Her voice was loud, but a frightful quiet answered her from a distance.

“I understand, I didn’t hold much hope to begin with,” Light Sword sighed. “I just hadn’t thought that you’d evacuate all of the surrounding civilians to move against me. It looks like you’ve made up your mind that I shall not be leaving alive!

“I am a gentle soul compared to some of the others,” she laughed at herself. “Or I would’ve fought to the death a few years ago and not be thus, to be actually nursing some hope...”

Indeed, her personality counted among the more placid of the thirty-six. Part of that was due to a comparative weakness to others, another part was wishing to quietly complete the conversion of her method. Never did she consider that she would ultimately reach this step after twenty years...

“Then... let us fight!” A sword appeared within the world, one that illuminated the sky!

Light Sword shouted and partially snapped the locks of her heart, lungs, and liver. She was swift and decisive as this was the Steadfast Duke’s territory. It was no place to engage in a protracted fight. If time dragged on, she wouldn’t make it out alive even if she snapped all five locks. The woman was well aware of how dangerous this place was, the battle needed to be over quick!

The skies shattered and earth fractured! A piercing ray of light glimmered. The five generals roared and brandished their weapons!

“KILL!” Light Sword screamed, erupting with strength that surpassed what He Yong had brought to bear in the ruins. She swept a sword through the void and severed heaven and earth. BAM!

The formidable Black General quickly stabbed out with his spear, but it instantly splintered upon a loud collision. It took only a split second before Light Sword shouted again and partially snapped a fourth lock. Her battle strength ballooned!

“Die!”

Boom!

The long sword exploded in all directions, marking a large fissure in the earth. The houses around fight collapsed into the opening. The Black General roared incessantly beneath the blow, incredulous that he couldn’t block it!

Pfft!

A line of blood appeared on his head as the sword descended. Light Sword screamed, ignoring him as strength that threatened to immolate the world surged out of her. It didn't feel like fire, but more like the sun's rays searing everything it touched.

All of the houses in the vicinity disappeared when she swept her sword in a circle, like they'd been vaporized! The other four generals rushed her, but all five abruptly froze in the next second. Petrified disbelief shone out of their eyes.

Minor detonations sounded from Light Sword's body as she bled from all orifices. Her organs were breaking into pieces, yet she smiled a ghastly smile that was slightly crazy. "Do you... not know... Silver Moon martial masters?"

She leapt into the air and crossed one thousand meters in a heartbeat, placing her close to the duke's complex.

A vicious look entered the gaunt Steadfast Duke's eyes as he stared down Light Sword from afar. "Think carefully on your actions. You are dead without a doubt if you continue in this vein. There is no hope of you surviving beyond today even if you seize the boots!"

He understood! Or rather, he saw clearly what state Light Sword was in.

The woman didn't respond. Instead, she slammed her palm on her chest and broke another lock with an explosion! Blood streamed down her face, giving her the appearance of a demon. "Hadn't it over... If I am to die, your complex will no longer stand after today unless you unseal yourself!"

"So... you've... reached this step..." murmured the duke. He suddenly kicked at Light Sword with an incredible flaring of his presence. "Then it must first be seen if you have the ability to do so!"

BAM!

A tremendous detonation rocked the four corners as a hole blew through the enormous complex. Countless structures collapsed as multiple servants exploded as well.

No one thought that the wizened Steadfast Duke could demonstrate such overwhelming strength, but Light Sword seemed to have anticipated it. She rocked the world again with another stroke and brightly lit up the surroundings. KABOOM!

The duke backed away, blood welling out of his mouth. The look in his eyes shifted—was one so much stronger after unsealing themselves? He was tempted to do so himself, but sighed when he saw how Light Sword's organs were collapsing and the woman was on the brink of complete insanity.

“Take it and leave. Don't force me...” He tossed out a storage ring.

“Only one?!” Light Sword shrieked when she caught the ring.

“Do you want them both?!” retorted the duke. “I just don't want to pay too high of a price. Do you think the current you is confident of killing me?”

Reluctance glinted in Light Sword's eyes, but she could sense her condition. She grit her teeth and instantly vanished when she took to the sky. In the distance, the frozen generals exploded the moment she disappeared!

Rushing over, the duke's two sons jerked with horror at the sight. Dead?? Five generals dead in a split second?!

“Father!” The two rushed over, quickly followed by a few Novas and Solars. Eldest master Xu Zhen asked urgently, “Why did you give her the Windchaser Boots? You just needed to engage her for a bit longer before...”

“She knows she’s dead if the fight dragged on any longer.” The duke looked coldly at him. “I would be crippled even if she doesn’t kill me. Use your brain!”

He could match Light Sword in her state only if he unsealed himself, but that would lead to more trouble. The duke hadn’t anticipated that the woman had cultivated to these levels. More importantly, the old witch had actually snapped all of her supernatural locks... She wasn’t long for this world even after seizing the Windchaser Boots!

Her organs would fail!

“Have someone follow her, she’s not getting away!” snorted the duke. He frowned when his eyes landed on where the generals had been.

Twinges of pain and regret pricked at him. The five generals could kill targets at the level of metamorphosis if they acted together. Light Sword had sealed off their battle strength and killed them all!

Even he was unhappy at the outcome. That was five powerhouses under his command! And, did his eldest son want him to die sooner?

Light Sword was obviously very strong, but he wanted me to keep her engaged for a bit longer... Already displeased with his eldest son after Xu Feng’s death, the duke’s dissatisfaction mounted!

Light Sword’s condition outmatched everyone, but she would also collapse soon. Where could she run to? They would not be losing the Windchaser Boots and she only had one of them that she couldn’t use. There wasn’t much point in seizing it.

Moments later, swathes of powerhouses chased Light Sword in the direction she’d vanished in. They didn’t dare draw too close as she was too strong, but they followed closely on her tail and waited for the woman to deplete herself.

.....

What happened in the east quickly spread throughout the land, yet Li Hao had already left White Moon City. He didn't know that Light Sword would act so quickly or that the woman was running toward Silver Moon at an unbelievable speed.

She was very, very far away, but there was hope.

Unfortunately, Li Hao was already heading for the ruins. He wasn't doing this on purpose, he could promise that!

Chapter 537: Tree Spirit (I)

The eastern expanses were in an uproar, but they were so far away from Silver Moon that the latest news wouldn't reach Li Hao for a while. Skystar Dynasty was too big even for certain special communication systems. The young man didn't have his own intelligence network either. Silver Moon did, but they wouldn't share what they knew since he wasn't part of their core personnel.

.....

The Divine Kun Ship flew for roughly two hours, covering approximately three hundred kilometers. Li Hao landed on a mountain covered with greenery and rivers. It was a beautiful environment that was far from a bleak, uninhabited expanse. There was a small town at the foot of the mountain; some lights were still on despite the late hour.

The ship landed soundlessly. A group of people swiftly disembarked. Being a deputy director for many years, Hao Lianchuan immediately recognized the place.

"This is Mount Cat Head because it is shaped like a cat's head. It's a local spot of interest and often drew tourists before the world was engulfed in chaos."

"It's not just because it's shaped like a cat's head, but also because there are a lot of stray cats here. We're less than fifty kilometers from Flare City and within its jurisdiction."

Hao Lianchuan flicked a sidelong glance at him. Not to be outdone, Wang Ming stared back. I was the one who introduced places before! You've stolen my job, fatty!

Li Meng opened her third eye and looked directly at the mountain—she'd always been a reckless soul. "I don't see anything. There seems to be wild animals inside, but not the great monster spirits of legend."

The various supernaturals all wanted to showcase their abilities. Yun Yao was the only one who remained quiet, she simply looked around. She was an ordinary water supernatural and her main mission was to heal the martial masters instead of fighting.

Li Hao took out a map without responding to the supernaturals. It depicted the mountain in front of them and had the ruins labeled with a red dot.

"Let's go!" Li Hao led the way; the Demon Hunters were close on his heels.

Mount Cat Head wasn't a steep mountain. Strictly speaking, it wasn't a big mountain. The elegant surroundings didn't speak of danger at all. Was there really a ruin here? Granted, this location wouldn't be fake since Golden Spear and the others had indeed explored one.

Li Hao found the marked spot on the other side of the mountain after looking for a while. There was a small mountain cave halfway up the mountain. A dense overlay of vines covered it. One could easily overlook the cave if they weren't paying attention.

Li Hao sprang into the air; the rest followed him in climbing up the mountain. He brushed past the vines to reveal a pitch-black mountain cave. This method of access seemed to indicate... that this ruin wouldn't amount to much. It appeared quite ordinary compared to the magnificent sophistication of Battle Heaven. There was no entrance that transformed into a wall, just a dark hole that even vaguely stunk.

Some bats also followed them in, raising a series of startled yelps.

Snap!

Fire rose with a crisp finger snap and illuminated the cave—Hao Lianchuan's work. A random gesture from this fire Solar created a fireball that rose up to throw light on the premises.

"It's the middle of the night." Wang Ming rolled his eyes. "You'll raise people's attention if there's light here."

"What's the big deal? We're inside Silver Moon," Hao Lianchuan retorted and stared intently at Wang Ming. Kid, don't forget that I'm the director. Even though I'm only an acting director, I'm still your superior officer! You're part of the Night Watchers! How dare you show such disrespect to me!

The rest of the Demon Hunters pretended to be deaf. Liu Long looked around. This... didn't seem to be a ruin. The martial masters on their first expedition looked at each other in puzzlement. They could see the mountain cave in its full, messy glory. There were bird droppings on the ground and the stench was overpowering.

Was this supposed to be an ancient ruin?

The group didn't know what to say. Li Hao didn't voice anything after looking around for a bit and headed further into the cave's depths. There was no stone or iron door at the end. Instead, there were clear signs of manmade marks from an ax. A small hole in an unobtrusive corner of the cave led straight down; it looked like it'd been dug out of the ground.

"Based on information from Senior Golden Spear, we'll reach the ruins when we enter the hole and land on the ground below. However, earth supernaturals may not find any signs of the ruins if they fly through the ground..."

Earth types were uniquely suited to ruin exploration, but some ruins could not be located even if one turned over every inch of the earth. They were right there, but they could not be seen. Take Battle Heaven, for example. Entering the cliff face from the Rift Canyon side would... take one

straight through the canyon wall, as if the entrance didn't exist. Some ruins didn't seem to exist in the same plane as the rest of the world.

The Demon Hunters looked curiously at the hole. It was too dark to see anything, but it looked rather deep. It was roughly one meter across, which was fine for most of the team. Hao Lianchuan peered into it, then took stock of his own body shape and nodded. He... wouldn't get stuck in the hole, would he?

His actions brought muffled laughter from Hong Qing and the others.

"Director Hao's body is wide," Wang Ming took advantage of the opportunity to say. "It would be inconvenient if he were to get stuck. Why don't you wait for us up here? We happen to need a guard at the entrance. There will be no one to look to for rescue if we all go in and are trapped inside."

Li Hao felt that he rather made sense.

"I'm a fire type," Hao Lianchuan rebutted before the young man could say anything. "I can provide light if I go down. I'm also a late Solar. If there really is a tree monster spirit down there, fire is more effective against it!

"There's actually not much use for metal types in an underground ruin."

"....." Li Hao laughed and gave his orders. "All of you wait up here for me, I'll go take a look... with Deputy Liu. It'll just be the two of us. The presence of supernaturals sometimes causes certain reactions."

He couldn't just lead the team down into the depths without first gaining an understanding of the area. That would be too dangerous. Li Hao didn't give them a chance to protest before waving at Liu Long and jumping down the hole.

“Kid, are you sure you want to pit yourself against me?” Hao Lianchuan transmitted to Wang Ming as soon as the troop leaders were gone.

“Director Hao, it’s you pitting yourself against me. It’s already a tough world out here, but you want to get involved too. Just be the Night Watcher director! What are you going after my job for?”

“.....” Hao Lianchuan was nonplussed. Who was going after Wang Ming’s job? I just want to get closer to Li Hao!

His fifth lock had appeared, propelling him to later Solar. It wasn’t a difficult step from late Solar to peak Solar, but going from peak Solar to Nova was a significant hurdle. He still hoped for Li Hao to help him in that regard.

.....

While the two bickered on land, Li Hao fell down through the hole. It remained as dark as night as even he couldn’t see clearly. He only felt that the hole seemed like a tunnel that led straight to the center of the earth.

They fell continuously, endlessly. The sensation persisted for a minute or two before Li Hao finally landed on the ground. It felt insubstantial, like he’d set foot into cotton. If landing took so long to achieve, did that mean they were one thousand meters below the ground? Wouldn’t that place them in the outer shell of the planet?

The thought flashed through his mind moments before Li Hao felt a slight tremor next to him. Liu Long had also landed.

It was still dark around them, but they were growing accustomed to the gloom. The young man could make out some contours after a while. There seemed to be a castle in the distance. This locale wasn’t sealed off by dirt. Rather, something existed overhead that blocked off everything above, leaving a modestly sized space below.

Ruins were divided into levels, this kind passed muster. Some without any protection had long been buried by mud and water. Ruins that still existed in a complete whole already counted as very well preserved.

Liu Long could also peer into the distance after spending a while to acclimate to the surroundings.

“Is that a castle ahead?” he transmitted.

Golden Spear hadn’t been able to enter it. He was forced to retreat when he encountered trouble outside. Li Hao looked around, able to capture details with increasing clarity. There was a haze on the outskirts of all sides, as if there was a formation or origin weapon defending the perimeter to secure this humble clearing.

There wasn’t much in front of the castle, no trees, flora, or sunlight. It was a barren place with the outline of the structure behind it. Golden Spear had not been able to draw near to explore.

“Be careful!” Li Hao reminded. Silver armor materialized around him to protect his body and Stellaris manifested in his hand. He looked around alert. At the very least, Golden Spear was a Nova. That meant he was not weak, but he had not managed to enter the core of the ruins.

A hole was located overhead from where they landed. That seemed to be the exit, or the man would not have been able to get away either. Were there other exits in these ruins?

The two advanced gingerly, stepping on soft soil that didn’t seem like soil. It appeared more like cotton.

Golden Spear hadn’t left more information due to his limited explorations. The Silver Moon Guards had discovered these ruins by accident. It wasn’t one supplied by Hou Xiaochen.

They drew closer to the castle after advancing for one hundred meters. Li Hao’s ears twitched and he slashed to his left!

Clang! rang out, like two weapons had collided. Stellaris' keen edge revealed itself and seemed to break through something with a crunch. The young man didn't have time to take a close look before he hastily waved his sword again.

Clang clang clang!

A series of collisions and even fiery sparks broke out. Li Hao continued to hack and slash at the air, Liu Long joined in with his fists, but incredible pain traveled up his arms. He took a close look—something like a tree branch had pierced through his fist. The man widened his eyes with alarm. How was this unknown object that durable?

He'd thought it was mediocre because Li Hao could easily sever it. But after a while of pounding his fists, the branch ran through his hand instead!

Chapter 538: Tree Spirit (II)

"Be careful!" Li Hao grunted. He waved his sword around and enveloped Liu Long within his range of attack. He cut through a dozen branches in one go; that marked the end of the ambush.

The young man remained wary and looked around him, seeing no further threats. He looked down to confirm if it was tree branches that attacked them. What he saw shook his heart!

There was nothing there!

He'd obviously shattered a lot of branch-like objects, but there was nothing on the ground. It was empty, the cotton-like surface devoid of anything. Li Hao's expression shifted drastically. Did this ground eat people like Battle Heaven did?

In that case... he stomped down with an eruption of earth sword aura. Bam!

The ground shook, but he didn't break through it!

Li Hao's heart quailed—the ground was incredibly durable! It was a frightening prospect if his current strength couldn't break through it. This tiny ruin had seemed much weaker than Battle Heaven, but his understanding was being turned on its head. Could there be even stronger existences here?

These tree branches weren't weak, they were on par with Solars. He could handle a dozen, but even he would falter if there were more. No wonder Golden Spear had chosen to retreat. If more came at this level of intensity, it would be beyond Li Hao's capabilities as well.

Liu Long looked solemnly at the young man's findings. "This ground... is atypical. It's incredibly durable, so we should be careful here."

"I know." Li Hao pressed forward.

Another series of clangs sounded before long as more vines or branches shot at him in the darkness. Li Hao cut some apart, then punched out with a fist that turned into a claw. He grabbed a vine and roared, ripping the end off.

The severed section in his hand writhed like it was alive. As it twisted, an enormous mental ripple undulated through the void. It seemed to be both a threat and intimidation!

Li Hao maintained a death grip on what he'd cut off. The attack ceased again moments later. His hand was lacerated by the broken vine's struggles, but he could finally see what it was he held.

It seemed to be a crystalline stick, one that was clear and translucent. It went without saying that it was inordinately durable. The young man rivaled a Nova, but he'd barely managed to break off one. If he suffered a split second lapse in concentration, the thing would get away from him.

It seemed to possess strong battle capabilities even after it was severed.

“Is this... a tree branch?” Li Hao frowned at it upon closer inspection. It... didn’t really look like it, but if it wasn’t, what was it? And where did these attacks come from?

They came and left without a trace, shooting out from the darkness around them. But when he approached the fringes of the gloom earlier, he couldn’t see anything. The attacks came in waves, punctuated by a break in between. Even he would have to seriously consider running for his life if there wasn’t an end to them. Continuing on like this was a dangerous proposition for him too.

Li Hao glanced at the castle not too far away. These things seemed unwilling to let him into the castle. What was this place? The familial grounds of an ancient clan? A sect? A school? The more he couldn’t ascertain the situation, the more curious he became.

As he pondered over the possibilities, he and Liu Long started moving forward again. A peculiar ripple traveled through the void—not the vines from earlier.

BOOM!

A mental explosion detonated in their minds. Li Hao roared—Tiger Roar Through Mountain and Woods! His mind intent erupted and a keen light glinted in his eyes. A ferocious mind intent unleashed itself as a tiger breaking out of its cage!

RUMBLE!

The collision happened only in the mind and lasted for a while before a muffled grunt marked the end of that offensive. Li Hao swiftly looked in a certain direction—it was dark there too, but there seemed to be the outlines of certain objects there. One... two... three tiny balls of light appeared.

He hadn’t seen them before, but he did now. The last impact seemed to have broken some kind of seal. Li Hao could see what it was—mysterious power stones. Indeed, they were fully charged stones.

He could see the energy ripples of stones that were full; he hadn't seen them earlier. He could now see that there was a large cache in the gloom, it'd just been concealed by the last mental ripple.

Grandmaster...

Was their assailant one of the grandmasters recorded in the ancient records? They said that only grandmasters could utilize mental strength—the equivalent of modern day mind intent. The two were slightly different, a fact that Li Hao verified in their last clash. His mind intent was less than the other's in terms of amount, but his was much more lively.

At least, that was the best he could describe it. A martial master's mind intent sometimes appeared to be alive—such as the Five Styles technique manifesting as all sorts of beasts and animals that moved like living representations.

As Li Hao's mind intent was livelier, he found it easier to overcome his more sluggish opponent. The young man looked around alertly and transmitted to Liu Long next to him, "There's something ahead... Be careful, chief."

Liu Long nodded slightly, he'd been affected by the mental attack earlier as well. Since it'd been primarily aimed at Li Hao, he could fend off whatever spilled over to him. The two changed direction for that corner of the darkness instead of continuing to the castle.

.....

Another strong burst of mental strength struck when Li Hao drew close. It swept over with a fury!

BOOM!

Collision!

A stunned Li Hao almost wanted to vomit blood. This one seemed to be stronger than the previous attack! He wanted to retreat! These attacks would be the death of him since they were so strong!

His eyes had darted to the small balls of light when the attack struck. They seemed to be breaking apart and disappearing. What was left glowed dimly. The young man's eyes widened when he realized something.

Energy!

The thing in the dark was absorbing energy to erupt in an offensive, hoping to expel him from the ruins! It wasn't that their attacker didn't want to deliver one fatal blow or sought to torment Li Hao to death, but that it seemed to lack sufficient energy. It could only absorb the mysterious power stones and attack one step at a time.

An interval of rest marked each attack. However, not only did the unknown attacker not scare off Li Hao, but the young man saw through to the truth of things. They didn't have many mysterious power stones left!

Just as they were about to gather strength for another attempt, Li Hao sent out ripples of his own. "Stop! I am a troop leader of the Reserve Defenders in the army of Battle Heaven!" His silver armor sparkled with light. "I am one of the eight guardian clans here to prospect the land. Cease your actions immediately!"

He communicated in the ancient language and referenced another location from the same period of time as he did so. If this thing really was a product of ancient heritage, it should understand his words. This was how the Gold and Silver Amors of Battle Heaven communicated.

The darkness remained silent, but Li Hao could see that the balls of light continued to dwindle. That represented that his attacker was still absorbing the energy; it hadn't given up resisting just because he was a Battle Heaven Army member.

If it was Golden Spear present, he could only retreat in the face of repeated barrages since he couldn't see the truth of the situation. But Li Hao was different, he could see the balls of light.

"Stop drawing on the mysterious power stones," he sent to the unknown entity again. "There aren't many here and they will be fully depleted if you keep consuming them. You might completely die then!"

"You cannot intimidate me as I am here under orders to investigate whether there are remnants from the New Martial era remaining. If you can understand me, you'll know that the Battle Heaven Army was on the side of good back in the day. Unless... you were part of the traitors' camp?"

"Trai... tors..."

Li Hao's words provoked a response out of the existence; a faint ripple slowly rose into the air. Light dazzled his eyes as illumination brightened the surroundings. There was a tree not too far away that looked to be shriveling. A big tree had collapsed, leaving one of its branches to regrow from its root system.

The old tree seemed to be dead, but its roots had given rise to a new tree! A tree spirit!

As he thought, there was a tree spirit here. That'd been Li Hao's earlier guess, one that was now proven. A dead tree had returned to life in these ruins.

It brightened the gloom like it was a piece of crystal. As small as it was, it threw light in all directions.

"Trai... tor... Battle... Heaven... City..." came slow ripples from the small tree. Li Hao saw that it was entangled with the dead tree, that its root system seemed to be of one body. The roots were exposed as they were what'd attacked them earlier. One of them was broken, likely the one that Li Hao had snapped off. The other broken segments seemed to have recovered after they landed on the ground. This tree could heal itself.

“Battle Heaven!” he repeated. “The city of the Wangs, part of the eight guardian clans! It was named by His Imperial Majesty himself!”

Something seemed to recover in the little tree and it shook its slightly withered branches. “His... Imperial... Majesty... But not... even... His Imperial Majesty... can... barge into... the palace...”

The palace? Li Hao’s eyebrows shot up.

Chapter 539: Tree Spirit (III)

What palace?

His Imperial Majesty couldn’t enter it either... That was an unparalleled existence that they spoke of! What couldn’t the august personage do?

Li Hao looked at the castle in the distance. As the surroundings were lit up, he could make out a thing or two. Why did... this castle appear to be... a cat? This was mystifying. The tree seemed to be randomly planted outside the castle walls and not part of the defenses as one might expect.

What kind of place is this?

“What palace?” Li Hao asked as he looked at the dying little tree. “You seem to lack energy. Are you dying after that last eruption?”

Yes, he could sense that the sapling growing out of the big tree’s roots might be dying.

“Death...” came a mental ripple. The crystalline tree swayed, ready to collapse at any time.

“Don’t... think... of... entering... the palace... Not... even... though... it’s... been... discarded...”

Li Hao could see the tree draw on more mysterious power stones hidden in the ground. The young man frowned. The tree seemed to be this place's guard. A palace? A discarded palace? Whose palace was it?

Its defenses were still active after countless eons, a different situation from Battle Heaven. The latter was equipped with immense defensive abilities to begin with. Meanwhile, the ones in this perimeter...

Li Hao could tell that these defenses here had something to do with the dead tree. It seemed to have blown itself up before it died. Strictly speaking, this might be a space similar to the tree tunnel outside Battle Heaven.

Indeed, they might be inside a dead tree at the moment.

The sapling had sprouted from the big tree's roots and grown up in this spot. It wasn't a tree from the ancient civilization, but seemed to have inherited some memories. Had a tree been protecting this place all along? It used the last dregs of its power to give birth to a new tree that would continue to stand guard. Unfortunately, the sapling seemed about to die as well.

Li Hao grew ever more curious about the ancient civilization. Whether it was human or monster spirit, beings from that age nurture a peculiar faith. Take the tree in front of them, for example. It was about to die, but it continued to act according to its beliefs and carry out its duties.

Does this tree have Water of Life?

Tree spirits apparently produced Water of Life, but it seemed to be a condensation of endless energy. Judging from its condition, did this tree have any energy to absorb? The cache of stones here might be the last of its reserves. It would consume its life force to produce Water of Life in this state!

Therefore... there was probably no Water of Life here.

Li Hao was momentarily dejected. Granted, he might be even more depressed if this was a tree spirit that was capable of producing the treasure. That would mean it retained tremendous battle strength.

When it came to the beings of the ancient civilization, the young man didn't actually seek to kill them. Every human and even monster spirit of that age nursed a special mentality and faith that one could not find in the modern day.

Li Hao didn't sense such a spirit when he killed Black Armors because they were only lingering obsessions. There was no consciousness within them. Now that he'd found a tree that he could communicate with, he didn't intend to kill it, even though it seemed unable to continue its offensive.

"I can stay away from the palace, but can you tell me who it belonged to?"

"Not a word!"

"....." Those words had certainly been spoken smoothly. "I want some Water of Life, do you have any?"

"....." There was no response, but Li Hao discovered that the tree pulled on the mysterious power stones at a faster rate. The remaining few had some energy to begin with, but were much dimmer now.

This looked like it was ready to make its final stand.

"I bear you no enmity." Li Hao hastily backed away. "As a troop leader of the Battle Heaven Army, I have taken on some missions to save the city. General Pagoda is on the brink of death in the city and needs some Water of Life to recover. The city cannot be mobilized if he does not awaken..."

These words raised some interest from the little tree. It had wanted to kill the intruder, but now seemed to realize something. “Are... you really... a Battle Heaven troop leader? One... of... the eight guardian clan...”

“Of course!” Understanding dawned on Li Hao—the tree spirit hadn’t believed him before. “How else would I wear the silver armor? Also, do you recognize Stellaris?”

The young man waved the longsword around. The little tree paused for a long moment before saying haltingly, “Is... this... Stellaris? Forgive my... lack of recognition... My heritage... memories... show Stellaris... as not so... weak. It is... a sword that can... rip through... the firmament...”

Since it wasn’t a tree of that era, it could only rely on some heritage memories and truly failed to recognize Stellaris. The sword in Li Hao’s hand was too frail.

The young man could say nothing to that. It was a blow to his ego!

“What are heritage memories?” he asked softly.

“Are you... so ignorant??” The little tree shook with suspicion.

“It has been countless ages since the New Martial calendar,” Li Hao explained with resignation. “Seas have changed into mulberry fields and mulberry fields into seas. No heritages survive, just bits and pieces of information. Therefore, it’s very normal that I don’t know anything. The current Battle Heaven City also sleeps in an inactive state. Its systems are not able to operate properly and we have long lost the capability to peruse more information.”

The little tree was so silent that it seemed to be dead. It was so silent for so long that Li Hao suspected it really had died. He wanted to approach for a look when another ripple came from the tree.

“Strong monster spirits leave behind memories of deep impression in their bloodline or life marks... These pass on through generation after generation... When both bloodline and life marks are activated... these memories are absorbed... Such as heritage memories...”

“What about humans?” Li Hao asked curiously. I have a powerful bloodline too!

“Humans... cannot,” the little tree answered. “Humans concentrate their might on themselves. Their descendants... only possess powerful bloodlines... Monster spirits... are incomplete from birth. Some power is lost... our bloodlines...”

“Do you need help? I can tell you’re almost out of energy,” Li Hao looked on thoughtfully.

“No... need!” Perhaps the sapling was still wary of Li Hao, but the young man did feel that the tree was sinking into the shadows of death. It’d consumed the last of the mysterious power stones. Without further replenishment, it would set foot on the path of death.

“No one will be guarding this place if you die,” Li Hao said thoughtfully. “The palace will be mine. You can continue protecting it only if you’re still alive. You might be the first living existence of the ancient civilization that I’ve come across...”

“Ancient civilization?”

“The New Martial era.”

“I am not... of New Martial... Father was lonely as... he protected the palace for thirty thousand years... He had no progeny. I was born only after he died...”

Li Hao’s eyes widened with amazement. How many years total was that?? The big tree alone had stood guard for thirty thousand years, giving birth to the sapling after that terrifying time span. And how long had the sapling been alive for? Did these terrifying experiences measure time in thousands of years? What level of strength was the dead tree to live for so long?

“No matter what, you count as one of the ancients,” Li Hao quickly answered. “Ancient tree, do you need help?”

“A reward without deserving it... Showing attention for no reason... is not... good.”

“That’s not it, I just want to partner with you,” Li Hao explained sincerely. “According to what I know, tree monster spirits... Ahem, ancient trees can produce Water of Life at a certain level of strength, so long as they have sufficient energy. The Water of Life is incredibly useful when it comes to healing injuries, cultivation, and prolonging life. I’m thinking that I can supply you with energy so that you grow stronger and can protect this palace. All you need to do is give me some Water of Life in return. Don’t you think that’s a very fair trade?”

“The royal city mode?”

“.....” Li Hao blinked. What city mode?

“My memories tell me... that a lot of people... did this in the past. My forebears chose... to join the camp of a powerhouse... or partner with them to build a city. We absorb energy to shelter the city and provide life essence. Human powerhouses protected my ancestors in return...”

Was this how they did it in the ancient civilization? That seemed to be the case! There was General Pagoda in Battle Heaven, as well as a dozen tree spirits that were still or dead.

Li Hao took another look at the castle in the distance. He was very interested in it, but perhaps this tree was worth more than the castle. A living creature was always more valuable than a dead object. There might be a lot of treasures in the castle, but he might not be able to digest them. A tree spirit with some memories of the ancient civilization might be of more help to him. This was an entity he could communicate and partner with.

While he could communicate with those in Battle Heaven, they were all dead and their memories incomplete. They wouldn’t easily tell Li Hao anything.

The young man had wanted to explore the ruins, but now he turned his attention to the tree.

“That’s right, that kind of mode. I’ll supply you energy and you coalesce Water of Life for me. This is a mutually beneficial relationship that ensures you can continue to protect the palace. It’ll be gone after you die. Even if I don’t go inside, others will.”

The little tree sank into deep thought. This was a feasible plan, particularly as the person in front of him was part of the eight guardian families and a troop leader of Battle Heaven. Otherwise, the human was so weak that he wasn’t qualified to partner with the tree. His qualifications put him over the line.

But could such a weak person help it? Well... the one that’d come last time was even weaker. Perhaps this one counted as strong enough.

Chapter 540: Tree Spirit (IV)

“You... just need life essence?”

“Yes!”

“You... will not enter the palace?”

“Of course not!”

The little tree sank into deep thought. “If you are sincere... can you first supply me with some energy stones?”

“.....”

Now that was a bad trade! Li Hao cursed to himself. You want me to pay up before I get anything and the key is, you can continue fighting me once you absorb energy. The tree's trying to trick me!

"I can, but I only have regular mysterious power stones..." The young man took out a stone common to this day and age.

The tree froze, stunned beyond belief, and said with difficulty after a while. "This is... a discarded energy stone... In my memories... not even dogs eat them... They can be used for cooking... but you want me... to use that... to collect life essence?"

"....." Li Hao blinked. "No way, they're that bad?"

The little tree remained silent. It seemed to have lost all hope. You might as well let me die! You can just kill me if you want me to coalesce life essence with this trash. Who spits out milk after eating trash? I'm not a cow!

Li Hao set his jaw and took out a stone from the Battle Heaven Army. "What about this one?"

"This..." responded the little tree after a while. "Is only the most basic cultivation stone. But it's much better than the one before, this one I can absorb from..."

"How many pieces of this will it take for you to condense one drop of the Water of Life?"

"....." How many? The tree paused for a long moment. "One thousand pieces."

"....." It was Li Hao's turn to freeze. One of these was equal to ten modern stones, so the tree wanted ten thousand modern mysterious power stones to coalesce one drop of the Water of Life?! You're joking!!

“Do you think I’m ignorant?” he erupted. “General Pagoda gave me one drop after I offered thirty stones.” He briefly flashed a flask to the little tree. “Do you see that? General Pagoda’s fee is so low, but you want one thousand stones?!”

“That one... is stronger than me... and even... stronger than... my father. It is easier for him to condense... life energy. I am... not strong enough... and consume more energy... That expenditure decreases... when I grow stronger...”

Was that so?

“Even that one... needs more energy stones... than thirty... Perhaps... that was a gift... to you.”

Li Hao pondered its words. Hong Yitang had said that the spirit was fishing for more—it appeared that this really was the case. However, one thousand stones for one drop of water was too much. This partnership was suddenly up in the air. Should he just seize the castle? He couldn’t support the tree’s needs!

The little tree didn’t seem that much of an idiot as it suddenly said, “A living plant spirit can do more than collect life essence... It can also absorb and gather energy from the world to create a sacred land of cultivation... The Human King created one in his day... Training for one day there was the equivalent of a year in the outside world...”

“If you are willing to supply sufficient energy... I can do the same for you... In the New Martial era, royal cities were the product of plant spirits and powerhouses... They created sacred lands of cultivation that attracted hundreds of millions of souls... They created the way of the human emperor... Of course, it ultimately failed...”

“Way of the human emperor?” Li Hao raised an eyebrow. “What is that?”

“I don’t know. If I did... I would be a peak powerhouse.”

Alright then, so what are you talking about it for? So the tree spirit could assist with cultivation?

“Let me think about it,” Li Hao offered. “The main issue is that energy stones are too rare in our era. I’m afraid that I won’t be able to give you enough support. The one that I took out first, the one that you said was trash, is an ultimate treasure in our world!”

The little tree didn’t know what to say. An ultimate treasure? This was rocking its worldview. Had the outside world deteriorated to these levels?

Perhaps!

After all, while this person that’d barged in was weak, he was passable. however, he was using this kind of trash for cultivation and treated it as precious treasure. It was plain to see that people of this age were very poor.

“I can... recover some abilities through... absorbing a little... and then gather the energy of the four directions... There is still energy in this age... What I just absorbed was collected from a few decades ago...”

“Energy erupted through the land twenty years ago.” Inspiration struck Li Hao. “You absorbed some and condensed it into energy stones. Did you put them away for later use?”

“Pretty much... but the energy suddenly vanished and there was too little left in the void... I only absorbed that much... and have nothing left after today.”

Li Hao took a deep breath. All those mysterious power stones were just its reserves? Momentary, casual absorption was sufficient for the tree to create mysterious power stones?

My word!

Were all tree spirits this amazing?

The young man's thoughts shifted. He had to trick the tree... no, he had to cordially coax it into a partnership!

.....

In the underground palace.

Two humans and a tree were communicating. Liu Long couldn't fully understand them—he wouldn't be able to at all if they did so purely verbally. Thankfully, they talked with the mind, so he could sense a thing or two through mind intent.

After a while, Li Hao looked hesitantly at the palace in the distance.

“Senior Tree,” he suddenly brought up. “A mutually beneficial partnership is what I desire to see, but I'm uncertain whether my efforts will be in proportion with my gains. The times are different from what they were. Therefore, I have a groundless request that I wonder if the senior will agree to?”

“What is it?”

“Senior says that you can collect energy to craft a sacred land for cultivation. What does that look like? I have a few more energy stones on hand. Could you provide a small demonstration after absorbing them?”

“Of course, senior might grow incredibly strong after absorbing so much. You might expel us or even kill us. So as a precaution... let me be petty before being a gentleman. I will control the number of stones I supply. If the senior can provide a proportional benefit, I naturally hope for us to work together.”

It would take a lot to maintain the tree and judging from its condition, mysterious power stones might be the most basic materials it wanted. It considered modern stones trash, but those were treasures to Li Hao! They were priceless to everyone.

If he paid a high price and didn't gain much for it, then there was no need to cooperate with the tree. It would die naturally without replenishment of energy even if he didn't kill it himself. Li Hao might think of the ancient civilization with a touch of reverence, but that didn't mean he would help others at his own expense.

If his counterpart wouldn't bring him any benefits, then he wouldn't invest too much. As for the palace... Okay, I'll stay out of it when you're alive, but all bets are off when you're dead.

The tree spirit seemed to be considering something as well. "That can be done... plant spirits and humans... monster spirits... have always coexisted through mutual benefit... Supply me with some energy stones... and I will show you the benefits..."

Li Hao made up his mind and decisively took out one hundred mysterious power stones. They weren't the ones that he'd received from the army, but the ordinary ones that he used in cultivation. After several raids, he possessed almost three thousand pieces. The ones from the army were worth ten each—he only had roughly twenty pieces left.

Those he was loath to part with. Stellaris produced greater sword energy when he fed them to it, so they couldn't be wasted.

The little tree wouldn't normally want to bother with this kind of trash, but any energy it could obtain now was good. One hundred pieces possessed sufficient energy to make the distaste worthwhile.

Li Hao didn't say anything after tossing them over. He had no choice but to offer so many at once. These ancient existences were gluttons; one hundred pieces seemed nothing but a fleck of poop to them. Anything less might insult them.

The tree's roots snaked out and stabbed into the stones on the ground, instantly draining them. It was too little for the tree spirit. Such an amount was a drop in the bucket, what a pity that it hadn't had time to absorb much when energy erupted in the past. The province's energy had more or less faded away afterwards, so it couldn't add to its stores.

This tree spirit wasn't the only one absorbing energy within Silver Moon. Entities within Battle Heaven also partook, making the revitalized energy in the world hardly enough. There was nothing left for Silver Moon human denizens.

The little tree mulled over something after absorbing the energy, eventually emanating a faint, unique energy. It was very weak and Li Hao subconsciously wanted to reject it when it neared the young man. He quickly realized something, however, and absorbed some.

It gave him a peculiar feeling similar to the Water of Life. Or rather, when he first entered the bathing pool in Battle Heaven City. It was a comfortable feeling of being nurtured.

Liu Long absorbed some as well and moaned. "What a strange energy..." he transmitted to Li Hao.

The young man inclined his head. Perhaps this was what made the tree spirit special.

"I am partially destroyed," came the little tree's ripples. "I can only exude some life force. This energy can enhance cultivation, extend lifespans, and heal injuries. That is all secondary..."

Li Hao cocked his ear. That was secondary? Then what was primary?

"I can also emanate a trace of the core origin of ancient dao if you cultivate near me. That will help your cultivation too."

"The core origin of ancient dao?" Li Hao was baffled. What was that?

The little tree seemed stunned by his ignorance and took a while to gather its thoughts. “The core origin... of martial dao... is the base nature of martial dao. I am also quite curious. You people are very strong, but also very weak. But your mental ripples from earlier is also a manifestation of the core origin.

“It is the fundamental force of martial dao. The ferocious tiger you displayed before is a type of dao, but there seems to be some difference. It’s very strange, you are different from the New Martial cultivators of my memories.” It didn’t know how to explain either.